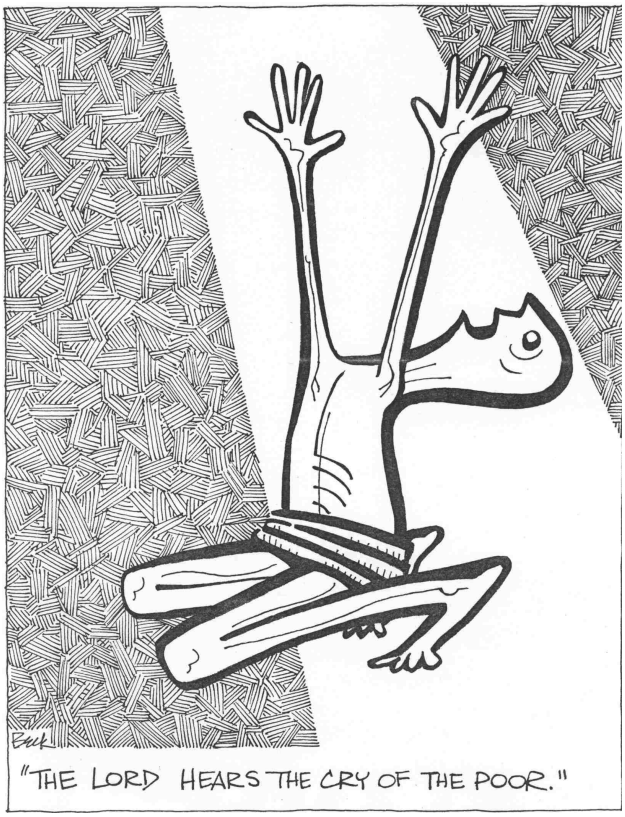
SUNDAY HOMILIES

Liturgical Year Cycle B 2012

by

Rev. Robert R. Beck

Homilies given in the year 2012
Mt. St. Francis Convent, Dubuque, IA



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Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11	Comfort my people
Psalm 85:9-14	You planted a vine
2 Peter 3:8-14	The Lord does not delay
Mark 1:1-8	Beginning of the Gospel

Last Sunday Advent began with a lament,
a cry from exile, from a lost distance.
This Sunday the first word of assurance,
of answer to the fear of darkness, is sounded.
From the throne of God on high the announcement of return
comes to Israel in exile.
From the desert a voice is heard announcing a new day,
a return from the felt absence of God,
a return to relationship.

Out of the desert of abandonment,
of misdirection and wandering,
comes a voice of reassurance.
In a time of darkness and doubt,
of questions and insufficient answers,
comes a voice of promise.

For myself, in these days of early Advent,
I find that I am still thinking of the example
of Mother Francis Xavier Tehmehr, foundress,
as presented by Sr. Pat Farrell, this past Friday.
I am still captured by the image of risk and doubt
that I received then.

The three moments that were shared with us:
the doubt and risk that must have attended
leaving the first community to begin another,
the risk and doubt that must have followed
from sending sisters to help the war wounded,
only to have so many of the sister die in the effort,
the doubt, risk, and boldness
that announced a mission to America.

I am also resonating with the frank words of assessment
of the present situation, with its apparent decline
in active religious life and mysterious future.

And with that, I come to the promise in today's scriptures,
to find a word of answer.
And here is what I find there.

The prophet we know only as Second-Isaiah,

who gave us the second part of the book of Isaiah,
who found himself ministering in Babylon,
during the time of Israel's captivity,
opens his writings with today's words in the first reading.
It is an announcement of the end of exile.
The time of servitude is ended,
and Israel is to turn its mind toward returning home
to Jerusalem and the territory of Judea.

The whisper of homecoming is in the air.
Then the shout of finally going home,
finally returning to the land given their ancestors,
and now themselves as well.

The prophets favors a particular image in describing the return.
He repeatedly speaks
of a smooth, green path through the desert.
"Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God."

"The wilderness and the parched land will exult;
the desert will rejoice and bloom."

Second-Isaiah pictures a New Exodus,
a second arrival in the promised land,
a second chance at beginning anew.
His imagery takes the old Exodus,
the passage across the Red Sea, and inverts it.
Instead of a dry path through the waters,
he envisions another path, this time through the desert
—a well-watered passage through the bone-dry desert.

He is saying that something entirely new is happening,
just as the first time.
Then it was unprecedented; now again it is unprecedented.
Just as in the past, God is capable of producing
something entirely new, entirely unexpected.

The process theologians call this "novelty."
It refers to the emergence of something without expectations,
without anticipation.
Something novel, beyond all promises.

But the scriptures affirm a God
who habitually performs acts of unprecedented novelty.
Second-Isaiah is saying that the newness has a precedent.

The New Exodus is preceded by the first Exodus,
and each is without a glimmer of expectation;
each is beyond the presumptions of hoping.

The message of Second-Isaiah is that we can count on a God
who takes things beyond our expectations.
That the basis of our hope is beyond anticipation,
beyond projections based on present trends.
God is not shackled by extrapolations of current possibilities,
charted out by the laws of probability.
God is the God of newness, of historical novelty.

It is this strand in the message of Second-Isaiah
that Mark selects when he cites the prophet
as regards John the Baptist, to begin his own work,
The Gospel of Mark.

For today we have as our Gospel reading
the very first verses of this Gospel.

For Mark not only quotes this prophet,
but he does so with a difference.
He changes the punctuation,
even while keeping the words intact.

The prophet announced:
"A voice cries, in the desert prepare the way of the Lord."
For the prophet, the way, the path, was in the desert,
a swift route home from exile.

But Mark intentionally does it differently:
"A voice cries in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord."
Now the voice is in the desert, rather than the road.
Instead of "A voice cries: in the desert prepare a way,"
it is, "A voice cries in the desert: Prepare a way."
It is a simple matter of shifting the quotation marks.

This is not a mistake on Mark's part.
It is not sloppy grammar. It is intentional.
It is his way of saying that, once again,
something totally new, something unimaginable,
something without precedent, is occurring.
Just as in the past, God has accomplished the novel,
the totally new.
Prepare yourselves for something unexpected.

This time is it the coming of the Christ.
This time is it a new age in salvation history.
It is the rearrangement of the relationship
between God and the human family.
It is a new position for us, as children of God.
It is a homecoming beyond the expectations

of Old Testament Israel.

This is the season that we are entering into,
with the mystery of the Incarnation as its culmination,
which we celebrate as Christmas—Christ's Mass.

But for today,
it is our lesson in the possibility of the entirely new,
the unexpected future,
that lies in the hands of a God who specializes in newness.

As we look at a present
that seems without large examples of promise,
we remember that hope begins where anticipation leaves off,
that hope is beyond expectations.
And that God is a God who specializes in the action
that exceeds all projections.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2011

Isaiah 61:1-2A, 10-11
Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

The sounds of Christmas coming are all around us.
The Salvation Army worker is at her corner.
Subliminal Christmas carols are sounding in all the shops.
Advent hymns fill the liturgy.
And the voice of John the Baptist is heard in the churches.
Today we hear it from the fourth Gospel.

This Gospel begins at the beginning.
In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Hebrew word for Word is Dabar, which also can mean Thing.
In John's Greek, the Word is Logos,
with a meaning close to Thought or Idea.
Interestingly, the French translation of this passage,
in the Jerusalem Bible, is Verb.
In the beginning was the Verb,
and the Verb was with God, and the Verb was God.

All of this is part of the heiratic hymn or philosophical poem
which begins John's Gospel.

But woven into the poetry like a colored ribbon in braided hair,
is the prose narrative concerning John the Baptist.
It tells us that he is not the light,
but rather testifies to the light.

Today we unbraid from the hymn the part about John,
and set aside the hymn about The Word,
in order to save that for Christmas Day,
and look more closely at John's place in the story.

What we learn is that John is none of the presences
that are anticipated for the coming new day.

He certainly is not the Messiah, he assures us.
The Messiah, the Christ, is the great figure
that Israel hopes will bring its liberation.
John is not the Messiah.
We are not surprised that John is not the Messiah,
for we know who the Messiah is.

But if this is not John's role, what is next? Elijah?
This seems plausible.
We know that the other Gospels cast the Baptist in the role of Elijah.
But now John says he is not Elijah, either.

For most of us, this exhausts the possibilities.
But the priests and Levites who are questioning John
think of another option.
Are you the Prophet?

Who is the Prophet?
Some sectors of the Judean community
were looking for a Prophet like Moses to arise in the final days,
as suggested in the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy.

So the priests and Levites, who know such things, pose their question.
But no, John is not the Prophet either.
Flattered you should ask.

No, says John, I am nothing other than a Voice.
Like the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland,
who fades in successive stages,
until there is nothing left but his smile,
John disappears behind the Voice.

"I am the voice of one crying out in the desert,
'make straight the way of the Lord,'"

The Voice does not insert his personality.
He does not put his twist on the message.
He is only the messenger, not the message.
If Jesus is the Word, John is the Voice.

Jesus is the Word, but John is the Voice, uttering the Word.
Announcing, or pronouncing, the Word.
The Word without the voice is mute.
It is unheard.

The Word is made flesh, wherever the Word is heard.
Wherever it finds a Voice.
The Word without the voice is mute, unheard.

Giving voice to the voiceless
is an longtime commitment of Christian ministry.
Where there are verbs, there are stories to be told.
Without those stories, we are impoverished.
We are diminished.

More severely, we are unable to achieve full justice,
for we arrive at our stable world by way of eliminating some,
refusing their story, their presence.
Their word is excluded from the larger chorus,
and the chorus is diminished by that much.
Their world excluded from the fuller world,
gives us a partial world, cribbed and stifled.

Giving voice to the voiceless is to allow us
to hear the stories of women in the church.
It is to open the experience of being church
to include the stories of all its members.
It would shine light on meanings
that can shape the message in necessary ways, as yet unknown.
It would make room for the multitude of Magnificats
that need to be sung.
It would allow the Word to be heard where it hasn't yet,
but longs to be.

Giving voice to the voiceless is to give speech
to the immigrant who is afraid to speak out, to be noticed,
who may even dwell in another language.
It would allow stories of marginal existence,
of flight to Egypt, of no room at the inn,
to be heard, and in hearing it, allowing the Word to be heard,
in stories that yearn to be, but as yet are not told.

Giving voice to the voiceless is to stand
with those in poverty,
whose voice is unheard on the national scene for lack of resources,
lack of means and opportunity to fund and organize a movement.
Whose struggle for existence focuses on juggling food or healthcare,
leaving little time and energy for advocacy.
Whose stories of manna in the desert
and water from the rock
permit the Word to be heard in places it has been mute.

Giving voice to the voiceless is to speak out for those in the margins,
in the margins of our awareness,

whether because of being outside the approved news coverage,
such as Darfur or Syria.
Or beyond the accepted margins of our national interest,
as are the Palestinians or other Muslim peoples.
Or because of their status as cultural pariahs,
such as gays or the homeless.

Or those officially designated as sexual offenders,

literally beyond the margins of our cultural territories.

Or those literally without a voice,
being as yet unborn, entirely dependent.

You can add to the list, but it requires thinking outside the margins,
thinking of those we have learned to consider unthinkable,
and speaking of those said to be unspeakable.
Unspeakable, and without a voice.

Continuing the ministry of John
is to give the voice to the unvoiced words, the unvoiced verbs,
and finding in them, as a result, the Word itself,
speaking in our place and age.

In the Advent season we celebrate, await, and concentrate
on the coming of the Word.
In giving voice to the voiceless we continue the ministry of John,
who brought the Word to the attention of the world.
A world currently preoccupied by the coming of Christmas
but which is also the coming of the Christ,
the Word waiting to be spoken.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2011

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16	The David Covenant
Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29	David Covenant, named
Romans 16:25-27	Secret now made manifest
Luke 1:26-38	The Annunciation

Christmas is just around the corner.
And as it does every year, the liturgy pauses
on the Fourth Sunday of Advent to consider Mary's part
in all of the proceedings. And no small part it is.

The story is part of our Christmas tradition.
And as Luke tells the story, it began in a small village in Galilee.
The Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, with important news,
and a request coming directly from God.
Luke reports it as a conversation.
Gabriel does most of the talking.
But Mary manages to make some impressive moves
on her side of the exchange.

We all know Gabriel's opening remarks:
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."

Gabriel is like one of those people who are always inserting
lines from poetry or popular songs into their conversations.
Most of his comments are from the scriptures, however.

So it is with the greeting.
He is not simply saying Hello.
He is also making indirect reference to passages from the prophets,
such as Zephaniah, who said, in his third chapter:
"Rejoice, Jerusalem, for the Lord your God is in your midst."
It was the prophetic way of announcing a new day.
So it is here, with Mary is standing in for Jerusalem.

Mary's first response is silence.
Luke says she was greatly troubled
and wondered what this greeting meant.
I would think there were many things
that she might be troubled about in this little episode.

But it was the meaning of the words
that is singled out for her consternation.

It is those words, "full of grace," that might be the problem.
We make theology out of them,

but originally they meant something like "highly favored one."

I am reminded of those commercials
in which the people from the Publishers Weekly
show up at some poor person's doorstep
and announce that they are the luckiest people in the world.
Or even the robocalls I get telling me that I won a fantastic prize.
So with Mary. How is she so highly favored?

Mary looks around her and thinks,
"Does this poverty look like being greatly favored?"
One can understand why her reaction later, in the Magnificat,
would be that God had lifted up the lowly.

Gabriel moves right into the silence with his next announcement.
Again he cannot refrain from making elaborate allusions to the scriptures,
this time to the promise to David,
that he would be a great king and establish a dynasty,
which would last forever.

The passage is known as the covenant to David,
and serves as our first reading for today.
We know it was said to be a covenant
because Psalm 89 repeatedly tells us that.
That psalm is our response psalm for today.

The promise to David became an issue when Judah lost the kingdom.
The promise was on the books, in the seventh chapter of 2 Samuel,
so it was not top be forgotten.
What God has promised will come to pass.
With that in mind, the belief grew that God would honor his promise,
which now seems to have been lost to history,
by raising up a great King, a Messiah,
to restore the kingdom and bring the glory back to Israel.

In case you missed it,
Gabriel's elaborate allusion to the promise given to David
can more simply be understood as saying to Mary
that her son would be the Messiah that Israel was expecting.
The great era in history, the fulfillment of the Israelite longing,
was about to take place.

And Mary was to be prominently featured.

In Mary's second response, she actually speaks.
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"

The momentous importance of what the Angel is saying

is not lost on Mary.
But she has another, more practical, question to ask.
Could the angel have the wrong address?
After all, Mary is not pregnant, and is not likely to be.
Maybe Gabriel is thinking of someone else.

Of course he is not, as he will shortly indicate.
But for now we can see that Mary hit upon the very thing
that this conversation will bring about.
She is calm, and is carefully doing some fact checking,
making certain of certain matters before she comes to a decision.

Gabriel cannot lay off
finding language from the scriptures to express himself,
and so using the language of Exodus, and the cloud of glory
that dwelt among the people and settled on the temple,
he explains to Mary that,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God."

This is the offer, the request, that lies at the center of this dialogue.
This is the heart of the event, the meaning of the moment.
But Mary is not being overwhelmed,
she is not excluded from the decision.
It is hers to make. And that will happen,
but first Gabriel has another matter to report.

He tells her that her kinswoman, Elizabeth,
is six weeks into her pregnancy with John, to be known as the Baptist.
Here the scriptural reference is to Samuel,
whose mother, Hannah, sang the song
which was the model for Mary's Magnificat.

Samuel, her son, would find his finest moment
when he anointed David king of Israel.
But that is far in the future.
For the moment, we simply have report of an improbable pregnancy,
as with Hannah in the days of old.

Mary's third response takes her beyond her first silence
and her second clarifying question.
Now it is a clear and certain affirmation.
She is willing.
She says, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."

She has placed herself at God's disposal.

She is willing to be the instrument of this turn in history,
in Israel's hope and story.

It is her decision to make.
She can refuse. She doesn't.
She says, "Yes."

And with her permission,
the events that make up the New Testament are free to begin.

What we see is that God makes offers.
God creates possibilities, but doesn't force the issue.
God respects Mary's freedom, with the awe-inducing prospect
that what we have come to know so familiarly,
what we base our faith upon, might not have happened,
or at least not as we know it.

It is my own thought that Mary's story in the Annunciation
is our own as well,
every time that a moment full of grace opens up for us,
presenting us with a possibility that we can refuse, or accept.

Often accepting requires a dose of courage,
since it can take us beyond the comfort of our familiar world
into a place where the rules aren't so clear.
Often it can mean floating on trust alone, on faith alone.
But without saying Yes,
we cannot find the future that some may be crying out for.

Rather than making a list of examples,
I would invite you to think of the times
that you agreed to go through with something
that made a considerable difference for someone,
even though you were dubious,
and even somewhat scared of going beyond your depth.
But later you discovered that some, even many,
were given a new day which could not have come any other way.

Last week it seemed that the biblical texts were telling us
that when we give voice to the voiceless we bring the Word to birth.
This week it would seem that the message is that often enough
the new world, for certain others as well as ourselves,
is only brought to being when we say Yes
to the grace-filled moment that appears before us.

In its way, it brings about a Christmas moment,
as surely as Mary's Yes
in the story of the Annunciation.

Midnight Mass: The Nativity Story

December 25, 2011

Isaiah 9:1-6
Psalm 96:1-3, 11-13
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 1:1-14

In the Christmas story we hear about the small town of Bethlehem which we picture to be situated out among the hills of Judea, with the barren countryside surrounding it. In the distance, shepherds are keeping sheep, but that only comes at the end of the story. For now we know about a census that has brought Joseph, his wife, and an unborn child that is due any day now. They have come to this town but because of the census, the town is overrun with visitors. The family makes do, since there is no available commercial lodging. The stable is nearby, and it is out of the wind. The sudden birth of the child, choosing to come at this inconvenient time, causes a little crisis. But Joseph, probably feeling totally inadequate by now, finds a manger for cover, and the child is born.

Perhaps this is not how you imagine it. But imagine it you do, in your own way. The census, the journey of the displaced, the unwelcoming inn, and the birth of the child. And then the shepherds.

With Caesar Augustus and the census, we sense the Roman empire rattling around in the background, confident that it rules the world. But our focus is on the foreground, where the domestic drama among the lowly people that the Bible calls the 'Anawim are pursuing their lives.

The census is part of the Pax Romana, the universal peace that was accomplished and enforced by the empire. It opened the borders between nations, and made possible the eventual dispersal of the new Christian movement from nation to nation. But there is another side to this story, indicated here by the census. A census probably had three purposes: to tax the colonies, to conscript new soldiers from them, and the corvee, which provided enforced labor. This was the darker side of the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. And the family of Joseph was feeling the burden of it.

But angels from on high came to the shepherds in the fields, and sang Glory to God in the highest. And then they said, "On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." On earth, peace. They announce a reign of peace as if they did not know about the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome. They declare a peace that has nothing to do with taxation, conscription, corvee. Nor does it require military enforcement.

The gospel account contrasts the two worlds, the two declarations of peace. One at each end of the story. In the foreground are the local lives of Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna. In the background the rumblings of the empire of Caesar Augustus. In the foreground canticles are being sung—Magnificat, Benedictus, Nunc Dimittis. In the background the counting of the populace is being calculated. Canticles and calculations; the

songs and the census. Two worlds. And while Rome is busy shaping the world, something else is happening.

Today there are words of peace in the media, with the War in Iraq concluded ten days ago, December 15. The best running account of the realities of the war that I know, is in the comic strip, Doonesbury. This past week it has informed us about the side of the war about which we seldom hear. Some items:

- we are leaving 5000 contractors, at salaries of 200 K plus each;
- since 2003, an estimated 600,000 of a million Christians have been driven from their homes, with a majority leaving Iraq;
- nine years, 4484 American lives, 100,000 Iraqi lives, $1 trillion.

In a devastating account in this week's NCR online, John Dear, the activist peace Jesuit, cites documents that put the count of Iraqis killed at 601,000, six times Doonesbury's count, and that put the price at $3 trillion.

We are justified in concluding that this peace is the peace of the empire. It is Pax Romana, not Gloria in excelsis Deo.

John Dear also cites signs of hope, citing "the Arab Spring, the millions who marched for justice and democracy throughout the Arab world, and the fall of various dictatorships; the ongoing campaign to protect the environment, including the Keystone Tar Sands pipeline protests and last week's protests at the U.N. Global Climate Conference in Durban, South Africa; upcoming elections for Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma; the three heroic African women who won the Nobel Peace Prize; and closer to home, the amazing Occupy movement that has exposed the class warfare by the 1 percent against the 99 percent."

He adds: "The struggle for justice and peace goes on. Millions are engaged. The movements are moving."

He cites the fall of dictatorships. But we might want to be careful here. In today's Christmas Eve edition of the TH, the editorial cartoon, as you no doubt saw, pictures portraits of Ben Laden, Moammar Gadhafi, and Kim Jong Il, each prominently marked DEAD, DEAD, DEAD. And the accompanying tagline was "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." This might be the Christmas of our civil religion more than that of the Bible. If you are like me, you think of the three kings from the east who are only welcome at the Nativity scene after they are dead, dead, dead. This is not the peace of Gloria in excelsis Deo, I think.

Christmas happens where the faithful are gathered—the Anawim, in the biblical phrase. The peace of Christmas is not the peace that comes from above, but rather the peace the works its way up from below, engaging hearts and minds along the way. It is worth remembering in this year of 2011, about to become 2012, that we date our calendars not from the Roman census, but from the obscure birth that is taking place in the stable on the outskirts of a town called Bethlehem, some six miles south of Jerusalem. No one would have guessed it.

Christmas Day: The Incarnation

December 25, 2011

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98:1-6
Hebrews 1:1-6
John 1:1-18

It was earlier, in Advent, that we noted that the liturgy
saves its reflection upon the theme of the Word for Christmas Day.
The Voice of the Baptist was heard then.
But now it is Christmas Day, and time for the Word.

For this, I was waiting on a book to arrive.
Friday it finally came.
After I finished sending my Christmas gifts via Amazon
to my family, scattered from Seattle to Orlando,
I apparently left the website on the wrong settings,
because my niece in Omaha began to receive all my book orders.
She kindly sent the book on to me.

The book is the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*,
a product of the new crop of Jewish scholars
specializing in New Testament studies.
Many of them teach in Christian seminaries and universities.
In fact, Amy-Jill Levine, one of the editors,
is also NT book review editor for the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

After WWII and the systematic slaughter of Jews in Nazi Germany,
Christian biblical scholars began to reflect on how
theological demonization of the Jews contributed to the situation.
A new generation of Christian biblical scholars are trying
to overcome this bias by recovering a sense of the Jewishness
of Jesus, and of Paul, and of the Evangelists.
The rise of Jewish NT scholars seems to be
a reciprocal response from the Jewish faith community.

I was interested to see what my new book had to say
about today's Gospel reading from John.
I've often wondered how the belief in the Trinity
could emerge from Judaism, which in the New Testament period
attracted many converts because of its monotheism.
It made so much more sense
than the elaborate pantheism of Greek and Roman gods.
Think today of the fervent defenders of monotheism in Islam,
and how difficult to imagine a belief in the Trinity
emerging from these circles.

In the book, I think I found my answer.

The Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin says it is thoroughly Jewish.
He has an essay on the Word in John.
He points to a Jewish history of personifying the creative Word of God.

The high, exalted image of the transcendent God,
far above and beyond the created order,
required angels to bridge the distance,
runners or couriers, keeping the information flowing.
The word "Angel" literally means messenger.
Later the image of the Word of God,
as the first productive impulse of the Creator,
was personified in Jewish thought.

In Genesis, the creative word was Fiat: *Let there be*. …
Rabbinic reflection on Exodus
connected that to the name of God: *I Am Who Am*.
The Word of being was the first expression of the Creator God.

So it is with John's Prologue, in today's Gospel.

Genesis says: In the beginning,
when God created the heavens and the earth
—and the earth was without form or shape,
with darkness over the abyss
and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—
Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light."
Let there be light, *Fiat Lux*.

John's Gospel says:
In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. …
What came to be through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;
the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

Nothing here that the rabbis couldn't have said.
The Word is the emanation of the creative divine being.

The Gospel goes on to talk of John the Baptist.
He is not the light, but bore witness to the light.
We have learned everything about John during Advent.
But now the emphasis is on the Word, not the Voice.

The Word has entered the world,
through the creative expressiveness of God.

But then we come to these words:

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
The literally rendering is that he "tented" among us.
So we are still thinking in biblical terms,
for during the desert wanderings,
Yahweh God pitched his tent among the Israelite people.

But to say, "the Word Became Flesh"?
Here we leave the Rabbis behind.
Now we move from the Trinity to the Incarnation,
the mystery that we celebrate on this day,
with this feast of the day. The Word made flesh.

This is not something the rabbis would say.
In fact, it is not what the other Gospels would say.
We can look over the New Testament witnesses
to Jesus status as the Son of God,
and see how the first of the New Testament writers, Paul,
in his introduction to the Romans,
saw Jesus as becoming the Son of God at the Resurrection.
We see how Mark, who was next,
moved this to the earlier moment of Jesus' baptism:
You are my beloved Son.
And then Matthew and Luke, writing even later,
singled out the birth of Christ as the divine moment.
Luke tells about Gabriel telling Mary
that "t*he child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God*."

But John takes us even earlier,
back to the very beginning, at the moment of creation.

But there is more to it than that.
Everyone before him spoke of *the human become divine*.
This is not what John is saying.
Rather, he speaks of *the divine become human*.
He is not pointing to the moment that Jesus became Son of God.
He is imagining the moment that the divine presence
entered the world in human form. This is entirely different.

There are other moments in the New Testament
dwelling on the Word.
I think of Mark's Parable of the Sower.
The seed is the word, and it needs fertile ground.

But those reflections are for the future.
For today the celebration is about the Incarnation,
the Word made Flesh. The divine become human.
The created world now recreated,
transformed by the transcendent God.

The world is transformed,
and all of our Christmas celebrations try to express that reality,
from our elaborate lighting displays,
that attempt to convert ordinary settings into something wondrous,
to the frenzy of shopping and gift listing,
to show to ourselves and each other
that something extraordinary has happened to us
and we are trying to find a response that is adequate,
to the song and carols and chorales,
enchanting our ears with sounds that come only once a year,
reminding us of the singular event we commemorate.

Underlying all of this,
often out of sight of those who celebrate it,
is the Incarnation, the fundamental meaning of Christmas.
And so it is, after the stories of Bethlehem, the Magi and the star,
we come to today's feast of the Day, and reflect upon the Word.
The Word made flesh.

The Octave Day of the Nativity of the Lord / Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God

January 1, 2012

Numbers 6:22-27	The blessing of Aaron
Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8	May his face shine upon us
Galatians 4:4-7	God sent his son
Luke 2:16-21	The shepherds come

Today the liturgy begins the new year with a potpourri of themes,
one for each of the different reasons this day is celebrated.
We begin with the blessing of Aaron, blessing the coming year,
as we would begin a meal with a blessing.

The Gospel for this Octave Day of the Nativity
is one final report from the Christmas season,
as we hear once again about the shepherds leaving their flocks
and coming to the stable at Bethlehem.
However, unlike the Mass of Christmas Dawn,
today's reading has one more verse:
that which mentions the circumcision of Jesus.
This day used to be known as the feast of the Circumcision,
and it is still known as such in the Eastern Churches.

But there is one more title, and one more reading.
For the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God,
we have a text from the letter to the Galatians.

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law, …

This sounds less than adequate, since Mary is not even named,
let alone singled out for celebration.
But there is more going on here than would appear at first impressions.

We do not often give Paul's letters much consideration in homilies,
and one good reason is that they so often require background.
So it is with the letter to the Galatians.
I would ask your indulgence to fill in the setting with a few strokes.

Paul was fairly angry in writing to the Galatians.
When he was gone,
they welcomed another group of Christian missionaries,
who were less bold than Paul and insisted that Christians
not leave Jewish practices behind.
Paul's response was strong, even harsh at times.
But in the central part of this six chapter letter
he makes his case for moving beyond
circumcision and the law of Moses.

This is tricky, because he, like other Jews and Christians,
believed that the law was given by God,
so it could not be mistaken.

Instead of claiming that, Paul says it was temporary.
He compares it to the situation in a Roman estate,
where a slave was assigned the task
of preparing the young son and heir of the patriarch
for a life of leadership.

But for the time being, he was under the control of his tutor, a slave.
Paul compared the law to the tutor,
whose authority, he insists, has now run its course.

He spelled out by contrasting the time before
—what "we were," he says—with what has now come to pass.
He has already run this by the Galatians just prior to this:
WE WERE under the law;
BUT NOW faith has come, and we have put on Christ.
Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,
we are now heirs according to the promise.

With the coming of Christ, he says, we are now adults.

Then he says it again,
this time for those who were once pagans before coming Christian.
You WERE once slaves to the elemental spirits, the pagan gods.
But now …
—and here we have today's reading:
The fullness of time has come.

God sent his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law,
that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters,
and the proof is the Spirit within us crying out Abba Father.

And if we are sons and daughters,
then also heirs of the estate.

I have made this little excursion into the middle part of Galatians
in order to point out some of the things
this brief passage in today's liturgy is saying.

For one, it echoes the sentiments of the Annunciation story,
since it is through a woman—a woman's assent—
that the new reality has occurred.

For another, through the Spirit within us
we share the prayer and cry of Jesus: Abba, Father.

We are adopted children, entering into the family.

But what I would most like to mention
is the image in which Paul has framed his thought.
As Christians, we have left childhood behind
and emerged into the freedom of adulthood.

I would like to connect that to the transition
we are passing through in the Church today,
which seems to me to be another kind of emerging into adulthood.

A book I have been reading during the Holyday season,
one that I truly recommend, is a collection of essays
called *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*.
It is edited by Michael Lacey and Francis Oakley,
and includes contributions from many leading Catholic scholars.

As noted in the Prologue, a central theme of the book
is that when tensions arise
between official teachings and the voice of conscience,
Catholics increasingly tend to follow their consciences first.

"This quiet insistence upon thinking for oneself
is the chief characteristic of Catholic modernity,
and it puts stress upon all the inherited conventions
of traditional relations between the hierarchy and laity,
the ordained the merely baptized,
the teaching church and the learning church."

This is not made any less troublesome by the fact
that due to a shortage of vowed and ordained church persons,
lay people have been asked to take up
many of the decision-making positions
at the local and diocesan levels,
which in turn has encouraged them to think for themselves.
It is not simply a matter of being influenced by the culture,
though a secular culture in which persons
live competent and sophisticated lives
cannot help but make demands
on those persons' relationship to the church.

Another way to say this
is that many of the censures that Leo XIII put in place,
requiring unquestioning obedience,
were inspired by a fear of a secularism detached from the church
—think Marx, and Nietzsche, and Freud—
which threatened to undermine the values
that the church had struggled to place in society.

But it was positive values of this same secular movement
that Vatican II affirmed,
with the invitation to work toward the human vision it suggested.
The ideal of perfection shifted from a discipline of obedience
to a vision of the dignity of the human person.

Once the change is made, there is no turning back.
Once lay people and non-ordained religious are invited
to perform as adults in the church, the change cannot be undone.
In this, there is, to my mind, hope.
The change will be neither clean nor simple,
but it will be inevitable.

In other words, I believe we are at another moment
in the movement toward mature freedom
that Paul declares in his Galatian letter.

In a similar manner,
the maturity shown by the Virgin's assent at the Annunciation
expresses a freedom that shows her to be the Mother of the Church,
as the exemplar of Christian freedom.

All of which is appropriate to celebrate at the turning of the year.

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 8, 2012

Isaiah 60:1-6	Rise up Jerusalem! Your light has come.
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13.	The kings of the East shall offer gifts
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6	The mystery revealed to the Gentiles
Matthew 2:1-12	The Magi arrive

For some time it has been a whimsy of mine
that the gifts of the Magi were not only giving something,
but they were also giving something up.

These messengers appear on the scene
from beyond the horizon of the Judean world,
and so we take them to be representatives of the Gentile world.
And just as the first day of Christmas
celebrates the coming of the Christ to the Jewish world,
so 12 days later—14 this year—the Magi signal
the coming of the Christ to the world of the Gentiles.

And they come bearing gifts.
Gold, frankincense, myrrh.
Each has been given a symbolic meaning.

But that symbolic meaning can also signal
what they are handing over, giving away, putting out of their lives.
In each case, they are relinquishing a devotion,
in favor of another devotion, another homage,
that they offer now, to the Messiah.

The love of gold, a special devotion, might be called
by the simple name of greed.
The wise men hand over not only the gift of gold,
but their habit of greed as well.
This is an act of true devotion.

The frankincense, used to give homage to divinity,
can be seen as indicating their homage to true divinity.
But in so doing, they are foregoing false worships as well.
This too is an act of devotion,
and relinquishment of past devotions.

The myrrh is commonly seen as the sign of mortality,
since its heavy perfume was used at funerals.
In their gift of myrrh, the magi are not only

presenting the Messiah with a meaningful offering,
they are giving up a devotion to the culture of death.
In leaving behind the fascination with,

and practical relationship with, killing,
on the behalf of a Gentile world
they relinquish their attachment to a culture of death.

But when we look around us,
whether we call our culture Christian or not,
we can see that we who are Gentiles have not let go
of our attachment for these things.

Certainly not greed.
When an Occupy Wall Street movement
can make the slogan, "We are the 99," into a national cry,
we can be sure that something is culturally awry
in our relationship to wealth.
When we mock the jobless and homeless,
when candidates to political office can sneer at food-stamp families,
we can be sure that our devotion is given to something other
than the compassionate God.

Nor have we banished false gods from our lives.
Celebrity culture, and with it,
an extreme sexualization of our culture, would argue otherwise.
If our god is that which dominates our concern, our devotion,
we need only look to the internet and the uses to which it is put,
to be clear it is otherwise.
The ordinary newspage online suddenly shows a blazing sidebar
with the heading, *Christ Is Lord*,
over a picture of a fetching young woman in a white cowboy hat,
with a knowing look and a decidedly non-western outfit,
telling us how to meet Christian singles.

As for a culture of death,
consult the last page of this week's *Time Magazine*,
an interview with a professional, now-retired, military sniper,
responsible for 160 certified killings for the American cause.
Sniping kills at a distance, without warning, without knowing,
without facing the one doing the harm.
Meanwhile, our military efforts are increasingly depending
on the use of selected assassination and drone warfare.
Drones kill people in the Middle East,
but are flown by operators in the States.
It is another form of sniping.

So perhaps my whimsical notion that the Gentiles
have given these things up is just that—whimsy.
And has nothing to do with truth.

But let us imagine that the magi
intend to make this offering, to give it up.

Because of what they see in the infant Messiah,
the promise that they see there.

Perhaps they see in this infant,
the promise that the child offers to the world,
the possibility of overcoming false devotions.

Perhaps they see, instead of greed, a new life for its victims.
Instead of the allure of wealth, an attention to poverty.
Maybe they glimpse the possibility of disciples
spending their lives in alleviating its cruelest effects.
Or even in adopting it as a way of simplifying their lives.

Or maybe they see in this infant
the possibility of a community devoted to peace-making,
challenging and thwarting to the best of their ability
the culture of death and death-dealing.
A devotion to the dignity of human life,
rather than the harsh power experienced by those
who choose to terminate it.

Or maybe they simply see the end of false devotions, false gods,
wherever they appear, distorting lives for lifetimes.
Maybe they have taken their clue from the star they followed,
like the North Star, guiding in the true direction.

The feast of the Epiphany gets its name
from the ancient Greek for "manifestation,"
and is said to refer to "the sudden realization or comprehension
of the (larger) essence or meaning of something."

Certainly a part, no doubt the central part,
of the meaning of the Epiphany is the manifestation of the divine,
shining forth from the child like the star that brought them there.
But with that epiphany is another
—the promise pointing to a new age made possible
by the community of his disciples—
an age of advocacy, simplicity, peace-making,
and authentic devotion to the God who calls us to them.

Second Sunday In Ordinary Time

January 15, 2012

1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19	The Lord called to Samuel
Psalm 40:2, 7-10	Here I am, Lord
I Corinthians 6:13-15	The Lord is for the body
John 1:35-42	Behold the Lamb of God

There is some consolation to be found
in the realization that the scriptures recognize
that sometimes we require a second try.
    Sometimes the first attempt at discipleship
    requires a later adjustment.

We get a hint of this with the boy Samuel,
who makes three false attempts before he gets it right
—with the priest Eli's help.
    Samuel is alert and eager, but he needs a redirection.
    He is only too quick to respond,
        but in his experience there is only one place to go.
        He has yet to learn there are others.

And then there is the apostle Andrew.
    Only John's Gospel gives us the story
    about how Andrew brought his brother, Simon, to Jesus.

But Andrew himself began as a disciple of John the Baptist.
It is John himself who sends Andrew to Jesus.
    It is something of a surprise to see John tell one of his disciples,
    No. There is the one you should follow.
        Not me.

And so Andrew adjust his coordinates, changes directions,
and becomes a disciple of Jesus.
    And then he, in turn, becomes a guide,
    to bring his brother, Simon, to Jesus as well.

I suspect we all have friends
who have experienced such a redirection of their calling.
    Many of those who began the journey with us
    have gone in different ways.
        Classmates, those who have been in our formation group
        or seminary class, have shifted their focus to other fields.

And so often they have become the disciples
that they otherwise may not have been.

You have your own examples. I have mine.
These I am going to mention are not the only ones,

nor are they necessarily the best examples.
But they occur to me as illustrations of the shifting response
to the call of discipleship.

Rick Mihm has been in the news a lot lately.
A while back he was dealing with infestations
at the Dubuque Rescue Mission, where he is director.
More recently, he has been interviewed
about their building project on Elm and 24th.
He has made the Rescue Mission a prominent feature
in the consciousness of Dubuquers.

I first met Rick as a student at Loras.
Later, he was ordained and the chaplain at Loras.
But he left that position to marry
and open the Hope House Catholic Worker,
with Mary Moody, his wife.

Subsequently, they started New Hope Catholic Worker farm,
south of Dubuque.
Rick and his father built the two story farmhouse themselves,
on donated land at the headwaters of the Tetes de Morts creek.
When the opportunity came,
he took on the directorship of the Rescue Mission,
bicycling to work from the farm.

It is likely that Rick would have been
an influential priest in the Archdiocese.
But it is inarguable that he would not have accomplished
what he is doing now.

Sr. Mary McCauley, BVM, has been a long time friend.
She was an effective administrator
and a member of the BVM community's administrative board.
When her term was up and it came time to look for a new ministry,
she went with her skills and served as parish administrator
in Monona, Marquette, and Postville.
Occasionally I did an evening presentation
for her adult education program.

Little did she anticipate the change in her life,
from administrator to prophet.
When the Immigration department performed in Postville
the largest raid on immigrants to that time,
Mary's vocation took an unexpected turn.
When overnight hundreds of Spanish-speaking immigrants
turned to her for help, she responded.
This was entirely new territory for her.

No longer was it a matter of management,
it was a call to compassion.
She found in her the ability to communicate compassion,
even without the necessary language,
and she became an effective advocate.

She remains an effective advocate,
even though she is no longer on the job at Postville.
Theoretically, she is retired.
But she has been transformed into a national spokesperson
for the plight of the immigrant.

Her sense of vocation couldn't have taken a more abrupt turn,
but in her response she has tapped into an unexpected reservoir.
Her gifts of ministry, advocacy,
and prophetic calling-to-account, tempered with compassion,
emerged to define her in ways
that administrative posts would never have promised.

My third example is not a personal acquaintance.
And it may not even fit my lesson.
But it is timely, since today is his birthday.
I am thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
whom I have never met.

But I have heard
that when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* was forming,
the old guard, long active in the struggle,
Revs. Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, Steele, and others,
realized that with their long history they carried baggage
that might impede the effort.
So they looked down the line
and selected for their first president young Dr. King.

He had been active, and performed well in some actions till now,
but he was relatively clean.
And he was elected first president of the Conference.

I do not know if this story is true, though it has been vouched for.
It has the ring of legend.

But if it is true, is shows one more example
of how what may seem a fortuitous happenstance,
an accident of history,
can change the direction in one's life
and open up a call to discipleship.

The call cannot always be predicted.
In important ways, it can never be.

And frequently it takes us in directions we hadn't anticipated
—even if they are not as dramatic as these examples.

Perhaps I've wandered from my theme.
I began by talking about leaving what seemed to be a true call
for another that proves its own truth.
And now I am talking about being open to the truth that calls you.
Which may simply mean persisting with what you began,
discovering in it your own truth.

Maybe so. But what underlies all of these, I believe,
is the quality of response,
answering to the need before you
with whatever you have to give to it.

It is in the response, I think, that we discover the call.
In the answer we give that we find the question.

*This was actually the Montgomery Improvement Association, and involved the earlier Montgomery Bus Boycott

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 22, 2012

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

The liturgical church year has the shape of a story,
and it is a story of discipleship.
The Ordinary Year begins with the feast of the Baptism,
and then proceeds into a string of stories
about being called to discipleship.

Today's stories are about
thoroughgoing and complete response to the call.
There is little that is obviously shared in the reading about Jonah
and the call of the first four disciples, except that.
We might note that in Matthew's Gospel
Peter is called "Simon, son of Jonah."
So there is a family resemblance,
but that is probably not the main reason for their pairing here today.

But there is something more, as a matter of fact.
In both of these call and response stories
there is more than meets the eye.
There is in each case a backstory.
More than what we see here, today.

This is true, I think, of every vocation story, every call.
There is the simple appearance it takes from a distance.
For some of us, this is the look from outside
that our relatives, or parishioners, have concerning vocations.
And here I am talking about vocations
to a life explicitly linked to religion.
What I am saying is probably true of all vocations,
all relationships, all commitments—
but for the moment I am being more specific.

From a distance it looks simple, though mysterious.
God calls. The person responds, leaving everything and following.
Not unlike today's story of the four disciples.
They left everything and followed him.
Or the spectacularly decisive conversions of Nineveh.

Even to those called, it might seem like that. At first.
Here the distance is that of "early on," versus "later."

Take the story of Jonah.

What we hear today is pretty simple:
Jonah makes his brief prophetic pitch,
and the king of Nineveh sits right up and listens.
Soon the entire nation is busy displaying signs of repentance.
Sackcloth and ashes. Even the cattle, it seems.

But what we do not hear today
is that this story is deeply ironic,
because Jonah desperately did not want Nineveh to repent.
Nineveh is the very image of the enemy, in Israel's eyes.
It was the author of her darkest days.
And Jonah did not want Nineveh to be saved.

In fact, when he was first called he jumped in a boat
and went, not east, but directly west,
heading for Spain, then called Tarshish.
That was when the famous fish brought him back.

The Lord again commissioned him to head to Nineveh,
which he did this time, only to perform the minimum.
Once a day, as he crossed the city, he said,
"Forty days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed."
Nothing more. No conditions, to options. Just that.

He was hoping no one would hear him.
Yet they did, and to his utter dismay, they repented.
And to his profound disappointment, the city was spared.

Jonah's story is a satire on the narrow vision
of the post-exilic community of Israel,
when it was so concerned about identity issues
that it closed its eyes to the larger world, looked inward,
and forgot about the call to be a light to the Gentiles.

So today's story has a backstory,
and it has to do with the call of the unwilling.
We know today that there is something larger
that Jonah is missing.
And we are reminded that we do not see the full picture.
No more than did Jonah.

And there is today's account of the four disciples.
Peter is representative, and his story develops
in ways he couldn't anticipate at this stage of his discipleship.

We know the stories of Peter.
We know the story of his denial about knowing Jesus,
when Jesus was in his last hours,
and Peter was not able to summon up the resources

to admit his discipleship at that time.

But his issues began earlier,
when he successfully answered Jesus' quiz:
Who do you say I am?
Peter was the one who recognized that Jesus
was the Christ, the Messiah.
(It is at this moment that Jesus calls him son of Jonah,
according to Matthew's account.)

But Peter's misconception about the coming Messiah,
common to those of his day, was that of a power figure,
a Jewish Caesar Augustus who would restore
the kingdom to Israel in a decisive manner.
So he entered a bitter argument with Jesus,
only to lose it at the Transfiguration,
when the voice from heaven called him to Listen to Jesus.

His misunderstanding prompted Jesus
to renegotiate the call we heard today.
The new version: If you would be my disciple,
deny yourself, take up your cross, and come follow me.

Peter discovered there was more to discipleship
than what he anticipated by the lake.
His difficulties would continue right up to the high priest's courtyard.
When it came to denying, he denied, not himself,
but knowing the one taking up the cross.

But James and John, sons of Zebedee, summoned in today's gospel,
also have a backstory.
As they approached Jerusalem, their ambition got the better of them,
and that was when they petitioned for the seats of power,
one to the right and one to the left, of the Messiah,
when he came into his kingdom.
This angered the other disciples, it is said.

The brothers' request was answered—
denied in the form they asked it, but reformulated
in terms of the baptism and the cup that they would share.

At the garden we understand what the cup means,
when Jesus prays to his Father that
This cup be taken away.
But your will be done:
It is the cup of the cross.

From a distance, the calls look simple,
and direct, and wholehearted.

But they have backstories.

There is the summons to distasteful mission,
that seems an affront to all one believes in.
Though, like Jonah, we do not see the larger picture.
Sometimes, in hindsight, we can see that ourselves.

There is the call to go deeper, into territory
that was entirely unexpected in the first round.
The call is renegotiated as new obstacles,
new options, new directions,
make their appearance on the scene.

There is the call to move beyond myself and my ambitions,
even to abandon them in a spell of suffering,
or disorientation, or humility, or another kind of self-loss.
The summons is to lose myself in ways
that seem too complete,
because I find myself beyond that curtain.

The call turns out to be not about me at all,
but about I can offer, what I am in a position to fulfill,
being the one in the place to fulfill it.
It requests me to disappear in the need, into the call.
And then, when it no longer matters to me,
I might discover who I am.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2012

Deuteronomy 18:15-20	A Prophet like Moses
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9	Harden not your hearts
1 Corinthians 7:32-35	Marriage and Anxiety
Mark 1:21-28	Unclean Spirit in the Synagogue

If you were going to dramatize the Gospel of Mark,
you would have to make much of today's story
of the possessed man in the synagogue of Capernaum.
It is the beginning of the conflict of the narrative,
the start of all the trouble.

I found this out after I had written a musical based on this Gospel
and even had a chance to audition it with some Broadway producers.
Their advice was to develop the dramatic qualities,
something I hadn't, in my innocence, even thought about.
So I began to investigate,
and discovered that this story we heard today
launches the dramatic conflict, after all the preliminaries
of John's preaching, the baptism and calling disciples
have been performed.

So I wrote a piece to announce the coming disturbances,
with these words:

He went into Capernaum
and went into the synagogue
and there he saw a man with an unclean spirit.
Right inside the synagogue
He found the poor demoniac
and brought him back to health.
What's it all mean?

I don't know but I'm sure it's gonna be
Trouble.
I don't know but I'm sure it's gonna be
Trouble.

He said to the demoniac:
Would you like your spirit back?
He said to the spirit:
Demon, get out of him.
The demon threw him in a fit,
And when he had enough of it,
He left him high, but left him.
What's it all mean?
I don't know but I'm sure it's gonna be

Trouble. …

The crowd in great astonishment
saw the spirit's banishment
Saw the man released from his enthrallment:
He teaches with authority,
it isn't like the Pharisee.
They wondered what the devil it all meant.
What's it all mean?
I don't know but I'm sure it's gonna be Trouble

The song was called *Demon*,
following my general principle of having one-word titles.
However, I was later to discover my mistake.
While Mark uses the word demon in some places,
he doesn't in this story.
I was to find that he uses a rather strange term,
one that almost seems a contradiction,
when he is speaking of demons.
The term is "unclean spirit."
Three times it appears in this story,
showing that Mark is insisting on this language.

When we think of unclean, we think of an excess of loose matter,
very physical stuff. Very material.
It is just the opposite of spirit.
But here those ideas are combined. I wondered why.

The answer turns out to be found in Jewish ritual,
where the holy and the unclean are placed in opposition.
Mark is borrowing language from the ritual language of Judaism
to describe the struggle at the heart of Jesus' story.

Up to now we have heard of the Holy Spirit.
It came upon Jesus at his Baptism;
it accompanied him into the desert where he encountered Satan.
And now the unclean spirits recognize him as the "Holy One,"
endowed with the Holy Spirit.
The coming struggle is set.
It will pit Jesus and the Holy Spirit
against his opponents, and the unclean spirits.

Actually this is the language of the opposition from Jerusalem,
who picture the world as arranged
in zones of holiness, versus uncleanness.
At the center is the holy of holies, in the holy place, the Temple.
This is situated in the Holy City, Jerusalem,
which is in the center of the Holy Land.
And so forth, as one moves out in gradations of decreasing holiness,

toward greater degress of uncleanness.

They had rules for maintaining holiness
and preserving the conditions
that prevent the invasion of the unclean,
preventing defilement.

This was the world that Mark shows Jesus operating in.
His healing miracles turn out to be sites of struggle
between his healing actions and the rules
that he appears to ignore in order to accomplish them.

Today's story shows an unclean spirit in the holy place of the synagogue.
Other stories show him touching a leper,
being touched by a hemorrhaging woman,
lifting a supposedly dead child,
sending a legion of demons
into a herd of pigs, an unclean food, into the abyss of the lake.
And so forth.
It is as if his actions are at war with the regulations.

An prominent example is the synagogue story that follows after today's
at the end of the week that this story begins.
It is a story of a man with a withered hand,
another form of uncleanness.

On that occasion the masters of the synagogue
are watching Jesus closely,
suspecting that he might decide to cure the man,
against all the rules about doing works on the Sabbath,
especially in the synagogue!

They were right of course.
In their view, this was unnecessary.
Their tradition was to maintain the holiness of the Sabbath
by refraining from unnecessary work.
The man's healing could easily wait until the next day.

But Jesus seems to have had other ideas,
and they centered on what God would want for this man
to have happen, on this day, in this place.
What was God about?
In other words, what is holiness?

Notice something about these categories of holy and unclean.
They make holiness equivalent to cleanness.
It is a metaphor that expresses the idea
that holiness is the same as purity, that is, cleanness.

Purity is a theory of holiness, but not the only one.

Jesus seems to be championing another theory of holiness entirely.
His has to do with compassion.
We see this in the story of the leper:
Moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand
and touched the leper, and said: Be made clean.

Compassion differs from purity on a number of points.
It reaches out instead of holding back.
It allows itself to get involved,
rather than avoiding contact that might defile one.
It is known by what it does, rather than by what it doesn't do.
It is inclusive, rather than excluding.

It is another image of holiness, what it means to be holy.
And Mark's Gospel seems to be making this point very assertively.

It seems to me that we have all grown up with the idea
that holiness is the same as purity.
It is perhaps liberating that Jesus, in Mark's view,
was against this idea, favoring compassion as authentic holiness,
compassion with its need for *empathy*,
seeing oneself in those who suffer;
courage, convincing oneself to take action
when it seems unwise or unsafe;
and *persistence*, sometimes called commitment,
in order to carry through.

Meanwhile, purity, as a spiritual ideal,
was given to the Pharisees.
At least, that was how Mark saw it
in his narrative portrait of the Christ.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 12, 2012

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46	Law code on leprosy
Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11	I turn in time of trouble
1 Corinthians 10:31-11	Avoid giving offense
Mark 1:40-45	A leper is cleansed

It doesn't take much reflection to realize
that treatment of leprosy in ancient times
was undertaken more for the benefit of society
than for that of the leper.
What little we heard in the first reading is enough to tell us
that the life of the leper was not an easy one.

Medical anthropologists tell us that our understanding of leprosy,
namely, Hodgkin's disease, was unknown in ancient Israel.
There are not traces there, unlike in other nations.
So what they meant by that name seems to have been
a cluster of various skin problems, all gathered under the one rubric.

And the religious word, "rubric," seems appropriate,
because it was viewed more as a concern about ritual uncleanness
than medical disease.
Hence, the instructions to clear matters with the priest,
rather than a medical professional.

What was primary in the ancient view
was to keep the defilement of leprosy away from the settlement,
thereby saving the community from danger of the unclean.

Most societies have such rules.
And if it isn't leprosy, it is something else
that can serve the same social function.

Michel Foucault, who was in the habit of beginning his books
with startling and memorable images,
tells us, in the opening chapter of *Madness and Civilization,*
that leprosy disappeared from Europe during the 15th century.
At the edge of every major city the leprosarium stood empty.
Within a few years, however, they were all filled again.
This time with the insane.
And with that the special "treatment" of the insane
began in Western civilization.
Is it always the case that societies identify a certain population
that it isolates and banishes to serve the purpose of symbolizing its purity?
Do we have that today? I think so.

Leprosy judgments are skin deep.

For us, these judgments take the form of racism.
Our society is content to fill our prisons with black males,
cordoned off from the common functions of society.
Recent articles have made certain grave points
about this warehousing of human beings.
We now have, in the US, more people imprisoned
than Stalin had with his gulags.

Currently there a 2.5 million people in prisons and jails in this country.
Black men are imprisoned at a rate of 6.5 over white men.
In the 40 years of the War of Drugs,
black Americans have been incarcerated
at 10 times the rate of whites.

Lepers were banned from the settlements.
With this in mind, take another example: sex offenders.
Without denying the harm they do,
there are real questions about how we deal with them.
The *Telegraph Herald* has offered a number of editorials
about the ineffectiveness of the current policy
of cordoning off zones in which they are forbidden to enter.
The proliferation of these zones
has made it impossible to enforce the law,
and has encouraged the offenders not to report in.
In Dubuque those complaint with regulations likely
end up living in a trailer park at the end of Peru Road.

Then there is the matter of clustering all types,
from seriously dangerous offenders
to 16-year-old youths who may have had a tryst
with a girlfriend a year younger, hence a minor.
Leprosy covers a multitude of troubles.

Or maybe a Bob Burke, given a sentence more severe
than that for many violent crimes, 30 years in prison,
for admittedly betraying a trust, and creepy voyeurism,
where he will no doubt be roughed up
by a system that preys on such persons.

The excess of these measures are not taken
for the benefit of actual prevention,
but primarily to signal that something is being done.
They are symbolic.

Skin color and banishment combine in a third example:
the panic over immigrant populations.
Brown skin seems to be an essential component in this syndrome,

since our northern border doesn't seem to generate
the same apprehension.
Canadians are like us. Not a problem.
But it is on the southern border that we want a wall.

The key term is "illegal,"
often used as a noun and in the plural—the illegals.
The laws of Leviticus made it illegal for lepers to enter the settlements.
The symbol was reinforced by the force of law.

Our own illegals find it nearly impossible
to pursue a legal course of entry.
Which suggests that legality isn't the issue at all
—it is the mechanism for maintaining the symbolism
of warding off foreign elements
that threaten to compromise the authentic community.

Today Jesus gives us the example of ministering to the leper.
This is part of what we understand Christian activity to be.
But there is a problem.
The problem is that the leper is invisible
—that is the point of the banishment.
The leper is to remain out of sight,
and out of sight is out of mind.

I am put in mind of the drawing
for this Sunday's column in the Witness.
Every week I include a line drawing to go with the column.
The drawings are contained within a dark-lined border
that acts like a box.

This week it pictured Jesus
and a circle of Christians singing a song.
The song is what is sometimes known as Beck's Our Father.
They are praying among themselves.
Only one of them is noticing that at the edge of the box
Jesus is encountering a leper.
The leper is not in the box.
The leper is outside the box, wanting to get in.

But that was not how it came out in the newspaper.
Probably for production reasons,
the whole drawing was put inside another box,
and so the leper was not stranded entirely outside.

It is a small thing.
And I am assured by friendly readers
that the point being made is still quite clear.

But it illustrates something.
Now the leper is no longer invisible.
Once inside, he can be seen; he needn't be sought out.
He's been brought in out of the cold.

But in our own dealings with lepers, they remain invisible.
We do not have people pointing them out.
They are the homeless when it's *not* Thanksgiving.
They are the handicapped who are *not* featured
in human interest stories on TV.
In fact, we need to school ourselves to see them.

I have presented three examples.
These are already known.
They have been pointed out by the media and web articles on the net.
They have to become visible to us.
It requires discernment as much as compassion.

Having said this much, I now come back to the gospel story
with a certain degree of surprise.
We rather take it for granted that Jesus touches the leper,
but it certainly was not inevitable.
It was rather out of the way.

It says something about the direction
of the ministry that Jesus pursued,
and the concerns of the church
that still celebrates and remembers him,
and acts in his name and presence among us.

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 19, 2012

Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25	In the desert a way
Psalm 41:2-3, 4-5, 13-14	Heal me, for I have sinned
2 Corinthians 1:18-22	Not "yes" and "no, " but "yes"
Mark 2:1-12	A person paralyzed

Everyone has a say in the Gospel story today.
Everyone, that is, except the person at the center of attention,
who lies in front of them all, like a prime exhibit.
Jesus makes himself clear.
The Scribes make their opinion known as well,
though they don't have much to say.
Still, they get it said.
And the four friends who bring the paralyzed person,
themselves not speaking much, but their care and concern
in persistently making their way to Jesus,
even to opening the roof
to make a passage for the paralyzed person,
this speaks volumes as well.

But what about the person himself?
Not a word. Not a gesture.
Only the final report:
He rose, picked up his mat at once,
and went away in the sight of everyone.

So—what if he got his say?
What if the local media came around afterward to interview him,
as we know would have happened today?
What would he say for himself?

What sin did he commit that made him paralyzed?
What sin was removed that enabled him to walk again?

He wouldn't be able to say.
It wasn't any one sin that made him paralyzed,
not as if one act suddenly froze him up.
Nothing like that.
What kind of sin could do that, anyway?
No, more likely it was a gradual process,
a gradual loss of action, listlessness of will.
It likely happened over time. He didn't notice it.
Suddenly, it was there, after a long fading away.

But now he is restored.
Apparently it is nothing that he has done that deserves this.
It is a gift—of his four friends, of Jesus,

and of God, who forgives.
A gift is without attachments.

Today we hear from the prophet Second-Isaiah.
He is reporting God's message to restored Israel,
returned from captivity in Babylon.
After they them are told that this is new and unprecedented,
that a people be restored to their former place,
something more is added.
God points out that they did not deserve this renewal,
that they did not ask for it,
but they are given the gift of renewal anyway.
It is a gift.
God, who has created the world, is the author of newness.
And now a new moment is given Israel.

This prophet is fond of using images
to envision the return and restoration of Israel.
One favorite image is that of people being healed.
Sight is restored; lameness overcome.
A newly empowered people greets the new day.
The effect is collective, cumulative.

One of the hints the gospel makes
is that Jesus' work of healing announces the new day for Israel.
There is something afoot now
that will lift their time of oppression and malaise.
There is new life.
Something unprecedented is happening.

There will be blind persons who come to see,
and in that a new understanding will grow.
There will be deaf people who gain their hearing;
lepers who are cleansed; demons who will be cast out.
And with them, the plagues that bedevil the people will be cast out.

But today we hear about a paralyzed person.
And in the paralysis is an image of lost ability to act.
It may reflect a loss of desire, or a lack of ambition.
It may be an image of paralyzed will,
an inability to choose, to decide for a future.

As a physical ailment, it is a form of bondage,
restricting the person's range of living,
a blight on life itself.

In the forgiveness, Jesus announces a lifting
of the pressure that caused the harm.

The forgiveness is unmerited; it is a gift.
It speaks of complete newness,
as the new day begins for the paralyzed man.
As a story about release from bondage it promises Jubilee,
an era of second chances. A time of new beginning.

We are on the cusp of Lent.
It is a time of promised renewal;
a renewal that is God-given, not earned.
And yet it is a time of turning anew
to accept the possibility of the gift.

Paralysis may describe our personal situation.
The lifting of the burden of the paralyzed person
shows us the possibility of overcoming
any spiritual paralysis we may feel.
Just as his lifting the burden of his mat, to take it away,
shows us the possibility of our response to the gift,
accepting the newness and walking with it.

Paralysis may describe our social situation,
whether communal, or political, or ecclesial.
Certainly there are examples in political life
in which the inability to resolve issues at a logjam
seem to be due only to lack of will,
issues of welfare, immigration, environment
—you can supply your own items to the list.

And certainly there are examples in church life
that seem insoluble only because of a certain gridlock
of human fears, passions, or conflicting interests.
Again, you can make your own list.

But today we see that the resolution of social paralyses
begins here at home, with the renewal offered by Lent.
We have an opportunity to move into the season
with hope as well as resolve.

We have a chance to make plans,
and the assurance that our resolve will be met
with a gift of forgiveness and release.

This word is given today especially for those who feel
that there is something that can no longer be changed,
no longer be dealt with, that it is too late.
That things have become too entrenched.

Today Jesus is shown healing,
not a fever, not a skin ailment, but *paralysis*
—supposedly the end of all action.
    It is a word for those who no longer harbor hope,
    but have decided to make do.
        It is not a time of New Year's resolution,
        but of responding to the God who calls us into fullness of life.

It is Lent that points to the Resurrection,
Easter life.

First Sunday of Lent

February 26, 2012

Genesis 9:8-15	Noah's Rainbow Sign
Psalm 25:4-9	Teach me your paths
1 Peter 3:18-22	Noah and Baptism
Mark 1:12-15	the Desert Temptation

Every year the First Sunday of Lent makes us an offer.
By showing us Jesus spending 40 days in the desert,
it invites us to enter Lent with repentance and resolve.

But this year we have a choice.
In the Gospel we hear about the 40 days in the desert,
but in the reading from Genesis we hear
about Noah and his family,
and we know about the 40 days of the flood.
So, 40 days in the desert or 40 days in the boat?
Which will it be?

We are fairly familiar with the metaphor of the desert.
Time in the desert speaks of quiet time,
time for meditation, reflection and introspection.
But we do not have ready associations for time in the ark.
To put it another way:
Why should the first reading of the first Sunday of Lent be about Noah?
What is the Noah story about?

Perhaps it is about survival.
I am put in mind of something a friend told me last week.
She is in a book club that allows each member in turn
to name the book they are to read.
This time it is a novel called, *Patriots*, by James Wesley Rawles.
It is described as pro-gun and pro-Christian.
Part of the blurb on Amazon,
which I offer, to give you a taste of it, goes like this:

America faces a full-scale socioeconomic collapse in the near future. The stock market plummets, hyperinflation cripples commerce and the mounting crisis passes the tipping point. Practically overnight, the fragile chains of supply and high-technology infrastructure fall, and wholesale rioting and looting grip every major city. As hordes of refugees and looters pour out of the cities, a small group of friends living in the Midwest desperately try to make their way to a safe-haven ranch in northern Idaho.

I suppose you can read the Flood story in these terms.
Though it is hard to imagine Noah wearing an ammunition belt.
I know my friend is struggling with what to make of the book.

Another possible association one might make
is with an old moral dilemma called the lifeboat scenario.
It typically is posed like this:
"You are drifting in a lifeboat with another survivor of a shipwreck.
The two of you have a single piece of bread left.
What do you do? Share, or fight?"
There are many variations, but they all depict
a closed world with insufficient goods.
And the question raised is what moral action is called for.

I am offering these dire speculations not only because
they are somewhat vaguely suggested by the story of Noah and his wife,
but also because this grim vision of desperation individualism
is current these days,
and is often considered the way to be truly American,
as in the book entitled, *Patriots*,
or even truly Christian,
a name that has been getting a lot of play lately.

And after all, the story of the Flood
presents a picture of a world gone bad,
with God deciding the clean house,
leaving only one family to carry on.

Against this image I would like to offer another,
and along the way suggest that it doesn't require a punishing God
for sin to produce unpleasant results for the sinner.

My alternative understanding of the story
turns on the meaning of a word, and the word is ARK.
What is an ark?
We think of it as a very large boat.
In our minds it is broad and long, with a kind of dumpy shape.
We've known this since childhood.

But Noah's ark is not the only item with that name.
There is also the Ark of the Covenant—
the traveling shrine, not unlike a cedar chest with carrying poles—
in which the sacred tablets were stored.
Another "ark" in the Jewish tradition
is the cabinet-like enclosure in the synagogue,
where the sacred scrolls are housed.

What all of these have in common is that they are containers.
They are receptacles of sacred contents: The tablets; the scrolls.
And in the story of the Flood, the sacred content is life itself.
Noah and his family are entrusted with the task
of ensuring the continuance of life on earth.

It is a story of stewardship and responsibility.

Where is that happening today?
I often think of certain places, some here in Iowa,
in which plants of greater genetic variety are preserved.
In a monoculture agricultural state,
this kind of variety tends to get lost,
and needs conscious effort to preserve it.
We may need it sometime, say after a crop disaster
enabled by monoculture farming.

Certain libraries or data centers are arks of a kind,
preserving something that might easily be lost, and still needed.
As we move toward digital storing,
with all the vulnerabilities that seems to bring with it,
secure libraries, or arks, seem all the more important.
And we hope somebody is doing that.

But the ark that always comes to mind for me
is captured in a photograph, one recently updated, in fact.
It is an image that we are the first generation to have seen.
The planet earth. The blue marble.
It is an updating of the Noah story,
to fit an updated vision of the cosmos.

It is not hard to imagine the blue planet as an ark,
traveling through the expanses of the universe,
entrusted with the task of bearing and preserving life.
We send out probes on occasion, as Noah did his doves,
trying to see if there is anyone out there.
We draw scenarios of encounters,
both pleasant and not so pleasant.
We make movies about it.

But underlying all of this is the fact
that this is the only place that we know about that has life,
and has that life in abundance.
It is the only place that has conscious life
that can know, and learn,
and make fundamental decisions.

But like the Noah story,
and like the novel, *Patriots*,
my planetary story is a parable.
It is a parable about survival and what it takes.
It takes care, both in the sense of being careful
and in the sense of caretaking.
It takes reverence for the gift of life and earth as home.
It takes humility as well as decisiveness to carry out the task

of stewardship entrusted to us,
we who know so much more about our world,
in its grandeur, strength, and vulnerability.

Recently it has been said that a concern for earth is bad theology.
Perhaps that fails to appreciate that the human family and its earth
are intimately dependent on one another.

Here at the beginning of Lent, we ponder what to make of the season,
how we can best enter into the spirit of the season.
We often devise programs of self-improvement,
virtuous regimes exercising our self-control.
Sometimes our moral vision is focused narrowly
on a daily schedule or weekly calendar,
with all the inspirational character of a menu.

But today it seems that we are invited to look up and around,
and envision our place in the large world,
consider our creatureliness before a creator God.

And with that, allow the season to be a time of learning,
of openness to discovery:
Where we are right now
in a world of various and competing needs,
and what we are positioned and equipped to be,
and called to do.

Even if it doesn't involve a lot of activity.
After all, it is a time of waiting upon Easter.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 4, 2012

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18	The Akedah (The Binding)
Psalm 116:10, 15-19	You have loosed my bonds
Romans 8:31b-34	He who did not spare his own Son
Mark 9:2-10	The Transfiguration

Religion is back in the news again.
This time for what it stands for.
And with it, the question of religious freedom in this country.
And what to do about religious claims that do not seem to fit
the customs of 21st century life in the US of A.

Some pundits have made the point that there should be a limit
on what religions should be able to do.
Some have said that religion should be private
and stay out of the public arena,
as if God is only interested in what people do in their private lives.
And is not a bit concerned about public policy, or world problems.

One of the candidates has made the point that religion
cannot by its very nature be contained to the private sphere,
though he did so in a less than polite manner.

In all of this, we come to today's scriptures.
In Genesis we have the Akedah,
the Binding of Isaac, in Jewish tradition.
The outrageous story of God asking Abraham
to sacrifice his only son.

And in the reading from the letter to the Romans,
we hear that God did indeed sacrifice his only Son.

It is these kind of outrageous statements and stories
that can give religion a bad name among the prudent of mind.
It can drive the reasonable crazy.
One hears about religious fanatics willing
to commit mayhem or suicide for their beliefs.
It is not to the liking of the judicious and temperate of spirit.

And today we also have a signal, if we notice it,
in the Gospel story of the Transfiguration.
Once again a beloved, only Son.
But now shown in conditions that verge
on the transcendent and sublime.

Which brings us back to the only son of the Akedah.
It too has become a set piece for the transcendent,

in the hands of the Danish existentialist philosopher Sören Kierkegaard.
In his classic work, *Fear and Trembling*,
he meditates upon this story.
Kierkegaard explores the tension between the ethical life and the religious.
For him, ethics describes the merits of a socially and morally proper life,
while religion concerns a person's relationship to God.
Both are necessary, in Kierkegaard's view, but they can be in tension,
and this produces anxiety.
The concept of "Angst" is one of this thinker's contributions
to philosophical discourse.

For instance, Abraham.
Abraham recognizes that his personal relationship to God
transcends his social commitment to ethics.
Abraham feels anxiety because it is his ethical duty to spare Isaac
and his religious duty to sacrifice Isaac.
Ethics are for the good of the many,
and they transcend an individual's concerns for personal fulfillment.
But the relationship to God transcends all of this.

Of course, it seems outrageous.
And many people will point that out, free of charge.

What on earth could justify such extreme claims for religion?
What makes it so special?
At this point, having already referred to one heavyweight thinker,
I would like to invoke another—the theologian Paul Tillich.

Tillich has contributed many ideas to the discussion of theology.
And one of his enduring items is the notion of "ultimate concern."
Religion has to do with ultimacy:
That which is beyond all, which is final, definitive, fundamental.
Or, to put it in terms of the Transfiguration,
and Peter's bewildered, terrified response,
that which is beyond human comprehension,
putting us way out of our depth.

Tillich noticed that in our lives
many things take on the aura of ultimate concern.
A friend of mine, who has never held public office and never will,
would live and die for the Democratic Party.
She is not particularly religious,
though she remembers some parts of her Jewish childhood.
But she gives up her time and energy repeatedly for the Party.

This week the world of sports endured
some negative reports in the news.
Coaches in professional football were offering bounty rewards
to those players who injured opponents seriously enough

that they would be removed from the game.
While they were officially repentant,
the general sense was that this was a part of good, hard football.
It is important enough that you willingly
offer your body and health for the cause.

Sports is one place where many of us experience ultimacy,
in a vivid, emotional way.
As an ultimate concern, it might be related to the God
who is offered thanks after the game.

Of course, the God of civil religion is another member of the pantheon.
When I see vehicles with large flags attached, I think of this.
This week a Marine was killed during a training session.
They were in an exercise that duplicated
the harsh conditions of combat in the Middle East.
We are not happy when things like this happen,
but we also tend to believe that it is part of the price one pays.
One gives his, or her, life for the country,
because that is a cause of ultimate value.
Or so we believe.

Which is why some pundits propose
that we limit religious expression for the sake of the national interest.
National interest trumps religious expression.
Or, they believe, should.

What is wrong with these expressions of ultimate concern,
is that we can demonstrate that they are not really ultimate.
Tillich's idea is that we should reserve ultimate concern
for that which is truly ultimate.
By definition, that would be God.

We get a glimpse of the experience of the authentically ultimate,
beyond normal human experience, in observing the mystics.
They do not seem normal to us.
And they probably are not, in our sense of normal.
They move in a realm beyond the daily human world.
We assume that it is because they have moved to a more sublime level.
We give them the benefit of our doubt.

But what the mystics demonstrate in dramatic ways,
we also experience in the claim that religion makes upon us.
For instance, the call to vowed religious life
does not justify itself on purely practical terms.
It is said that the most successful retirement living
is that which takes place among women religious.
However, no one joins a religious order for its retirement policy.
That is just a unsurprising side benefit.

Nor is the experience for the professionally religious only.
It is there—perhaps buried behind other things—
in every authentic religious intuition.

It is something beyond cultural religion, cultural Catholicism.
I remember coming from Waterloo,
where Catholics were not that numerous,
to Dubuque, and discovering the culture of being Catholic.
While this encompassing environment may help one be faithful,
it may get in the way of faith as well. Do its work for it.

What actually moves us is something else,
something that I want to call a claim made upon us by the divine.
You can call it a Call.
But whatever you want to call it, it takes the shape of a discovery,
an awareness that there is
something beyond the conventional world,
something, or someone, who compels a response.
It is a glimpse of a possible, impossible world,
a transcendent life beyond the conditions we know.

It is what Peter meant,
when scrambling for something to say, adequate to the occasion,
and failing miserably,
proposed constructing three tabernacles
on the mountain of Transfiguration.
He knew not what to say.

And then they came down the mountain,
and continued with life as it was before.
Except that it wasn't, because they had seen something more.
Something ultimate.
And now everything had changed.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2012

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23	The Babylonian captivity
Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6.	By the streams of Babylon
Ephesians 2:4-10	God's love for us
John 3:14-21	Jesus and Nicodemus

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might not perish
but might have eternal life.

It is possibly the best known bible verse in our popular culture, thanks to bumper stickers and billboards.
With it, John concludes his account
of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus.
He had come to Jesus under cover of night,
the evening of the day Jesus cleared the temple
of moneychangers and sacrificial animals.
A member of the Council in charge of temple affairs,
Nicodemus wanted to check out this daring critic.

They talked about being born again, or from above.
Jesus mentioned how the Spirit was like the wind.
He spoke of judgment.
And he spoke of favoring the dark instead of the light.
He concluded as we heard today,
with the image of the serpent in the desert.

And then John adds the famous line about God
so loving the world that he gave his only Son.

What does the famous line mean?
It is reminiscent of the story of Abraham and Isaac,
that we heard a few Sundays ago.
What kind of parent would do this?
It seems unconscionable.

Except that we do it all the time, but for other reasons,
namely, for national defense.
There, no matter how much we dislike the thought,
we believe that the cause justifies the sacrifice, if necessary.
To do such a thing, we need a cause to believe in.
Apparently, our way of life is just such a cause.

Today we hear from 2 Chronicles.
This is about the only time in the entire liturgical cycle
that this book serves as our reading.
Similarly, while I can't say how many times

that I have brought up the Exile,
as the definitive trauma of Israelite experience,
this is the first time we have actually heard about it in the lectionary.

Trauma it was.
It was a chasm, a deep divide,
between the memories of the ideal early days
and the compromises of the present reality.
They collected the stories of the early days
after their return to the land,
as with the passage we heard today.
They searched the ancient stories for clues
about what they were experiencing,
with all its ambiguity and uncertainty.
While some wanted to recreate the past to replace the present,
others saw it as a reminder what they might seek
in living in the present reality.

These days we are witnessing play out on the national stage
a debate about social values.
We too have our ancient stories and abandoned customs.
Some want to return to a lost past;
others want the past experience
as a guide to living in the present.
Both turn to the ancient ideals in trying to live
in the compromised present reality.
Most of the discussion revolves around
matters relating to sexuality.
Very little of it concerns violence.

As a matter of fact, our ancient stories praise and glorify
the accomplishments of violence, as they are imagined.
The national myth that governs our imagination
is the conquest of the Wild West.
Our national holidays are felt to be left uncelebrated
if they do not include a military parade.
It seems those ancient stories are with us yet.

This week we learned about an American sergeant
who stalked and killed 16 Afghan civilians.
A calculated war crime.
We also read about the fruit of our new gun laws,
as a young black man visiting friends was accosted
and killed by a self-appointed neighborhood watchman
with a concealed carry permit.
We are shocked when these things happen.
But they are not alien to our national narrative.
We look the idealized past in the ancient stories,
while we live in the compromised reality of the present.

The last thing Jesus says in his talk with Nicodemus
invokes an image from the Old Testament:

> *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,*
> *so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*
> *so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

The serpent is an ancient symbol of healing,
seen for instance in the staff of Asclepius,
still used as an emblem by the American Medical Association.
In the Moses story,
the harm caused by the burning bite of the serpent
was cancelled by the burning bronze image of the serpent.
Something like an antidote,
in which a bit of the disease can cure it.

The serpent is also a symbol of resurrection,
perhaps because it sheds its skin,
which seems like a remarkable method of renewal.

When Jesus speaks of being lifted up in this Gospel,
he means not only the Crucifixion,
but also the Resurrection, and the Ascension.
As if it were one continuous motion.
But today, imagining the serpent pinned on a staff,
we see a symbol of the cross.

And when we do, what do we see?
For one, we see the uncompromising reality of dying.
When Jesus confronts death in front of Lazarus's tomb,
the truth he witnesses sends shudders through him.
"He was troubled in spirit," John's Gospel tells us.
But it also shows him moving into the moment that awaits him.

What do we see?
We see the example of his own dying.
It is the story we will hear on Good Friday.
There is no other way to Easter.

It is often said of this Gospel
that it presents a picture of Christ
as one who died as he lived: for others.

We see that,
and we understand how to make sense of living and dying.
We understand that God, who loved the world so much,
also gives us the gift to love as well.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 25, 2012

Jeremiah 31:31-34	Covenant written on the heart
Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15	Create a clean heart in me
Hebrews 5:7-9	Jesus' agony remembered
John 12:20-33	The Hour, and the grain of wheat

It is a short week until Holy Week,
and the Scriptures readings for the day
are filled with images that overwhelm the words.
The seed that dies in order to produce much fruit
finds mirror images all around us.
The bulb plants are blooming.
The rhododendron is in flower,
and the clematis vines are budding.
The plants that lie dormant all winter are waking,
often to our considerable surprise,
we who thought they were dead and gone.

Jeremiah speaks of a covenant written on the heart.
It brings to mind St. Paul's remarks in Second Corinthians,
when he speaks of letters from God,
"written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God,
not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh."
Like Jeremiah, Paul is speaking of the Old Covenant of Moses,
in need of renewal.
The penitential psalm 51 calls for creating a clean heart.
We immediately recognize the plea for renewal,
for this is the season of clearing away and cleaning up.
It is the season for spring-cleaning.

But all these images of renewal do not come to us
without demanding a cost.
Jeremiah felt the need for a renewal of the covenant,
one now written on the tablets of the heart
where it could not be ignored,
because he lived in a time
when the world of Israel was coming apart.

It was something he scarcely could bear to observe.
And yet he was called to warn the people about it,
and salvage what he could.
His desperation and sense of failure can be sensed
in his longing for a covenant renewal
that will not be lost in the past pages of time.

And the words of Jesus, that image of the seed
that must fall to the ground and die in order to bear fruit,

is uttered on the threshold of his Passion.
John, who does not tell the story of the Agony in the Garden,
does give us this passage.

Jesus says that his soul is troubled.
He said this before, at the door of Lazarus's tomb.
And now he is at the threshold of his own.

And then he speaks the words
that we have come to associate with the Garden Prayer:

> *"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?*
> *'Father, save me from this hour?'*
> *But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour."*

The text from the letter to the Hebrews
amplifies the sense of the Hour:

> *In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh,*
> *he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears*
> *to the one who was able to save him from death,*
> *and he was heard because of his reverence.*

It is a sobering thought to realize
that Jesus himself was not spared the troubles
that we all must know, and have known.
We have our own issues that preoccupy our lives.
Sometimes they are trivial.

For instance, halfway through preparing these remarks,
my computer failed,
and after some difficult moments,
I had to start all over again.
Where did the first version go?
I have no idea. It just vaporized.
And the thought that some things can do that
is itself a worry.

And of course there are larger struggles.
No one that I know about is spared some trial,
often secret and unknown to most people.
And so many people bear that trial graciously and bravely,
so that few know, or even suspect.

And like Jesus, we often stand before the graves
of those whom we love, who have been a part of our lives,
whose departure means that we have to learn
how to live again, somehow in a new way.

And even then we continue to pursue our lives,
often with this large invisible hole in the air,
where some person who was a companion
now makes his or her presence.

And like Jesus, we face our own departure,
with greater or lesser degrees of compliance.
We, who cannot imagine the world without our friends,
can imagine even less a world without ourselves in it.
The thought disturbs us deeply,
and we try to face it with faith,
with all the help we can call upon.

The image of the seed that falls to the ground and dies,
in order to bear fruit, comforts us
in its assurance that what is needed is letting go.
Certain things must drop away, must be released.
Must die, if you will.
Only then will the newness find a way to emerge.

I do not need to build the new.
I only need to let it emerge and grow.
I only need to let what is in the way fall away.

All of our Lenten practices, all of our Lenten reflections,
lead us to this thought.
That what is needed is to allow what is dead, or dying, fall away.
And then the new that is waiting to emerge
will have its opportunity, its new day.

And this is what is so stimulating
about the images that we encounter this Sunday.
Not only do they stir us with their honesty,
their telling the truth about the need to pass through difficulties,
but they also insist on the newness that is on the other side.
Not only do they speak of dying,
but they speak of it as a passage.
Not only do they recognize the frailty that hampers us,
but they see in that very frailty the seeds
that bear the fruit of the new reality.

Hope is not wishful thinking.
Hope is not pretending nothing is wrong.
Hope comes from looking frankly
into the heart of the reality in which we live,
and recognize there that it is not the final word,
but a passage beyond it to something more.

It is in the heart of the reality that the covenant is written.
It is this cleanness of heart that can renew the face of the earth.
Hope lives only in the house of Truth.

Homily: Passion Sunday

In Mark's Gospel Jesus of Nazareth, who begins his movement in the villages of Galilee, evokes opposition from those who are based in the temple in Jerusalem. Early on, they come north to confront him. Later in the Gospel story he turns south to confront them in their own precincts: the city on Mount Zion. However, true to his roots he stays, not in the city itself, but in the nearby village, Bethany, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. During the course of that last week he will come into the city in the morning and return to the village at night.

This daily commute between two hills describes a pattern that finds its most profound expression in the pattern of mutual confrontations that occur during that week. After entering the city on Sunday, Jesus returns the following Monday, and performs the prophetic action that we call the Temple Cleansing. He radically criticizes their center of worship, and in Mark's language of holy and unclean, by cleansing the holy site strongly suggests it is no longer the criterion of what is holy.

This is the first move, from the Mount of Olives to Mount Zion. At that moment the guardians of the temple vow to return intrusion for intrusion. After three days delay, due to the favor Jesus enjoys among the people, they find a way, on Thursday, with Judas's help, to reach him. Now they come to the Garden on the Mount of Olives, where he is praying, to arrest him. But this time, there is no decision to reciprocate. Jesus, knowing what they intend, refuses to respond in kind.

The rest of the story unfolds as we have heard. Except that the fuller ending doesn't come yet—not until Sunday.

Holy Thursday

Perhaps when Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed Jesus' feet earlier in the week, he got the idea to do something similar at the supper. Maybe he thought that Judas's complaint about saving the money and giving to the poor had some merit. Though he spoke for his own purposes, Judas made use of the moral feeling many had, and have, that we cannot celebrate the good things while there are so many who are desperate. And so Jesus thought he might use the gesture to endorse the commitment to the poor, and demonstrate the paramount value of service.

This time it was Peter, not Judas, who objected. He also had ideas of how things should be, and Jesus was turning them upside down. But where Judas is parsimonious and tight, Peter is extravagant. Never will you wash my feet. That is the role of the disciple, not the Master. Never, never, never.

Judas's objection elicited the response from Jesus that his burial was near. It was like his saying about the Bridegroom: When he is here you rejoice; later you can mourn. Peter's objection elicits another kind of response from Jesus: "If you forbid this you will have no inheritance with me." It reminds us that the Servant came to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many. And the disciples must learn that the first shall be last and servant of all.

Peter, still objecting with all his being, abruptly swings to the other extreme: Then wash all of me, not just my feet. My hands. My head. Peter is not given to moderation in speech. But whereas Judas stays fixed in his opinions and his intentions, Peter is able to change, repent. He is not so caught up in his own self-image—maybe because even he notices his own occasional impulsiveness—he is not so caught up that he is unable to back off and take a new direction. He can be corrected, and he can correct himself. All in the name of discipleship.

Easter Vigil 2012

Very early Sunday morning
As the sun rose
They reached the tomb
To anoint him.

As they came the women cried:
Who will roll the stone aside?
Yet the tomb was opened wide,
There a young man sat, inside.
Sitting at the right,
Shining in a white robe.

You are looking
For Jesus
He is risen He is not here
He's been raised.
He is risen?
He's been raised?

This rhyming translation of this evening's Gospel reading
was taken from the last song in the *Mark* musical.
This much ends with a question.
The story of the Resurrection begins in disbelief,
and gradually finds its way to belief.
It doesn't anticipate this turn of events.

Bishop Wright, in his book, *Surprised by Hope*,
argues that those skeptics who claim that the Easter story
is the result of nothing more
than the disappointed disciples' wish fulfillment
points out that in all the Easter stories
the resurrection is unexpected.
It catches them by surprise.
No one anticipated it.
No one's wish was fulfilled
because no one thought to wish it.
The bright edge of the Alleluia cry is that of surprise.

This note of newness is the thread
that runs through the long line of Old Testament readings
from which we heard a selection this evening.

The vigil liturgy rehearses the traditions
that feature images of water, to be sure.
Baptism is placed in its metaphorical setting.
But the common content is the story of surprise,

the note of utter, unmotivated newness.

The God who creates, with no need to do so,
also created a people, Israel, out of next to nothing.
And as he separated the waters above and below,
to make a living space for life,
so he separated the waters of the Red Sea, left and right,
to open a way for the newly created people
to find their way to a new life.
Unexpected.

The God who led them out of Egypt
also brought them out of Babylonian captivity,
brought them back to the land for another beginning.
Who has ever heard of such a thing? the prophet wondered.
The God who found a dry path through the sea
also brought a renewed people along a greenbelt oasis,
through an arid desert.
Come to the water.

And the God who brought a people back to life,
also brought the Messiah to his mission.
The God who called for a voice to cry out,
preparing a way through the desert, to return home,
also called for a voice in the desert, crying out,
Prepare the Way of the Lord.
It is what Mark called the Good News, the Gospel.

And that Gospel comes now to this moment.
The record of unbroken series of surprises,
the history of unprecedented newness,
the God who is able to surpass all expectations, regularly,
has news for us.
Christ is risen. Alleluia.

Our hope is not in vain,
because the God we believe in
is no ordinary God.
This is the God who knows no defeat.
This is our hope.
This is our faith.
This is the news we hear and celebrate this night.

Second Sunday of Easter

April 15, 2012

Acts 4:32-35	The early community
Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24	His love is everlasting
1 John 5:1-6	By water and by blood
John 20:19-31	Thomas believes

Recently I mentioned that not only does the scripture
culminate in the Eucharist,
but also the liturgy is a school in the ways of scripture itself.
This has been true for me as regards Thomas's words today:
My Lord and my God.
This understanding began for me this past Advent,
in the liturgies here.
Since there is little else pressing today,
I'm inclined to tell the story.

If you remember, and I would be surprised if you did,
last Advent there was much talk of John the Baptist
as the Voice in John's Gospel,
and how this intersected with the Gospel announcement
that the Word became flesh.
And among the conclusions drawn was that in our world
the Word cannot become flesh unless we give it voice,
and that means giving voice to the voiceless among us.

For me that began a process of reflection.

I had often thought about the depiction
of the Son of God in the New Testament writings,
and how the later the writing,
the earlier the moment the Son was proclaimed.
For Paul, in the opening verses of Romans, it was the resurrection.
For Mark the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his public life.
Matthew and Luke have infancy narratives,
and the birth of Jesus was the incarnational moment.
But John took it back to the original moment:
In the beginning was the Word.

But this year I began to see something else.
Not only was John the earliest,
but he imagined that moment differently
from all the other NT writers.
For them there was a moment in which Jesus was acclaimed Son of God.
For them, the human became divine.
But for John it was the other way around.
He began with the divine, and at one point the divine became human.
Instead of the human exalted to the divine realm,

it was the divine entering the human world, the flesh.
This was completely different.

I began to see that the Word become flesh
was not simply an announcement uttered at the beginning of the Gospel,
but it was also a program for the unfolding narrative of the gospel itself.
It was as if there were two stories,
or two levels to the story.

On the one hand, there is the story of Jesus of Nazareth,
moving from the declaration of the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God,"
all the way to the Passion account.
From the declaration of Andrew and Peter that Jesus was the Messiah,
all the way to the crucifixion of the "King of the Jews."

On the other hand, there was the Word invading the human world,
as the divine became incarnate.

But the narrative of the Word changed the story of Jesus.
I groped for analogies.
Maybe it was like the way light bends
when it comes near the gravity of massive objects.
Maybe something else.
In any case, I began to see why this gospel
began with the Temple Cleansing
rather than ending Jesus ministry, as in the other Gospels.

I thought of it as "occupying" the world of the flesh,
like Occupy Wall Street.
As the story unfolded, first to be occupied
was the Holy of Holies at the center,
for now we have the temple of his body, as he said.
I understood, or thought I did, why places dominate the first part,
as the Word occupies sacred spaces,
after the Jerusalem temple, then the holy site at Samaria.
And then the sacred times, as the feast of Sabbath,
Passover, Tabernacles and Hanukkah followed.

Meanwhile the crisis deepened,
and it seemed to me that the two stories,
or the two levels of the story seemed to strain and lose each other.
On the one hand, the human story of Jesus got more desperate,
while on the other the Son of God as Word was even more in control.

The crisis peaked at the tomb of Lazarus,
and for me this was where the tension
between the two levels of the story were most alarming.
I saw Jesus before the tomb, weeping,
shuddering as he was deeply troubled, the text tells us.

And as he was personally coming apart,
there was the controlled, commanding presence of the Son,
saying, *"Father, I thank you for hearing me.*
I know that you always hear me;
but because of the crowd here I have said this,
that they may believe that you sent me."

They were so different.
As Jesus was coming apart,
it seemed to me that the Gospel itself was coming apart,
no longer a fully coherent narrative.

But there was another problem.
It was in that image of the Word become Flesh,
the Son descending into the World.
It seemed Gnostic.
I know that Gnosticism—that is, G-n-o-s-t-i-c-i-s-m—
seems ancient and irrelevant.
But its effects are still with us,
casting a shadow across our Christian faith.

Gnosticism was an alien virus, infecting Christianity from the outside.
It was separate and harmful.
The Gnostics believed that we were spirits first,
and that original evil was the fall
from pure spirit into a world of matter, which they saw as evil.
Salvation was deliverance from this material sludge
and return to the spiritual existence, to be like angels.

A couple of Easters ago there was a media flourish
about the Gospel of Judas.
This was Gnosticism pure and simple,
as Jesus tells Judas that his task is to deliver him, Jesus,
from this body in which he is imprisoned.

This is not the way either Judaism or the New Testament think.
Existence is bodily, and God created it.
The earth is our home, and we are to take care of it.

The legacy of Gnosticism is not only our tendency to think of salvation
as a matter of souls rather than persons,
but also the tendency to think of our bodies as evil,
as a burden weighing down our spirits.
Also part of this legacy is the way we tend to think about sexuality
as not good, something shameful.
Something belonging to the discredited, shameful body.

John's story of the Word entering flesh reminded me of the Gnostic myth,
and I began to see why the great New Testament exegetes,
such as Rudolf Bultmann, thought the evangelist John
was influenced by it, even though that theory is no longer in favor.

But then I saw that when we come
to the final days of John's story, things change.
What was falling apart started coming together;
what was divided began to converge.

I first saw it in the titles of Jesus: Messiah and Lamb.
John's Passion makes a great deal of the title
King of the Jews, another name for Messiah.
At least in the popular conception.
Pilate puts it on the cross.
The Jewish leaders object and suggest
He said he was king of the Jews.
Pilate insists on keeping it.
It is his way of saying that your king has failed.

But Jesus dies as the Passover Lamb.
For John the crucifixion takes place the day before the Passover,
as the lambs are being slaughtered in the temple.
And the line that John quotes about *not a bone shall be broken*
is taken from the ritual of the Passover lamb.
But the death of the Passover lamb meant the liberation of the people,
as they left the darkness of Egypt.

And just as the central site of God's presence in the temple
was given a new meaning at the beginning of the narrative,
so here at the Passion
the Exodus, the central event of salvation for Israel,
is also given a new expression in the death of Christ.

And just as King and Lamb converge, one redeeming the other,
so the sacred times of Passover and Sabbath converge.

And when Jesus promised that he will be lifted up,
he meant the cross, and more than the cross.
For this too was a process, a continuous movement.
It began with the crucifixion,
but continued with the resurrection, and then the ascension.

We see this progression on Easter Sunday, as John tells it.
Mary, then Peter and the Beloved Disciple
discover the empty tomb, for he is risen.
Then later that morning Mary meets Jesus in the garden,
thinking he is the gardener.

His words are *Noli me tangere*, Do not touch me,
for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But that evening he enters the locked room
where the disciples are huddled,
and breathes the Holy Spirit upon them.
Thus, for John we have Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost
all in one day. Another convergence.

But then we come to the following Sunday,
a week later, as we are today.
Thomas who wasn't there before is now present.
Jesus, who warned Mary about touching him,
now invites Thomas to do so.

And with this we have the affirmation
of the bodily reality of the risen Christ.
This is no tract for Gnosticism. Against it, if anything.

And then Thomas responds, *My Lord and my God*.

And here the two narratives,
that of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the Word,
which threatened to split apart, finally converge in one phrase.
My Lord and my God:
The Word become flesh.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2012

Acts 4:8-12	Good deed for a cripple
Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29	The stone rejected
1 John 3:1-2	We are God's children
John 10:11-18	"I am the Good Shepherd"

When Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd
he is placing himself in a long line of shepherd traditions.
When he criticizes the hired hands,
he is adding fuel to the fire that is building against him
and will shortly end with his arrest and crucifixion.

The Shepherd traditions are about authority.
Hammurabi the Great,
long before Israel was a blip on the historical horizon,
introduced his famous law code by styling himself
as a great shepherd of the people.

It is not surprising that the famous Israelites of the past
also made shepherding claims.
Many of the most significant
had shepherding experience on their résumés.
Not only that, but it was instrumental
in their assuming the positions of leadership
that they came to enjoy.

Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes, also known as Israel,
was known for being crafty.
This trait was never so prominent
as when he used his shepherding experience
to best his twin brother Esau to capture the inheritance,
by covering his arms with a kid's fleece
to fool his blind father, Isaac.
And with that he became the father of the nation.

Moses, whom most pointed to as the archetypal leader of Israel,
who brought them out of slavery into freedom as a free people,
received his call when he was herding sheep near the Mountain of Sinai.
He lost one, and it led to his encounter with the burning bush.
After that nothing would be the same, for him and for Israel.

David, who later established the one kingdom of all Israel,
first emerged into public notice
when he used his prowess as a shepherd with a sling
to put down the Philistine, Goliath,
and with him the looming subjugation of Israel to a dominant nation,
one who had entered the Iron Age,

when the Israelites still were making weapons out of bronze.

Just as the Moses story taught that God was their true leader,
their true shepherd, who delivered them from slavery,
so the David story taught that the true shepherd
was vigilant against oppression
and the threat of a new slavery.

In the Gospel,
Jesus demonstrates his qualifications as the true shepherd
by citing his feeling for the sheep.
He shares their experience.
He has spent time with them.
The sheep trust him because they know that he understands;
he has shared their fine times and their difficult times.

I am reminded of the peasant tradition in Russia
during the time of the Tsar.
It was reported that he traveled around the country incognito,
slipping out of the palace when no one noticed.
Moving among the peasants,
he came to understand their issues, their dilemmas, their lives.
Their affection for the Tsar was such
that they could excuse him from any responsibility
for whatever harsh policies that came their way.
Obviously, it was the fault of government officials
who were undermining the Tsar's reputation.

To use another figure,
Jesus' accusations against the hired hands,
who have no relationship with the sheep,
might be compared to the world of education,
and the substitute teacher who comes into the classroom
without the commitment of the full-time teacher.
The regular teacher has a feeling for the students.
She decorates the room.
She purchases materials out of her own pocket,
despite the inadequate salary she receives.

The substitute may be conscientious, or may not be.
But either way, the substitute does not have
a living relationship with the class.

There is an obvious application begging to be made here.
One could compare the situation described by the Good Shepherd
as similar to certain church conditions
in which the leaders do not share the experience of the flock,
nor value it.

But I am not going to make that comparison.
Besides, you probably already have.

Rather, I am going to point to something else.
It has to do with the nature of authority.
There are two competing theories of authority.
One pictures it as coming from above.
The other pictures it as coming from below.
In the latter, authority is conferred upon a leader
by the consent of the governed.
However, this is not how we customarily think of the matter.

I recall vividly when I was a fresh face on the faculty at Loras.
At one time, in the moments after the meal,
when we lounged in the big chairs and read the magazines or newspapers,
I entered into a discussion on the matter of authority
with one of the mild-mannered older priests.
I was startled to see how angry and agitated he became
when I suggested that persons in authority
were accountable to those below them.
His position was that authorities were accountable
only to those above them.

We know that this is still an issue today,
when there are competing views
on where authority lies in the contemporary church.

I simply want to point to today's image of the Good Shepherd.
One would certainly be excused for thinking
that it is telling us that the mark of true authority
is authentic relationship with those over whom it is exercised.
It would seem that the true shepherd
is one whom the sheep recognize as the shepherd.

At least it should count for something.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 6, 2012

Acts 9:26-31	After Paul's conversion
Psalm 22:26-28, 30-32	All shall bow down before him
1 John 3:18-24	Love in deed and truth
John 15:1-8	I am the True Vine

The story is that Professor Joseph Ratzinger,
of the University of Tübingen, yet to be Cardinal and Pope,
initially a strong supporter of the Vatican Council,
changed his views during the student uprisings of 1968 in Europe.
It would seem that he had a vision of a world out of control.
The popular voice was loud and seemingly chaotic.
It was not congenial to one who was brought up
in a very Catholic enclave in Bavaria, with a German sense of order.

The subsequent course of the reform of the reform
would seem to confirm this feeling of alarm.
There is a sense in which it is a reaction against loss of control.

Loss of control is a human fear,
one for instance we all face as we grow older.

The common symbol of this is giving up one's car keys.
It is hard to let go.

For many in the church, this loss
looms as a massive crisis, one would think.
A lost age remains a vivid memory,
and becomes the world to which one wishes not to leave.

Those of us who have committed our lives to the renewal of Vatican II
are experiencing it ourselves now, in another way.
We glimpse the prospect of having all that we gave ourselves for
disappearing as if never having existed.

In today's account of the Vine and the Branches,
we hear about the benefit of pruning.
This is part of our common experience.
Right now the weather has turned and it is time to plant annuals.

I also have been bringing plants that overwintered in pots
in the basement and on the sun porch
out to the summer air.
And pruning is part of the process.
The dead branches have to go.

And in some cases the winter growth has to be cut back

so as to give the new growth its chance.

I am sure that there are certain circles in the church
that see this image of pruning today
as image of the reform of the reform.
It is not hard to imagine that the recent attempts
to restore a pre-Vatican II church
is interpreted as pruning out the dead growth.
Or maybe weeding out the wild growth.

But there is an opportunity here to reconsider this,
to look at it in a larger framework.
The larger framework that I am thinking of
is the obligation to come to terms with the world in which we live,
to bring the message of faith to that world.

In this context the meaning of the pruning differs.
It raises the question of what contributes to this divinely assigned task,
and what does not.
When we look at what is left out of our current faith perspective,
we can get a fresh look at which branches are productive
and which are not.

I can think of at least three areas
in which the seed of the future in the shell of the present calls us,
and to which we have not yet worked out a response.
Today's world is both larger and smaller
than past generations knew it.

The world is vastly more immense.
The created world has grown exponentially a number of times during our own lifetimes.
One can make a review of the changing views of the cosmos.
From a flat earth with a dome overhead,
to a globe with the heavens revolving around it.
And then, thanks to Copernicus, to a sun-centered world.
And more recently a galaxy centered universe to what we see today,
a universe of numberless galaxies without a defined center.

Currently we are searching for planets similar to our own,
and coming very close to finding them.
What will happen when we find life elsewhere?
How will our faith accommodate that?

Will we leave it up to those who explain all mysteries
by invoking extraterrestrial aliens?
More specifically, how then will we understand
the meaning of Christ, and Christology?
And what will our faith bring to this world?

Is our planet special?
Are there other Incarnations in other worlds?
Or is it best simply to ignore what is happening?
So far that seems to be what we favor.

The world also is dramatically smaller.
We no longer live in neighborhoods like ghettos
in which everyone we encounter is like ourselves.
Now we are in touch with people and cultures all around the world.
This world, in one sense larger than that in which we grew up,
is in another sense shrunken to where different cultures
are now placed alongside our own.

We move around like never before.
Diego Velez, who does odd jobs for me,
is sometimes in Colombia, sometimes in NY, sometimes in DC.
I think he and Tara are in Paris right now. Or soon will be.
I can always find him on Skype, however, with my list of repairs.

Cultures mix in our minds.
Radically different religions sit alongside our own.
We have to decide what to do with this.
Do we say that everyone has his or her own truth?
Do we say that only we ourselves have the truth?
Neither of these answers seems to satisfy.

Currently, it is the Islamic culture
that is making the greatest impact on our own sense of the world.
It has become a test case of how we respond to difference.
According to John Allen, the Catholic Church
is making some headway in this direction,
by making common cause with Islam,
but in opposition to the modern secular age.

But is this an answer?
It brings us to the third dimension I mentioned.
What are we to do with the distinctly modern sensibility?
To call it secular, and therefore to dismiss it,
is not adequate to the situation.
It is much more than that.

The Enlightenment cannot be reversed,
although I have heard some wish it could.

Charles Taylor, the Catholic philosopher,
has been exploring the modern sense
of the moral value of self, of person.
He claims it is unprecedented,

and makes a unique contribution to civilization.
He talks about the contemporary value of ordinary life,
unlike the former exaltation of warrior heroes,
who got all the glory and goods this world offers.

Perhaps the simplest way to signal what he is talking about
is the modern recognition of voices of those previously neglected.
Women, minorities, come to mind.
Think also of entire classes of people whose value has been recognized.
We have, for instance, the demise of slavery,
the concern for children, including the unborn.
Witness the primary value that we give to the human person.

Here too, with this chorus of voices, we come to an area
in which our faith tradition has not yet come to terms.
In the present crisis of authority, or crisis of expression of authority,
these issues are coming into prominence.

In this sense, the pruning of the vine will be a matter
of discerning what promises to claim the future in the present
and what does not.

Perceiving where new growth is emerging,
and where it has stopped growing,
discerning the dry wood and the green.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 13, 2012

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48	The household of Cornelius
Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4	God has revealed to the nations
1 John 4:7-10	Let us love one another
John 15:9-17	I call you friends

Today we meet Cornelius,
whose story begins long before he was born,
and which continues even today.

Long before the Roman Centurion Cornelius, in Caesarea Maritima,
the Roman headquarters in first century Judea,
there were other soldiers and other empires.
    One of these, Babylon, captured the city of Jerusalem,
    leveled and burnt its temple,
    and herded its inhabitants into captivity.
        Thrust out of their homeland,
        the Judeans experienced more than physical hardship.
They also knew theological anguish,
for how could Yahweh God have failed them?
    Was God angry?
    Or worse, was God powerless before the Babylonians?

The prophet we know as **Second Isaiah**,
whose writings are in the second part of the book of Isaiah,
tried to interpret their situation for them, giving them purpose
and meanwhile showing that God was neither gone nor defeated.
    The prophet explained that the Israelites were thrust
    out into the world beyond their homeland for a purpose.
        They were to be a light to the Gentiles, he said,
        bringing the true God to other nations.
This is what he called the glad tidings, or good news.
When they were allowed to return home, this was also good news.
    The Gospels borrowed this phrase.

Returning to their homeland, they received another shock.
The empire, this time the Persians,
did not permit them political independence.
    Just as when they were in exile,
    they found themselves amid foreigners and others
    who did not share their outlook.

The prophet we call **Third Isaiah**,
whose writings are in the third part of the book of Isaiah,
    continued the message of Second Isaiah.
They were to look outward.
They were to be citizens of the world, as it were.

Citizens of other nations would learn from them,
adopt belief in the true God.
The faith would spread, not through conquest and force,
but through persuasion.
Converts would come into the fold voluntarily.
Something never seen before.

However, another impulse seized them.
They began to turn inward,
and enclose themselves behind symbolic walls.
Fearful for losing their identity,
they instituted certain identity markers
to remind themselves and show others who they were.
One of these was circumcision; another was the kosher food law.
The Sabbath grew in importance,
as did signature feasts, such as Passover.
The outward vision of Second and Third Isaiah
was abandoned as a program,
and consigned to the status of an unrealistic dream,
for dreamers who read the ancient scrolls.

The most famous of the passages of Third Isaiah
announced a year of Jubilee,
a time and era of release, from debts, disease, and death.

It began with the words,
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

We are familiar with this passage because **Luke** begins his Gospel
with Jesus reading it aloud,in his home synagogue.
Luke likes that word "acceptable,"
and will use it again in important contexts.

Luke has a purpose behind his depiction,
for this is the program for his double work, Luke-Acts.
Not only does he go about performing these actions,
but he promises to take his message
beyond the borders of Galilee and Judea.
He will be like Elijah, who took his mission to the widow of Serepta,
or Elisha, who attended to the Syrian commander, Naaman.

In **Acts of the Apostles**, through the mission of his disciples,
Jesus does that.

The mission, driven by the Spirit,
begins in the upper room in Jerusalem,
the same upper room where they met the risen Christ.
The Spirit sent them forth.
They went beyond Jerusalem, into the surrounding area.

And that is where we find .
Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army that occupied Judea.
Not only that, but he was what they called a Godfearer.
By that they meant a Gentile who feared God,
that is, was devout and worshiped God,
even though they did not technically convert to Judaism,
and become Jews.
They were friends of the synagogue and helped to support,
and defend, synagogues throughout the empire.
However, they did not join up.
They were put off, it seems, by those very identity markers
that the Judeans had put up to support their sense of themselves.

Three times Luke calls Cornelius, or has someone call him,
one who fears God.
One of those instances is in our reading today,
when Peter enters his house and remarks,
"In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.
Rather, in every nation whoever fears him
and acts uprightly (note those words!)
is acceptable to him."
And there is that word "acceptable" again.

Luke is said to have had Godfearers in mind when he wrote his Gospel.
It is said that they were his target audience.
So we can see how important Cornelius was to his story.

And just as important was that opening moment
when Jesus stood in the synagogue of Nazareth
and read from the scroll of Third Isaiah.
One day the nations would come voluntarily.
Cornelius, it would seem is the proof.
He and all the other Godfearers that were coming into the fold,
finding in the Jesus movement an expression of Jewish tradition
that satisfied their theological hunger.
No wonder Luke shows Jesus saying,
at the conclusion of his reading the scroll,
"Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."
For Luke, it was happening in his own experience.

At the beginning I said the story continues even today.

We still have our theological tensions.

> We still struggle between an openness to the wider world
> and the need to build a wall against it with identity markers.

As today, the biblical record includes advocates on both sides.
And for the Bible, both sides are included in the inspired Word.

However, I would insist that there is a difference
between citing bible verses that fit preordained positions
and following the lead of the biblical story itself.

There are two views honored in the Old Testament scriptures.
Luke shows Jesus coming down on one side.
That seems a clue. And more than a clue.

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

May 20, 2012

Acts 1:1-11	The Ascension
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9	God mounts his throne to shouts of joy.
Ephesians 1:17-23	A Spirit of wisdom and revelation
Mark 16:15-20	The longer ending of Mark

What do we celebrate when we celebrate Ascension?
We say that it is when Christ ascended into heaven.
But what do we celebrate in that?

Some of the candidates for celebration are,
first, the return of the Son to the Father.
This is what John seems to have in mind
when he catches Mary Madeline talking with the Risen Christ,
who tells her, *Noli me tangere*.

Luke, while not disregarding that, also seems to want to mark
the termination of the time of Jesus' resurrection appearances.
After awhile they stop happening,
and 40 days is the symbolic number that would do nicely.

Recently I read about something else
that Luke might have in mind with the Ascension,
in that it would echo the apotheosis of Caesar Augustus,
whom Luke seems determined to confront
with the universal kingdom of Christ.
In other words, it would suggest that for Luke
it is the Ascension that marks the moment
at which Jesus became definitive Son of God.

There is another meaning that comes from the letters of Paul,
although from none of the many possible selections
from the letter to the Ephesians that are proposed for today.

I am thinking of the second chapter of Philippians,
and the hymn that Paul quotes,
and perhaps modifies, in vv. 2-11.
This passage makes some of the same assumptions as John,
but with perhaps a greater emphasis
on the appropriation of human nature, in all its sense of diminishment.

The hymn follows the time of kenosis, emptying,
with a time of exaltation.
The exaltation seems to take its fullness
from the degree of emptying that preceded it.
The hymn is quite emphatic about the kenosis, the emptying.
Though he was equal to God,

he did not find it necessary to make claims upon that,
but emptied himself, becoming human, even to the point of dying.

And here Paul may have added:
even to death on a cross.

He emptied himself of prerogatives,
of any sense of entitlement.

Why? The hymn doesn't say.
But one can imagine that it was an act of love.
One reads of persons diving into a burning house
upon hearing that someone is still in there, doomed to die.

Or those who plunge into raging rivers
to pull out those who are drowning.
Often drowning themselves.
We admire this, even when we very seriously doubt
that we could ever do it.

The hymn seems to say that the plunge into the human condition
was one in which Jesus as the Word entered into that condition
with all its danger, all its predicament,
as if to experience it for himself.
It is as if he entered into it to pull it our of the fire,
reaching all the way, as when,
to borrow a homely example from doing laundry,
one reaches all the way in
to turn a sock right side out.

And so, he not only adopts the human conditions in all its vulnerability,
without keeping some safety measures in reserve
for when he might need them,
but he makes the plunge all the way to death,
the ultimate human experience.

It is a human experience, because though all living things die,
humans know they will die.
They can look forward, foresee, anticipate death,
with dread or hope, however they manage it.

But, as Paul notes, it was not only death
that the descent of Jesus embraced,
but even a humiliating, disturbing death.
It is not enough that people die,
but some die in terrible circumstances.

Usually this is at the hands of other human beings
who have made it a study to devise horrible ways to have people die.

It seems a specialty of our race.
Not only are we the one set of living beings that can anticipate death,
we can also use that knowledge
to devise wretched ways of making it happen.

And so Jesus was not satisfied experiencing a human death,
he had to experience a death that demonstrated
how badly we can make other people die.

And it is for this that he was exalted.
And why would it be for this?
How does the exaltation pivot on the emptying?

Well, for one, the farther back it is from which you come,
the more exultant it is to be winning the trophy.

But there is more than this.
Jesus does not return alone. He brings us with him.
That is the meaning of the emptying.

In the kenosis he has acted in solidarity
with the suffering and unhappiness of all of us.
He has absorbed our sorrow.
He has brought it with him into the ascent, the exaltation.

In the Ascension he is not escaping the human condition
to return original and unmarred,
but rather he is taking all that he experienced
all that he adopted,
all the dimension of human experience into which
he found himself abandoned, lost,
and then brought into himself,
all that he brings back with him in the exaltation,
and lifts all of us up with him.

The Ascension is the Son reporting back to the Father,
with the mission accomplished. Yes.
But that mission is to retrieve the lost,
and he let himself be lost in performing his mission.

Today we celebrate the Ascension.
In a week we will celebrating the high feast day of Pentecost,
marking the movement of the Holy Spirit
in jump-starting the church.

In between, it seems a time of waiting, of nothing happening,
an interval of nothingness
while the days turn toward the coming of the Spirit.

But that is not the case.
The emptiness is actually over, having been taken, one might say,
into the interior life of God, and blessed and resolved.

The loss has been overcome.
Soon the report will arrive that it has taken place,
and we will move on.
But for now we celebrate the retrieval.

Pentecost Sunday (Mass During the Day)

May 27, 2012

Acts 2:1-11	The story of Pentecost
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34	Lord, send out your Spirit
1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13	Spiritual gifts
John 20:19-23	Receive the Holy Spirit

To what do the Scriptures compare the Holy Spirit?
How do they name it?

Wind.
Strong drink.
Breath, and with that, Language.

As **Wind**.
A sound of wind blew through the upper room
where the disciples were gathered.

> "And suddenly there came from the sky
> a noise like a strong driving wind,
> and it filled the entire house in which they were."

What do we know about wind?
> In the past week we have been treated to a great deal of wind.
> The wind was a constant pressure, a constant sound.

There was something knocking on the outside wall of my house
every time the wind blew.
> Repeatedly I went outside to see what the wind
> was blowing against my house.
> I never did find it.

What does the scripture way about the wind?
> When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, as John tells the story,
> he compared the Spirit to the wind.

> "The wind blows where it wills,
> and you can hear the sound it makes,
> > but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes;
> > so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The thing about the wind
is that you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
> It is unexpected.

The weather channel can tell you wind speed
with gusts up to whatever.

It can explain how isometric lines
come close together in a sudden shift in temperature
and that means you can expect high winds.

But with all of that, it only tells you so much.

The wind is a symbol of freedom for a reason.
To ride on the wind is to ride on freedom.

The wind creates debris, and sweeps it away.
In one swoop.
Like the Spirit, it renews the face of the earth.

And **strong drink**?
Why should we add that to the list?

Today Paul tells us that
we are all given to drink of the same Spirit.
Seems like a strange way to put it.
But then we remember the sequel to today's story of the first Pentecost.

The following two verses say this:
They were all astounded and bewildered,
and said to one another, "What does this mean?"
But others said, scoffing,
"They have had too much new wine."

Peter immediately defends them against this charge,
pointing out that it is only nine o'clock in the morning.
This is a somewhat odd defense,
since it seems to imply that it might be a fair inference later in the day,
but we will not pursue it.

What is interesting is that this image of strong drink
appears repeatedly.
Not only Peter but also Paul.

One imagines that it refers to enthusiastic, even wild,
speech and behavior.
It would seem to refer to a lack of sobriety in demeanor,
a lack of deliberative reason
and even a lack of self-control.

This is not a spirit of calculation in dealing with others,
not a spirit of self-interest.

Breath.

Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Breath, of course, is another name for wind.
We are inspired, perhaps by the Spirit, but one day we will expire.
We will breath our last, as the Gospels say that Jesus did on the cross.
The Spirit gives life.

For Paul and for Luke,
a sign of the Spirit is ecstatic speech—speaking in tongues.

Ordinary speech is a strange form of breath control.
Somehow the human species,
which has in common with most other advanced species
the ability to make noise with our mouths—
somehow the human species has mastered the art
of making sense out of this noise-making.

Paul is concerned about the gifts of the Spirit in Corinth.
More specifically, he is concerned about the gift of speaking in tongues.

He is really concerned about the spirit of competition among gifts.
But what he is trying to bring under control
is the wild speech of the Spirit in the community.
But the Spirit is difficult to control, and Paul knows it.

He asks, not that they stop, if they could,
but that they include in the community
those with the gift of interpretation of tongues.

The gift of speech freed
from the control of grammar and logical articulation.
The gift of free speech as the gift of breath freely offered.
Spontaneously given.

Among the images of the Spirit are certain recurring themes.
Wind—freedom, unpredictability, renewal.
Strong drink—beyond control, beyond daily conventions,
beyond daytime reality.
Breath—life-giving, life-uttering, life-infusing word.

Today we celebrate what is commonly called
the birthday of the Church.
Among other things it tells us
is that the Spirit is the life of the Church.

We who count on the Spirit, who trust in the life of the Spirit,
look for the freshness, the newness.
We celebrate the freedom, the unexpectedness.

But we also realize that by definition we, along with others,
have no control of the life of the Spirit.

What is unexpected may be unexpected for us as well.
What is unpredictable is beyond our calculations.

But in the last analysis, if analysis is appropriate here,
we rejoice in the freedom and celebrate the newness.
Whether or not it is our newness, or freedom under our control.
Which is, of course, to speak nonsense.
Freedom by definition is not under control.

But the nonsense that we celebrate today is not our nonsense,
but that of the Holy Spirit, and Spirit's enthusiastic speech.

For as Paul reminds us elsewhere in the first letter to the Corinthians,
God's foolishness is wiser than our wisdom.
Today we make that concession,
though its true whether we concede it or not:

The life of the Church is in the hands of the Spirit.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)

June 10, 2012

Exodus 24:3-8	Covenant ratified
Psalm 116:12-18	The cup of salvation
Hebrews 9:11-15	A more perfect sacrifice
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26	"My blood of the covenant"

Last year the feast of Corpus Christi, as we used to call it,
focused thematically on the bread, the body of Christ.
This year it focuses on the cup.

This year, however, is the first year that we call the cup the "chalice."
A few days ago I mentioned the article in Commonweal magazine
by John Donohue, SJ, the prominent Scripture scholar,
in which he protested the mistranslation of cup as chalice.

He named three ways in which the ill-chosen word
created separations where there once was promise of unity.

that between Christians and Jews;
that between Catholics and Protestants;
that between clergy and lay.

First of all, insofar as the Last Supper was a Passover meal,
and the cup was one of the four cups in the Passover ritual,
the new translation separated the Catholic practice
from its roots in Jewish tradition,
at a time when we are hopeful of mending bridges
and overcoming the trauma of Christian participation in the Holocaust.

Secondly, the word chalice evokes the partisan past
when Christianity was divided
between Protestants who had the Bible
and Catholics with the Chalice.
And this at a time when Catholics are hungering
for greater knowledge of the Word.

Third, in identifying the cup of the Last Supper as a chalice,
it reinforces a distance between the clergy with the chalice
and the rest of Catholics without,
particularly in light of the decision to retain the word "cup"
in the congregation's response of faith after the consecration.

But it is not enough to point out where the word "chalice" fails to perform.
It is also important to realize where the other word, cup, succeeds.

For this we can look at the larger context
Mark provides for today's Gospel reading.
Perhaps a place to begin is in the shape that Mark,
the first of the Gospel writers, had given to his story.

A similar sequence appears in chs. 1 and 14:
The two temptations of Jesus in the Gospel,
first in the desert and then in the Garden,
are each followed by primary symbols:
the baptism at the beginning and the cup at the end.

Each of these is followed by an arrest—
first, John; then, Jesus.

The two temptations relate to the task Jesus is given.
Hearing the call at the baptism,
Jesus ponders the cost for forty days in the desert;
but it is still a long way off.
However, in the Garden the time has come,
and so has the moment of decision.

The symbols express the same difference.
Immersed in the water of the baptism,
Jesus commits to the mission.
But on the night before, at the supper, he drinks the cup,
internalizing the commitment.

The moment in the garden is significant:
Father, if you will, take this cup from me.
But not my will, but yours be done.

A key moment in the Gospel expresses this.
After the third Passion Prediction,
Jesus finds James and John
requesting seats to his right hand and left,
when he comes into his glory.

He asks them, in this gospel,
can you drink of the cup I must drink
and be baptized with the baptism I will experience?
Clearly he is referring to his coming trial and death.

The cup is a participation in the cross,
and the disciples agree,
though they do not realize to what they agree.

And the garden event, coming immediately after the supper,
causes us to realize that the blood of the covenant,

the cup Jesus shares at the supper,
draws its meaning from the same cross.

The cup is a participation in the cross.

In Mark it is called the blood of the covenant.

That evokes the notion of Sacrifice,
and brings to mind the first reading from Exodus
and its account of the Sinai covenant.
And one can begin to believe that the theme today is that of Sacrifice.

And yet this ritual is not actually a sacrifice.
It is a sealing of the covenant between God and the people Israel,
with the blood, representing life, symbolizing shared life.
There is no note of exacting a blood price to release from the debt of sin.

One might appeal to the letter to the Hebrews, however,
since sacrifice is a prominent theme in this book.
And yet, as far as I can tell (and contrary to popular belief),
Hebrews is not promoting the theme of sacrifice.

It seems to me rather that it is saying
that the death of Jesus replaces a history of ineffectual sacrifices.
It did what sacrifices had attempted to do but failed.
This does not sound like an endorsement of sacrifice.

Jesus' death is, of course, described in the language of sacrifice,
but I think that this is in order to make the comparison.

But if Hebrews is not talking about Jesus' death
as a sacrifice in which God requires the shedding of blood
and death of his Son,
then what does it intent?

I think the answer is to be found in the very next chapter
in which we read, commenting on Ps 40,
in anticipating of Jesus' Passion:

First [the psalmist] says,
"Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings,
you neither desired nor delighted in."
These are offered according to the law.

Then he says, "Behold, I come to do your will."
He takes away the first to establish the second.

"I come to do your will."
Certainly the author of Hebrews is now thinking

of Jesus' own commitment to doing the will of his Father,
in the Garden of Gethsemane:

"Abba, Father, all things are possible to you.
Take this cup away from me,
but not what I will but what you will."

In the story of Jesus as told by Mark,
Jesus is not required by God to spill his blood in sacrifice,
as if God desired him to die.

Rather, Jesus is called to a mission of risk,
with likely severe consequences.
He was not called to die, but to accomplish something,
but that something was at the risk of death.

The cup is the symbol of accepting the call to risk.

It is the cup of commitment
to a call with consequences.
It is the cup of courage,
not to falter when the difficulties arise.
It is the cup of communion and the chalice of social justice
and nonviolent peace.

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 17, 2012

Ezekiel 17:22-24	Parable of the Cedar Tree
Psalm 92:2-3, 13-16	Like a Cedar of Lebanon
2 Corinthians 5:6-10	Whether at home or away
Mark 4:26-34	Parable of the Mustard Seed

How many small organizations or faith communities
do you know with the name Mustard Seed?
I can think of three. Not all of them still active.
I have the suspicion that today's parable of the Mustard Seed
is responsible for the popularity of the name,
with its promise of important things from small packages.

And this would not be wrong.
The parable trades on the difference between the proverbial small seeds
and the large plant that results.
Enough to provide shelter and safety to the birds,
that is, to those who need it.

But today's liturgy of the Word adds another dimension to the story,
when it tells the tale of the cedar of Lebanon,
and Israel's aspirations to be like that.

And this reminds us that Jesus' parables often have a back story,
a tradition of Jewish story telling
around which he builds his own versions.
Often with a hint of irony.

We see other examples of the parable of the great cedar tree of Lebanon
in other places in the prophetic books of Ezekiel and Daniel.
There the tree is a figure for great empires,
both Egyptian and Mesopotamian,
the areas we think of the two cradles of civilization.

But also both signifying imperial powers that gave Israel grief,
first in the Exodus from Egypt,
and then in the exile in Babylon.

Today's parable about the cedar does a spin on that tradition,
in that it imagines a time when a twig from one of the great cedars
will be planted on Mount Zion,
the site of the temple in Jerusalem.

In other words, it signals the hope that Israel one day
will have its turn as being a great empire.
Of course, these sentiments were uttered at a time
when Israel was a colony,

a small outpost of imperial holdings.

But the dream lived on
that one day the kingdom would return to Jerusalem
and the great king, whom they called the Messiah,
would have a chance to deal with power
as power had dealt with them.

It is in this tradition that Jesus tells his tale of the kingdom of God.
It shares with the cedar tree story tradition
some important common features,
most notably that it will provide the birds of the air
the possibility of shelter.
It too is a safe haven.

But there are some conspicuous differences as well.
The mustard plant is really not very big. Nor is it really a tree.
In fact, it is an annual,
a plant that grows from a seed in the ground each year.
There is the possibility of a slight joke here,
with Jesus quietly debunking the inflated ambitions
of those who need an empire to do a good deed.

So here he raises a question about the Kingdom.
(I prefer to keep the terminology of Kingdom,
since it retains the political overtones
that are proper to the parables.
However, this is more an anti-kingdom
than a true and mighty empire.)

So he raises the question about the Kingdom of God.
Where is the saving power of God at work in the world today?
And does it require the power
that those who love dominion over others prefer?
Does it need the kind of monopoly of force
that empires enjoy in order to do its good?

You can provide your own examples.
Maybe you are thinking of different models of church
that are at work in today's faith community.
Some favor top-down coercion—for the good of all, of course.
This does not seem to be what Jesus is talking about.

Or you may be thinking, as I am,
of certain expressions of American power.
The use, for instance, of selected targets through drone warfare
seems a questionable way of doing good,
although that is the reason given.

It is better than the alternatives, we hear.

But Jesus' mildly mocking moral tale
seems to be saying something else.

Nor is the other parable we hear today that different.
Here too there is a hint of amusement.
I expect not many farmers would agree
that all it involves is sleeping and rising.
But the parable contrasts that
with all the work that the seed is doing:
first it sprouts;
then it grows;
then it yields fruit; first the blade, then the ear,
and then the full grain in the ear.
The parable seems to be drawing out the growth process
to make it sound as laborious as possible.

There is further irony here.
It turns the labor requirement upside-down,
spelling out the hard work of the seed,
while the farmer has nothing to do but sleep
and rise to a new day.

So what can it mean?
My guess is that Jesus is telling his disciples, as he does elsewhere,
that their job is to plant the seed,
and then let the process take care of the rest.
But someone still has to do the planting.

That would seem to be the lesson for us, as well.

In fact, it seems to me there are at least three lessons here.
The first is to plant the seed.
Do what is available to be done,
and this will make a difference.

The second is implied in this.
Trust in the activity of God,
working in the world, working through us,
continuing the process that will take care of the rest.

The third lesson is perhaps less obvious, less apparent.
The gentle humor, the sly irony of Jesus' parables
speaks of a confidence in God's work that comes from that trust.
When he replaces an imperial cedar with what is, after all, a weed,
an invasive species the farmers do not want in their fields,
the mustard plant,
he is poking fun of our need to have mighty forces at our disposal

in order to do something worthwhile.
It betrays a lack of trust.

He is also slyly pointing out our fascination
with dominating power and the effects of force,
not to speak of violence and destruction.

And doing so with good humor.

That, it seems to me, is a lesson in itself.

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 1, 2012

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24	God made us imperishable
Psalm 30:2, 4-6, 11-13	You drew me clear
2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15	Your abundance shall fill their needs
Mark 5:21-43	Two "Daughters"

The Scriptures today speak eloquently
to the expectation of resurrection life.
The book of Wisdom speaks to young Jews steeped in Greek culture,
reminding them that their own Jewish culture has much to promise.
And among those promises is that of immortality.

And Mark's Gospel tells us about a young girl
whom Jesus raised from her deathbed.
Her concerned father, Jairus, sought Jesus out,
traveling some distance to reach him and explain his plight.
Jesus agreed to go with him,
and upon arriving, despite the discouraging reports of the mourners,
went in to the girl, and raised her up.

But something happened along the way.
There was a woman who came up without telling Jesus,
and touched his cloak.
This woman is somewhat outside the main story, off to one side.
In fact, in the shorter version of today's reading she is simply left out.
She seems frequently left out.
But in her self-effacing hesitancy, she still arrests our attention.
We cannot avoid noticing her.
And she causes us to wonder.

Who is this woman? What do we know about her?
Of course there is the obvious and stated things.
We know about her illness.
We know that she has spent years—twelve, in fact—
and most of her resources
trying to find release from her burden.

What about that history of dealing with doctors?
Perhaps Mark is telling us about that
only to show how futile the medical profession was in her case,
and how powerful Jesus' work is by contrast.

Or maybe we are to imagine that they did not treat her very well.
Or very seriously.

Maybe they took her money, knowing that she could not be helped.
But knowing that she was desperate,

and they could take advantage of that desperation.
One thing we do know: she was persistent.

Then there is the fact that she is acting on her own.
It would seem to suggest she was a widow.
Or a single person, at any rate.
Of course, with all the consultation of doctors
it might also mean that she was fairly wealthy at some point.
In any case, one wonders how this would change the equation.
Is there a man in her life, in this patriarchal culture?
If not, does that act like a signal
to anyone who might want to exploit her?

But she seems entirely capable of managing her own affairs.
Except of course for this troubling matter of medical consultation.

Then there is her indirection,
her manner of dealing with the situation,
avoiding a fuss and drawing attention.
What does this mean?
Does it suggest that she is not demanding?
She seems persistent enough.

Or does it mean that she has been disappointed so many times
that she does not want to make a public scene,
for fear it would turn out to be another failure?
In any case, she does not want to draw attention,
but hopes to secure what she needs without undue attention.

We also know that she does not succeed in avoiding notice.
She almost succeeds.
No one has seen her. No one notices.
And when Jesus mentions it,
the responses he gets are almost sarcastic.
But Jesus senses the touch,
and in sensing it he needs to talk to her.

Why?
Well, we can suppose for one thing
that this event is not about magic, not about physical power.
It has to be more than that.

But there is more to Jesus' insistence.
He not only senses power, but someone in need of it.
He needs to meet her. He needs to converse with her.
This is Jesus' recognizing the personhood of the woman.
It is a matter of connecting with her,
of having an adult discussion with her.

She doesn't seem to have wanted this.
Her actions would indicate as much.
And yet he insists.

And then she comes forward.
She seems both embarrassed and relieved.
She knows she has done the right thing. She is healed.
But perhaps she should have been more open
about what she was doing.
In any case, the secret is out, and she seems relieved that it is.
"She told him the whole truth," the gospel says.

There was a flow of power.
The woman's ailment rendered her ritually unclean,
as spelled out in Leviticus.
This was not an ethical judgment; it was a ritual condition.
It meant she was restricted from entering holy places.
And perhaps touching holy persons.

There was a flow of power,
and instead of the unclean power overcoming him,
the holy power flowed out and healed her.

But Jesus insisted on a conversation,
and in the conversation he said:
"Daughter, your faith has saved you.
Go in peace and be cured of your affliction."

It was her faith that saved her, not a pipeline of power.
The dialogue between the two of them made it personal.
Her faith consisted of her persistence,
as well as her seeing in Jesus hope for her release.

Sometimes when I hear this story,
I think of how it might have unfolded
had Jesus not made his intervention and had his talk with her.
She would be healed.
We know that.
But would it be as satisfying?
Would it mean the same thing?
How has it changed, once he meets her?

Sometimes I think that there is a possible story
of the cure without the conversation.
And I think that what if there was the conversation
without the cure?
Which is more important?
We know that healing was very important for her,
after twelve years.

But what about the encounter?

In our own health care practices
there are many techniques that verge on the miraculous.
New wonders, new procedures are announced every day
online and on the television news.
And yet, it typically can be pretty mechanical
—adjusting, rearranging, dosing, repairing the physical body.
It can be fairly soulless. Utilitarian.
Where is the personal encounter?

Neither I nor you—with a couple of exceptions—
can administer the medical treatments that cure the body.
But we do not need that specialized knowledge
to initiate the encounter.
The part that Jesus insists upon
happens to be the part that we can actually do.

Luke's Gospel has the reputation of dealing more kindly to women—
an assessment with which the women biblical scholars I know
do not actually agree.
But today we see Mark telling the story of a couple of Daughters,
each reaching a critical twelfth year.
We have looked at one of them more closely.
But we can see that Mark also noticed
Jesus' insistence on the full humanness of this woman.
And all women.

And actually, it can be seen in all of the gospels.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 8, 2012

Ezekiel 2:2-5	Directions to a prophet
Psalm 123:1-4	Have pity on us
2 Corinthians 12:7-10	When I am weak, I am strong
Mark 6:1-6	Jesus rejected at Nazareth

Rejection is always difficult to endure.
This is true whether it is the middle school angst
of having a personal friend drop you for some unknown reason,
or whether it is greater, as when a social movement
rejects what you deeply believe.
Sometimes it even happens in one's religion,
where it may cut even more deeply.

Rejection sounds a recurring refrain in today's readings.
You might even identify it more narrowly
as "rejection of the prophet by one's own people."

This sober theme might be lightened somewhat
if we realize that in none of today's instances is rejection the Last Word.
It is always rejection as opening into opportunity,
as presenting possibility of newness.
As Paul says today in 2 Corinthians,
"When I am weak, then I am strong."

The textbook I am using for my Scripture class this summer
makes the point that it was the rejection of the prophets
that led them or their followers to put their words into writing.
Later validation by subsequent events made their reputation,
and convinced readers to pay them attention.

Ezekiel's call to prophecy already seems to anticipate this problem.
The words of his call to prophecy acknowledge
that his hearers will not listen.
And yet we still have these words to read, centuries later.

One of the most poignant occasions of rejection
is the rejection of Jesus by his hometown people of Nazareth.
Today we hear Mark's version of that incident.
Mark reports him quoting a proverb:
"A prophet is not without honor except in his native place
and among his own kin and in his own house."

In this Gospel the Nazareth rejection
marks the end of Jesus' ties to Galilee.
He now turns to the larger mission ahead of him.

The very next episode reports
the mission of the Twelve into new territory.

Following the lead of Mark, the other Gospel writers
repeat the event and the proverb, but in different circumstances,
deepening and extending the meaning of rejection
in the Gospel.

Matthew keeps Mark's Nazareth story,
but he subtly changes it, omitting the part about one's own kin.
Perhaps this is because he locates Jesus' native place,
where his kinfolks lived, in Bethlehem.
In Matthew's version, Nazareth comes into the story only later,
when the family is looking for a place to live
upon returning from Egypt.

So when Herod sought the life of the infant Jesus
in what we call the Slaughter of the Innocents,
it is for Matthew the first, real rejection of the prophet.
He is chased away from home.

It sets up the entire gospel, since from this moment onward,
Jesus is striving to return to Jerusalem, as his given birthright.
His final rejection there, again,
leads to the concluding commission
to go forth to the nations preaching and baptizing.

Luke's use of the story and the proverb is even more dramatic.
He moves it to the beginning of his Gospel,
where it starts with a reading from Isaiah 61:
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me….
To proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

And suddenly we find him saying, "Amen, I say to you,
no prophet is accepted in his own native place."

Jesus connects his rejection
to the ministry of Elijah and Elisha among non-Jewish Gentiles,
with the implication that their rejection of him
would be the prompt that begins the mission to the larger world.
And so it is, that when he is rejected in Jerusalem,
the book of Acts, with its world mission, follows.

Luke places the proverb at the heading of his double work, Luke/Acts.
He puts the entire Gospel under the rubric of rejection of the prophet.

Which brings us to John's Gospel,
and its even more surprising turn of the phrase.
John knows the proverb, but he puts it in another context.

After cleansing the temple in Jerusalem , in chapter 2,
Jesus has gained some attention, and it is not favorable.
When they are trying to kill him, he needs to leave the city.

After the stop at the Samaritan well,
and the discussion with the woman there,
he continues on to Galilee.
"For Jesus himself testified that a prophet
has no honor in his native place," John tells us.
Here the place John has in mind is Jerusalem itself.

But there is more.
John has put this in a larger, even cosmic, frame.
In the opening prologue we read:
"The word was made flesh and dwelt among us."
And, "He came to his own, but his own received him not."

Here rejection is at the center of the Christian mystery of the Incarnation. It is the pivot upon which the major story turns.
The understanding of rejection in the Gospel setting
has grown more profound as the evangelists reflect upon it.
The ministry of Jesus.
The mission to the World.
The Incarnation itself.

For us too, the moment of rejection
may be a time of clarification and reflection, and new opportunity.
It is never pleasant, and may feel like the darkest of times.
Nothing can ease the pain in the midst of the moment.
But it seems to move toward newness, and fresh opportunity.

Throughout the biblical story of Israel,
as well as in the four Gospels,
the great moments of theological breakthrough,
the times of self-definition in faith,
follows upon crises of rejection.

Perhaps we can say that when rejection finds reflection,
reflection finds a breakthrough.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 15, 2012

Amos 7:12-15	"I was no prophet"
Psalm 85:9-14	Justice and peace shall kiss
Ephesians 1:3-14	You also were sealed by the Spirit
Mark 6:7-13	Sending out the Twelve in pairs

The Theology Department at Loras, where I still work sometimes,
has identified certain characteristics
as touchstones for the Catholic tradition,
following an influential article by Richard McBrien.
One of these markers is sacramentality. Another is mediation,
in the sense that God works in history through human mediation.

Missing from the list is the prophetic dimension.
For a long time I disagreed with this,
and even argued for claiming a prophetic side to Catholicism.
I had behind me for support a long tradition of such,
seen for instance in the Catholic Worker.
But it was not to be changed.

Today's liturgy of the Word may have changed my own mind.

The famous passage from the book of Amos,
a native of the village of Tekoa, south of Jerusalem,
tells of his visit to the northern shrine of Bethel,
where he is told by the priest to go back to where he came from.
I am familiar with this kind of reaction to nonviolent actions,
or if you will, prophetic actions.
Amos is identified as an outside agitator,
and threatened with charges of trespassing.

Part of the priest Amaziah's invective makes the insinuation
that Amos is a professional prophet who makes his money that way.
The implication is that he is getting paid to give Amaziah trouble,
and Amaziah is having none of it this kind of cheap trick.

Amos is stung to the quick by this accusation,
and is quick to defend himself, and to defend his message.
He is not a professional prophet, a member of a company of prophets.
He is a shepherd and a seasonal farm worker.
He was called from this by God
especially to make this trip and deliver this message to Bethel.
Amaziah, in other words, should be worried.

For Amos, then, prophecy is not an institutional occupation.
It is not an office as a part of an institutional structure.
It is an alternative voice, not blessed by the status quo.

It is a special calling, apart from the social frameworks
that keep the day to day world humming, for good or ill.

Something similar is taking place in Jesus' instructions to his disciples.
The mission is official.
They are assigned a mission and given the authority to carry it out.
But at the same time, they are to live in radical dependence
on the grace of God
and the generosity and hospitality of those to whom the are sent.
In a very real way they lack the institutional structures
that would undergird a permanent mission.
Here too the professional supports are missing.

Prophecy, it would seem, is necessarily an alternative voice,
apart from the established forms of the institution.
Furthermore, it seems necessarily so,
in order to be able to challenge those forms and structures
when it is time to do so.

As long as there are closed circles,
there is need for alternative voices.

Consider a case that was been in the news recently,
involving a closed male power structure
with little need for accounting for itself,
leading to repeated cover-up of sexual predation and abuse.
I am speaking, of course, of the official report on the scandal at Penn State,
and the career of Jerry Sandusky, published this past week.
It was a big item of discussion at the coffeehouse.

You may have thought I was speaking of something else.
Perhaps the crisis in the church.
Well, there are distinct unnerving parallels.
But in the case of Penn State, there is a degree of candor
and uninhibited call to account that is unique.
It serves as a good example for the need for alternative voices.

Topics that I heard discussed over coffee included these:
It was an exclusive culture, lived a bubble.
As an all male culture, it was blind to certain things.
One guy insisted that the problem
was that there were no women in the program.

The former head of the FBI, who made the report,
talked about a severe lack of empathy for the victims.
The need to maintain the image of the program,
the virtuous image that everyone feared to have tarnished,
the sense of absolute priority of the program
—all of this was hashed over.

There were no alternative voices to call to account
—or, to keep with the athletic metaphor—
blow the whistle on the culture of abuse.

So I have started to conclude that Richard McBrien
and the Theology Department at Loras
are not wrong for not including the office of prophecy
among their marks of Catholic theological practice.
Prophecy is an outsider voice, an alternative voice,
that cannot be incorporated into the program
without being closed down, without being unduly silenced.

But the fact that prophecy cannot be institutional
does not mean that it cannot be communal.
There is such a thing as the prophetic community.
That I learned from the community of Jonah House, in Baltimore.

Their mission is to present a witness to social patterns
that disrupt justice, peaceful social practices,
or commit acts of inhumanity.
But they do so as a community.
Which means that when it an occasion or situation
calls out for a word of witness and truth, they answer the call.

But not all can be on the line.
Some may be on probation, and they need them to stay out of jail.
Some may be needed in the community for other reasons.
So they have a process of discernment to see
who it is will be allowed to present themselves for civil disobedience
and risk arrest, and jail time.

Jonah House is admittedly more drastic in their prophetic mission
than are most communities, but they illustrate a point.
There are prophets.
And there are prophetic communities.
There are prophets.
And there is the care and feeding of prophets.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 29, 2012

2 Kings 4:42-44
Psalm Ps 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18
Ephesians 4:1-6
John 6:1-15

We are taking some time out from Mark's Gospel,
the usual gospel for this year.
I think that the lectionary editors want us to spend some time
with the Bread of Life Discourse from John,
which follows from his account of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes.
We will be doing that in the next four weeks.

We had arrived at that point in the unfolding narrative of Mark
where we would have heard about the Loaves miracle
from Mark's point of view.
But apparently it would be better to begin the discourse
with John's account of the miracle,
since one grows out of the other.

It may surprise some people
that the second book of Kings, chapter four,
contains an account of the multiplication of loaves by the prophet Elisha.
We thought that was something that Jesus originated.
And yet, there it is in today's first reading,
written about six centuries before the Gospel of John.
What are we to make of that?

I am sure that some people will have no problem
deciding that this means that the Gospel writers
invented the story about Jesus,
simply imitating what they found in 2 Kings.
However, the story appears six times in the Gospels,
which is another way of saying that it is testified to from many directions.
So something else must be going on.

I suspect it was something like this.
Something happened with Jesus and the crowd of hungry people
that brought to mind the Elisha story.
In effect, they could not think about what Jesus did
without thinking about Elisha.
It was as if this provided the language for their experience,
the shape into which they poured their wonder.

One thing they knew: the hungry were fed,

and it was the work of Jesus.
It signaled to them the care that God takes for his people.
It told them that they do not have to be hungry,
that there is an answer for that.
It said hungry masses are an offense before heaven,
and should not be tolerated.
It said that distribution of the bread is the work of disciples.
It said that something can be done, even when it seems impossible.

But apparently they could not think about what Jesus did
without thinking about Elisha.

In borrowing the Elisha story to interpret what Jesus did,
the early church understood the work to be prophetic.
Not prophetic in the sense of predicting the future,
if the biblical prophets ever were like that,
but rather prophetic in displaying the power of the spirit.
The prophets were known to have done wondrous deeds.
Elisha was one who did.
And now Jesus.

The prophets were the alternative,
not part of the establishment.
They lived and worked outside the structures of power.
But they had a power of their own that was respected and known.

It is perhaps significant that John reports
that the crowd wanted to make Jesus king,
and so he made himself scarce.
That is not where the prophet does his work.

But if the early church thought about the prophets,
the evangelists were all reminded of the Lord's Supper.
This is where the Gospel version of the story differs from that of Elisha.
One the Gospel stories speak of the breaking of the bread.
John says that Jesus gave thanks and distributed the loaves.
As with Elisha, these were barley loaves.

Mark, to take another example, tells us,
"Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish
and looking up to heaven, Jesus said the blessing,
broke the loaves,
and gave to the disciples to set before the people."

The Lord's Supper is prelude and program
for the Passion of Jesus, his death and resurrection.

The cup he shares is the cup he accepts in the Garden,
when he prays first that the cup be taken away from him.

The bread he breaks looks to the broken body on the cross.
I am thinking of a liturgical song from some time ago, which said,
"He opened the bread, and there was love inside."

But the love was not, and is not, without cost.
The breaking of the bread reminds us that such is the case.

But if the early church saw a prophet,
and the evangelists saw the Lord's Supper,
the commentators today see the Eucharist.
There will be much in the Bread of Life passage that follows
to support this understanding.
But for now it might be enough to say that the Eucharist
is our share in the Lord's Supper, with its fuller meaning.

It says that he distributed the loaves.
We are among those to whom the distribution comes,
and at times, through whom the distribution is carried out.
The cup is a signal of the cost of discipleship.
The bread it a sign of its purpose.

And here we come full circle, back to the wonder of the initial deed,
the care shown to the hungry crowd
by the plentiful gesture of Jesus' generosity.
And the answer that deed gives to the protest
that feeding the hungry, meeting the needs of those without resources,
is not impossible.

Nothing, it seems, is really impossible.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 5, 2012

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15
Psalm 78:3-4, 23-25, 54
Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
John 6:24-35

As John the Evangelist tells the story,
Jesus has just finished with the multiplication of the loaves,
and now he follows it up with a reflection on the event,
in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and the crowd.

Here, in turn, are some reflections on those words.

It begins with an exchange on the meaning of true bread,
and then moves into a question about doing the works of God.
Finally, the sign of the Manna in the desert
brings a primary symbol to the discussion,
one that will last for the duration of the discourse of the Bread of Life.

When Jesus accuses the crowd of showing interest
because they had their hunger satisfied,
we are to remember a similar exchange with the Woman of Samaria.
Just as she asked about the water in the well,
and questioned whether Jesus thought the living water he had to offer
was better than that of their ancestor Jacob, who gave them this well.
And just as she concluded with requesting that living water,
so it is here.

The crowd, accused of wanting perishable bread,
and told of the bread of life,
wonder if Jesus thinks that it is better
than the manna their ancestors enjoyed in the desert.
They too end with requesting the living bread he has to offer.

But if they had they physical hunger satisfied,
and he tells them of a greater bread,
it is a deeper hunger that needs to be satisfied.
There is a hunger that can only be satisfied by the bread of life.
It is a hunger for more than ordinary bread, ordinary food.

We is it we hunger for? Many things.
To be treated with dignity, to be recognized for our worth.
For a place in the world.
For a society that gives each his or her due.

In the words of the Beatitudes:
"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice,

for they shall be filled."

There is a deep hunger and longing in the world today.
It is seen in the middle east among the Arab nations,
where the Arab Spring calls out their longing,
for democratic expression of the people,
for taking their place in the congress of nations,
among the peoples of the world.

It is seen in the developing nations,
struggling to overcome the effects of the years of colonialism.
There is a human hunger that cries out.

It is seen in the society around us, where seekers are everywhere,
and the longing for spiritual substance is almost tangible,
all the more for the frustration of not finding it where it is expected to be.

After this, Jesus tells the crowd to work for more than perishable food.
They wonder what that means.
What are the works of God?
He says it is to believe in the one whom God has sent.

Faith and works are honorable and traditional themes of scripture.
Faith is trust in God,
and this is what happened with Moses in the desert.
But Jesus speaks of more than trust in God.
They are also to believe in him.

Jesus is the sign of the Father, the living image of the God on earth.
In John's words, The Word made flesh.
And what do we see when we see Jesus?
In this Gospel we see him feeding the hungry.

We see him bring the blind to sight, and insight.
We see him removing the bondage of the paralytic at the pool.
We see him conversing with the woman at the well,
who is accustomed to being left out of the conversation.

And we see him raising Lazarus.
The life he gives takes many forms.
It comes in many ways.

These are the works of God in Jesus.
They are the works of Jesus in us.

This answer of his prompts an angry response from the crowd:
Surely you do not consider yourself greater than Moses,
who gave our ancestors bread from heaven.
His unexpected response:

I am the bread come down from heaven.

Clearly there is someone greater than Moses here.
Why is it when we hear words like these
we think in terms of a status competition?
Our man is better than yours.
Why not look further, and see that something more is being said.

Something new, beyond the traditions of the ancestors, is happening here.
Something more than the manna.
The tradition still stands.
The manna is the touchstone of the tradition,
the emblem of the theme.

But it is not the end, the culmination of the tradition.
There is more here, and more to come.
Tradition is not the end and fullest expression of the theme.
It is its starting point and birthplace.

For there are other throngs, other deserts, other hungers.

Today, because of the accidents of time and place
—if indeed these are coincidences—
through the position of Sr. Pat Farrell amid the events of the day,
this Franciscan community is unexpectedly in the limelight.
Not directly, to be sure, but still close enough
to have gathered the attention of many
who might otherwise have never heard of you.

I am not about to say that this is bad, or that it is good.
I am only going to point out
that the ministry that you have carried forward,
simply because it needed to be done,
and never because you thought people would admire it,
is now being noticed for what it is.

It turns out to be a witness,
even though that was farthest from your minds.

There is a view that the criterion
for being a Catholic Christian is orthodoxy.
This criterion, like wealth in the secular world,
is useful for those who wish to make comparisons,
and place some higher or lower than others.

Another criterion, that never claims to be a criterion,
is what some have called orthopraxis.
Others simply call it ministry.
Or doing the works of the Gospel.

It is its own message.
And today it seems that the message is being heard.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 12, 2012

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:2-9
Ephesians 4:30-5:2
John 6:41-51

Poor Elijah.
The greatest of the old-time prophets, and now he has come to this.
Sitting under a broom tree in the desert,
praying for death because of his lack of success.
The Angel of the Lord arrives with a small lunch,
and with that he takes an after dinner nap.

Actually, he seems to be sleeping the nap of the depressed.
The Angel of the Lord insists that he have another go at it.
And it turns out that even depression can be resolved by a decent meal.

Actually, though Elijah is seriously depressed about being a failure,
he was a great success,
having bested the priests and priestesses of Baal
in a contest of sacrifices on the summit of Mount Carmel,
after which he slaughtered them all.
That was Elijah's style. Nothing held back.

But now Queen Jezebel had turned the tables on him,
and he was running for his life.
His magnificent moment had turned to dust.
Thank God for the ministering angel,
who came to him with a small lunch, and insisted he eat it.
And then, had to insist again.
After that he rose
and proceeded to the mountain of God, Mount Horeb.

The story continues
to say that when he reached the Mountain of God
he waited for the voice of the Lord.
It was not in the thunder and lightning.
It was not in the brimstone and hail.

Instead, it came in the still, small voice.
It was a surprise to Elijah, for this was not his style.
He was not a still small voice.

Can prophecy be something other than confrontative?
Can it also be happening in the quiet, reasonable, but persistent voice?
Can prophecy press its case without raising its voice?
Without creating a situation?

Without eliciting an angry and resistant response?
Can prophecy call for dialogue, without giving up its vision?

In the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of John
we have come to the moment when the crowd has some objections.
They were interested in what Jesus had to say,
and followed him across the lake to the place where he was teaching,
and wanted to hear more.
But now they wonder.
Isn't he the person they knew as he was growing up?
Do they not know his family?

In the other gospels,
this question arises in the episode in which Jesus returns to Nazareth,
and finds that they have a difficult time accepting what he is doing.
He says at that time,
A prophet is not without honor except in his own hometown.

John does not include that proverb here, though he does elsewhere.
Nonetheless, it seems on his mind,
since Jesus mentions that it is written in the prophets,
They shall all be taught be God.

But how can prophecy come from someone we know?
Someone who has lived among us, whose family we know?
Whose story we have shared?

Shouldn't it be the property of someone distant and remote,
like the great Elijah?
How can we accept the word, when we know the back story?
It is too easy to attribute conflicting motives.
We know what made the prophet fixate on these themes.
Others may be fooled, but not us.
We are so wise. Or so we think.

The letter to the Ephesians informs us today
that the baptized Christian should put aside
all bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling.
It proposes that we be kind to one another, and compassionate.
Can prophecy be compassionate?
Or, to put it another way, can compassion be prophetic?
Can compassion present an alternative reality?
An alternative response to the conflicts of the world
in which we live and work out our destinies?
Can compassion be a word of contradiction?

These turn out to be the questions of the day,

as different visions of what it means to be church struggle for acceptance.
Different images of what is important.

Tom Fox, the editor of the NCR, wrote in his blog yesterday
that something he had never seen before
happened at the end of the LCWR meeting.
The sisters invited all of the service personnel
that provided hospitality for their meeting
step forward so that they could be appreciated and applauded.
My guess is that you do not find this surprising or unusual,
but that it is just the natural, or Christian, thing to do.

My guess is that this seems to you to be an obvious thing to do.
A simple recognition of the efforts of those
who do not get enough recognition.

But it was a revelation to Tom Fox.
He had never seen it before.
Not at any of the conventions or meetings which he,
as a person not unacquainted with conventions and meetings,
had experienced.
My guess is that it doesn't happen
at the annual national gathering of the American bishops.
My guess is that it never happens at any convention
which is run by males of the masculine persuasion.

This is what the church at official levels is missing,
and needs.

This is a prophetic voice for today's church.
Or at least one of the prophetic voices of today.

Elijah was a discouraged prophet.
His method of stark confrontation and hard deposition
turned out not to be as effective as he expected it to be.
Domination and overpowering the opponent was satisfying,
but not lasting.

Elijah discovered that there was another way to pursue differences,
to challenge doubtful practices.
It was an approach that did not suit him,
but when he reached Mount Horeb
he was invited to name a successor.

That is, he had had a chance at his approach.
Perhaps it was time for another.

Perhaps even we can learn from this.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 19, 2012

Proverbs 9:1-6	The house of nine pillars
Psalm 34:2-7	Taste and see
Ephesians 5:15-20	Not wine but the Spirit
John 6:51-58	My flesh is true food

It was nothing more than a severe case of indigestion,
a difficulty with my digestive machinery.
But at 1:30 yesterday morning I didn't know,
so when I had what seemed to me to be serious chest pains,
I went to the ER at Mercy to find out.
It turned into more than a twelve-hour stay,
since, as the young physician pointed out,
the full twelve-hour observation and test period
is the gold standard of diagnosis.

Since I had left behind my cell phone,
my iPad, and every single book I owned,
I had plenty of time to contemplate,
and so I dwelt on something
that has had me puzzled for the last couple of weeks.

And what is that?
I am talking about today's Gospel reading
that concludes the Bread of Life discourse of John's Gospel.
Now you may think I am saying I am never away from the job,
but let me explain.

I am with the readings for at least two weeks
before I come here on Sunday morning to remark upon them.
I submit a column two weeks in advance,
and work with a Bible study group one week in advance.
So I have plenty of time to think about things.
And now it is today's Gospel reading.

All the commentators say it is about the Eucharist.
Finally, at the end of the discourse, the theme comes around to this.
But here I was puzzled.
Everywhere else in the New Testament,
the language of Eucharist is *body* and blood,
not *flesh* and blood.

The word flesh seems out of place.
In fact, it is usually a negative term.
It sure is in Paul.

In Galatians, for instance, flesh is always contrasted to Spirit,

as in the paired phrases
walking according to the flesh
and *walking according to the Spirit*.
The first is to rely on human resources, human effort.
The second is to rely upon God's grace.

And so the usage appears in John, in a couple of places.
One is in the discussion with Nicodemus, in chapter three.
Another in the verses that conclude this sixth chapter of John.

But there are seven other instances in this Gospel
where the word, "flesh," appears.
Six of them are in today's passage,
usually in the phrase, "eat my flesh and drink my blood."
One senses why the consensus prevails
that it is about the Eucharist.

But there is one more instance of the word,
and an important one.
In the beginning of the Gospel, in the famous prologue,
we find the pivotal statement,
"The Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us."

The Word became flesh.
We understand this to mean that the divine Word took on human flesh,
the divine became human.

Certainly it cannot be a coincidence
that these uniquely positive meanings of the word
appear in these two places in John—
importantly in the prologue and repeatedly in today's reading.
Certainly, they have something to do with one another.

So for a couple of weeks I have been puzzling about this.
How does the *Word become flesh*
lend its meaning to *Eat my flesh and drink my blood*?

Last Advent my reflection was about the Word,
and John as the Voice.
And how the Word cannot be heard without the voice.
And how we make the Word become flesh
when we give voice to the voiceless.
But now the thought was about the Flesh,
not so much the Word.

Then yesterday I spent 12 hours in 3rd floor east,
with a chance to think about it.

It occurred to me without too much need for reflection

that one thing we can say about the flesh
is that it is vulnerable.
    It occurred to me that one thing we know about the flesh
    is that though the Word may come with power,
    the flesh is limited and provisional.

For me yesterday was a false alarm.
This is something that many of you also know something about.
    But you know as I know that one day it will be the real thing.
    These practice sessions, these dress rehearsals,
    allow us to draw some conclusions,
    do some reflection.
        Perhaps gain some wisdom
        and spend some time in the house of nine columns
        that Proverbs talks about.

It occurred to me that when the Word became flesh,
it was not humanity in the abstract.
    It was not the concept of humanity
    adopted by the divinely spoken Word.

Rather, in the mystery of the Incarnation,
the Word takes on vulnerable, broken human flesh.
    Our broken and vulnerable flesh.

Perhaps when Jesus says in the Bread of Life discourse
"unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,
you do not have life within you,"
    we can understand it as sharing in this precariousness,
    this fragility, embraced by the Word.

If we are to embrace or own frailty
rather than run from it, we find it transfigured.
    It is no longer a detriment and a rebuke,
    but rather an unexpected passage to fuller life.

We often think of the Eucharist
as the presence of the Risen Christ among us.
    And so it is.

But in the Gospels the resurrection appearances of Jesus
always show the marks of the wounds in his risen body.
    Even in the Risen Christ
    the marks of vulnerability show through.

We connect the cup with his suffering on the cross.
All the Gospels seem to see this, as in the Garden prayer:
    "Father, take this cup from me,

but not my will, but yours be done."
We also connect the broken bread with the broken body.
We say this in our songs.

And maybe John is condensing these meanings
in Jesus' saying about eating his flesh,
drinking his blood.

Perhaps, it half-humorously occurred to me,
that even the homely and undignified ailment of indigestion
might be an ironic sign of the price of this sacred meal,
coming to us with its costs as well as it glories.
Its humilities as well as any heroic sufferings,
its indignities as well as its tragic dignity.

But also, in the times in the desert,
as the closing words of Jesus today insist:

"This is the bread that came down from heaven.
Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died,
Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 26, 2012

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b	Covenant in the Land
Psalm 34:2-3, 16-21	Taste and See
Ephesians 5:21-32	Husbands and Wives
John 6:60-69	To whom shall we go?

This is the fifth and last week we are spending with the Gospel of John.
It is the fifth week we have recited the same Responsorial Psalm,
Psalm 34: *Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.*

The Bread of Life discourse of Jesus has ended,
and now comes the fallout.
A crisis occurs in the midpoint of his ministry in Galilee.
Many of his disciples decide that they can no longer
be associated with his movement. It is too much.
It is a time of decision—for or against.
It is the moment upon which the mission turns.
Some leave; others stay, asking,
"To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

The sharp edge of decision seems to be the theme for the day.
In the passage that concludes the book of Joshua,
the conquest is completed, the land has been apportioned.
Some already in the land,
who have joined them in their social revolution,
are now invited to join them
in their covenant commitment to God Yahweh.

And those who have been with Joshua all along,
through the time in the desert,
are invited to renew their commitment,
now in the land promised them.
Their response is affirmative:
"Far be it from us to forsake the LORD for the service of other gods."

It occurs to me that we are frequently in a time of crisis.
In the church; in society.

Some cite a crisis in vocations.
One of the motivations stated for the recent visitation
of American congregations of Religious Women,
as well as the concern directed toward the LCWR,
is a slackening of vocations.
A crisis, it would seem.

On the other hand, a current article in the NCR cites
the CARA report that vocations to the priesthood remain steady,

but at what is a running deficit,
being fast outpaced by deaths and retirements.
Another crisis.

In addition, we can evoke
the concern about departures from the Church.
It has been said
that the largest religious group in America, after Catholics,
is ex-Catholics.
And yet there seems to be no shortage of idealism.

Then there is the concern about heading in new directions.
Concerns about new theologies, ideas outside the traditional patterns.
Our time is a time of crisis, it would seem.

It is not hard to imagine a certain homily that will be preached today
(but not by me),
easy to compose and comfortable to hear,
that builds on today's readings something like this:

This homily will affirm that today's problems are caused
by a departure from the true ways of the past.
It is in the choice that Joshua presents:
"decide today whom you will serve,
the gods your fathers served beyond the River
or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling."
For the problem is that we have give in to the idols of our culture
and abandoned the faith of previous days.

Or this:
Because the crisis in the Gospel
reflects an issue in the community of John's church,
among those who could not accept
the High Christology of Jesus' divinity.
So today, it might be suggested in this hypothetical homily,
it is a departure from the faith categories that proclaim Jesus' divinity,
in favor of a liberal theology of the human Jesus
and his ministry to the poor and marginalized,
that has brought about the troubles the church is experiencing today.

But this proposal for a homily that I am not going to give today
neglects to notice that in these stories we heard,
it is the newness that is causing the difficulties, the resistance.

This newness may be theological newness, as in John's Gospel.
It may be something that is not what they are used to hearing,
not what they have always known.
It is new and scandalous to their ears,
and so they can no longer stay.

It is not those who reject the new and return to the old ways
that are counted as faithful here.
Instead, those counted as the faithful
are those who embrace the new;
those who reject it are counted as no longer in the fold.

Or in the case of Joshua's gathering,
they are now situated in the land promised them.
They are in a new political situation, a changed world.
The covenant commitment they are called to embrace
is to enter into the new situation, in a spirit of faithfulness.
They are to engage with the world as it appears
in this new and different guise.
They are to embrace the promise that was given them.

There is one other reading in today's liturgy,
which is perhaps one of the best examples of these patterns today.
Except where another reading is substituted,
this is the account, troublesome for many,
about wives and husbands and subordination.
Some will take great comfort in this text.
Others will not.

In addition, the version for today, from Ephesians,
differs from the similar passage in Colossians
in that it elaborates the idea in terms of Christ and the Church.
While it can be said that the passage is not so much about marriage
as it is ecclesiology, that is not the whole truth.
For some, that simply reinforces the social patterns.

Yesterday I read this:
"… many Catholics do not know
that there is a complex theology at the heart of the Catholic priesthood,
rooted in the idea of Christ as the bridegroom
and the Church as the bride.
The priest theologically assumes the role of Christ
and becomes the bridegroom in relation to the Church as the bride.
If the priest were to be a female, the theology breaks down,
because you end up with two brides and no bridegroom."

Whereas Ephesians takes the male and female roles of the day
to explain the relationship of Christ and the Church,
this statement works the other way around
in a kind of logical circle.

The world of Ephesians was one of Roman patriarchy,
perhaps today best represented in the families of the Mafia.
But that is not our world.

We no longer accept it as viable or just.
Today, worldwide, the role of women is changing.
The dignity, the contribution,
the full stature and status of women around the globe,
these are increasingly being recognized.
This change is ongoing, and irreversible.
It will have an inevitable effect.

As the customs and practices of all societies change,
and the prejudices that support bad theology dissipate,
beliefs will change.
Not without pain and struggle.
But it will change.

The call in Scripture is toward fulfillment of the promise.
It is a call into the future.
The promise may be in the language of the land
in which, invited by Joshua, they are given to settle.
The promise may be in terms of eternal life,
as Jesus brings to a close the Bread of Life Discourse.

Or the promise may be the vision of a just, inclusive, full social reality
that we can glimpse and hope for,
sustaining us, even as we struggle toward it.
Especially as we struggle toward it.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 2, 2012

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8	Hear, Israel, these decrees and laws
Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5	Those who do justice
James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27	Be doers of the word, not hearers only
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23	On cups, jugs, and unwashed hands

Once in a blue moon we have Sunday liturgy
on a Labor Day weekend between two political conventions.
Well, we just had a blue moon to finish off August.
And we are in that in-between time—
between summer and fall,
Republican and Democratic,
Paul Ryan and Joe Biden.
It is going to be an interesting couple months,
with two Catholics running for the VP spot on their respective tickets.
And two views of what it means to be Catholic.

For we not only have a deep and even split among political views,
we also have something similar among Catholic views of their religion.

Today, when we hear Jesus
talk about hiding the word of God behind human traditions,
it is not hard to imagine those
on each side of the Catholic theological divide
accusing the other of so doing.
For every person who makes the charge
that Catholic liberals are replacing the orthodox faith
with guitars and compromises with contemporary culture
there is someone else saying that conservatives are abandoning
the call of the Holy Spirit in the Second Vatican Council
in favor of the past identity markers of cultural Catholicism
like Latin and plenary indulgences.

Mark's account of Jesus' repudiation of false traditions
makes an interesting contrast to the passage from Deuteronomy.
In the drawing that I dredged up from the files
for the column for this Sunday,
two statues are shown in niches in a church wall.
One is of Moses; one is Jesus.
Moses is holding the book of the law, and a sharp pencil.
Jesus is holding a pencil too, but with the eraser side down.
It is a symbol for today's two-sided readings.

In Deuteronomy we heard Moses saying about the law,
"You shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it."
But when we turn to Mark, we hear something quite different.
Especially in a verse skipped over in the reading,

where Mark tells us that in this way Jesus made all foods clean.
And this is despite the fact that Deuteronomy
spends a good portion of chapter 14
spelling out what foods are unclean and not to be eaten.

What are we to make of this?
Here I am going to turn to the Christian philosopher, Merold Westphal,
and his highly recommended little book,
Whose Community? Which Interpretation?

Merold Westphal is a congenial, funny, generous professor,
who comes from the Dutch Reformed tradition,
but teaches at Fordham.
He has given one of the Philosophy Lectures at Loras,
and was thoroughly enjoyable.

In his book, Dr. Westphal makes the case
that every believer finds him or herself in a faith community,
and that community represents a tradition.
That tradition guides our faith understanding,
and our interpretation of what we believe.

For instance, in today's readings, the book of Deuteronomy
was written to preserve a faith community
surrounded by pagan cultures.
It is very insistent on maintaining the belief in one God, Yahweh.
It brooks no dissent.
Customs such as avoiding unclean food reinforce their faith practices
and help them maintain a united front.
At the same time, a close reading shows
that the book was continually updated to make it fit subsequent ages.

Mark's Gospel, on the other hand, was probably written in Rome,
where the Christian community also lived among pagan cultures.
However, in this case the community
wanted to reach out and enlist converts.
Mark focuses on those aspects of Jesus' teaching
which shows him confronting certain aspects of the law
that would get in the way of non-Jewish converts.
And so, Mark assures us, all foods are declared clean.

Dr. Westphal repeatedly invokes four different faith traditions,
scattered through time,
and diverse in their insights into Christianity:
the desert fathers,
the Geneva Calvinists,
the American slaves,
and today's Amish.

The desert fathers gave us monastic and mystical versions of the faith.
The Calvinists of Reformation era Geneva
saw deeply into human fallibility and the need for grace,
in terms of radical depravity and predestination.
The American slaves embraced an image of the bible
as the book of liberation of an enslaved people,
with social justice and political implications of biblical faith.
Today's Amish present us with a lived-out vision
of simplicity, gentleness, and nonviolence.

All of these four, a handful among many,
find their inspiration in the Bible and Christian belief.
Each emerges from a tradition and a faith community.
Each witnesses intensely to an authentic side of being Christian.
And they could not be more different from one another.

Each tradition is partial, and each is true.
And each preserves and witnesses to something
that needs that witness.
Each maintains a piece of the whole.

Westphal reminds us of the old story of the six blind men of Hindustan
trying to figure out just what an elephant might be.
One at the leg decides it is like a tree,
another at the ear compares it to a fan.
The trunk is a snake, the tail a rope,
the side a wall, the tusk a spear.
Each is true and each is partial.
Together, if they can get together,
they make a case for the whole.

This isn't a case of pure relativism,
of "anything goes," of "whatever."
These are all possibilities brought out of biblical faith.

Westphal uses another example
—the familiar optical illusion of the rabbit-duck.
Look at it this way, it is a rabbit.
Look at it that way, it's a duck.
But that's about all it is.
It is never an American buffalo, or a Harley Davidson motorcycle.
So it is with interpretive faith communities.
They see, read, and understand out of their traditions.

This worshipping community is no different.
It has a particular take on a larger Catholic community.
A Franciscan community may trace its charism, as they say,
to the strikingly original vision of Francis.
It colors what is seen, what is heard.

This is not false. But it is partial,
and benefits from the witness of others.
Just as others benefit from this witness.
In fact, it would seem that we are required to witness boldly
to the truth we know.

Similarly, an alternative faith community like Anawim
may bring to light aspects of what it means to be Christian
that may otherwise be lost or ignored.
But it is partial, and we can learn from other expressions,
even those that may seem to be completely unrelated.

When Deuteronomy insists that not a word be changed,
it acts to preserve the witness of that tradition.
When Mark shows Jesus attacking
human traditions in the way of God's word,
he is not attacking tradition itself.
It would seem he is hoping to clarify it.

And when, in the next two months,
we hear about the contrasting Catholic visions of Biden and Ryan,
we may do well to think about them
as different, perhaps complementary, witnesses to our faith.
Not unlike the witness of the desert fathers,
the Geneva Calvinists,
the American slaves,
and today's Amish.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 9, 2012

Isaiah 35:4-7	The dumb shall speak
Psalm 146:7-10	Sight to the blind
James 2:1-5	The poor are chosen
Mark 7:31-37	A deaf mute healed

The first strange word of the day is *Ephphatha*,
an Aramaic word that means "be opened."
It is one of many in Mark's Gospel that he records and then translates.

Another, elsewhere, is *Talitha coum*, meaning "Little Girl, arise."
And then there is *Golgotha*, meaning "Skull,"
and *Eloi, eloi lama sabachthani*,
"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"
the Aramaic version of Ps 22.

"Be opened" is a memorable instruction.
It can open into so many meanings.
The opening of the ears, the sense of hearing, the ability to listen,
the opening into a new world of sounds and possibilities.
Ephphatha is definitely the central word of today's Gospel.

But there is another, one that is equally unusual, but in Greek.
And since Mark is already writing in Greek,
he has no need to translate it.
And we who are reading the bible in English do not notice it.

The word is *mogilalos*.
It means "speech impediment."
It appears only twice in the bible.

Once in today's Gospel,
where it follows the command, *Ephphatha*, with the result:
The man's ears were opened
and his speech impediment was removed.

But it also appears one other place,
and that is in today's first reading, from the book of Isaiah.
This is clearly not a coincidence, but purposeful on Mark's part.
He wants us to connect today's Gospel
with this particular Old Testament reading.

And the lectionary editors noticed that, and made it possible.

So maybe we should look at bit at the reading from Isaiah.
Actually, it may be from Second-Isaiah,

since it talks about the return of the captive Israelites from Babylon.

It is a poem ten verses long, and this covers the entire chapter.
The first part of the poem features Yahweh
going over to Babylon to release the prisoners,
in what reads a lot like an Entebbe raid of sorts.

The second part of the poem shows the exiles returning to Jerusalem,
now renewed.
Each part, coming and going,
symbolizes the passage in two symbolic ways.

One is the greening of the desert,
in a sort of greenbelt oasis along the path of departure and return.

Streams will burst forth in the desert,
and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

The other is a picture of the people renewed.
At the end it is Jerusalem itself, coming back to life.
But earlier it takes the form of illnesses healed and handicaps removed.
It pictures the renewal of the people as a whole
by way of individuals recovering their health.

And here, having already introduced two strange words,
I am going to risk another.
This is word is *synecdoche*, meaning that figure of speech,
distantly related to metaphor,
in which a part represent the whole.
As in counting noses,
or all hands on deck.

In this case, the individual renewals
represent the social entirety of Israel revived.
And the result is grand and excessive.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;

then will the lame leap like a stag,
— not only walk, but dance.
then the tongue of the mute will sing.
— not only talk, but sing.

And the word naming the mute here
is none other than *mogilalos*.

Perhaps the singing will do the cure.
I have heard of singing as a cure for stammering.
But no, something more is going on here.

I do not know if Mark knew the word *synecdoche*,
but I think he new what Isaiah was up to.
He knew that the healings represented the whole people.
And so he wants to bring that meaning into his story.

He wants to say that Jesus' work
among the marginal, discouraged, and ailing
was doing more than providing unhealthy individuals with a new future,
it was bringing back to life an entire population.

This can be seen in different ways.
One way is to notice how Jesus' healing actions
would bring people back from the margins into the center of social life.
He would send them home to begin a new phase of their life there.
He would enable them to become participants
in the community business, in their villages, their synagogues.

Richard Horsley,
famous for developing recent perspectives
on the role of empire in biblical societies,
and the devastating pressure that such imperial influences
exerted on local communities,
describes Jesus' healings in terms
borrowed from the great post-colonial writer, Franz Fanon.

Societies perpetually subjected to foreign domination,
as in classic imperialism,
tend to be societies in which a number of illnesses begin to flourish,
as if fed by despair.

Horsley sees that being treated in Jesus' miraculous cures.

One thing is clear, however:
Mark wants to signal an entire society
returning to health and fuller life.

And our lesson for today will take its cues from that theme.

Today we begin two months on the national scene
in which the election cycle will reach its peak.
We will hear about Jobs, healthcare, middle class, immigration.

Each of these presented in a context of fear.
An unspoken message that will be included
is that our society is changing from a familiar white-skinned world

to one of many colors and cultures.
And here too we should be afraid.

What makes a society healthy?
For its members: Participation as active members,
some degree of self-reliance,
integration into community and its give and take, minimizing fear.

But what answers fear?
What is its remedy? What is the antidote?
Or, at least, what is its opposite?

Is it not trust?
Trust in God, as one who is actively interested in our well being.
Trust in one another, in a mutuality of care and reliance.
Trust in oneself, as having worth, as being a child of God.

Today we name prayer partners,
as an expression of the visible and invisible threads
that stitch the community together as a virtual web, a social fabric.

It is a network in which each contributes in ways that she can.
The partners in prayer make that clear,
and take it to an intentional level, as more than a promise.
It is a spiritual offering.

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 16, 2012

Isaiah 50:5-9	The Third Servant Song
Psalm Ps 114:1-6, 8-9	I will walk before the Lord
James 2:14-18	Faith without works is dead
Mark 8:27-35	A sharp turn toward Jerusalem

It didn't take Peter long, after reaching his greatest achievement
in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah,
to find himself in a complete turnaround,
arguing with Jesus and creating a scene.

The problem is that there was a rather common opinion
about who the Messiah, the coming Son of David the Great, would be
—what kind of a program this coming king would follow.
It would be forceful and devastating.
It took its cue from Psalm 2,
which was quoted at the Baptism of Jesus. "*Ask it of me,*
and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
and, as your possession, the ends of the earth.
With an iron rod you will shepherd them,
like a potter's vessel you will shatter them."

Domination of the nations.
It sounds a lot like imperial conquest.
It sounds a lot like Rome.
One can imagine pious Israelites like Peter
would be imagining a Jewish Caesar Augustus.

But the voice at the Baptism also cited another scripture passage,
and this was the opening lines
of the first Song of the Suffering Servant.
These songs, written during the Exile of Israel,
were about enduring embarrassment, suffering slights and derision,
and even harsh physical treatment at times.
The songs turned the psalm on its head,
since they were about enduring the domination of alien empires,
rather than being empire.

Today's first reading from the book of Isaiah,
and the third of the Servant Songs,
gives a sense of the themes.

So the Baptism Voice was adding Servant to Messiah,
in a startling revision of the promise.

So when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?"
and Peter responded, "You are the Messiah of God,"

he only had half of the truth.
Peter was going with what he knew.
And he wasn't present at the Baptism, and so he didn't know
about the Servant theme being a part of the story.

But Jesus immediately makes the first of three announcements,
that he must go to Jerusalem
(where the Messiah belonged, after all),
where he would suffer and die, and rise again.

This part was new to Peter, and not welcomes news.
Hence the argument.
Peter did not like this new direction,
and he did not like the way Jesus was losing his charisma,
his sense of possibility.

This kind of talk sounded defeatist to him.
Furthermore, Jesus surely didn't expect them to follow him still,
given what seemed like the abandonment of the Messianic program,
did he?

Well, it seems Jesus did.
Immediately after the dispute he summoned the people
and made that clear, by renegotiating the call.

You remember the call by the lake.
It was "Come, follow me."
And immediately they left everything, and followed him.
It was bold and it was courageous.

But now that is all being reworked:
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves,
take up their cross, and follow."

Notice the new pieces.
Deny yourself. Take up your cross.
These words will make a bitter memory for Peter
when, later on, when he is in the High Priest's courtyard,
and Jesus is inside being interrogated by the Council,
and the servant girl in the courtyard
asks Peter if he knows Jesus.
And Peter gets it exactly wrong.
Again.

Instead of denying himself and taking up his cross,
he denies that he knows the one inside accepting his cross.

Was it fair for Jesus to change the initial call of the disciples?
It would seem that he first wanted them

to understand about the Messiah,
and then after that, how the role of the Messiah
would be quite different than what everyone thought.
It was as if they needed to make the initial commitment
before they could be trusted to understand about the refinement,
the darker implications.
From now on, all the way to Jerusalem,
he preaches Servant Discipleship.

But what we see today is that he renegotiates the call.

We do not find that surprising.
We have discovered the same thing.
We look back at what we originally thought
we were committing ourselves to in the way of discipleship,
and it has so little resemblance to what we know today.

This is, of course, true of every commitment.
Things change.
Circumstances arise that were unforeseen.
That could not be foreseen. And so the call is adjusted.
Perhaps more than once.
Perhaps, in certain stretches of time,
needing to be reaffirmed daily.

Is this unfair? Not really.
The entire purpose of a commitment is to promise beyond today,
into the unknown future.
The marriage commitment is for better or worse,
with the only thing known is that
it is going to be both better and worse.
How better, how worse, and in what ways, no one knows.

And yet, as the disciples are discovering, the changes can be hard.
They can rock one's resolve.
They may, in fact, capsize it.

But even when circumstances occur that vocations change,
commitments come to a difficult turn,
the new direction has the same shape,
the same resolve in the face of the unknown.
The same wager and hope.
We set our face and do our best, or so we hope.

One thing we recognize thoroughly,
in whatever passage of discipleship that we find ourselves,
and that is the role of the Servant is always there.
As a matter of fact, the satisfaction of discipleship
is primarily in serving, in addressing needs

and being able to do something about them.
The program is the same, though the landscape changes.

Today we are commissioning ministers.
This ceremony, and the activities it represents,
are ritual images of the life of community,
as we assist one another in praying together,
and the work of service, as we serve in ministry.

The liturgy is symbolic drama of our faith lives,
and the commitments we make today
are small settings of the larger commitments of our faith lives.

As they say, we are in this together.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 23, 2012

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20	Plot against the Just One
Psalm Ps 54:3-5, 8	The Lord upholds my life
James 3:16-4:3	Your conflicts from your passions
Mark 9:30-37	Second Passion Prediction

In Mark's Gospel we are on our way to Jerusalem.
For the second time Jesus announces what is to happen
once they arrive at Jerusalem.
While it is sobering, disconcerting news,
the disciples are engaged with something else entirely.
They are concerned about their respective ranking.
How do they rate against one another?
It is an absorbing question.
But it little notices what Jesus has just announced.

Jesus responds to their inattention with two moves.
First, he clearly states the theme of the teachings on the road:
"If anyone wishes to be first,
that one shall be last and servant of all."

Second, he illustrates the point to make sure he has their attention.
He takes a small child and he tells them
that whoever welcomes such a child in his name welcomes him.
And whoever welcomes him,
welcomes the one who sent him.

You will find him, it seems, in the least of these.

This turns things upside down fairly completely.
But because we are so accustomed to these sayings,
perhaps it would be useful to cite some remarks to the contrary
to show how radical Jesus' position is.

Friedrich Nietzsche is always good for this.
According to Nietzsche's story,
there were originally two kinds of people—
"the noble, the powerful, the superior, and the high-minded"
and the "low, low-minded, and plebeian."
The former had a feeling of ruling and superiority that was justified
by the fact that they were ruling and they were superior.
'Good' was associated with those
who were superior, noble and privileged,
while 'bad' was associated with those
who were common, plebeian, and low.

According to Nietzsche,

the essential struggle between cultures has always been
between the Roman (the master, the strong)
and the Judean (the slave, the weak).

Nietzsche thought that Christianity,
not merely as a religion
but also as the predominant moral system of the Western world,
in fact inverts nature, and is "hostile to life".

As "the religion of pity",
Christianity elevates the weak over the strong,
exalting that which is "ill-constituted and weak"
at the expense of that which is full of life and vitality.

According to Nietzsche, Jesus' position is profoundly immoral.

Then there is **Ayn Rand**, the philosophical novelist
who is so popular in certain political circles today,
especially in sectors of the Tea Party movement.

A disciple of Rand, Dr. Edwin Locke,
advertizes one of his lectures with these words:

"This talk argues that only Objectivism, the philosophy of Ayn Rand,
provides a code of morality suitable
for living successfully and happily on earth.
Objectivism holds that reality is real,
that reason is man's only means of knowing it
and that one should act in one's own rational self-interest,
with rationality being the highest virtue.

In contrast, Christianity asserts that
reality is governed by supernatural forces,
that knowledge is based on faith
and that the highest moral virtue is self-sacrifice.
It will be shown [in this lecture] that Christianity
cannot be practiced consistently,
destroys the integrity of man's mind,
and is incompatible with living successfully and happily in the real world."

One commentator writing in *Sojourners* magazine
criticizes the philosophy in this way:

"Rand was clear that her philosophy, …
was incompatible with that of Jesus.
For her, any system that required one individual to live for others
and follow anything beside his or her own self-interest was immoral.

For Jesus, any system or behavior

that does not take into account living for others
and acting on their behalf is immoral.
Christians should take Ayn Rand's words as a warning.
To follow her and her vision, one must give up Christ and his cross."

Followers of Rand divide society into individualists and collectivists.
Apparently collectivism is the only form of community
that is visible to them.

There is an attempt today to blend Rand's thinking with Christianity.
However, the result is a caricature of Christianity
that lacks a sense of community.

As Christians we live in a spirit of trust.
Our trust is in God, and God's grace.
Our trust is also in one another,
as common members of the community of God's family.
The disciples on the road to Jerusalem,
competing with one another and jockeying for position,
have yet to learn this.
However, in time they will.

In the readings from the letter of James,
which we have been hearing in the second reading for some weeks now,
but have found little opportunity to comment upon,
expresses well the radical nature
of the faith commitment to one another.

We have heard his insistence that faith is doing as well as seeing,
works as well as belief.
It is in this mutuality of faith-doing
that links faith in God to community and trust in one another.

We live in a spirit of trust, and this trust may be belittled.

The sneering condescension of those
that the first reading calls the "wicked,"
following a stereotype of wisdom literature,
is directed toward those who trust in God.

They exploit that trust by proposing to threaten the Just One's life,
and see if it works out as a faith moment.

Where this rings true today
is that it is no longer the case
that religious faith is supported by social custom.
It is no longer automatic.
It is now more of a deliberate choice, a commitment.
In this environment it becomes clear

how radical a commitment it is.

"If anyone wishes to be first,
that one shall be last and servant of all."

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Homecoming

September 30, 2012

Numbers 11:25-29	Eldad and Medad
Psalm 19:8, 10, 12-14	The precepts of the Lord
James 5:1-6	Gold and silver corroded
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48	An unplanned rival

"For whoever is not against us is for us."
Haven't I always heard it the other way around?
"Those who are not for us are against us."
The difference, of course, is real.
One is the tribal principle
which says that unless you agree with me you are my enemy.
It builds walls and separates people to either side of those walls.

But now we hear that if you don't agree with me, then that is fine.
You are not necessarily my enemy.
This leaves an avenue open.
It invites rather than prohibits.
It builds bridges instead of walls.

In the stories we heard today the two positions argue.
Someone proposes walls—Joshua, John—
and then someone else—Moses, Jesus—answers with bridges.

It is possible that the outsider who is not a disciple,
and yet is casting out demons in Jesus' name,
noticed the commotion swirling around Jesus and his entourage,
and thought he would try something of the same thing.
It seemed to be working.
But the disciple John was not impressed. He wanted it stopped.
Casting out demons in the name of Jesus?
Isn't that our brand?
Does it infringe on our rights?
Don't we have that franchise?
Can this be allowed?

The Moses story introduces us to an oddly-named couple.
Even in the original Hebrew their names sound a bit comic.
If you are a former English major like me,
you might be reminded of Vladimir and Estragon,
the hapless questioners in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Not only were Eldad and Medad not present at the meeting of the 70,
but they did not even present a dignified alternative.

With them, with names like theirs,
they are not only borrowing the brand, they are cheapening it.

Joshua wants it stopped.

We usually mention brands and franchises
when we are talking profits and financial advantages.
But we might suspect that something more is involved
—at least if the competing salaries of professional athletes suggest anything.
Sometimes the point is not greed; it is bragging rights.

Behind the anxieties about boundaries and walls, often enough,
lurk questions about my own worth.
When everyone shares in the gift that I thought
was special to me, to our group, then what?
If everyone has it, what happens to me?

Putting it this way sounds small and plaintive.
But maybe that small, plaintive voice is sounding inside each of us.

In the world in which we regularly live,
walls are popular and constantly under construction.
And they are being raised in many quarters.

We are weeks away from a national election.
When you live in a swing state, like Iowa,
you occupy a front seat on our polarized political scene.
Dueling TV commercials remind us
how pathetic and hopeless the other side is.
In the blogosphere, we are constantly invited to be outraged.
Any attempt toward compromise or cooperation
is derided as "caving," as in caving in.

We have two irreconcilable tribes, Republican and Democratic.
And they give no quarter.
And with them, we have two VP candidates, Paul Ryan and Joe Biden.
It is going to be an interesting 40 days,
with two Catholics running for the VP spot on their respective tickets,
providing us with two views of what it means to be Catholic.

For we not only have a deep and even split among political views,
we also have something similar among Catholics' views of their religion.
It is not difficult to imagine advocates
on each side of the Catholic theological divide
accusing the other of departing from the true path.

For every person who makes the charge
that Catholic liberals are replacing the orthodox faith
with guitars and blatant improvisation,
with compromises with contemporary culture,
there is someone else saying that conservatives are abandoning

the call of the Holy Spirit in the Second Vatican Council
in favor of the past identity markers of cultural Catholicism
like Latin, communion rails, and plenary indulgences.

In the new tribalism,
virtual walls have placed us inside virtual gated communities,
where each of us can spend our online time in echo chambers
that agree with our views.
We are safe behind the screens, TV or computer.

We are safe, that is, until we venture out into the commons.
For instance, we might attend a homecoming reunion.
After all, we come here across times and distances.
Vast times and long distances.
We cross decades of different life experiences.
And this can be a shock.

Former roommates discover they now have little to agree.
Former teammates seem to have spent the intervening years
on different planets.

Later, after the gatherings are over, the questions are asked:
How is that someone who used to be so reasonable
could have become so opinionated and wrongheaded?

We come here across vast times and long distances.
And we cross decades of different life experiences.

Homecoming can mean different things on different anniversaries.
After five years it may pretty much be a matter of touching base,
of getting back together, trading stories.

At twenty years, along with that there might also be
an element of exciting envy, looking better,
even if it might have to be faked just a bit.

At 50 years it might be something else:
Like wondering what happened to the campus that used to be on this very site.
This chapel is the same, or at least similar.
Except no one is taking attendance.

But there *are* other things: Who moved the grotto?
And—What? No one lives in Keane Hall? How isn't that a waste?
What do you mean, the women outnumber the men?

And where are all the priests? The place used be overrun by priests.
Now the only ones you see are other alumni.

But Loras too is a living institution.
It lives and breathes, expands and contracts.
And because it is living, it changes to meet the changes in the times,
to continue its mission under new demands, new challenges.

But it is still Loras, even with its new face.
And this is still a homecoming.
And at homecoming something happens.
We allow ourselves to accept differences, and cross bridges.
Vast times and long distances begin to fade away.

As we gather in this chapel to pray together,
we say something that is more than our prayer,
an enlargement of it.
We relive the communion that lies behind our differences,
that is bigger than us and our disputes.
Vaster than the distances and times we have traveled to be here.
Deeper than the seeming chasms between life experiences
that have intervened in the meantime.

We come as a common people of God,
reflecting the variety and richness that makes our prayer
something verging on universal.

We understand the concerns of Joshua.
We know what makes John raise questions.
But we are invited by Moses, by Jesus, to reach across the distance,
and we enter, at least for a while, another's world.
We are invited to open our imagination to embrace, as best we can,
the world of those on the far side.

To imagine bridges, and cross over them.

To hear the words: "Whoever is not against us is with us."

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 14, 2012

Wisdom 7:7-11	Solomon prays
Psalm 90:12-17	Prosper the work of our hands
Hebrews 4:12-13	The Word is a two-edged sword
Mark 10:17-30	The Rich (Young) Man

The letter to the Hebrews tells us
that the word of God is a two-edged sword.
Those who know about such things point out
that unlike the single-edged sword, which slices,
the two-edged sword is designed to pierce, to stab.

The word of God pierces to the heart,
penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow,
able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.

This could be describing the experience of reflecting on the scriptures,
with the aim of actually sharing those reflections, as in a homily.
It takes one beyond the surface to another meaning.
It takes you beyond the surface,
to a place that may surprise and most likely will nourish.
But it doesn't always show itself on the first reading.

For instance, the first meaning of the readings today
certainly has something to do with wisdom and wealth.
Today we have the riches of Solomon,
and a Rich Man seeking eternal life.

But we also hear about the wisdom of Solomon,
who surpasses all rivals.
The passage finds and equivalent to the spirit of wisdom
in the virtue of prudence.

This is a fair comparison, though it is only partial.
Wisdom is that which comes with maturity, and experience.
It contains self-knowledge.
Just as it knows the ways of the world,
and how to negotiate them successfully.
It includes good judgment and fair dealing.
Respect and certainly compassion.

But the word of God penetrates
to disclose the reflections and thoughts of the heart.

I was considering this while sitting in the coffeehouse
working on this homily, when Tom and Rachel walked in.

These two are married and each teaches at Clarke University.
I knew that Rachel had an life-threatening incident
right after the start of the school year.

Rachel bikes to school,
and as she was cruising down North Grandview
in the part behind Senior High where it dips down,
and you coast to pick up speed in order to climb back up,
a van pulled out in front of her and she hit it at full speed.

There were some touchy days in the hospital,
but she looks pretty good now.
Tom told me that she looks good on the outside,
but there are still troubles that can't be seen.
He said that it was one of those watershed events
that sorts things out radically.
For their entire family.

After visiting with them, I began to notice
that these readings today are about sorting things out.
I began to see that in the story of Solomon
and in the story of the Rich Man
there was something of a common pattern.

It began with a seeker.
Solomon prayed; the Rich Man came asking about eternal life.

Solomon prayed. He was seeking.
Presumably, now that he had a kingdom to rule,
he was seeking guidance in fulfilling this demanding role.
The seeking was followed by a message, a call,
that was also a Test.

In the dream, Solomon was given options.
"Whatever you ask I shall give you."
Solomon chose wisdom, which pleased God.
He gave Solomon everything else as well.
And so Solomon was known not only for his wisdom
but also for his wealth.

Perhaps Solomon already had a measure of wisdom,
in that he knew the wisest thing to ask for.

Perhaps the gift of wisdom that he received
only revealed what was already there in some way.
Solomon passed the test,
and it opened the door to the rest.

The Rich Man also came seeking, asking about eternal life.

He also was given some choices that amounted to a test.
Jesus told him to follow the commandments.
Jesus seems suspicious here,
as if afraid that the man was trying to flatter him by calling him "good."

Perhaps he was looking for the simple and sure way,
like the lawyer who asked Jesus about who his neighbor might be,
hoping to narrow the requirements.

But when the man informed Jesus
that he already followed the commandments, Jesus softened,
and invited him to discipleship.
Leave it all behind, and come follow.
But the man did not pass the test.
It was too much.

What was too much?
It turns out that the message is not only about what is chosen.
It is also about what is not chosen.
In addition to the wisdom which is chosen
there is the wealth which is not.

Riches are not simply riches here.
Riches is a name for everything that was not chosen.
It implies the many things that seem to be important,
or were overwhelmingly important at one time,
but when the crisis comes, turn out to be not all that important.
There is, it seems, one thing that trumps all the others.

That is what the arrival of Tom and Rachel on the premises
made me realize.
There is something in the call that comes as crisis,
that invites sorting out,
separating that which is good but not ultimately needed
from that which is essential.

It is like the parables of the treasure and the pearl,
when the seekers found what they recognized
as the only thing worth keeping,
and sold everything to concentrate on the one.

After the rich man walked away, Peter,
speaking for the alarmed disciples,
made sure that Jesus remembered that they had given everything up
to come follow him.
He agreed.

And he commended those
who give up everything in the call to discipleship in the kingdom

—and here he elaborated on the discernment taken,
and what the sorting out might lose or place in brackets
as possible loss: house or brothers or sisters
or mother or father or children or lands.

In other words, all the things gathered under the one label,
that of "riches."
And ironically enough, all the things that wisdom
supposedly would allow one to acquire, now dismissed.

But then he added that, as with Solomon,
everything lost would also be gained,
and finally, also that which the rich man sought: eternal life.

At times the call to discipleship comes as crisis.
It comes as a call to radically sort things out,
to discern what is essential and what only seems so.
At times it comes in less dramatic ways, daily ways.

But still, probably without exception,
it comes like a two-edged sword, penetrating
even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow,
and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 21, 2012

Isaiah 53:10-11	The fourth Servant song
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22	We place our trust in you
Hebrews 4:14-16	A high priest who has been tested
Mark 10:35-45	James and John request a seat

In the journey to Jerusalem, as Mark portrays it,
we have nearly arrived at our destination in Jerusalem.
For the third and last time Jesus has announced
what will happen once they arrive at the city.
Each of the previous times this has happened
the disciples misconstrued what he was saying.
Today it is the turn of James and John to get it wrong.

They request seats at each side when he comes into his glory.
They are thinking that the Messiah will ascend to the throne of Judea,
after the Roman occupation is dismissed
and Israel returns to its own rule.

They are clever in thinking of this idea first.
Jesus answers in two directions, one toward them,
and secondly to the outraged disciples,
who apparently find themselves outmaneuvered,
regretting they were not as quick as this pair.

First he speaks to the brothers.
Can you be baptized with the baptism that I must undergo?
Can you drink the cup?

In Mark these refer to the Passion of Jesus.
In the Garden temptation he prays that the cup be removed from him.
But then, without hesitation, he accepts it:
Not my will, but yours be done.

The brothers agree immediately
that they can accept the baptism and the cup,
for they do not know what he is asking.
They are eager to agree to any conditions.
But their ambition is thwarted.

Then he turns to the other ten
and delivers a few words about ambition,
common among the nations of the world.
They will not be like that,
but instead will follow the lead of servant discipleship.

For the Servant came not to be served but to serve.
And give his life as a ransom.

These last lines quote and evoke the first reading for today,
which in turn carries its own significance.
The ending of the fourth and last and greatest
of the songs of the suffering Servant
sounds a note that sounds very much like atonement.
Through your suffering many will be saved.

The Gospel is applying this to Jesus,
but the prophet is not talking about Jesus,
for Jesus is five centuries in the future.
He is thinking of the people Israel,
carried off into captivity in Babylon
to their humiliation and religious anguish.

Their suffering will save many, he says.
And while their suffering is difficult,
they will be honored among their many descendants,
and the Israelites to follow.

And among those is Jesus of Nazareth,
who follows the lead of the Servant,
and whose disciples will follow his own lead.
They will not lord it over one another, as they do in the Gentile world.
He insists on this.

When we turn from the Gospel to the world today,
we find it all too easy to apply these lessons
in criticism of the way things often happen in the church.

But this approach has risks.
Just as accusing another of hypocrisy risks indulging
in the same hypocrisy for yourself,
so there are dangers in seeing all the problems elsewhere,
in other life stories, in other resumés.

It seems much safer to consider Jesus' invitation,
and what it calls us to.

What is servant discipleship?
Any number of items can be cited.
But for the sake of naming some, let me name three:
compassion, solidarity and personal cost.

Compassion is often thought to be interchangeable with pity.
But there is a difference.

Compassion, which means to suffer with,
allows itself to be involved in the lives of those who are suffering.
It includes empathy.

Pity, on the other hand, maintains its distance, its separation,
from those whom it pities.
It stands above.
Compassion abandons the aloof position.

My spokesperson for this, and there are so many one could name,
is Bishop Oscar Romero.
His ecclesiastical position allowed him to maintain a safe distance,
but he passed on that.

He began in full possession of the official claim to privilege,
but events caused him to reconsider,
and place himself with the endangered.
And the danger reached him.

Solidarity invites one's imaginative membership in the repressed group.
It includes more than sympathy,
for it recognizes an identity with the oppressed and threatened.

I have a Dominican friend
whose hometown keeps changing on his Facebook site.
Wherever human beings are being victimized by other human beings,
he names that place as his hometown.
Currently it is Aleppo, Syria.
It is one of the ways for Jerry to express his solidarity
with the distraught and the anguished of the world.

My spokesperson for solidarity is Mother Teresa of Calcutta.
Her sense of solidarity took her to the dark corners of the world,
the Black Hole of Calcutta.
It was an expression of identity
that saw her putting herself in that place,
and identifying herself as "of Calcutta."

But again, there are many possible examples.
You can supply your own.

Personal cost is my name for that initiative of servant discipleship
that not only serves, but does so with some degree of price to pay.
Helping others at some price to yourself is not uncommon.
Parents do it all the time.
So do teachers, health care professionals.
Civil servants such as police and firemen.

And many more.

In the readings today it is the Servant
giving his life as a ransom for many.

My spokesperson for this trait of servant discipleship
is the Polish Franciscan friar, Maximilian Kolbe,
who volunteered to replace a condemned man, a complete stranger,
on death row in the Auschwich concentration camp.

Again, the dramatic power of this act may take our breath away,
but in some ways it is not uncommon.
It is ordinary in some ways for some to release others
by acts of personal sacrifice.

The role of the saints is to dramatize aspects of the life of discipleship
in ways that arrest our attention.

But the heightened drama of their lives
points to patterns in our own daily dramas,
in those decisions that we make regularly,
that can only be described as moments of discipleship.

This is the substance and power of Christian living,
and its effect is cumulative.
It is the ordinary power of the Christian community at its best,
living the life of the Servant,
and singing his songs.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 28. 2012

Jeremiah 31:7-9	I will gather the blind and lame
Psalm 126:1-6	We were like dreamers dreaming
Hebrews 5:1-6	Beset by weakness, patient with the weak
Mark 10:46-52	Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho

As I've mentioned before,
every week I accompany the weekly column I write
with a drawing from the files
—drawings that I made in the 1980s to go with the different Sundays,
and have largely forgotten.

Some of them I like better than others.
This week's is a favorite.
It shows the blindman of Jericho to one side, calling out to Jesus.
I like that the drawing reminds me of Ray Charles,
with his dark glasses.

Meanwhile, Jesus is walking through town
surrounded by an entourage that looks very much
like a contingent of Secret Service men.
At least that was the intent.

They each have those wrap-around dark glasses
that hide where their eyes are looking, just like the Secret Service.
It seems especially timely, during this election season.
They are protecting Jesus from any untoward interruptions,
like that of the blind man calling out.

One implicit message is that with their glasses
they look very much like the blind man.
It raises questions. Just who are the blind ones here?

The disciples of Jesus certainly seem to possess a certain blindness,
in their eagerness to keep blind Bartimaeus away.
What are they thinking?

Perhaps that they feel that they are on an important mission,
with an important personage, a celebrity of sorts,
and they are pleased to be part of the movement.
They seem to be jealous of anyone else sneaking into the circle.

In any case, they attempt to hush Bartimaeus,
and nearly prevent the healing encounter from occurring.

We will see the disciples only a few times after this.
At Jesus' farewell speech on the Mount of Olives, they are with him,

looking over the temple and thinking about its end.

They are seen when sent into the city
to fetch a donkey for entry
or to prepare a table for the Passover meal.
We see them gather at the meal and scatter from the garden.
Peter we see once more in the high priest's courtyard.

And then, for Mark, that is all.

This picture of them preventing seekers from reaching Jesus
is not a good image for them to project
in this last stop before entering the city for the final week.

What are we to make of this story?

I find myself thinking of those who want a smaller church.
For instance, I have heard it said
that there are only five million real Catholics in the US,
which would leave out the other 60 million.

Then there is the persistent rumor
that P. Benedict, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger,
suggested that we might need "a smaller, purer, church."
This may be something of an urban legend,
as it cannot be found among his writings.

In any case, it is doubtful that it would be his opinion now as pope.
For consider what it means pastorally to those at the margins.
It says, "We do not need you. You do not fit our profile.
You are not what we consider the pure."

The Gospels sketch a picture of the Pharisees
as those who demand a high level of purity.
Purity was defined by what they did not do, what they avoided doing.

They did not eat with sinners.
They did not heal on the Sabbath.
They washed cups and vessels before meals.
They watched with whom they associated.

Whether this picture of the Pharisees is historically accurate
or not—and there are some questions—
it does represent a pattern which Jesus in the Gospels does not accept.

When we look at what Jesus is doing in his ministry,

we see him calling for repentance.
"For the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent."

In other words, one thing is necessary to join the movement:
That you be a sinner, and know it.
That you recognize your sinfulness and repent of it.

That you be a sinner?
How would that not include all of us?

In polls about religion,
it turns out that the second largest religious group in the US
are the "nones."
That is, n-o-n-e-s, not the Nuns on the Bus.

That is, as in the survey question,
"To what religion are you affiliated?" Answer: None.

It turns out that the Nones are mostly younger,
just starting out on their adult life.

It seems that scarcely any month goes by
that I do not find someone who was formerly active in her parish,
but now has dropped out.

I say "her" because those I know are primarily women
lay women who were lectors, religion teachers.
Active in the parish.
But not now.

It is not that they have become apostate,
but that they feel that they are no longer wanted as members.
That their vision of church is not welcome.

But what happens after the women and children are gone?

It is possible I am being overly negative,
dwelling on the dark side.
Is there any good news?
For "Gospel" means "good news."

Well, as a matter of fact, there is.
It is the central point of the story
of Bartimaeus, the blind man of Jericho.
For the protectors of Jesus do not prevail.
Something surprising happens.

Jesus makes contact with Bartimaeus
over the heads of his disciples.

He hears the blind man's cry,
despite the wishes of his followers.
The ministry of outreach succeeds,
even when it is not encouraged.

When we last see Bartimaeus he is no longer blind.
And the phrase that makes this clear is profound in its meanings:
He followed him down the road.

For he too is a follower.
Nor is he a blind follower.
And he takes the road with Jesus.
And the road leads to the city,
and the last week, the week of the Passion.

One understands that Bartimaeus will be there through the week.

Words for All Saints

The irony is that because we regularly celebrate Thursday feasts on their evening vigil, we are now celebrating All Saints on the Eve of All Saints, which is traditionally known as All Hallows' Eve. Or, in the common parlance, Halloween.

And as we gather here this evening, it is Tricks-or-Treats time around town, from 5:30 to 7:30. From what I gather from ads and magazine inserts, a major theme this year is zombies. Another irony, for zombies supposedly are the half dead and half living.

I do not know what is behind the fascination with zombies. Perhaps it is simply a fascination about afterlife, in a time when it often is not a matter of Christian belief. Or maybe it is a matter of anxiety about what is going to happen. In our own tradition, we sometimes go through periods of such anxiety, and are more driven by fear than by trust. All Souls Day sometimes seems more important than All Saints.

But at the heart of the faith is the belief in Resurrection, granted as a gift by a God who loves us. It is in that spirit that we gather to celebrate. It is in that tradition that, for instance, Robert Ellsberg has written a book called All Saints, in which he remembers and celebrates persons of notable courage and belief, whether they are Catholic or not. He makes use of the Catholic tradition to welcome others who would seem to belong there, whether it is Gandhi, Job, or someone else.

For the theme is given in the readings for today. Those who are celebrated in the Beatitudes are those we want to remember. And those who are pictured in the book of Revelation, both the numbered and the vast unnumbered, are included today. Those who are numbered might be seen as representing those who have been canonized and have days given for their commemoration. But the vast throng of the unnumbered are those of quite virtue and common courage that live in all the corners of the world, and well as our own corner, who share the neighborhood with us, and make life, and especially the life of faith, all the more possible for living. And it is in this spirit that we add names to the community of the unnamed, and number those we know among the unnumbered.

When we celebrate All Saints, we make an affirmation of faith in the saving work of God in the life of Jesus, and consequently, in the community of disciples, from then to the present day. We make an affirmation of faith in the astonishing gift of grace that would welcome us into the circle of the just community of the resurrection. And in that, we not only celebrate them, but also ourselves, and the assurance that we too are in the circle of the saints, as dubious as that sometimes seems. But we remember, it is not our doing, but the work of the God who unaccountably loves us.

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 4, 2012

Deuteronomy 6:2-6 Hear, O Israel!
Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51 My rock, fortress, deliverer
Hebrews 7:23-28 No more need for sacrifice
Mark 12:28b-34 The Great Commandment

As we come toward the end of the Church Year
(we aren't that far from Advent!),
we also come to the end of Mark's Gospel.
Jesus and his disciples have completed their journey to Jerusalem,
and now we find him as he has been defending himself
in debates in the Temple.

Pharisees have asked him about paying the tax to Caesar.
Sadducees have mocked the teaching of the Resurrection,
telling a tale of a woman married seven times.
And now today a scribe asks him a question.

This does not seem to be a trap, for a change.
It seems more like a question that a seeker would ask a famous rabbi.
What is the way? How do I follow it?
Jesus turns for an answer to the place any rabbi would:
The Shema.

Shema Yisrael. Hear, O Israel,
the Lord our God is God alone.
It is the daily prayer of the pious Jew.

It was the Mezuzah, written in small scrolls
to be placed above the doorways, .
It was bound to arms and foreheads in the phylacteries.

The Shema made a public declaration
of the central faith moment of Judaism.
It was the mission of this religion to maintain the truth of the one God
in a world of countless gods and goddesses.

It was up to Judaism to preserve this belief,
and pass it on to the peoples of the world.
Nothing expresses this mission and task like the Shema.

And so when the Scribe asked Jesus the question,
he had a ready answer, an obvious answer.

The first of all the commandments is this:

You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your mind,
and with all your strength.

But Jesus doesn't stop there.
Even though he wasn't asked this, he continues on:
And this is the second,
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

He did not make this part up either,
since it appears in the book of Leviticus,
in a law that prohibits taking revenge.

We are invited to consider why he felt it necessary
to continue his answer to include a second command.
It is as if stopping at only one would give the wrong impression.

But then we wonder: Is there some way to love God
that still might not to justice to the faith?
Is there some way in which worship of the one true God
might turn out to be false worship?

When we look at what Jesus has added,
and this combination seems to have been his contribution,
we discover that it has to do with the way we treat one another.
If we might use the Ten Commandments as an example,
the Shema corresponds to the first three, about loyalty to God,
but the addition of love of neighbor
corresponds to the following seven,
about relations among the human family.

It would seem that Jesus is saying the piety
is not present where compassion is lacking.

It seems that Jesus is saying that authentic faith
involves care for the neighbor and the vulnerable among us.
It seems to be important to him.
He believes that this commandment about love of neighbor
should be right up there where people cannot ignore it.

But there is another reason: that God thinks it is important.

And that an image of God that doesn't include compassion
is not a picture of the true God.
Worshiping God without this is to misrepresent who God is,
what God wants.

The Bible confirms this.
Wherever we look we find a God who cares.

For instance, the covenant law code
selects three examples for the love of neighbor:
the widow and her child,
the stranger in the land,
and the poor neighbor.

That is, the single mother,
the immigrant,
and those below the poverty line.

These are the vulnerable whose welfare
is the gauge of the presence of justice in the land,
the criterion for the success of that society.
And, the bible suggests, any society.

Worship without compassion for the neighbor is not true worship,
at least not of the God of the Bible.

The Scribe confirms this.
When he says that these two commands
are worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices,
he is referring to the Temple worship,
the authorized worship of the Israelite era of salvation history.

But more important than all of this authorized liturgy,
without which it would not be authentic worship,
is the love neighbor that imitates and participates in
God's love for them.

What is integral to our God,
what is essential to the God we believe in,
is love for the creaturely human family.

And I would say a word to our visitors.
It is in this firm belief that together we bring
our commemorations to this sacred space.

It is in our confidence in this God
that we commend our loved ones to his care, knowing that,
in the words of Wisdom,
their souls are in the hands of God and no torment can touch them.

It is our firm belief that we have a loving God,
and that we can count on that.

And it is in this belief that we welcome you.
You have supported this community,
in part because you understand this community
to live out the image of God who cares,
the image that we are given in these scriptures for today.

But in supporting this community, you share in its mission,
and demonstrate your own belief in a God
who prizes compassion for the neighbor.

It is for this reason that we welcome you,
and bring you to the center of our worshiping space.
For worship that honors the God of compassion is true worship.

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 11, 2012

1 Kings 17:10-16	Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath
Psalm 146:7-10	The fatherless and widow he sustains
Hebrews 9:24-28	Not a sanctuary made by hands
Mark 12:38-44	The widow's mite

Back in the book Exodus, among the covenant laws
connected with the Commandments delivered by Moses,
is a passage that might be called the Cry of the Poor.
It talks about the stranger in the land, the poor neighbor,
and the widow and orphan.
It warns against molesting these
who represent the more vulnerable in the land.

If they cry out to God, they will be heard,
and God will attend to those who harm them,
for God is a God of wrath and a God of compassion.

Every widow we encounter in the Bible
is supposed to remind us of this legal warning.
The prophets repeatedly mention them,
as they test the winds of public policy,
trying to determine how well the social experiment of Israel is doing.
For failing here, they fail for good.

And the Bible suggests the welfare of the vulnerable
is the criterion of the health of any society.

One of the loveliest, most engaging books of the Old Testament
is the small book of Ruth.
It tells the story of Naomi, who lived in ancient Bethlehem,
but during a severe famine left for the land of Moab
with her husband and two young sons.
The sons grew up and married Moabite women.

And then the men died, one after another.
Naomi and her daughters-in-law
were thrown upon their own resources,
and Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem.
And against Naomi's advice, the one named Ruth returned with her.

Naomi returned bereft and barren.
She and Ruth were widows, and strangers in the land
—Naomi in her own land, not yet at home.

And they were poor. Ruth gleaned the fields.

Leaving the leftovers from the harvest in the fields
was a practice in Israel, for that belonged to the poor.

Boaz, a relative of Naomi,
and the exemplar of the upright Israelite, met Ruth,
and the story ends with Naomi being restored to her heritage
and Ruth becoming the great-grandmother of King David.

But behind all of this is the memory of the cry of the poor,
and the question of the widow and the orphan,
the foreigner in the land,
and the poor neighbor

And when Elijah visited the widow and her son
in the land of Zarephath, a foreign land in present day Lebanon,
she also was poor,
down to the last drop in her jar of meal and jug of oil.

And yet Elijah had the nerve to ask her for help.
And more importantly, she gave it.

And when Jesus, at the end of his debates in the temple
during the last week of his life,
notices the poor widow giving her last coins to the temple treasury,
what came to everyone's mind
is the plight of the widow and the poor.
And the scribes that were taking advantage of their vulnerability,
perhaps by schemes similar to those we get by email today.

But again, what fixed Jesus' attention,
and what he brought to everyone's attention,
was her generosity.

She too defied her classification as one among the vulnerable,
the helpless of the land.
But it turns out she is not so helpless after all.
Though it is not clear what she will do now.
But that is not as important as her freedom to give,
despite her situation.

While the wealthy could donate more, and more easily,
theirs was not as great a contribution as the widow's two cents worth.

The spirit of calculation
might evaluate the amount of the donation;
the spirit of the gift
considers the cost to the giver.

The lesson of the widows today, it seems to me,
is that the same person is both the giver and the one in need.
Put in those terms, I think it applies to all of us.
We are all poor, in some way,
but we all can find a way to give.
We are all needy,
and yet that doesn't deny our ability to be generous.

Today we honor as guests of this community
those of you who support it.
And in our gratitude for your giving,
we look to those among you who have died.
In your generosity you support us;
in turn we pray for you in your need,
for those who have died and left a open space in your lives.

We are all givers and persons in need,
and the sum of this is the web of lives that we call community.
In your support of this community, you are joined to it.
In our response, we open the center of our prayer space,
and welcome you into the circle of our liturgical life.

In the gift given out of poverty,
the jar of meal never goes empty
and the jar of oil never goes dry.
It is another circle,
and in this circle also that we make our prayer today.

The Solemnity of Christ the King

November 25, 2012

Daniel 7:13-14	The Son of Man coming on the clouds
Psalm 93:1, 1-2, 5	The Lord is king
Revelation 1:5-8	Behold, he is coming amid the clouds
John 18:33-37	"Are you the King of the Jews?"

Today we crown the church year with the feast of Christ the King.

And we join with Pilate, as he asks Jesus, "Are you a king?"
We wonder, what is Jesus' kingship?
We know that Christ means king,
and that the name of this feast is somewhat redundant.
But that only intensifies the question.
What is this kingship?

We know that Jesus informs Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world."
And so we wonder: Where is it? What is it?

There is no shortage of theories.

When Jesus says "it is not of this world,"
some say that it must be elsewhere,
that it is all a matter of location, location, location.
Heaven, that is, not earth.
And this seems to be the point of the reading from the book of Daniel
—one like a Son of Man is coming on the clouds.

But when Jesus explains what he means
by saying that if he were a king of this world,
his attendants would be mounting a movement
to spring him loose from his captivity,
then we know that he is talking about something other than location.

He is talking about matters of power and force.
His kingdom is not of that kind.
That is the pattern of the Imperial powers,
such as Pilate himself, the procurator from Rome.

So if it is not a matter of location—heaven not earth—
then maybe it is a matter of avoiding the political.

Some would agree with this.
They would hold that Jesus is speaking
of the separation of church and state.

They might point to Jesus' remarks during the temple debates,

where he says to render to Caesar what is Caesar's
and to God what is God's.

Apart from the anachronism of this idea,
it is not clear that Jesus did not believe that all creation was God's,
human as well as the world of nature.

It is clear that the God of the Bible is the God of History.
God does not restrict his interest to the private realm.
God is actually interested in public policy
and what is going on in the larger world.

The kingdom is a political image,
and the Gospel is full of similar imagery.
And in John's Gospel, after the exchange of remarks in today's reading,
we understand that Jesus dies as a political threat,
the king of the Jews.

So if the kingdom is not apolitical, if it has political aspects,
some would say that the kingdom is involved in the work of the world,
and must make its presence felt.

Taking their cues from passages from books like Revelation,
which pictures heaven as the throne room of a mighty emperor,
greater than any earthly empire, like Rome,
the persecutor of John of Patmos,
they imagine the kingdom like the empire, only more so.

Where John, in writing Revelation, wished to make the point
that the imperial presence that so troubles the Christian church
is not the last word in power,
that God is still in control of the world and their destinies,
even if it was not entirely evident to them at the time,
he chose to make that point by picturing God
as more powerful, more imperial,
more intimidating than any empire.

The point is well made, but there is a danger in this approach.
It leaves the door open for Christians to adopt imperial practices,
even though the Gospel opposes them.

Jesus faces Pilate, and tells him that his kingdom is not like Pilate's.
Nor should we want it to be.
His power, he says, is the power of truth.
Simply truth. Nothing more.

Where does this take us?
To answer that, I would like to relate an experience.

This past weekend, as you know, I was at a conference.
I was not the only one to speak there.
One of our colleagues in the Loras theology department,
a young theologian named Amanda Osheim, was also there,
and also gave a paper.

Her talk was about two visions of church in its vulnerability.
She based it on Paul's famous hymn of kenosis, or emptying,
in Phil 2:

> Have among yourselves the same attitude
> that is also yours in Christ Jesus
> Who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.
>
> Rather, he emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave,
> coming in human likeness;
> and found human in appearance,
> he humbled himself,
> becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

This kenosis, this emptying, this vulnerability
is part of the church, and a mark of the kingdom.
How is it to be understood?
Amanda contrasted two ways in which it is understood.

The point of her contrast was captured
in two notable figures in modern American Catholicism,
whose pictures she projected upon the PowerPoint screen:
Cardinal George of Chicago
and Sr. Pat Farrell of the LCWR.

Both understand that the kingdom is to be found in the world,
though not of the world.
But they differ in how they make that understanding.

They differed on where they found the call to vulnerability.

For Cardinal George, it was the cost of obedience to orthodoxy.
Our task is to adhere to the teachings, and suffer the consequences.

His famous quote is. “I expect to die in bed,
my successor will die in prison,
and his successor will die a martyr in the public square."

Clearly, vulnerability in this view is a consequence of being right.

For Sr. Pat Farrell,
(and here I cannot remember the exact quote Amanda chose),
vulnerability was not a consequence of obedience,
it was obedience itself.

It was obedience to the will of God
to enter the plight of the vulnerable.
Instead of a result, it was part of the process.

Instead of a proof that we are right,
it is an immersion into the plight of those
who live amid the confusions and uncertainties of the broken world.

Instead of a glory that leads to kenosis
it is rather a kenosis that hopes toward glory.

It is this kingdom that Jesus speaks about
as he moves toward his crucifixion,
in conversation with the one who will crucify him.

Pilate speaks from his throne,
but Jesus' throne will be none other than the cross itself.
His power is the power of truth
and his truth is the truth of the vulnerable.