

First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2018

Jeremiah 33:14-16 I will raise up a just shoot
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10, 14 To you I lift up my soul
1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 May you abound in love
Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 Signs in the sun and moon and stars

Advent is the season of awaiting the coming,
for “Advent” means “coming.”

And traditionally there are three comings celebrated in Advent.

In the fourth and last Sunday it is the coming of the Christ child
—what we normally think Advent is all about.

But in the Second and Third Sundays, we look at John the Baptist,
and the coming of Jesus into his Messianic calling,
his public ministry as an adult.

But the first Sunday, today, we look at a third king of “coming,”
and that is the coming of Jesus as Lord in the end times.

The readings are apocalyptic, and the the poetry is full of signs in the skies
and warnings to maintain vigilance.

The rest of the Sundays of Advent are memorials of beginnings.
In a subdued sort of way, we celebrate the beginning of Jesus public ministry.
And in a more excited frame of mind, we look to Christmas.

But these are memorials of comings in the past.
Only one of the there kinds of comings applies to us,
only one is yet to happen,
only one is exclusively our own,
and that is the one we celebrate today.
This is the coming that we await.

But the question is how do we live in this expectation?
How do we take these apocalyptic warnings?
How do we read the strange poetry of apocalyptic?

Among certain evangelical traditions in America and the British Isles,
apocalyptic is treated like a road map.

Failing to recognize the poetry, they adopt a literal interpretation,
counting years and days,
and looking for endtime figures that they can identify.
And when that identification turns out to be wrong,
look again for another.

Apart from disregarding the poetry,
and replacing it with puzzles to be worked out,
there are other problems with this reading of the signs.

In deriving a doctrine of the rapture,
from a certain way of reading Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians,
they adopt an attitude of escaping the world, leaving it behind.

Ignoring Paul's intent of providing consolation for those in the community
who fear that those who have died in the meantime will miss the final gathering,
they concentrate instead on his idea that they have already risen.

But if this earth is not our home,
we have no obligation to maintain it, to preserve it.
If our gaze is elsewhere, we can spoil our nest, and move on.

And in reading Romans 11, where Paul is expressing his hope
that though his Jewish compatriots have failed to join the Christian movement,
they will not be lost, because they are the chosen people
and God will call them in again after he has finished calling the Gentiles,
ignored until now.

But a tendentious reading focuses on the one idea
that Israel will return before the final times, and running with that idea,
looks to present day Israel as a sign of the coming end.

The result is a partnership of convenience,
in which evangelicals are friends of Israel, not because they favor the Jews,
but because their arrival will facilitate the coming of the end.

And Israel makes use of that friendship of convenience
in order to solicit political support for their own purposes.
Each using the other.

But, if that is not what we are to read
in the apocalyptic poetry of the bible, what then?

A clue, I think, can be found in the passage from Jeremiah.
A day is coming when the promise will be fulfilled. What promise?
That one will come who will ensure justice in the land.
For David will be raised a just shoot,
and Judah and Jerusalem shall be called, "Yahweh, our justice."

Which is to say, God's dream for Jerusalem,
for the New Jerusalem which is that in which we live and hope,
is one of justice.

It is a justice not yet achieved, but one that is glimpsed,
one that we can almost see, almost reach.

It is part of the hope of the season of Advent.

But it is not yet.

Injustices of racism, of sexism,
of criminal neglect of the environment leveraged against a baneful future,
these we know.

We see families teargassed on our southern border.
We see images of children in Yemen attacked and starving.
We watch them starve on the internet.
We hope, but we feel helpless.

However, we have our prophets and our visionaries showing us the way.
There is a Martin Luther King, Jr., who has a dream
about the end of racism, and the end of war,
and insists on our remembering it.

There is Pope Francis insisting that we understand the plight of our home planet
as part of the Christian call to action, part of our reality.
That any vision of the end times that does not include our care of creation
is blind and a self-fulfilling judgment.

There are theologians
like Elizabeth Johnson, Sandra Schneiders, Barbara Reid, insisting
that God's people in its fullness includes women,
that the dream is diminished otherwise.

There are the prophets
like Liz McAlister, Daniel Berrigan, Dorothy Marie Hennessy
speaking out against injustice with their voices and their very bodies.
Like Dorothy Day, whose death anniversary we celebrated this week,
and those who follow her example in the Catholic Worker.

There are many voices urging us, calling us to stay awake,
pleading with us to keep alive the dream God has for us.

Sometimes the way clear is not at yet visible.
Then the obligation is to keep the hope alive.
To keep the voices unmuffled.

This hope is the hope of Advent.
Or, as in the words of the gospel today—
“Be vigilant at all times
and pray that you have the strength

to escape the tribulations.”

Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2018

Baruch 5:1-9	Up Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights
Psalm 126:1-6	The Lord brought back the captives
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11	I pray for you always
Luke 3:1-6	The voice of one crying out in the desert

In the Second Sunday of Advent,
the promise is given, but the answer is not yet clear.
Without seeing a way forward, the hope still seems audacious.
For the audacity of hope, to borrow a famous phrase,
is what we are going on at this part of the journey.

The voices in the readings for today are full of longing.
The reading from Baruch with which we began speaks of Jerusalem
as one does when it is still far off.

We remember the phrase, “Next year in Jerusalem!”,
which spoke to the desires of Jewish believers
who one day hoped to make a pilgrimage,
but who probably would never get the chance.

So it is with the voice in the book of Baruch.
It is one of the few books of the Hebrew Bible
that was written outside the land of Judah.

In fact, it wasn’t written in Hebrew,
and it did not make it into the Hebrew Bible,
though it is in ours, and in that of the Orthodox church.
It is a voice from the margins, from outside.
From someplace other than Jerusalem.

With confidence it announces, “Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;
look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west.”

And yet it has not happened, and one wonders
if the confident voice is bravely speaking against the probabilities.
It speaks of a Jerusalem that is far off,
and it evokes a sense of longing for home.

In the introduction to the book in our Catholic Bible, we read:
“Baruch turns out to be the book for people who are separated or lost,
physically or emotionally, from the normal environment. ...

In our homelessness Baruch seeks to impart a sense of prayer,
of biblical traditions, of hope and humility.”

Homelessness and hope are the words of the day.

Homelessness is no stranger to us and our world.

We know the traditional meaning of the word, and it brings to mind images of people having nowhere to sleep but on park benches. It also brings to mind the Iowa City Catholic Workers who are protesting that city's installation of park benches with multiple arm rests. The city says it makes them more comfortable. The Catholic Worker suspects it is to prevent people from sleeping on them—to solve the problem of homelessness by pushing it elsewhere.

When we hear the word "homelessness," we cannot help but think of the vast numbers of refugees moving across our world, moving into Europe, moving up from Central America.

And when we think of that, we think of the measures taken to prevent them from entering into the land to which they travel. Europeans fearing the loss of their traditional identities. We in the United States of European ancestry with a similar set of anxieties. Meanwhile exiles are drowning in flimsy boats in the Mediterranean. Refugees seeking asylum are being greeted with tear gas at our border.

We may think of homes that are lost. We see images of what has happened to the beautiful cities of Syria. We see what is happening in Yemen.

And we experience our own homelessness. For some it is the loss of a familiar world, as (to take one example) the world turns to digital devices which not everyone is equipped to handle. The old skills and understandings no longer apply.

Or it is the loss of a faith community. Recently I put online a column from the NCR, in which a woman of faith explained why she was leaving the church in the aftermath of the sex abuse scandals and their mismanagement.

Many of my women friends responded. Among the many there was one remark I cannot forget. A long time friend of mine, she was the first person to take a Religious Studies major from Loras when we started that program. She later went through our graduate program in Theology. She wrote in her response to the article I posted: "What to do when staying feels as wrong as leaving?"

Homelessness takes many forms, and Baruch's cry takes a different turn in the Gospel reading from Luke. Now it is a voice in the desert, crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

We hear this in all the gospels, but Luke takes it further.

He continues the quote until the part that says,

“and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

For Luke wants to continue the story beyond Judea into the wider world,
which he will do in his second volume, Acts of the Apostles.

He noticed that if he continues the quotation from Isaiah,
he can get to the part about “all flesh.”

Where Baruch wants to get to Jerusalem,

Luke wants to move out from Jerusalem to the wide world.

But he is still thinking about homelessness,
about “all flesh” needing the salvation of God.

And we too in our time look at the wide world and also think about homelessness.

For this planet, our home, is also under threat.

And it is because we have mismanaged our trust,
our commission to care for it.

And here I have another anecdote.

When I was teaching at Aquinas in Dubuque,

part of the consortium of Catholic, Lutheran, and Presbyterian seminaries,

I had a student named Jim Hgayak.

He was an Inuit, an Eskimo, as we say, and studying to be a Presbyterian minister.

He and his wife were from Point Barrow Alaska,
the northernmost point on the north coast.

Knowing he was an indigenous American,
and since I was into mythology at the time,

I asked him about native myths.

He was not receptive to the question.

He said to me, What about your American myth?

I said, What myth?

He pointed to the history of European conquest of the continent,
restlessly moving west, leaving a trail of waste behind.

He called this myth, “Spoil your nest, and move on.”

I have never forgotten that.

And so it is with our planet.

There too we are in a state of homelessness,
and are only beginning to wake up to the plight.

For the problems out there begin within, and the changes have to occur there.

This has been something of a glum rehearsal.

And of course it can be extended with other examples from other areas.

But we are in that part of Advent that calls us to recognize our predicament.
We are called to repent, and to call upon God, our hope.
For the changes we need must begin with the changes we make,
and that begins within.

For now, we are called to name our homelessness, to recognize it,
to feel it and become dissatisfied with it.

Only then will it move us to make the necessary changes toward the new day.
Before the resolve comes the recognition of the need for it.

And so we have Paul's prayer for the Philippians offered for us today:

*And this is my prayer:
that your love may increase ever more and more
in knowledge and every kind of perception,
to discern what is of value, ...*

*I am confident of this,
that the one who began a good work in you
will continue to complete it
until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3:4-18 Shout for Joy, O daughter Zion!
Isaiah 12:2-6 Shout with exultation, O city of Zion!
Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always.
Luke 3:10-18 He preached good news to the people.

This is Gaudete Sunday. "Gaudete" means "Rejoice."
The invitation to rejoice comes from the letter to the Philippians today.

But why should we rejoice? We are still in Advent.
Christmas is more than a week away.

Philippians gives an answer to that question. The Lord is near.
So it appears that we are starting to get signs of the season.

Of course, in the commercial world
we have had nothing else but signs of Christmas.
We have been hearing Christmas songs everywhere
since the week before Thanksgiving.

But Advent moves to another rhythm.
Gentler, less raucous.
More attuned to the meaning of the season we celebrate.

In that regard, the Old Testament readings of the season have been tracing the growing awareness, like a dawning, of the coming of the Lord.

It has been talking about it in terms of traveling to Jerusalem.
A homecoming of sorts.

Today we hear there another version of “the Lord is near.”
In both the passages from Zephaniah and Isaiah we hear “the Lord is in your midst.”

This is a surprise.
Somehow the Lord is already here, but unrecognized.
The coming of Advent is already accomplished,
but the moment of revealing it has not yet arrived.

So often in life the answer is already at hand, but we do not recognize it.
So often what it needs is the right moment,
the right person to understand what is going on and bring it to our attention.
I think of so many life-changing discoveries that lay unrecognized for all time,
until the right moment and the right person came along to tell us about it.
Penicillin, the first true antibiotic, came into our lives by accident,
when Alexander Fleming, Professor of Bacteriology,
noticed something unusual happening in his petri dish,
and bothered to follow up on it.

Electricity is a central part of our lives now,
as it undergirds our entire digital system as well as so many aspects of modern living.
And yet, my grandparents did without it,
and its potential and even an understanding of its existence is relatively new,
even though it has been there since the beginning of time.

So it is with so many things in our lives that we take for granted.
At one time they were not there.
Or rather, they were there, but no one knew it,
for no one had recognized their existence.

So often we have the answer to our troubles at hand
but we are not able to recognize it because it does not fit our preconceptions.

And so it is with the message from the biblical texts today.
The Lord is in your midst.
But where? We do not notice him.
He is not due for another nine days.
If the Lord is in our midst, where is he?

The classic Catholic Worker answer to this question was given by Dorothy Day.
She said that the person coming in the door to the Worker was Jesus.

This was not apparent to everyone, and it still isn't.
The person who comes to the Worker for help doesn't look like Jesus.
We have to squint to see him there.
Of course, it was that squinting that Dorothy was talking about.
We have to learn to achieve that way of seeing.

But of course, Dorothy was simply taking a page from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25—the parable of the sheep and goats.
We call them the works of mercy.

They Lord will say to the righteous,
'Come, you who are blessed by my Father.
Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.
For I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
a stranger and you welcomed me,
naked and you clothed me,
ill and you cared for me,
in prison and you visited me.'

But here is the thing: they did not know it was the king.
For they ask the question, When. When did we do these things?
The Lord was in their midst, and they did not know it.
But in performing the works of mercy,
attending to the needs of the vulnerable,
they came to recognize him.

Today in the gospel reading, the people respond to John's preaching by asking, "What should we do?"
His answers are deceptively simple.
There is nothing heroic in what he recommends.
And yet, what a difference it would make.

Who ever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none.
We may think of the saying on non-retaliation—turn the other cheek,
and give even your shirt to the one who demands your cloak.
Or we may think of the picture Luke also gives us
of the community at the beginning of Acts of the Apostles,
where they shared their goods.

John says to the tax-collectors, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed."
Sounds simple and obvious. But it gets at the greed
that caused many to take up the occupation of tax-collector,
for it wasn't a popular profession.
If you couldn't make a killing on it, why do it?

Even the soldiers get in on the act, and John tells them, three things:

“Do not practice extortion,
do not falsely accuse anyone,
and be satisfied with your wages.”

Where the tax-collectors were driven by greed,
the soldiers were accustomed to power and the satisfactions that it provided.

Power is easy to abuse when you possess it.

It can be intoxicating.

It gives you a leverage over others that is tantalizing, easy to exploit.

But John wants to take that away.

Soldiers are invited to ask themselves why they are in that profession.

At this point, I typically make reference to occasions in our own experience that reflect the points made in the Scriptures.

Today’s gospel mentions protecting the vulnerable,
avoiding acting out of greed,
and refusing to exploit a monopoly on power.

I invite you to make your own connections and applications.

For now, I am simply going to say, Rejoice.

The Lord is near.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2018

Micah 5:1-4 You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19 Shepherd of Israel, hearken
Hebrews 10:5-10 “I come to do you will.”
Luke 1:39-45 Mary visits Elizabeth

It is the time of the year when changes are occurring.

The solstice has turned its corner and now the year is headed toward longer days.

This year it was enhanced by a comet and a full moon.

At the less cosmic level, families are gathering

and old acquaintances are making contact again after perhaps long silences.

On the grand scale and the more personal, the times are a-changing.

And as I’ve mentioned before, what strikes me about the Christmas stories of Luke, is the same double perspective of the grand scale and the local, more personal.

On the grand scale, we see the working of the empire in the background.

Caesar Augustus has decreed a census of the whole world.

The occasion and reason for this is the Roman empire

needs to take stock of the world it now manages.

The time is known as the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace,
enforced by the military legions deployed across the ancient world.

It has long struck me that the announcement of the angels
that appeared to the shepherds in the fields was a declaration of Peace on Earth.

The angels apparently didn't give the Pax Romana much credit.
A new peace was needed.

That is in the background.

In the foreground we see Mary and Joseph,
Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna
—faithful Israelites pursuing their lives among the villages of Galilee and Judea.

They are devout.

They maintain the customs of their faith.

And they are waiting on the Lord for the new day
that they believe is desperately needed, and long overdue.

The message of the Christmas story of Luke
is that the day they have waited for so long is finally arriving.

For they are not only waiting, they are welcoming the new moment.

That is the point of Elizabeth's greeting to Mary, in today's gospel.

And it is the point of Mary's answer, in the Magnificat.

It is the message of the angels, and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon
—"You may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation."

So part of the Christmas celebration
is thanksgiving for God's action on behalf of his people.

The Incarnation, God entering human form and life,
is an initiative on the part of the Divine.

God's first move is what we call grace,
and it is at the center of the Christian vision.

God's love has brought us back.

But the story has another side as well.

Today's reading from Hebrews alerts us to this,
when it portrays Christ saying

"Behold, I have come to do your will."

There is one place in the gospel story where Jesus says this,
and it is in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he says to his Father,
"Not what I will, but what you will."

It is a turning point in the gospel story,
and everything hangs on the answer Jesus will give.

But in these days, it reminds us of another similar moment.
Elizabeth greets Mary on her arrival with words of blessing,
for the corner of history has just turned,
and that is because of Mary's answer to the angel Gabriel, just previous.

Mary too says, "Your will be done."
More specifically, she said, "May it be done to me according to your word."
But her answer is "Yes."
Just as Jesus' answer will be "Yes" in his garden temptation.
These two *Yes* moments,
these two willing affirmations of God's demand upon them frame the Gospel story.
Mary begins it; Jesus brings it to a successful conclusion.
But they have one thing in common.
There would be no gospel story without these two *Yes* moments.
In other words, God's grace finds an answer
in the human response to act upon it.
Grace finds a place in the world, a purchase in the affairs of human beings,
when it is heated as a call to action, and acted upon in response.

And here is the thing:
In the Christmas stories, the responses that make the difference
are found here in the stories of the villagers,
not in the loud operations of the empire in the background.
It is in the actions in the foreground, among the local faithful
who are responding to the impulse of God's call in the best way they know,
that the real differences are made.

I like to think that these events we hear about occurring in Nazareth and Bethlehem
bring about the New Year, soon to occur.
But it is larger than that,
for the entire calendar is going to be dated from the year one.
For that is when this story is happening.
But this is not because of the decree of Caesar Augustus.
It is because of the Yes of Mary.
And the confirming Yes of Jesus.

We tend to look upon the events of the larger world in which we ourselves live,
and feel powerless to change things.
We tend to think that we are small people at the edge of the world with its powers.
We, to be specific, live in what is called "flyover country."
That is a name given by others, but we tend to believe it.
In short, we think of ourselves as powerless.

But the Christmas stories of Luke tell us this is not the case.
Changes occur where we make them occur.
Part of the meaning of Christmas is that we are affirmed in our particularity,

our local human existence, wherever we may be,
no matter how humble, how apparently insignificant.

For that is what we share with the villagers
in the stories we tell in the Christmas gospels.
One part if the work of God, and it is called grace.
The other is our own response,
and it can change the world in ways we do not even suspect.

There is one more small addition I would make.
These two *Yes* moments of Mary and Jesus
are honored in our most familiar prayers.

The words of Gabriel—"Hail Mary, full of grace"—
and the words of Elizabeth we heard today
—"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb"—
are not only a response to Mary' *Yes*.
They are also the basis for our prayer, the Hail Mary.

And the *Yes* of Jesus' in the Garden
is a version of the Lords' Prayer, with its "Abba, Father."
True, instead of "Give us our daily bread" we hear "Take this cup away."
But that is followed by "your will be done."
And the plea that his disciples "not fall into temptation."
The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

These two prayers, which make up the Rosary,
are not simply common Catholic prayers counted on the beads.
They are also affirmations of the two *Yes* moments
that responding to the impulse from God make the Gospel story possible,
and change the world.

And in so doing,
they affirm our own actions in response to the invitation from God,
which place the gospel story in our own day,
and also can change the world.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 19 2019

Acts 14:21-27 Opening the door to the Gentiles
Psalm 145:8-13 Known to the children of Adam
Revelation 21:1-5 A new heaven and a new earth
John 13:31-35 Love one another, as I have loved you

In the scripture readings of the Easter season,

Acts of the Apostles has a special place.

We have been hearing its story of the early Christian community spreading out from Jerusalem, and the Holy Week that took place there.

Today we hear about Paul and Barnabas in Asia Minor.

Their first mission complete, they return to their home community and report that “God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.”

The mission to the world beyond Judaism has been secured.

To put this in some perspective, it is helpful to get a sense of the times.

The socio-anthropologist Bruce Malina has spent a lifetime trying to understand the culture of the first century Mediterranean world.

He tells us that in the time of the New Testament there was no sense of the universal human family.

There was only the race of humans, which was my own tribe, and all the other questionable tribes, not perhaps fully human.

It appears that one of the first break-throughs in perceiving the common humanity of the human race was in the mission of the early Christian church.

No one who was marginal was not invited inside.

No one was excluded from the definition of God’s children.

Even today we find this understanding of the one human family not reaching everywhere, even among the Christian communities.

As has been so dramatically demonstrated this past week, the full equality of women is not always and everywhere accepted.

And we have our racial blindness with blacks, and indigenous Americans, both of whom are assigned lower rungs on the ladder.

The vision of the New Testament writers is still to be realized in many places and toward many populations.

And often the historical record of Christian missionary activity was compromised by imperial politics.

And yet, it was also sincere, driven by a dream of the one people.

Missionaries lived and died with their people.

And the vision of Acts of the Apostles is still there, acting like an irritant, insisting on the sisterhood and brotherhood of all nations, urging the necessary changes to continue.

In the Gospel for today, the disciples are at the Last Supper with Jesus. Judas has just left. Jesus continues to speak to the rest.

He speaks of the glorification that will be coming to him.

And he begins to speak of something

that he will elaborate for a few more chapters.

That “something” is the new commandment he gives them—“love one another.”
With his own love for them as an example, they are to pass it along,
and they will have help when the Spirit comes to dwell among them.

This is the heart of the vision of the human family
that drives the early community out into the world.

It is to bring a vision of mutual love as the very life of the human family.

And no one is to be discarded because of lack of status, lack of significance.
No one is outside the circle of mutual love.

The image of Acts is one of waves moving outward from Jerusalem,
like ripples in a pond, when a stone is thrown into it.

The persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen has driven them out,
and the waves continue outward.

But more recently, another image of the movement of Acts has taken my imagination.
In some ways it is the reverse of the common image I just mentioned.

I call it the movement from edge to center.

It begins in the margins and moves to the heart of the nation.

We see it first in the gospel. Jesus begins in the hinterlands of Galilee.
He spends time attending to the needs of the devastated villages,
economically and spiritually broken.

The symptoms are a plague of illnesses and demon-possession,
pointing to a depressed, lost village society.

They manage their difficult social situations
by banishing certain problem cases to the margins

—banishing the beggars and the blind,
ostracizing the lepers, including the social lepers.

Jesus spends his time addressing their needs, healing the broken,
and in so doing, restoring the excluded back into society.

Personal healing becomes social healing as well.

At a certain moment, he shifts his attention to Jerusalem,
taking the message from the hinterlands, the provinces, to the central city.

They scoff at the rustic Galileans.

But he challenges them,

moving from attending to the symptoms of the social illness to the causes.

His efforts get him killed.

But his spirit lives on, in the Spirit-filled movement that he began.

This is the story of Acts.

At first we see Acts moving from Jerusalem outward.

But the story ends in Rome, as Paul is taken there under arrest.

Once again, we see a story that begins in the hinterlands,
the province of Judea, with its capital Jerusalem,
and moves from there to the center of the ancient world,
the empire centered in Rome.

It suggests that the pattern of the gospel will be repeated, but on a world scale.
The rejection that Jesus experienced in Jerusalem
resulted in releasing it from narrow national boundaries.

It moves out to the center of the Empire.
What will its experience there mean?
That, I think, is part of the meaning of Acts.

Central to the vision is the commandment to love one another.
And this takes the shape of accepting all,
even those who are marginalized by social mores.
Perhaps, especially those who are marginalized.

We have seen in our lifetimes the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America.
It takes as one of its fundamental principles
the Preferential Option for the Poor.
Christian mission, like the practice of Jesus, begins there.

Furthermore, as far as the dominant world culture is concerned,
the European-American axis of influence and power,
Latin America is the hinterlands.
It is itself in the margins,
but now bringing its influence to the larger church.

And taking it further, Pope Francis
is the personal embodiment of the margins coming to the center.
He is the first pope from the Americas,
and he brings the vision of hope to the marginal with him.

In my own sphere is interest—namely, nonviolent social change—
the pattern continues.

The power of the people comes from the margins, from below,
and changes things at the center.

Gandhi attributed it to Jesus.
Martin Luther King Jr. explored its gospel possibilities.

Nonviolent power is the power of love, not force, or violence.
Or, as Jesus says today, “love one another.”

The persistent underlying principle is that no one is to be disregarded,
dismissed because of social prejudices, unpleasant associations.

No one is to be counted among the worthless,

for the true estimate of worth is not made by the banks or the board rooms,
but by the fact of being a creature of God,
called to be one of God's family.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 26 2019

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29	The Jerusalem Council
Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8	Let all the nations praise you
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23	The New Jerusalem
John 14:23-29	The Advocate, the Spirit

In our travel through the book of Acts this Easter season
we are about half way, and that seems as far as we will get this year.

We have reached the account of the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem,
gathered together to deliver a decision on Paul's activity,
allowing non-Jews to enter the community without becoming circumcised.

And also Peter's experience
of not requiring Gentiles to follow the kosher rules for meals,
with a couple of exceptions to honor Jewish sensibilities in shared meals.

But (as mentioned earlier this week),
this event has a backstory that takes into the Hebrew scriptures,
and the story of Judaism.

It has to do with the role Israel saw itself performing
in the history of God's unfolding creation.

The Israelites were entrusted with a sacred task
—carrying through time the special revelation of the one, true God,
which they were to guard against the incursions of a pagan world.

It was a candle against the darkness.

It was an ark carrying the sacred cargo down through time.

This task they took very seriously.

But when they lost the kingdom and temple,
and were carried off into exile in Babylon, to live among aliens,
they felt even more vulnerable, and their assigned task more desperate.

It was then that certain Jewish practices became more important in their eyes.
These identity markers were circumcision, food laws, Sabbath worship, marriage laws.

They declared to the world, and to themselves, who they were.

I sometimes think of this as a double protection
—a shell guarding a precious content, inside another shell.

The first is the *community*,
tasked with guarding the sacred truth down through time.
But the second shell is a protection around the community itself,
namely the *identity markers*
that helped preserve the community that guarded the sacred truth.

But a strange thing happened while they were in exile.
They encountered other exiles from other nations.
They recognized a common suffering. They made friends.

And many of those other peoples were attracted to the truth of the one God,
and were converted to Judaism.
It is said that this was the beginning of religious conversion as we know it.
And Judaism expanded up to ten times its former number.

But there was a contradiction in all of this.
The very walls they built around the religion
got in the way of those who were attracted to the revelation.
The invitation to the nations, extended by Second Isaiah,
was contradicted by the purity concerns of Ezekiel.

Once the exiles were allowed to return to the land,
and found surroundings even more hostile,
they put aside the invitation to the other peoples, and closed ranks.
Under the leadership of Ezra, they built the symbolic wall higher,
and concentrated on survival.

It is at this point the Luke, the author of Acts,
shows Jesus entering the picture.
Jesus makes his first move in the synagogue of Nazareth,
where he reads from the book of Isaiah,
re-opening the invitation to the peoples that Ezra had closed.

And it is the concern of Luke's Gospel, and Acts of the Apostles,
to tell that story of the invitation to the peoples,
once again extended to the world.

The story works its way
until we arrive at today's event of the Apostolic Council.

Peter had a vision of all foods being clean.
Paul and Barnabas felt that converts needs not be circumcised.
The question of the identity markers
was raised in a way that could not be ignored.

I see a parallel in the Catholic church in which I grew up.

We felt ourselves a minority in a Protestant world
—at least in the city I came from.

Catholic practices, from First Fridays, to novenas, to fasting in Lent,
were important as identity markers,
telling us who we were, and telling others.

I remember the term, “mackerel snappers,”
referring to Catholic abstinence from meat on Fridays.

It was a begrudging acknowledgement
of our insistence on keeping our identity clear.

It is this that makes it hard to let go of certain practices,
since it seems like letting go of our identity,
and giving in to the common mores of society.
And then we disappear.

(I had a revival of this feeling this week
when I saw the news story that the school I attended, k-12,
was closing after 110 years—Sacred Heart, Waterloo.

It is that tinge you feel when you witness something significant to you
finally disappearing from view, and, before long, memory.)

So it was with the Jewish Christians.

They felt that Peter, and Paul and Barnabas, were giving too much away,
and what seemed so important to them was disappearing from sight.

And so the struggle of the early church, Jewish and Gentile,
came to this moment in Jerusalem, as the Apostolic council met.

With a final decision that did, at least, honor Jewish sensibilities
by avoiding certain deeply emotional practices.

The other readings surround this pivotal, historical decision.

A corner has been turned,
and the precious heritage, guarded through the ages,
is now released to the Gentiles in the larger world.

The image of the New Jerusalem, from the book of Revelation,
reminds us that we are on a journey,
and have not yet arrived at the destination.

The vision is given.

The demands made upon what it means to be a Christian,
with all its implications for recognizing the full humanity of all peoples,
poor as well as rich, women as well as men,
is given in promise,
but slowly working its way through the societies of the world.

And the gospel reading from John tells us
that the full meaning of that precious truth,
handed on from generation to generation, is now given—God is love.

And if God is love, we are to love one another.
But learning this is again a journey.

And Jesus mentions the Spirit.
The Spirit is the life of the community.
The Spirit is an “advocate.”

Which is to say, we have a guide on the journey,
and that guide is the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit in the community.
And the journey is a journey through time,
heading toward the fullness of God’s dream for the human family.

Otherwise known as the New Jerusalem.

Pentecost Sunday - Mass during the Day

June 9 2019

Acts 2:1-11 The first Pentecost
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34 Renew the face of the earth
1 Corinthians Gifts of the Spirit
John 20:19-23 “Receive the Holy Spirit”

It is Pentecost Sunday, when according to tradition
we celebrate the birthday of the church.

It has long been a time of proclaiming our pride
in the success and honorable presence of the church in our world.
We trace the story of Christianity from the upper room in Pentecost
to the expansion of Christianity, and especially the Catholic church, across the globe.

And yet recently something has gone wrong. And very quickly.
The Church is in the news, almost obsessively, for all the wrong reasons.

This week, a flurry of articles has reported questionable actions
on the behalf of the bishop of West Virginia,
ousted after having given “cash gifts totaling \$350,000 to fellow clergymen,
including young priests ... and more than a dozen cardinals
in the United States and at the Vatican.”

Meanwhile, Cardinal Dinardo, head of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops,
responsible for leading the hierarchy in needed changes
in dealing with disorders in their dioceses,
is himself under attack for mishandling the cases of accused priests.
The American press gives no quarter these days to a Church leadership

that it once accorded a degree of respect and deference, and even admiration.

And then James Carroll, former Paulist priest, anti-Vietnam war hero, famous novelist as well as commentator on Church renewal, published an incendiary article in the current Atlantic Magazine entitled "Abolish the Priesthood."

It has prompted a number of aggrieved responses, both sad and very angry.

Things have changed, and suddenly.

I could not have imagined that things would collapse so quickly.

And I think "collapse" is the right word for it.

I am familiar how sudden changes can occur after a long period of no change. Almost stubborn no change. Then the dam breaks.

That is what it was like with Vatican II.

And when the change comes, it comes so quickly, and so transformatively, that it is hard to process.

So it seems to be happening today.

One longs for the moral voice of the church to enter into the public debate.

But that voice seems to be currently preoccupied with other pressing issues.

And so this Pentecost Sunday seems different than some in the past.

And yet, there is something in the story of the first Pentecost that is very evocative of today's situation.

It is a turning point, a time of radical transition.

While one story is over, an unexplored new direction is announced.

Certain themes in the story of the first Pentecost seem to speak to today.

One is the confusion of the peoples gathered.

Their confusion is a way of reminding us that the Pentecost event reverses the scattering into many peoples and many lands that is told in the story of the Tower of Babel.

In Greek, it is called the Tower of Confusion.

Another theme is that very movement out into many lands and cultures, announced in the story by the list of nations represented by those gathered in Jerusalem.

A third theme is, of course, the coming of the Spirit upon the gathering, promising a newness that is carried out into the many lands and cultures.

Today the *confusion* is endemic, widespread.

It is in our culture, as it is in our church.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, the differences of language, of cultures, and races, trace back to hubris.

Hubris is a specific kind of pride—
“an extreme or foolish pride, a dangerous overconfidence.”

There are signs of hubris in both culture and church.

It is often a result of missing voices, voices that might offer a correction,
but are ignored.

Without that correction, we can saunter merrily down a dark lane.

I am thinking here of the church in its culture of exclusion.

But also the culture in its nationalist fervor.

White male boards of directors become a symbol of a male-centered culture
that has not experienced, or admitted, other viewpoints as credible.

This is not to say that suppressed voices have the full truth,
but rather hearing the fuller truth needs all voices.

Then there is the movement outward to many *lands and cultures*.

It is happening with the *church*.

And it is being thwarted by the *culture*, or aspects of it.

Currently we live in an international world that is drawing back into cultural enclaves.

It is as if the Internet allowed us to look up and notice

that there were so many people out there

who are not at all like those in our neighborhood, and we are startled.

Where did all these people come from? Were they there all along?

Why didn't I know that?

Close the curtain so I can't see them.

The gift of the Spirit is almost defined by unexpectedness.

The Spirit blows where it will and no one knows where.

“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.” [John 3:8]

And yet, in the confusion of voices, a direction is implied.

Out to the many peoples, the many who are unrepresented, unheard.

The presence of the Spirit is a promise of hope.

It is saying that the future is assured.

However, it does not say that it is the future that we would have planned.

So while we make our plans for the future, we somehow include in those plans

a space for something entirely unexpected, unplanned.

Planning beyond plans.

So what is the future? I think there are hints of promise.

Even in the daily news, there are other signs worth noting.

Here are some that have caught my attention.

This week an article in the *NYT* talked about the project called Nuns and Nones.
That is, “nuns” as in Nuns on the Bus.

And “nones” as in those of the millennial generation
who mark that slot in census forms concerning religious affiliation, “none.”
Millennials are the least religious group in America.
And some are looking for ritual, meaning.

Meanwhile, the number of religious women is shrinking rapidly, as you know.
The Nuns and Nones project brings them together.

The millennials discovered a group of women
with lives devoted to concerns which they too shared.
A certain Ms. Bradley said: “These are radical, badass women
who have lived lives devoted to social justice. And we can learn from them.”

And the sisters also found something.
Another millennial, a Ms. Salgado said of the sisters,
“When they talk about dying out,
they’re less concerned about making sure the institution survives
and more about who’s going to inherit the charism,
who’s going to keep doing this mission
that’s been fueling them all these centuries,”
“For the sisters, Nones and Nuns could be a vehicle
for passing along their charism.”

And, meanwhile, young religious have something to teach us.
For example, in my view Sr. Sarah Kohles represents one direction
—the deliberate engagement with the future of the diminished church.
She represents a hope does not move from what the church was,
but rather from what it now is.
Her soundings involve discerning the straws in the wind
—the wind being that of Pentecost.
Her search takes her to diverse places, voices, cultures.
Not unlike Pentecost.

One more thing—In the current *Commonweal*,
an article on Hannah Arendt cites her belief
in unexpected flowering of democratic processes.
As with the movements of the Spirit,
sudden changes can assure a future in surprising ways.

The article mentions the “organic, mass mobilization of suburban women
occurred in the wake of the 2016 election.
From Wisconsin to North Carolina there were “newly formed citizens groups”
that “spread like wildfire” throughout 2017,
spurred not by any existing organization or call from above
but instead by a sense that the course of the nation’s political trajectory

could not be left uncontested. ... In Pennsylvania alone,
these groups fielded sixty mostly first-time candidates for local office.
Four out of five of them won their races..."

The day before yesterday at the coffeehouse
I encountered a group of young seminarians and priests,
good guys, open and fully aware of everything I have been talking about.
They are the church of the immediate future.

And yet they too know that there is a church about to be born
that will go in directions no one can predict.
They know that they will have an important role
in facilitating that new reality that is Pentecost in today's church,
the life of the Spirit.

I came away encouraged that the future is assured, if not in ways I can foresee,
and that the Spirit continues in its unexpected ways.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

June 16, 2019

Proverbs 8:22-13 Wisdom at creation
Psalm 8:4-9 The work of your hands
Romans 5:1-5 God, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit
John 16:12-15 When he comes, the Spirit of truth

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day of which many people say
it just doesn't say anything to me.

The talk about the inner workings of the Trinitarian God,
how the Father and the Son are related to one another,
and how then they relate to the Holy Spirit,
that is just too abstract to mean much to me.

However, there may be another way to talk about it.

And that is the way the New Testament does—
how God relates to *us*, in different ways.

One way to say this is that God is Creator of the universe,
and yet comes to me in a personal way.

That is quite a stretch, from cosmic to intimate.

It is also a stretch to think about God is as Creator of the universe,
but also as involved in human history.

That is the way the Bible most often thinks about God.

The New Testament thinks about the story of the biblical God
as culminating in the Incarnation of the Son, as Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

And the Holy Spirit is another aspect of God's presence with us.

This is through the life of the community, the ongoing breath of the Spirit.

But that much is also so much talk.

What is another way of talking about the different ways God is present to us, as related to the Trinity?

Here is one that occurs to me.

Posted on their website, the Dubuque Franciscans have this message—

“In our personal, communal and public lives,
the Sisters of St. Francis commit to ongoing conversion as we:

- deepen our relationship with Mother Earth and Sister Water;
- stand with persons who are poor;
- and make peace and practice non-violence.”

First of all, notice the separate attention given to
“personal, communal and public lives.”

Three aspects of a single commitment. That’s interesting.

But then we have the three areas of commitment of the congregation
—Mother Earth, the poor, and nonviolent peace.

These seem pretty diverse and unconnected. Is there a common theme?
Maybe there is, maybe in a faith commitment to the Trinitarian God.

God is Creator. We commonly associate this with the Father,
God as the foundation of the world, being, and all reality.

The positive relationship with the natural world, Mother Earth, Sister Water,
is very much in the spirit of St Francis.

And Francis our Pope has written eloquently
about our relationship to this planet, in *Laudato Si’*,
which borrows its title from St. Francis’s Canticle to the Sun.

The pope is reminding us that part of the person of faith’s commitment
to Mother Earth is that of care-taking, the stewardship of creation.

The **second commitment** of the Dubuque Franciscans is to stand with the poor.
In the biblical history of the human family,
as presented prophetically in the Old Testament
and in the incarnation story of the Gospels,
care for the vulnerable in our world is at the heart of the message.

The “cry of the poor,” a theme dear to the Israelite people of God,
becomes the song of Mary’s Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke.

The biblical “God of history,” is concerned about justice,
especially justice to the vulnerable.

The God of history is incarnate in the Second Person, Jesus the Christ.

In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*,
Pope Francis has spoken to the Christian obligations to the poor,

as presented in the gospels.

The third plank in the Franciscan platform is to make peace and practice nonviolence.

Peace is not a passive thing,
which is why it takes the form of nonviolence in times of conflict.

Is it straining it too much to see here the dove of peace that also represents the Holy Spirit?

The life of the Spirit in our communities and in our larger common life is one of mutuality. It is a life of parsing differences, living together with different visions,
and yet agreeing to negotiating our differences without resorting to violence, overt or otherwise.

We commit to resolving our differences, rather than forcing our own way.

In *Amoris laetitia*, or “The Joy of Love,”

Pope Francis speaks to the challenges of modern family life under the image of the Spirit-filled community of love.

The family becomes an image of the life of community.

And it extends to the family of God, writ large.

And so, the apparently diverse commitments of the Franciscan community come together under one vision, one God and Three Persons.

And yet the very fact that they are commitments tell us that each is not simply a given, an automatic blessing.

They are tasks to be pursued, in the way of stewardship.

And the needs are great.

Consider our relationship to the created world. Our planet is under threat.

We are entrusted with the care of the planet,
and this is demonstrated negatively in our very ability to destroy it.
Like it or not, we are entrusted with its survival.

One observer, David Bromwich, wonders why it doesn't get talked about.

*“It's happening in plain sight and all around us,
and most of us clearly can't bear to think about it. Why not?
Because we are creatures of habit and immediacy,
because the imagination can't fix for long on a distant and unbearable future.
Habit disposes us to normalize the abnormal.
It's a human propensity as natural as the protective mechanism
that helps us not get stopped in our tracks
by the painful things we did or suffered.”*

And yet, an Australian study has indicated the consequences of our disregard human civilization could end by 2050 due to the destabilizing societal and environmental factors

caused by a rapidly warming planet.

Secondly, the poor.

The imbalance increases, and there is a callous dismissal of those who are powerless, displayed egregiously with our national leader.

But it is everywhere.

There is no sense of adopting the viewpoint of the most vulnerable.

The struggle in the US is the rich vs. the middle class.

This is the economic issue. The poor do not have a place at that table.

Thirdly, the cultural struggle.

We are in the midst of a resurgence of nationalism,
prompted by the migration of the poor and vulnerable.

This can be understood as a desperate attempt to preserve ages old cultures.

We are properly concerned about natural species going extinct.

And we do what we can to preserve dying languages
that need to be recorded and saved.

But the same might be said about cultures that feel under threat.

But this has issued in cold disregard for those who are outside.

Walls. Gated communities on a national scale.

And yet, just as the Trinity are faces of the one God,
these many faces of concern, even desperate concern,
come together at last in the realization that we are one people, one human family.

All of these come together under one God, one people.

We must save *the planet* as common inhabitants concerned about our common home.

Similarly, we must regard *the vulnerable* as members of our own family,
members in need of special protection.

Finally, we must learn to *resolve our difficulties*
in ways that do not continue the pattern of mutual destruction,
for that simply keeps it going.

No family can survive that for long.

Just as we are under one God, who relates to us as different persons,
so we are many peoples, but one family.

The Trinity comes to us in our diversity.

The one God shows us our own oneness, our common humanity.

The Ascension of the Lord

June 2, 2019

Acts 1:1-11

The Ascension, in Acts

Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9 God mounts his throne

Ephesians 1:17-23

Seated at the right hand of God

Today we celebrate the feast of the Ascension.
It is an important feast,
and has been moved from Thursday to Sunday
so that we can be free to celebrate it.

In today's world, unlike the rural culture of the past, most of us are salaried,
and do not have the freedom to take off in the middle of the week.
Funerals for family members might provide an exception.
But not likely the feast on Ascension Thursday.

So we gather this Sunday to worship, and honor the feast.
But what is it that we are honoring? What is the meaning of this feast?
The theology of the Ascension says that
"by ascending into His **glory**, **Christ** completed the work of our **redemption**."
He returns to the Father. His work is done.

It is this that the reading from Ephesians celebrates,
when it pictures Christ on the heavenly throne, reunited with the Father,
"far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion."
The image is one of triumph and conquest.
But how are we to take this?
I think it depends on where we stand, both in faith and in social status.

We miss something, I think, when we take the triumphalist view of the matter.
When we stand amid a Christian, Catholic culture, and celebrate the victory of Christ,
it puts us in the situation of conquerors, masters of the world.

Recent studies, for instance, have noticed similarities
between Luke's vision of the Ascension of Jesus
and Roman traditions about the apotheosis of Caesar.

The apotheosis of Caesar referred to the belief that Caesar, upon his death,
was raised on high to become one of the gods.
Apparently, there was a major comet appearing in the sky, to confirm the belief.
The recent commentators who have noted the similarities with the Ascension
make the point that Luke is saying that Jesus is higher than Caesar.
Jesus is Lord, and not Caesar.

From where we stand, in our modern society,
as fairly comfortable middle class citizens,
having our problems, but on the whole not too bad,
from our vantage point we miss what this meant
in the time of Luke and Paul and the other New Testament writers.

In the ancient world of the Roman Empire,

there were the very few who were considered “honorable,” and of an honorable caste. Nearly everyone else, the vast majority, were part of the poor, unhonored masses.

The word for them were the *humiliores*—the lowly.

The Gospels were written for and by them,
those whom Mary celebrates in her Magnificat.

Recently, I came to a new appreciation of our distance
from this social class and the life that they lived.

It began with the sensible question about Pilate, who believed Jesus was innocent.

He said because he was innocent,
he was going to have him flogged and then released.

But, we wonder, if he was innocent, why have him flogged?
It seems a reasonable question.

But since then I came across in my reading,
for the current project in which I am involved,
a description of subordinate and dominate groups in society.

While this division is true across most of the history of our planet,
a simple example that makes the point dramatically
is that of the slave culture of the American South.

The slaves had to be especially careful not to disturb their masters
—and for that matter, any white person.

(This, by the way, is still true of persons of color in our society.)

As the sociologist James Scott points out,
public defiance on the part of members of subordinate classes
provokes others to trespass in the same fashion.

Throughout history those in positions of power
decisively discourage others from public defiance.

“One deserter shot, one assertive slave whipped . . . ;
these acts are meant as preemptive strike to nip in the bud any further challenges.”

In other words, flogging for any perceived insolence or opposition
was standard practice for keeping the lower classes in line.

Pilate flogged Jesus because it was a lesson in keeping people in their places.

Jesus did not have to be guilty. Pilate did not have to explain.

And while this kind of treatment was true then,
in today’s world, in one way or another, it is still true.

It may not be flogging, but there are many species of cruelty to draw upon
to teach people to keep quiet and stay in their place.

But for us, we who enjoy a certain degree of social standing,
a degree of freedom from threat, or starving,
it is hard to imagine such a way of having to live, to survive.

But with an act of imagination we can put ourselves in their place.

And when the New Testament portrays Jesus placed above the Emperor,
we can appreciate their sentiment.

While they are cast down and humiliated now, it will not always be thus.
For they have the future on their side.

God will not be mocked, and God is greater than Caesar,
even though the emperor is supposedly king of the known world.

To return for a moment to the American slave experience.

Scott records a passage from the catechism
that the white slaveowners provided for their black slaves in the antebellum South.

It describes the program the owners wished for the slaves:

Q. Are not servants bound to obey their masters?

A. Yes, the Bible exhorts servants to be obedient to their masters, and to please them well in all things.

Q. If the master is unreasonable, may the servant disobey?

A. No, the Bible says, "Servants, be subject to your masters in all fear, not only to the good and gentle but also to the forward ..."

Q. If servant suffer unjustly, what are they to do?

A. They must bear it patiently.

And yet, the black churches developed their own liturgies,
their own style of worship.

Instead of the solemn, quiet style that the tradition thought of as worshipful,
the black churches moved toward an emotional, more boisterous, celebratory style.

And as for the Bible, Moses and themes of liberation
were favored over the prescribed passages in their catechism.

Similarly, from faith life of the peasants of Latin America
has come another expression of liberation—liberation theology,
and its theme of the preferential option for the poor.

This has come to us in North America, where our experience is very different.

We are not peasants.

And within limits we are not suffering or oppressed.

On the other hand, we have learned from our sisters and brothers in Latin America.
We have learned from the experiences of indigenous and blacks in our own society.

We know that the society of peace and full recognition
of the various members of the human family, as dreamed of in the Bible,
is not yet here.

It is almost too easy to list the places where the dream of justice has fallen short:

Inequalities of gender, race, economies, persistence of violence and war,
each is a major study in itself.

We are not yet at the fullness of the New Jerusalem.

And yet a decisive corner has been turned.

In the triumph portrayed in the Ascension of the Risen Christ
a claim for the future is put in place.

We are not there yet. But we are on our way.

First Sunday of Lent

March 10 2019

Deuteronomy 26:4-10 My father was a wandering Aramean
Psalm 91:1-2, 10-15 Be with me, Lord
Romans 10:8-13 Paul speaks to the Gentiles
Luke 4:1-13 Temptations in the Wilderness

The parable of the Grand Inquisitor,
in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky,
is one of the more famous interpretations
of the three temptations of Jesus in the desert.

For Dostoevsky, the story is about our total freedom,
and the escapes from freedom by the solaces of religion
—miracles, mystery, and authority.

The three themes are elaborated in the stories of the three brothers.

In the parable of the Grand Inquisitor, the church fails to pursue Jesus' mission.
There is a clue in that, I think.

As the story unfolds in the gospels,
it represents Jesus' response to being named the Messiah,
by the Voice from heaven at the time of his baptism, just previous.
He is the Messiah, it tells him, but as the suffering Servant of Yahweh.
Jesus takes time to ponder this message, and what it means.
It takes him into the desert for awhile.

The temptations of Jesus, then, are about his role as Messiah,
and how he is to undertake that role.

What kind of Messiah-King is he to be?

To put it another way, it is about the Kingdom of God,
and how it differs from what we might assume kingdoms to be.
In that sense, it involves us as well, as members of the kingdom of God.

In the past, I have looked at these three temptations in different ways.
But in these times I am taking a clue from the parable of Dostoevsky,
and thinking about them in relation to the struggles of the church today.
Each of the moments has something to say.

* * *Page Break In the first temptation, the devil invites Jesus to turn stones to bread.
How is this a temptation for the Messiah, for the kingdom, for the church?

Providing bread to the hungry is a praiseworthy mission,
and one that fits the Christian mission.

However, I think the clue to the passage is the response of Jesus—
“It is written, One does not live on bread alone.”

Which is to say, there are many kinds of hunger, and some are not physical.
There is also spiritual hunger.

It seems to me that this also describes a crisis in the church today
—a *spiritual crisis*.

We often hear about earnest people who say they prefer spirituality to religion.
This can mean many things for many people,
but I am taking it to mean they have a hunger that is not being satisfied.

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ comes to us as bread.
One of the meanings of this is that in Christ we are to be bread for the world.
We are to address the pangs of poverty that so many people feel.

But it also speaks to a spiritual hunger.
Often enough the Eucharist is a mark of membership,
rather than an outward sign of hunger being fed.
It acts as a signal for knowing who is included in the fold and who is excluded,
rather than being a symbol of spiritual longing finding its home.
The sign of being bread for the world is lost, hidden.

Today we have a pope who is pointing the way beyond the crisis in spirituality.
In calling for a church for the poor,
he is reminding us of the bread for the world,
and calling us back to a spirit of compassion, of solidarity with the marginal.
In answer to the Grand Inquisitor, we have Francis.

In addition to the crisis in spirituality,
today we also experience a *crisis of authority* in the church.
There is no need to elaborate the struggle begun waged at the top levels
in response to a flawed handling of sexual predation among its ministers.

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In the second temptation,
the devil offers Jesus control of the kingdoms of the earth.
This is one way to be Messiah, king as dominating power.
The only price required is worship of him, the devil.

What this means in practice, of course,
is to adopt the methods of coercion, force, domination,
tools traditionally used to subdue a subservient population.

It is an old story about the adoption of worldly power.

After all, the pope is not only the bishop of Rome,
he is also monarch of the longest continuous monarchy in the world.
He is a head of state as well as the vicar of Christ.

But in a time when the bishops of the church
are under suspicion of misleading their flock,
authoritative pronouncements are losing their effect.
The entire structure of the hierarchical church is under threat,
and no one knows what will happen.

One of the strongest charges is that the culture of clericalism needs to be changed.
What this means, no one is quite sure,
but it does mean that other voices besides those of the traditional hierarchy
be brought into serious play.

Some lay voices are even pointing out that the tendency among laity
to identify the hierarchy as “the church”
is itself a symptom, example, and encouragement of clericalism.

Pope Francis has been criticized for not moving fast enough on this issue.
He has been called out for not delivering an edict.
And yet his approach has been to decentralize authority and bring in other voices,
which is to address the source of the problem.
Delivering an edict is the opposite of rejecting clericalism.

Against the crisis of authority he has pointed to a church of service.
Authority as service.
This was Jesus’ realization as well, in adopt the role of the suffering Servant.

* * *Page Break The third temptation of Jesus is a peculiar one.
The devil invites him to throw himself down from the parapet of the temple.
What kind of temptation could this be? I often wonder about this.
Is the devil trying to have Jesus injure himself? Or even be killed?
Is he trying to say that Jesus is a hypocrite if he claims to trust in God,
and yet is not willing to perform the act of ultimate trust?
Is it a call to make a big display of religion?
It seems like a religious stunt.

Again, I think the key is to be found in Jesus’ response.
“You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.”
It is a question of who is setting the agenda, oneself or God?
Who is being honored by the display?

In the church we might call it a *crisis of witness*.
What at one time served as a witness no longer does so.
I am thinking of our magnificent churches.

They were once a symbol of ardent faith.
Now, each time I come here, I go by Steeple Square.
The spire of St Mary's has been renewed with copper coating.
It is splendid. But it is no longer a church.
It is the memory of a church, a memorial.
It is a witness, but to a past when the churches were full.

What is the witness for today?
I think it is not in display, but in humility.
That too is a signal from Pope Francis.
A simple Fiat for transportation.
Simple brown shoes, instead of Gucci designs.

But it is not a display of humility,
but a genuine identity with those at the margins.
It is to see things from their point of view.
It is simple service where it is discovered to be needed.
Genuine service is the true witness.

And so we enter Lent with these proposals—
Against a crisis of spirituality, a spirit of compassion.
Against a crisis of authority, the authority of service.
Against a crisis of witness, the witness of real humility.

And the beauty and wonder of this is that this renewal of the church
is not something that needs to happen only at the top levels.
We too can participate in these same programs of renewal,
these building blocks of a renewed church.

And yet, we are not setting the agenda.
We do not know what the future holds for the Church.
We only trust that it is in the hands of a provident God, a guiding Holy Spirit.
We are only asked to act out of faithfulness.

We too, as a Lenten discipline,
can act humbly,
doing works of service,
in a spirit of compassion.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 17 2019

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 The Covenant of Abraham
Psalm 27:1, 7-9, 13-14 Hide not your face from me
Philippians 3:17-4:1 Our citizenship is in heaven
Luke 9:28-36 The Transfiguration

This year, St Patrick's Day falls on a Sunday,
and there is no need to ignore the Lenten regulations
—although I am not sure that makes any difference to anyone.

For this also is the Second Sunday of Lent.
And today, on the Second Sunday of Lent, Abraham falls into a trance,
as God appears in the covenant ceremony in the form of smoking fire.

Also, we see Peter, James and John follow Jesus up the mountain
where he is transfigured.

But the trance and the transfiguration
point to something more—transcendence.

First, the trance: Abraham falls into a trance.
One can understand that, since the moment overwhelms.

But why do the disciples fall asleep, in a trance of their own?
Certainly it is not a boring moment.

But maybe this is part of the same experience.
They are out of their element.

The trance is a way of speaking about living for a moment
in an alternative reality, a world beyond the ordinary existence.

Which takes us to transcendence:
the reality beyond our ordinary existence.

This is the world beneath the surface,
the world that envelops us at all times without our constant awareness of it.

At one level, it is the explosive fire in the atom.
At another, is what people mean when they say
angels attend our every move.

Transcendence, ultimately speaking, names the God
who sustains the world, and keeps *us* in existence,
and whose presence, usually unnoticed, can at times
break into our world and astonish us, moving us to awe and humility.

And so, then the transfiguration:
Here the trance and the transcendence
come together in a moment in the gospel story.

The dark times are ahead; the Gospel story now turns to Jerusalem
and the difficult days of the Passion account.

In the church year, most of the season of Lent lies ahead of us.
As we, and the Gospel, enter into the times of trial,
we have an assurance of glory that lies ahead.

We have a reminder of the God who supports the universe,
and the personal world in which we ourselves live.

The readings, pointing to transcendent reality,
are not so much about a pie in the sky by and by,
as they are about the experience of encountering a world beyond our own.

One aspect is the simple matter of placing oneself and one's life in context.
In experiencing a world beyond our own, we are humbled.

We are placed in a position of reassessing our place in the world.

In believing that the world is God's creation,
we are saying that it is coherent.

And more than that, we are not in charge.

And yet we have a place in it, a purpose.

Much of faith is understanding our place in the scheme of things.

And accepting it, and celebrating it,
and making it work for us and for others.

For some, this experience comes with a realization of the nearly infinite universe.

It is an experience that transforms a person.

The humility that results is one that can be deflating.

But it can also be transformative.

We can encounter in that experience the God who made it and us,
if we are of a mind to believe.

It may be seen as a reason to reject religion.

Or it may be a testimony to the grandeur of God.

For some, the experience of transcendence comes in a more personal way.

It can be the deliverance from a near-death experience.

Either of oneself or of one's beloved.

The crisis opens eyes. The quotidian, daily world is broken open
to allow us to see beyond, beneath the surface.

For others, it can come from a personal experience of bottoming-out.

One has reached the end of one's resources.

Two ways are open, two roads in a yellow wood.

One leads to despair and defeat;

the other to a desperate fresh start, again.

And in that new start, now made on grounds that no longer assume
one's own invulnerability, one's own all-powerfulness,
something new begins.

And one sees a world beyond that
to which one was so often blind before.

Often the word we get from outsiders
is that as Christians we fail to live up to what we are about.

That is true.

But it is not clear that outsiders know what we are about.

When atheists tell us what Christianity is about,
I am reminded of “mansplaining”

—men explaining to women what the women are trying to say,
as if the men knew better than the women themselves.

I also saw recently on Facebook an African American saying
that whites do not need to explain to blacks the meaning of racism.

That is for blacks to determine, based on their experience.

I see something similar with the outsider
explaining to Christians what Christianity should be.

Or Atheists explaining what religion should be.

For instance, I read frequently that the essence of Christianity is
“Do unto others as you would have done to you.” The Golden Rule.

But this dictum is found in most religions, not just Christianity.
It can hardly serve as the essence of our belief.

True, the moral imperative of Christianity, to feed the hungry,
provide shelter to the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned, is essential.

But behind it, what makes it Christian, is a faith experience.
This not need be dramatic, though for some people it is.

In addition to works of mercy, there is the need to worship.

For we who are activists, this can seem pointless,
as if this were a matter of avoiding the engagement that the times require.
It can seem to be akin to escapism.

But worship is how we acknowledge the deep dimension of reality
that is part of our belief in a creator God.

It is how we acknowledge the movement of love of that God for us,
realized in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus.

It is this experience, which we usually call mystery, that motivates worship.
There is a world beyond ours, that sustains ours,
that we need to acknowledge.

Especially if we have had an experience that made that divine dimension
known to us in a special way.

And yet, worship itself is not without its social effects.

It is not without its own kind of resistance.

Walter Brueggemann has a book called
Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to a Culture of Now.

He speaks of resisting the cultural symptoms
of anxiety, coercion, exclusivism, and multitasking.

It sounds like a Lenten program, if not a lifetime project.

And from another perspective, this week again
there was a white-supremacist terrorist attack on a place of worship
—this time a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.

It has not gone unnoticed that there is a pattern here.

On Friday's edition of PBS Newshour,
Mark Shields spoke to the pattern, "... whether it's somebody
who is going after Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston
or the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh
or in New Zealand yesterday going after Muslims at prayer."

Black Baptist church, Jewish synagogue, Muslim mosque
—two things in common: targets of white terrorism,
and caught in a posture and place of worship.

Some, who place their trust in violence,
think that places of worship should be armed.

It is the good guys with guns scenario.

But trust in God looks elsewhere,
and to continue in that trust, instead of destructive weaponry,
is itself an act of resistance.

We are into the second week of Lent.

There are many more to come.

As we move into the days ahead
we move into the time of prayer and contemplation
that is required of the season.

But we do not leave behind
our social condition in a troubled and distorted world.

We bring it with us, to include it in the redemption
for which we pray and hope to see.

Third Sunday of Lent

March 24 2019

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

Psalm 103: 1-8, 11

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Moses and the Burning Bush

He has made known his ways to Moses

All were baptized into Moses

Alongside my driveway is a shrub commonly called a burning bush.
It turns bright red in the fall.

It was given me by some friends on the occasion of my father's death,
as a way to remember him.

It is named, of course, after the passage in Exodus that is our first reading today.
The burning bush of Moses is world famous.

Last Sunday we saw the burning fire that put Abraham into a trance.

This opened into transcendence

—the reality beyond our ordinary existence, the world beneath the surface,
the world that envelops us at all times without our constant awareness of it.

Today we witness the fire in the burning bush.

Transcendence comes to us in the way of the Holy.

This is Holy Ground, Moses hears.

Remove the sandals from your feet.

Rudolf Otto, the German theologian and philosopher,
famously described the Holy as the “wholly other.”

As in “entirely other.”

He said, it is “that which is quite beyond
the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar,
which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny',
and is contrasted with it,
filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.”

The Holy is outside the normal,
the daily reality in which we spend most of our lives.

The feeling or consciousness of the wholly other comes upon us
in the presence of that which defies our experience of the way things are to be.

It astounds us, makes us uneasy, seems uncanny.

It can be in a strange event, or maybe an astonishing occurrence in nature.

Today it is a burning bush.

Moses, who was looking for a lost sheep,
finds something he didn't realize he was looking for.

He has an encounter with the divine, the God of his ancestors,
now appearing to Moses in an unsettling experience of transcendent reality.

The God who introduces himself to Moses makes it clear
that he is the same God who has been part of the story from the beginning.

He does, however, introduce himself with a new name—I AM WHO AM.

This has come down to us as “Yahweh,”

the name that Jewish worshippers will not utter, out of reverence.

This reverence, this utter awe and devotion,
is what the Bible calls “fear of the Lord”
—here replacing the word “Yahweh” with the title, “Lord.”

It is a sense that penetrates the faithful Israelites to the core of their being.

This is the realization and emotion that the liturgical reading from Exodus
invites us to share in this Third Sunday of Lent.

We are also on a journey of discovery, finding our own burning bushes,
learning in our own story the name of the God who directs and sustains us.

And while it is true that this is the lesson the reading for today offers us,
I am going to suggest it is not the entire lesson intended by the scripture.

There is a passage from the middle of this Exodus reading that is omitted,
presumably because the editors’ focus for this Sunday
is on the experience of the holy God.

But this fuller meaning is actually the focus for this passage.
It is the call and commission of Moses.

After the Lord introduces himself to Moses, he tells Moses:

- 9** Now indeed the outcry of the Israelites has reached me,
and I have seen *how the Egyptians are oppressing them.*
- 10** Now, go! *I am sending you to Pharaoh*
to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

In other words, Moses’ experience of the Holy is the first part.
The second part is his call to return to Egypt and liberate the Israelites.
This too is part of the self-revelation of the God
who makes himself known to Moses.

He is a God of liberation, of release from bondage.
This is an essential part of his identity.

Thus it is that the theology of the Exodus is to be found
not only in the writings of the Doctors of the church.

It is not only in the experience of the Holy,
that overwhelms us and seeps into our being.

It is not only in the whispered prayers of the devout.
It is also found in the outcries of the oppressed.

Think, for instance, of the Slave Spirituals of the American South.

Listen to the words:

“When Israel was in Egypt land
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go!
“Go down Moses

Way down in Egypt land
Tell all pharaohs to
Let my people go!”

This is the theology of the slave, and it is the theology of Exodus.
This too is a part of the Holy, the holiness of God,
who does not countenance oppression of our neighbors,
of our sisters and brothers.

Our own holiness begins with devotion,
as we recognize our proper place in the order of things,
in relation to God and the created world.
But it moves on to the recognition that this is a call
to complete the creation that we have failed to serve and preserve.
It is a call to regard the hurtful places in our world,
and move the best we can to ease the pain.

It is a call to justice.
It is a call to liberation in the name of a God
who has identified himself as Liberator.

Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year C Readings

April 7 2019 - Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21 The new Exodus as return from exile
Psalm 126:1-6 The Lord brought back the captives
Philippians 3:8-14 For his sake I have accepted the loss
John 8:1-11 The Accused Woman

The story of the Accused Woman is famous.
It is part of our popular culture, and suffers many retellings for different purposes.
It also reminds many people of the account of Susanna,
in which Daniel and the elders have a famous court case
in which she is accused but exonerated.

And now it is the gospel reading for the last Sunday of Lent before Passion Week.

But because of all this, it may be worthwhile to look at it more closely.
A lot is happening here.
There are three sides to the story—the woman, the elders, and Jesus.

And like every story, in fact what makes it a story,
is that it is different at the end than it was in the beginning.
Something changes along the way.
That is the law of narrative.

But there are three stories, in effect,

and something changes for each of them.

The story of the **accused woman** has always captured our attention. Even so, she is not treated as the center of attention among those in the story.

The elders are simply trying to trap Jesus, and for them the woman is simply a prop, to use in the process.

Many have noticed that they claim that she was caught in the very act of adultery. Such an act requires two people, so they wonder why the man isn't part of the story.

They have a point.

The law that is invoked, from Deuteronomy 22:22, says very explicitly that both parties should be punished by stoning. That would include the man.

By the way, this harsh law, matched by similar ones in Deuteronomy 13 and 21, has been studied by exegetes.

Caryn Reeder, in her book, *The Enemy in the Household*, has concluded that what was at stake in all three of these instances was the preservation of the faith, for a people in an alien culture.

In actuality, the law was probably never carried out in its fullness, but rather was mitigated in the actual circumstances.

Nevertheless, it was kept on the books to emphasize the seriousness of the situation.

In any case, the woman finds herself alone, and not even addressed in the story, but standing there, with her life at risk, presented as a living example of the requirements of the law.

She is an exhibit, not a person.

However, her story changes at the end, when finally Jesus addresses her personally, regarding her as a human being, and not simply as an illustration of a point to be made.

Her redemption comes in the recognition of her person.

Another story is happening with the elders.

They are righteous upholders and defenders of the law.

But what they primarily have in mind is to trap Jesus in his speech.

They are thinking about the law only secondarily, as a way to get at Jesus.

But he starts to write on the ground.

Many have speculated about what he is writing.

There are many theories,

including that he is writing their personal history of failures, and so forth.

But as a matter of fact, John doesn't tell us what he is writing.

In the story we have, this is a long silence.

They cannot trap him in his speech when he doesn't talk.

But when Jesus does speak, it is short, and to the point:

“Let the one among you who is without sin

be the first to throw a stone at her.”

And then the speech stops,

as again Jesus writes on the ground. A long silence. [L] [SEP]

But there is more going on here.

Jesus has just invited them to stone the woman, with one proviso
—that the sinless one cast his stone first.

This is an immensely tense moment. And it is drawn out.

As we know, they begin to walk away, one by one, beginning with the eldest.

I think the long silence is required for this.

Instead of answering them, or even accusing them

as Daniel does in the Susanna story,

Jesus simply gives them time to think.

And it takes time. He has invited them to reconsider,

even to repent of their intent, and come to a conversion of sorts.

This does not happen immediately.

First, they have to pull up short in the fierce impulse of their charge against him.

Then, they have to look at what they were doing,

but now from a different angle, seeing it as others would.

And then they have to decide whether they want to continue,

or to come to some kind of moderation in their behavior.

Eventually, the wiser ones, which I assume is what the eldest are,

make the decision to call off the attack, and withdraw.

The others follow.

Jesus has invited them to self-examination, and they respond.

In a sense, he has risked the woman's life

in order to save the men from their intent to do harm.

But in not attacking them back, he has invited them into reflection,

and saved them as well as the woman.

The third story is that of Jesus.

The entire scene is set up to trap him.

While the woman is threatened with stoning,

Jesus himself will also be threatened in the same way before the chapter is out.

Now he is being tested, and at different levels.
In the first place, he is tested by the elders in their terms.
As defenders of the law of Moses, they are examining Jesus
to see if he, as a professing Jew, is faithful or not.

For in addition to the law in Deuteronomy 22, concerning adultery,
there is another in Deuteronomy 21 (vv. 18-21), about upstart sons,
who does not listen to his elders, but who abandon the tradition.

They are to be charged as stubborn and rebellious, a glutton and a drunkard,
and be stoned to death.

Again, we remember that these laws were likely not carried out,
but were subject to exceptions that always could be found in particular instances.
And yet, maintaining the tradition was serious, and the law said that.

Also, we remember that in another place Jesus is accused
of being a glutton and a drunkard,
suggesting that he was not fully keeping the law.

For now, Jesus passes their test
by invoking their own personal history with the law.

But there is another level at which he is being tested,
and that is not so much on their terms, but on his.
They are forcing him to live up to his own words and teachings.

He is an advocate of love of neighbor, even love of enemy.
He preaches nonviolent action in times of dissension.
But this time he will have to break from that set of principles
if he wishes to save the woman, as he probably does wish to do.

He might want to use force, to defend her.
Or be like Daniel, and attack them mercilessly,
abandoning his vaunted principles of love and nonviolent confrontation.

But he does not do that. He finds a way to defend the woman,
even while inviting her accusers and his as well,
to move to a new state of mind, to conversion.
And so, for the time being, he escapes their trap.

In the end, the story has moved from what it was in the beginning
to something entirely different at the end.
That is the law of stories.

And in the end, the woman is recognized as a person in her own right.
The elders have come to a recognition of themselves in a new and deeper way.
And Jesus has lived out his own ethic of love and nonviolence
in a moment of extreme jeopardy,

meanwhile teaching us that we are to trust in the way of nonviolent love.

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

April 14 2019

Luke 19:28-40

Jesus Enters Jerusalem

Isaiah 50:4-7

The Third Song of the Suffering Servant

Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

“My God, My God why have you abandoned me?”

Philippians 2:6-11

Even death on a cross

Luke 22:14–23:56

Luke’s Account of the Passion

In the story we just heard, some of the participants realize Jesus is innocent.
Three of these are in this gospel alone.

They are Herod and his retinue,
the women of Jerusalem,
and the Good Thief.

Each responds to the events in his or her own way.

Herod recognizes Jesus is innocent, but he mocks him.
He dresses him up in pseudo-royal robes, and makes him the subject of ridicule.

For Herod, Jesus is a fool,
someone who allowed himself to be captured and accused
even though innocent.

Herod has no sympathy for him.
He has brought it on himself.

Jesus is the vulnerable and poor person in our world.
We are like Herod when we find ourselves distant from such people,
thinking that they have brought their situation on themselves.

They are not industrious, or they are not prudent.
Or they have in one way or another managed to have behaved in such a way
that causes the condition they find themselves now.

Our culture has provided language to dehumanize these persons.
We are distant from them. They are unlike us.

The Daughters of Jerusalem lament Jesus on the Way of the Cross.

They may be professional mourners.

But they represent Jerusalem and its people.

They have difficult days ahead of them.

The women may recognize that Jesus is innocent,
but he is still distant from them, apart from them.

His fate is not their own.
While they do not lack compassion, as does Herod,
they don't feel a personal connection either.
They decry the situation, but do not feel personally implicated.

We are like the Daughters of Jerusalem when we recognize the suffering of others,
feel a great sympathy for them, but do not see ourselves in them.

We do not find a connection.
Our culture has provided us with a way to observe from a distance,
and not get involved.
We regret, and even lament,
but do not enter into the story to change it.

The Good Thief is known as Dismas in the tradition.
His partner, the bad thief is known as Gestas.

Unlike Herod and his retinue,
the Good Thief cannot completely disengage himself from the situation of Jesus,
for he shares it very conspicuously.
He cannot view Jesus as a fool, without seeing himself equally as one.

While he is like the Daughters of Jerusalem in that he laments the situation,
he is unlike them in that he cannot view himself
as not connected to the fate of Jesus.
He very obviously shares it, as he hangs on the cross next to Jesus.

And unlike Gestas, the bad thief,
who unwittingly echoes the charges made against Jesus,
not recognizing that he also is among those they like to ridicule,
Dismas the Good Thief refuses to mock,
but instead places his fate alongside that of Jesus.

We are like Dismas when we recognize our own complicity,
our own involvement, our own place in the story.
We are like him when we ask forgiveness.

And that brings us to one more moment that only appears in this gospel.
It is when Jesus looks on those who are deriding him, and then crucifying him,
and he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We are among those needing that mercy,
that forgiveness.

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 30 2019

1 Kings 19:16, 19-21 The call of Elisha
Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-11 You are my inheritance

Galatians 5:1, 13-18
Luke 9:51-62

You are called to freedom
Jesus turns toward Jerusalem

In the ancient memories, Elijah saved the religion
when it had almost disappeared from existence.

One hundred years after David's son, Solomon,
had established it across the lands he had conquered,
building a temple that would be famous, things had deteriorated.

The country had split in two.

The northern kingdom was drifting away.

At that time God raised up Elijah as a strong voice for the Israelite religion.

He was the first of the classic prophets,
who called the wayward, especially the king, to account.

He challenged, he contradicted, he would not be ignored.

The Bible speaks of the law and the prophets.

Abraham was the beginning, when God first introduced himself
to those who would become Israel.

Moses was a powerful leader who brought the divine law to Israel.

But Elijah was the prophet.

The law of Moses established that God protected the vulnerable,
the widow and orphan, the stranger in the land, the poor neighbor.

But the prophets keep that vision alive for each age, warning and urging.

The tradition began with Elijah, but it continued on,
once Elijah called his successor, Elisha,
to continue the work of being the gadfly,
the reminder that the comfortable did not want.

In Luke's gospel, which we are hearing from this year,
Elijah is not associated with John the Baptist, as in the other gospels.

No, in Luke's account Jesus receives the mantle of Elijah, and Elisha.

We hear it in the opening scene of his public life,
when he stands in the synagogue of Nazareth, reading from the scroll of Isaiah.

The inhabitants of Nazareth reject his message,
and he then says that he will be like Elijah,
who went to the widow of Zarephath,
or Elisha, who went to Naaman the Syrian.

We tune into Luke's gospel today,
emerging from the special seasons of Lent and Easter,
at a crucial point in the narrative.

The ministry in Galilee has just ended.

Jesus “resolutely determined” to journey to Jerusalem.
The literal translation of the verse says “he set his face toward Jerusalem.”

From now until almost Advent
we will be on the road with Jesus and his followers,
headed toward Jerusalem.

And today, at the beginning, we hear of calls and summons to discipleship.
This seems appropriate at the beginning of a new phase of the story.
And furthermore, the story of Elijah calling Elisha to prophecy
seems to be a common thread in the gospel incidents.

Elijah, famous for calling down fire from heaven
upon the sacrifices on Mount Carmel,
is signaled in the desire of James and John to punish the Samaritans similarly.
After all, Mount Carmel was on the north border of Samaria.

And the themes of returning to finish family business,
and of setting the hand to the plow, remind us of the Elijah and Elisha story.
The language and imagery is similar, and evocative.

But lessons are difficult.
What are these stories getting at?

First of all, it is clear that Luke is making clear
that discipleship of Jesus is prophetic.
Not in the sense of predictive, but in the sense of speaking the truth, even to power.
Speaking the truth that needs to be spoken.

But the stories are still obscure.
So here are three things that I see.

The first concerns James and John,
and their lust to incinerate the villages that do not welcome them.
Jesus says “no,” that is not what we do.
We are not in the business of destruction, but of clarification.
We do not enforce our views with violence,
nor do we join with those who would.

Rather, we stand on the word alone.
Our task is witness to the truth, and the truth will be our only defense.
That is the nature of prophetic discipleship.

The second lesson is condensed in the words,
“the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.”
Which is to say, those who follow him share his condition.

There is a restiveness, an unsettled quality to discipleship.
It keeps moving; it does not settle down.
It is not yet home, and it knows it.

Just when it appears that the truth has begun to prevail,
something else shows that it has not, and it has to be addressed.
Prophetic discipleship has nowhere to rest, as if its task is done.

The third lesson is in those last two strange exchanges.

“Let the dead bury their dead,” says Jesus.

And “No one who sets a hand to the plow,
and looks to what was left behind, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

We can talk about these for quite awhile, deciding what is being said here.

But let’s agree on this much—

there is no turning back, once the decision to follow is made.

Just as with Elisha, who burned his plow and sacrificed his oxen,
so the sayings of Jesus seem to reflect a decisive turning point.

The past, Jesus suggests to the inquirer, with its network of relations,
is dead to you now.

And once the plowing begins, it requires full attention, no hesitation.

With prophetic discipleship there is no turning back,
once the decision is made.

These words are uttered by Jesus as they begin their journey to Jerusalem.

That journey is ten chapters long in Luke.

It will involve separate interactions with his disciples,
with his opponents, the Pharisees and doctors of the law,
and with the crowds that increase in number as they move toward the city.

But today we heard words for the disciples.

They stand in the tradition of the prophets of Israel.

They stand on the word of witness alone.

They do not settle down as if the prize were won.

They do not turn back, once the decision is made.

But these words are read today for us, in our own circumstances as disciples.

We all know the prophets among us.

You may have your own models of the prophet
who speaks the truth that needs to be said

—the word of witness, the restlessness, the decision that is not revoked.

I have my own favorite prophets for today;

and no doubt you have yours.

But we are being told that this is also *our own* discipleship.
We too share in the call to prophecy, in the biblical manner.

Perhaps you already know this.

But if any of us do not, we have James and John,
and a couple of anonymous followers of Jesus
to help us sort it out.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 7 2019

Isaiah 66:10-14	Rejoice with Jerusalem
Psalms 66:1-7, 16, 20	Let all the earth cry out with joy
Galatians 6:14-18	May I never boast but in the cross
Luke 10:1-12, 17-20	Jesus sends 72 out on mission

It has been a couple of difficult weeks.

For me, much of it was summed up by David Brooks,
the conservative columnist for the NYT,
who appears regularly with Mark Shields on PBS's *Newshour* on Friday evenings.

This Friday he was reacting to a question
about the detention centers on our southern border. He said:

“Well, a couple things. One, we have had these great jobs numbers. We could be feeling good about ourselves. But a lot of us look at those centers and think, I'm ashamed of my country. And it's such a drag on our national morale that our government is sponsoring something that makes us feel embarrassed and ashamed. So that's the first thing.

“The second thing we have learned is, deterrence doesn't work. The idea of the Trump administration, we could be so cruel, and make it so hard to get here, and cause people so much pain, that they will stop coming. Well, they're still coming.”

Those two things—our sense of national shame,
and a perverse policy of cruelty by creating enough pain
that people do not want to come here
—these are what David Brooks has so deftly identified for me.

It is these I want to keep in mind when considering the readings for today.
What does the Bible say?

The reading from the book of Isaiah today
comes from the last chapter of that book.

And here at the end of the book, we are given a portrait of Jerusalem,
pictured as a nurturing, nursing mother.

It is an affecting image.
But it gains from being put into perspective.

As you know, the last two-fifths of this book, chapters 40-66,
are written during and after the great trauma that shatters Israelite history
—the exile in Babylon.

At first, in chapters 40-55, the promise of return is announced.
Preparations are called for. Anticipation rules.

But in the last chapters, 56-55, they have returned,
and now are trying to reconstruct their lives.
There is struggle and there is hope.

But today we witness the hope. They have returned to Jerusalem.
Their exile among the nations is now over.
They have returned home. Jerusalem is homecoming.
The image of Jerusalem is one of security and care.

It speaks loudly because this is precisely what they have been without.
They have felt vulnerable, living among risk and uncertainty,
among different customs and unknown expectations.

It is difficult when you do not know how to respond to a greeting,
when you do not catch the implications—
is it genuine, or false? Simple, or ironic?
What are the rules for answering?
Being strangers in a strange land can be exhausting.

But now they are home.
And Jerusalem as a nursing mother provides a vivid image
for their feeling of finally being at home.

A different, but related, image is given in the gospel reading from Luke.
They have just embarked on the long journey to Jerusalem.
Again, Jerusalem is the destination.

And here at the beginning Jesus sends out emissaries
to the towns and villages ahead, to prepare the way.

We are familiar with this passage.
It is like other passages in which Jesus
sends out the Twelve ahead of him on mission.
But have we looked closely at what it says?
There is an initial notice that Jesus is sending them out
—like lambs among wolves, he says.
There are hazards along the road, and they should be aware of that.

But the rest of the instructions have entirely to do with hospitality.
He talks about how they may or may not be welcomed.

First, he talks about households.

If a peaceful person is there, your peace will rest on them.

But maybe not. Maybe they will not be welcoming.

In that case, the peace will return to you.

If you are welcomed to a household, stay there for the duration.
Make use of their hospitality.

After Jesus talks about households, he shifts his focus to towns and villages.
If a town you visit welcomes you, heal the sick.

Be a healing presence in that town.

Tell them that the kingdom of God is at hand.

For Jesus, healing is the primary witness to the reign of God,
overcoming the injury and division that devastated society.

But Jesus doesn't stop there.

He also warns them that they might not be welcomed.

If that happens, they are told to shake the dust off their feet
in judgment of that town.

In the ancient world, a sign of hospitality was washing one's feet,
after a long and dusty journey, wearing sandals.

But, in this case, look at the dust on my feet—no hospitality here!

At point the lectionary editors skipped over a part of the passage.

We are familiar with it. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!

For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon,
they would long ago have repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes."

Perhaps it was felt to be too harsh for our consumption
on a fine summer Sunday morning.

But it does say something about the importance of hospitality
in the Christian scheme of things.

My own take on what it means to be Christian

is heavily influenced by the Catholic Worker, and Dorothy Day.

Her ministry was hospitality, hospitality houses.

She is said to have made the point that it is not hard to find Jesus.

Jesus is the guest coming in the door.

One thing that has taught me is that hospitality is not a peripheral virtue.
Rather, it is a concrete expression of the works of mercy,
which are right in the center.

Not seeing that, not being able to see Jesus in the guest,

is a blindness to being Christian.

When the disciples returned, they reported in.

“Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name.”

Jesus’ response seems over the top.

He “observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky.

“But do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you,
but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.”

In my view, he is saying that it wasn’t just individuals that they were healing.

Though of course, it was individuals. But more than that,
it was communities, villages, societies that were being healed.

For just as David Brooks pointed out this week,
punishing the vulnerable rather than offering hospitality
“makes us feel embarrassed and ashamed.”

But welcoming the stranger, and allowing others to experience hospitality,
as the 72 did, is healing and restoring.

It is a recognition of our common humanity,
our shared membership in the family of God’s children.

In the gospel, too, Jerusalem is the destination of the journey,
as it was with the exiles returning from Babylon.

But Jerusalem will be conflicted destination
—the place of crucifixion, but also of resurrection.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 14, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:10-14

Psalms 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37

Colossians 1:15-20

Luke 10:25-37

The book of the law is not distant

Turn to the Lord in your need

Firstborn of creation, firstborn from the dead

The Good Samaritan parable

Today, as the scheduled ICE (*Immigration and Customs Enforcement*) raids
on thousands of undocumented refugee families are to begin,
the crisis on our southern border is on many minds.

I find myself thinking about the dream I had
on the night before the presidential election in 2016.

I and others were hiding from agents coming in the middle of the night
taking people away without warning.

But what has focused my attention today
is an article in this week’s *Commonweal* magazine.

Its subject is Scott Warren. Warren is an activist with the Arizona-based humanitarian group No More Deaths (NMD).

In January 2018, “he and seven other activists were charged with trespassing and littering in the course of their humanitarian work—providing stores of food, water, and other supplies along the treacherous desert routes through which migrants enter the United States, as well as recovering and helping to identify the bodies of those who die on the journey.”

The charges brought against Warren, and others providing “food, water, clean clothes and beds” as “harboring” migrants “has been used to threaten other activists besides Warren with felony charges.”

The author of the *Commonweal* article, Regina Munch, says:

“In short, the cruelty is the point.

A strategy of “prevention through deterrence”—making crossing the border so perilous and grueling that people will choose not to attempt it—has dominated U.S. policy toward migration and the border for decades.”

Of course, it is almost impossible to miss the comparison with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

But for that, let’s set the scene.

We have begun the long road to Jerusalem, in Luke’s gospel.

Along the way, Jesus instructs his followers and attracts the crowds.

In addition, he carries on a traveling debate with the Pharisees, and their legal counsel, as it were—the scholars of the law, or lawyers.

That line of contention begins with today’s episode.

The lawyer begins with a question, likely to test Jesus—

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus asks a question in turn: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?”

You’re the lawyer; you tell me.

Interestingly, this is the first time the word “law” appears in Luke’s gospel.

The lawyer brings it out.

As a result of Jesus’ response, in this gospel,

the questioner provides the answer instead of Jesus:

Love the Lord your God with all your being, and your neighbor as yourself.

But in this gospel, unlike the others, this is not the end of the matter.

For the lawyer asks another question in turn—And who is my neighbor?

While it sounds like this is an attempt to nullify the law

by minimizing its requirements, as we might expect from a legal expert,

there is more going on here, as Luke knew.

The passage quoted about love of neighbor actually comes from Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18.

And it was a center of lively debate in the Judaism of Jesus' day.

First of all, it is worth noting that the verse from Leviticus is introduced by an admonition against seeking revenge.

It then says we must love our neighbor as ourselves.

So at the very beginning, it opposes violence in our relationships.

But, again, who is the neighbor?

In those days some defined the neighbor very narrowly.

The Essene community at Qumran, according to the Dead Sea scrolls, taught that only the members of that community were counted the neighbor, and not even other Judeans.

Some Pharisees agreed with this. Others said it was all Jews.

Others said it was not only Jews, but converts to Judaism.

Others, noting that later in the same chapter Leviticus makes this point, said it also includes the strangers among us. Even if they have not converted.

It is under these circumstances that we have Jesus give his answer—the parable of the Good Samaritan.

As you no doubt have heard, Judeans typically did not like Samaritans.

A couple of weeks ago, James and John wanted to call down fire on some Samaritan villages because they were not welcomed.

And they were not welcomed because they were heading toward Jerusalem, which garnered no love from Samaritans.

And in a few weeks we will hear the story of the Ten Lepers, only one of which returns to thank Jesus. To which he wonders,

“Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?”

For Samaritans were considered foreigners.

And yet the one who stopped to help was the Samaritan,

and not the priest or Levite, honored holy men among the Judean community.

The parable was unnerving for the conventional Jewish believer.

The Samaritan was moved with “compassion.”

This word, “compassion,” appears a few times in the gospels.

This is one of them.

Compassion is a “feeling with,” a form of empathy that recognizes oneself in the other person.

It erases the differences, and sees only the common humanity.

And so I find myself thinking of what is happening on our southern border,
and those who are Good Samaritans.

And not only Scott Warren, but others, such as Sister Norma Pimentel,
head of Catholic Charities for the Rio Grande Valley,
whose respite center, has aided 100,000 migrants since it opened in 2014.

And I think of the Sister Water project,
as reminding us of our fundamental need for water,
in contrast to the practice reported by *The Guardian*: “

United States border patrol agents routinely vandalise containers of water
and other supplies left in the Arizona desert for migrants,
condemning people to die of thirst in baking temperatures.”

But today, mainly, I am thinking of Scott Warner,
for whom compassion is illegal,
and a reporter’s piece on him, in *The Intercept* (Ryan Devereaux).—

“**SCOTT WARREN HAS** a checklist he goes through
every time he finds a body in the desert.

The earthly components are straightforward.

Log the GPS coordinates.

Take photographs and notes.

Scour the brush for more bones

and pull together all the data pertinent to the investigation
that local authorities will, in theory, initiate once they arrive.

These elements are basic evidence-gathering.

But for Warren, the process doesn’t end there.

Warren believes that these moments merit an acknowledgement of humanity.

And so, after years of recoveries,

the 36-year-old has developed a modest ritual for the grim encounters.

He goes quiet, lowers himself to the earth, collects the dirt around him,
and then lets the soil pour through his fingers.

The point, Warren says, is to take a moment to reflect
or, as he puts it, “hold space.”

It may not sound like much,

but for him, this process and everything that attends to it
is as sacred as anything one might find in a conventional house of God.”

And Jesus ends his parable with this:

“Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?”

He answered, “The one who treated him with mercy.”

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 21 2019

Genesis 18:1-10 Abraham hosts three visitors

Psalm 15:1-5 The just person lives in God's presence

Colossians 1:24-28 Pauls' afflictions, and the cross

Luke 10:38-42 Mary and Martha welcome Jesus and friends

Once again the theme of the readings is the importance of hospitality, as it has been many times recently.

And once again it bring to mind the contrast with our own American policy of animosity toward visitors who are refugees.

And this week, adding some hostility toward four American women of color who are members of Congress, who have complained about the treatment of the refugees.

Then also, the disgraceful pep rally this week that demonized those women with hateful chants.

The homily almost writes itself.

Then, Friday night I got up in the middle of the night, after hydrating with many glasses of water earlier in the day, as we were advised to do.

I was startled to see that at 2:00 AM the temperature was 85 degrees.

And the dew point was 80 degrees.

Checking my phone, as one does when getting up in the middle of the night,

I noticed messages from friends who were also startled, and who thought the unusual weather felt a bit apocalyptic.

I think there have been nights like this in the past, but still I began to share their feeling.

And I began to think about hospitality in another way, a larger way.

Sometimes I think about the eco-apocalypse.

Scientists talk about a tipping-point, which comes after a long period of gradual change.

Suddenly, the tipping-point comes, and everything flips.

I find myself thinking about the planet Venus.

I don't know if you know, but Venus is in many ways our sister planet.

It is very earth-like. But with one glaring difference:

it is hellishly hot with an atmosphere that is 96% carbon dioxide.

It is covered by clouds of sulphuric acid.

And it seems to have lost all its water due to a runaway greenhouse effect.

Check out Venus—it is a sobering study.

I don't know how Venus started on this path,
but for me it represents a possible future for this earth.
In many ways, we are unthinkingly headed toward a future danger,
like passengers on the Titanic.

When I think of eco-apocalypse,
I think of some who are preparing by building underground bunkers,
filling them with survival supplies,
with guns and ammo to defend them against other less prepared survivors.
And with that I am struck how this is the opposite of hospitality.

At the same time, I am encouraged by my experience
of seeing people come together after a natural disaster,
how they rally to help those whose lives are caught in the disruption,
how they help one another.
And again I find myself thinking about the larger meaning of hospitality.

It depends on our care for one another,
and how that is grounded in seeing ourselves in each other,
that we are members of one family.
And families rally when need arises.

The elaborate hospitality of Abraham is on display today,
as the three visitors are according the finest treatment he can muster.

I am reminded of when we started the Catholic Worker in Dubuque in the mid '70s.
A byword for those who were running the house
was a saying that we attributed to Dorothy Day herself.
Namely, that if you were looking for Jesus,
he was the guest coming in the door of the Worker.
So in today's story, Abraham discovers that with his hospitality
he has entertained the Lord himself.

In desert societies, where conditions are extreme,
where outrageous heat and lack of water can be deadly,
hospitality reigns as an absolute necessity.
For the Bedouin, hospitality rules.
And here it means taking care of one another,
not letting anyone succumb to the harsh conditions.
Abraham's story reflects those conditions, and those customs.
It is one human response to the threat of hostile conditions.
Or eco-apocalypse.

In the gospel story of Mary and Martha, we see Jesus as the guest.
And again we see a parable of sorts on hospitality.
Jesus is on the long journey to Jerusalem,

inviting acts of hospitality along the way.
Just as those he sent out two-by-two did earlier.
He is inviting others to demonstrate their own welcome.

The story of Martha and Mary has many angles,
and many readings—some positive and some not.
But let us make this much of it.
It shows two faces of hospitality.
One is the act of creating a place of welcome;
the other is simply listening and meeting with the visitor on a personal level.

Martha is busy with the customary works of hospitality
—“burdened with serving,” it says.
It seems to be a lot of work, with the intention of welcoming the stranger.
And she could use some help.

Mary is meeting the visitor on a personal level.
This too is necessary for welcoming,
and it points to what is missing where there is a lack of hospitality.
The failure to recognize the human, living person in the visitor.
The stranger is one like myself.
The stranger and I are one.

Jesus on the road, inviting others to give him welcome,
provide sustenance, maybe a place to stay,
reminds me of Jeff Lenhart.
I suspect many of you knew Jeff Lenhart.
He is the resident manager at the Dubuque Rescue Mission.
I do not know him personally, but he is a Facebook “friend.”
His motto is “Be kind.”
Currently Jeff is on vacation.
He is touring the west coast states and Canada on his motor scooter.
Not a motorcycle, but a scooter.
A yellow Vespa, with *Be Kind* sayings posted all over it.
He is saving a lot of money on gas.
And he is reporting on his adventures on Facebook.

His plan is program is what he calls “couchsurfing.”
Couchsurfing is the art of finding people to stay with
as one travels from place to place.

Some are people he knew before, but have moved west.
Some are people he knows about, whose books he has read,
or whose efforts in justice work he knows about.
And some are just complete strangers.

And he takes with him his message of Be Kind.
This is why I think of him when I hear of Jesus
traveling on the road to Jerusalem,
eliciting hospitality from those he encounters along the way.

Jeff stands at the opposite end of the spectrum
which has at the other end hateful rallies mocking American women of color.
His mantra, “Be Kind,”
is something that he is not only promoting, but living.
And asking others to live as well.

Once again it reminds us of the underlying meaning of hospitality—
of my home,
or my country,
or my planet—
it is the ability to recognize the human, living person in the visitor.

The stranger is one like myself.
The stranger and I are one.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 11 2019

Wisdom 18:6-9	A reflection on Passover
Psalms 33:1, 12, 18-22	Our soul waits on the Lord
Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19	Meditation on Abraham’s faith
Luke 12:32-38	Words for servants and stewards

As you know, last week I was at a family reunion.
It was good. Just my own generation.
The nieces and nephews and their families couldn’t make it this year.
I have two brothers and three sisters still living.
A sister died very young,
and my youngest brother Ken died about ten years ago.
For the rest of us, it was good to get together.

I had a good talk with my youngest sister, Mary.
She is just retired and getting ready to move to Europe.
She has seized the opportunity to take dual citizenship with Luxembourg,
and is waiting for the papers.
In the meantime, she is radically downsizing,
putting as much of her life on computer stick-drives as possible.

A few months ago, she requested digital copies of my homilies that I give here.
I was surprised.
So when we got together, I asked her about it.

I should tell you that my family is unchurched.
We grew up with daily mass and rosary. But much has changed.
Mary is an example.
She is a scientist, and thinks like a scientist.

So why the homilies, I wondered.
She said she has been an atheist for about 30 years.
But she likes to read them, to see how I make my case.
She said she thinks we have a lot in common.

I had to leave the family reunion early.
I had forgot to pack my CPAP machine, which allows me to sleep at night.
So the first night there was miserable, and so I came back the next day.
And missed the last day of the reunion.

So this week I went over to my brother Paul's house, here in Dubuque,
and asked him if anything interesting happened after I left.
He said Mary and my sister Phyllis got into an interesting discussion about religion.
Mary said she was an atheist,
and Phyllis said she thought she was more of an agnostic.

I should say something about my sister Phyllis, third in line. (I am the oldest.)
Phyllis left home early to become a Wheaton Franciscan.
She also became a nurse. Later, in the 1960s, working in the inner city of Chicago,
she met her husband, Will, then a Christian Brother.
They married and had two daughters.
(Yes, I know. A familiar story.)

That marriage did not last.
But Phyllis has had a successful career,
establishing the doctoral programs in Wisconsin and Texas, among other things.
She also exited the church many years ago.

But she remained involved, as they say, in spirituality.
Awhile back, she told me that Pope Francis got her attention.
She feels they share a vision.

Recently, the transitions in life has sent her in a new direction.
She has been busy reorganizing the curriculum structure
of the University of Dallas, a Catholic college in Texas.
She told me she has just subscribed to *Commonweal Magazine*.
Something here is brewing as well.

Okay. I usually don't go into personal history like this.
And my point is not that my family is unique,

at least not in its relationship to religion. Just the opposite.

I suspect that you can tell a similar story about your own family.

And if not, some that you know.

And that is my point.

Our families are reflections of the world we live in today.

It is increasingly secular, without even any apparent thirst for the transcendent.

And here we are, still publicly claiming our faith.

Still religious. Still vowed, perhaps.

Maybe treading water, but still in the stream of things.

It is with these thoughts that I come (finally) to the scriptures for today.

Again Jesus is teaching his disciples.

In other words, something said for us who claim to be disciples.

First, he speaks to their need to live simply, in language that reminds us of the instructions to the mission of the Twelve and the Seventy-Two.

Trust in God, not your earthly possessions.

“For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”

But his main theme is keeping vigil.

Keeping the lamp burning.

Luke is writing his gospel in a vivid awareness that we are in an in-between time, in between the first coming of Christ and the second.

I remember when we used to talk about the “already/not yet.”

The words of Jesus today are about how to live in the already/not yet.

And a primary theme is keeping vigilant.

Keeping the lamp burning.

I see that as a message for us who are still publicly committed to Christianity, to Catholicism, to the gospel.

Among other things, we perform a service for our friends and families

who are wandering far and wide

in search of a valuable meaning to shape their lives around.

We may have doubts ourselves,

but we illustrate that the struggle is worth continuing

within the borders of the church, the shared profession of faith.

And speaking of faith, that is the message from Hebrews.

Today it features Abraham, the paragon of faith

in both the Old Testament and the New.

The Jewish tradition speaks of the ten times Abraham’s faith is tested.

Today. Hebrews speaks of three.

The faith of Abraham is described in terms of the promise to Abraham.
God promises him a land and many descendants.

The three tests of faith relate to the promises.

First, he receives the call to drop his former life,
and go to a distant land as his inheritance;
then, he accept the promise of an heir,
despite the extreme age of both him and Sarah;
and finally, he survives the threat to the life of Isaac,
through whom the promise was expected to come.

And through this all, Abraham persists in believing,
in trusting God.

Abraham's faith is extreme and exemplary.
He believes beyond reasonable prudence.
His faith sets a standard for us in our own days, I think.

In our faith, we present the world with a question, a quandary.
Why do we persist in believing?

Apart from our own answers to that question, there is this—
it is valuable to keep the question of belief alive.

We do that.
Not only for ourselves, but for the world we live in.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 18 2019

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 An attempt on Jeremiah's life
Psalm 40:2-4, 18 Lord, come to my aid!
Hebrews 12:1-4 Our eyes fixed on Jesus
Luke 12:49-53 Come to set the earth on fire

Today we hear Jesus say,
“Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division.
From now on a household of five will be divided...”

But what happened to the Prince of Peace?
The division of families is not something that we can easily condone.
We think of the families on the southern border.

We deplore the fact that kids are being kept in cages.
It disturbs us that the recent ICE raids in Mississippi
were conducted on the first day of school,
so that kids returning home discovered their parents were taken away from them.

We recognize that this is a policy of intended cruelty
designed to deter refugees from coming here.

So we hear the gospel today,
and it almost sounds like Jesus condones this kind of activity.

And it is not hard to imagine certain Christians
defending our border policy with this gospel passage.

But let me counter these examples with another set.

In these, the decision that divides families
is made toward compassion instead of cruelty.

I think of a religious sister who is a friend of mine, not from this order.
She comes from a family of non-religious people,
and they were mightily upset when she decided not only to be a Catholic,
but even to become a nun.

She was effectively disowned.

But she continues her work in serene commitment.

She regrets the division in her family, and stays open to mending it.
But in the meantime, she has her vocation to fulfill.

I think of Jame Carroll, known now as a writer of novels
and commentary on the Catholic church.

During the Vietnam War he was a Paulist priest,
and a nationally visible activist against the war.

However, he was also the son of Lt. Gen. Joseph Carroll, Chicago-born Irish,
and during the war, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency,
the military intelligence arm of the Pentagon.

He did not approve of his son's activity, to say the least.

In his book, *An American Requiem*, Carroll recounts the separation from his father,
how it affected their lives permanently,
and how it reflected the struggles of similar families across the nation.

Or perhaps this example. When I first came to Loras,
I and others started a week of activity in Washington DC.

It was not so much a service week as it was one of advocacy.

We worked with Elizabeth McAlister and Jonah House,
and the Community of Creative Non-Violence.

Activities included protesting at the Pentagon,
alongside the Atlantic Life Community.

The ALC were hardcore, very serious peace activists.
They did not laugh much.
And they were there to get arrested for civil disobedience.
Their activities were courageous and affecting.
And they were very compelling for altruistic college students.

So we had one rule: No is allowed to get arrested.
Everybody gets on the bus back home.
But one student, let us call him Ron, did not want to return.
He did come back with us, but he quit school,
with just a couple of weeks left in the year.

And he returned to DC and joined the resistance movement.
His family did not like it, and there was a permanent division in the family.
I always think of his story when I read this gospel account.

But this is another kind of division among families.
And it has a different cause—not cruelty but compassion for the victims.
And that takes us back to the scriptures for today.
In discussing the passages for this Sunday,
the theology of baptism came to the surface.
Jesus cries out: “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized,
and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!”

We discovered that all the biblical commentators refer us to the story in Mark’s Gospel,
where the apostles James and John seek the right and left-hand seats in the Kingdom.
And Jesus responds, “Can you drink of the cup,
and be baptized with the baptism I am to be baptized?”
They of course said yes, not knowing what he meant.
He was speaking of his Passion and death.

And St Paul speaks of baptism as a participation in the death and new life of Jesus. There is a
way in which baptized Christians have already died and risen with Christ.
And it is, of course, baptism as immersion, not sprinkling or pouring,
that provides the symbolism.
It is going down into the water and coming up again that
dramatizes the new life.

And with this in mind, we took another look at that story about Jeremiah,
in the first reading for today.
From a political point of view, he is opposed by the nobles of Judah
for opposing their war effort against the invading Babylonian army.
Jeremiah thinks it is useless to fight it,
and that to continue is only to suffer a greater humiliation.

He was right, insofar as the result of their effort

was the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.
And the end of Judah as an independent state.

It was a major shift in the presence of Judeans in history.
And Jeremiah was trying to warn them, but to no avail.

It is in this regard that the princes take action.

Not wanting to kill him outright,
they dump him in one of the many ceramic-lined cisterns
that allowed Judeans to survive the dry season.

If he died, well so be it. But they didn't actually murder him.
Jeremiah put up with a lot.

But the action of the story resembles in its own way
the ritual of baptism by immersion.

Jeremiah is dumped into the almost dry well, and then pulled out again.
The princes tell the king to put him in,
and the king says OK. And they do.
Then Ebed-Melech tells the king to let him out again,
and the king says OK. And they do.

That is the whole story.

It is a version of immersion as passing through death to life.
It is prophetic action under the image of baptism into death and new life.

By the way, Ebed-Melech is a title, not a name.

It means "Servant of the King."

It would no doubt remind people of the "Servant of the Lord,"
the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

For the New Testament, that Suffering Servant is Jesus.

The image then is of a definitive turning-point.

The past is no longer alive for them, but only the future.

This is the meaning of baptism, as it is of prophetic action.

And so this mission to set the earth on fire, as Jesus says, dividing families,
is not directed to preserve an imagined past,
but rather opens into a possible future.

It is not designed to humiliate and discourage the refugees
nor those who would welcome them;

it is not longing for a simpler past without people different from themselves.

Rather, it embraces a possible new life for all God's family.

Beyond divisions that plague us.

For we are one family.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 1 2019

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 In praise of humility
Psalm 68:4-7, 10-11 You have made home for the poor
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24 Not Sinai but the heavenly Zion
Luke 14:1, 7-14 On holding a banquet

In today's first reading,
Sirach is pretty enthusiastic about the virtue of humility.
He seems fairly convinced that it is the key to a successful life.
I think we can all agree to that.
But then, what is this "humility" that he is talking about?

Maybe it is what some people call "Iowa nice."
This is a close cousin to "Minnesota nice"—a similar set of virtuous traits.
Here, for your enlightenment, are some of those traits,
as no doubt you will recognize—
courteous, reserved and mild-mannered.
That sounds like us.

Some would add other items to the list:
a polite friendliness, an aversion to confrontation,
a tendency toward understatement.
That sounds right.

Also, a disinclination to make a fuss or stand out,
emotional restraint, and self-deprecation.

Maybe this is humility.
And we are lucky to be from an area that is naturally humble,
and so we are home free on this score.

But other people disagree with this.
Some do not view it as positively, and say it simply is Passive Aggression.
Passive aggression avoids direct confrontation,
even while finding ways to stymie the other person's wishes.

It is a method of having your own way, without making a scene.
So maybe we're not talking about humility here, but something else.
Maybe it simply is a form of socialization.
As a friend of mine once said, "Growing up in Iowa
means growing up with 'Who do you think you are?'"

So Sirach leaves us with some questions.

But then there are the views of Jesus.

Today's story is famous.

Guests are competing for the best places, but Jesus advises an alternative strategy.

Go for the lowest, and maybe you will be called up higher.

Or maybe you won't. That is the gamble.

The ancient world was dominated by a social system quite different from Iowa Nice.

Sociologists call it an honor/shame society.

The purpose of life was to accumulate honor and glory.

Also, to avoid shame.

Every encounter among males was a challenge to honor, something like a symbolic duel without weapons.

If you won, you gained honor; if you didn't win, you were shamed.

It is much more elaborate than this, but you can see this social system at work in the story of Jesus advising the guests.

They are seeking honor.

But he is flipping the system, suggesting that if they go lower, then they will be honored by being called higher.

But the gospel account doesn't end here.

After Jesus gives some advise to the guests, he turns to the host.

And here his words take a different twist.

No longer is he talking about how to establish your place in society.

He seems to be talking about something else entirely,

when he advises the host to invite the poor to the table, instead of his friends.

He seems to be talking more about *recognizing* those who are humble rather than *being* humble.

Of course, when you think about it, he is asking something equally unlikely from the host.

Can you imagine the host saying to his friends—

“Sorry, I am not inviting you to my banquets any more.

Now I am reserving the places for people completely outside our circle—poor, crippled, lame, and blind people from the streets.”

I don't suppose his friends would say,

“Great idea. We enjoyed your company, but we endorse your decision to replace us with the nonentities of the world. Have a good life.”

I don't think so.

And yet maybe we are coming closer to the meaning of true humility.
When you think of it, Jesus' suggestion to the host
makes a shambles of the honor/shame system.

He turns it upside down.

He is asking the host to abandon the entire project
of seeking honor among his peers by calculated invitations.
He is even seems to be asking him to dump his peers.

Abandon them for another class of society entirely
—those completely lacking honorable status.

To put it another way, Jesus is asking the host
to view all persons as honorable, no matter what their status be in society.

All persons have worth.

He is asking us to give equal consideration
to the cleaning woman as to the CEO,
to the disabled person as to the star athlete,
the refugee as to the righteous citizen, the beggar as to the boss.

All are full members of the human family.

All are children of God.

Jesus is asking them to junk the honor system of classing people.

All persons are valuable.

And here I am reminded of the German philosopher of the death of God
—Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche mourned the loss of the classical system of the ancient world.

He condemned what he called the “transvaluation of values.”

What he was referring to was the effect of Judeo-Christian morality
on classic Greco-Roman cultural values.

He railed against what he saw as the values of the strong by those of the weak.

In his view, the ethic that values excellence was replaced by egalitarianism.

The value system he regretted, but saw as Christian,
was one that privileged human equality and community.

It says that each person has an equal claim to respect.

It seems to me that this perspective that Nietzsche rejected,
and which Jesus recommends, is the true description of humility.

Not that I am lower than anyone,
but that we are all part of the human family,
and you are, and I am as well.

When we begin to understand this, it will take us out to the streets,
to encounter the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

Where Nietzsche speaks of the transvaluation of values,
Jesus says, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”
Or, as in today’s gospel,
“Every one who exalts himself will be humbled,
but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Or as Mary says of her God, in the Magnificat—
He has shown might with his arm,
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.

This does not sound like the Greco-Roman value system.
Nor, does it sound too much like Iowa Nice.
Though I wouldn’t want to be too negative.
That would not be polite.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 8 2019

Wisdom 9:1-4, 17 Who can know God’s counsel?
Psalm 90:3-6, 12-13, 17 Teach us wisdom of heart.
Philemon 9-10, 12-17 Paul returns an escaped slave
Luke 14:25-33 Jesus has some words of admonition

Once every three years Paul’s letter to Philemon comes to the liturgy.
It is only one chapter long,
and so it can’t command too much space in the Sunday lectionary.
Despite its minuscule size, it is important and worth devoting some attention to.

In reading it, we discover that Paul is returning a runaway slave to his owner.
This tends to confirm all our prejudices about Paul,
who is accused of never challenging unjust social structures.
We see in other letters that he tells slaves to obey their masters.
And so it would seem here.

Paul is in prison and the slave Onesimus, whose name simply means “Useful,”
has escaped the household of his owner, Philemon.
Philemon was an important Christian in the city of Colossae.
The Christians gathered in his house for Sunday worship.
That is probably why Onesimus knew of Paul, and so why he escaped he went to Paul.
Now Paul is sending him back, along with this letter.

All this seems pretty unforgiving. That is how it seemed until a remarkable essay was written about this letter by James Burtchaell, who was a priest on the faculty at Notre Dame University.

The rest of what I am going to say depends on his insights.

Paul makes a point of the fact that Onesimus is returning to Philemon as a fellow Christian, a brother in Christ, if you will.

He is asking him to welcome Onesimus.

To see what Paul is asking here, and how outrageous it is, we must think about how the slavery system worked in the ancient world.

Slaves tended to run away.

Apparently they did not like the kind of life it offered.

Consequently, the penalties for runaways was severe.

It could be death.

Or more commonly a visible mutilation, like the loss of an eye or a couple of fingers.

This would provide a warning to the other slaves about the dangers of trying to flee.

In returning Onesimus, Paul was risking these consequences for Onesimus.

But the greater challenge is for Philemon. What is he to do?

The sanctions for runaways was there for a purpose.

What were the consequences of ignoring them?

If he pardoned Onesimus, the rest of his slaves might see that as a good reason to run off to Paul as well.

And if he pardoned all the slaves in his household, the neighbors would not appreciate it, with their own slaves now at risk of running away.

On the other hand, if he carried through with the custom of punishing the slave, how was that treating him as a Christian brother?

What Paul came to visit, as he said he hoped to do, it would not do to gather around for the sacred meal and have him see Onesimus over on one side with only one eye.

No, it would not do.

In effect, Paul was giving Philemon a choice—you can be a slaveowner or you can be a Christian, but you cannot be both.

Philemon must choose.

And notice this, while Paul leaves the choice up to Philemon, he has created a situation where he forces that choice.

Philemon has a free choice, but he is not free to avoid choosing.

We can be assured Philemon made the right choice.

We know that for at least two reasons.

One is that he is mentioned in the letter to the Colossians as an important member of the community.

The other reason is simply that we would not have this letter to read if it hadn't worked, if the letter hadn't done its job.

What are we to say about all of this?
How does it speak to us today?

Well, first of all, it shows that Paul did not accept unjust social structures, even if he did not challenge them in a public arena.

In fact, he did challenge the institution, as Philemon would be the first to insist.
In addition, he did establish firmly the Christian opposition to social injustice.

We see his pattern elsewhere, as when he baptized Gentiles, non-Jewish believers, as the proper thing to do, and let the Council of Apostles work it out from there.

It had the character of a *fait accompli*, an accomplished fact.

In Galatians 3:28, Paul wrote the famous line about the baptized—

“There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free person,
there is not male and female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In the letter to Philemon we see him act on the conviction that there is neither slave nor free person.

In Galatians, neither Jew nor Greek.

I am not sure if we have documentary proof of any action of his supporting the principle of neither male nor female.

However, in listing it among the social discriminations, we can be sure that he included it among the injustices that he opposed in action.

There are many ways to protest injustices.

We have a tradition of nonviolent confrontation along with civil disobedience as a certain expression of that.

Currently news articles are mentioning the cases of the seven protestors of the Kings Bay Plowshares action in Georgia, protesting the Trident submarines based there.

Each of these is capable of carrying up to 200 nuclear warheads.

They protestors are being held under rather extreme conditions.

One of them, 79-year-old Elizabeth McAlister, widow of Phil Berrigan, and a friend of mine, and of Loras's Ray Herman Peace and Justice Center, has now been held for over 500 days, longer than her sentence would be if she were able to have a hearing.

The Berrigan's Plowshares movement is one form of challenging unjust laws and practices.

But there are others, and a range of these, from organizing protests, to boycotts, to writing letters to the editor. All are important.

But Paul shows another way.

It does not confront publicly, but it does indeed confront damaging social structures.

It refuses to participate in them.

It refuses to recognize them as legitimate.

Paul shows us a Christian community that lives otherwise,
that tries to live according to a standard of shared common humanity,
in an understanding of God as a God of love,
valuing each person as embraced by that love.

It is always a question of how effective protest can be.

We are seeing another case of testing the possibilities,
in what is happening in Hong Kong in these days.

We do not know how, or how quickly, change can come.

But one way to bring it about is to live the new world ahead of time.

It is a method of bringing change to a world
akin to the line attributed to St. Francis

—“Preach always, and if necessary use words.”

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 15 2019

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14

The golden calf

Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19

Of my sin cleanse me

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul as a saved sinner

Luke 15:1-32

Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son

The parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Prodigal Son
dwell on the rejoicing that comes upon finding what had been lost.

The rejoicing is real. But it is not innocent.

That is, it is not like the joy we feel when rising to a perfect day,
with the sun shining and birds singing,
and the benevolence of nature laid out before us.

It is not like that unearned rejoicing, for it follows upon loss.

It overcomes the loss.

It is as intense as the loss was traumatic.

And so, we might take seriously the experience of loss,
if we are to understand the joy of the parables.

Sometimes what is lost is trivial, but somehow maddening.

About to leave the house, you lay something down, the shopping list, or the car keys.

And now you cannot see where you put them.

This kind of loss is infuriating precisely because it is so trivial,
and yet it consumes our entire attention.

But other kinds of loss are not at all trivial.

The story of the Prodigal concerns the loss of a son, a child of one's flesh and blood.

This we also know.

Some of the most harrowing is the loss of a child through death.

My parents knew this; my brother and his wife know this.

I have friends who have lived through the deaths of their sons or daughters.

They are permanently marked.

The experience leaves a deep gash in their spirits, that never really heals,
but which they learn to live with.

The news frequently features stories of lost persons.

This week the story was about a car found at the bottom of a pond in Florida,
with a person inside who had been missing for 28 years.

His parents were interviewed of course,

with the expected remarks about the welcome closure and the continuing pain.

We endure the ongoing stories of refugee children,

both at our southern border and in boats on the Mediterranean,

who do not survive the journey.

Or who are mistreated upon arrival.

Again there is a sense of loss without retrieval.

And then there are the stories of the lost who *are* found.

Amber Alert and similar warning systems tell us of children who go missing,
and frequently report that they are found safe.

We are more aware than ever before of human trafficking crimes.

Here again the recognition of these practices bring with them
the depressing sense of loss, fear that it is permanent,
worry that it is harmful, even deadly.

We live constantly with the sense of loss and a part of our life,

and a part that can rather quickly become overwhelming.

It is this, I think, is the sense of dread that underlies the parables for today.

The fear of loss and the awareness that the threat is always there, not far away.

But the deeper the sense of loss,

the greater the celebration when it is overcome,

when the lost is found,

and life is restored to something resembling normal.

This is the uncontainable rejoicing of the Father,

when the Prodigal who was lost, is found.

As he tells the bothered other brother,
“But now we must celebrate and rejoice,
because your brother was dead and has come to life again;
he was lost and has been found.”

But we also understand that in the parable
the Father represents the mercy of God.
He is an image of the merciful, rejoicing God.

And here we touch on one of the major narratives of the New Testament
—the retrieval of the alienated human family,
initiated by God, as a gift,
and carried out in the heroically nonviolent life and death of Jesus Christ.

This is what Paul talks about in the fifth chapter of Romans,
when he says that God brought us back
when we were still sinners, still enemies,
and powerless to return on our own.

For me that describes the love of God.
The Father in the parable of the Prodigal dramatizes the love of God.
It is something we need to hear.

Many of us grew up in a church that was influenced
by Jansenist views of a strict God monitoring a sinful human family.
It was the Catholic version of the Calvinist doctrine
of the total depravity of human nature.

One effect for us was the impression
that a strict adherence to the laws and teachings of the church was required
if we were to be spared punishment.
One is reminded of the Prodigal’s older brother,
who dutifully followed his father’s wishes.

Along with our task of maintaining strict obedience
came a kind of moral rigidity called scrupulosity.
It all depended, we thought, on what we ourselves did.
God’s role was to catch us out, or so it seemed.

Many strands of theological recovery have followed
from the damage that outlook has caused.
But the most important is in the Bible itself.
God is a God of love and forgiveness.
God knows our weaknesses, for God is who created us.

But it takes us awhile to accept that God loves us for ourselves.

Forgiveness is a gift, freely given if we want to accept it.
But often we do not want to accept it, but rather wish to earn it.
Like the older brother, we want to claim our rights,
even when they are not so obvious.

And we worry about friends and family
who are no longer “practicing,” as the phrase has it.
We worry about a strict, if not vengeful, God
who accepts no departure from the norm.

But again we do not count on the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus,
who is continually reaching out,
like the shepherd in search of a lost sheep,
or the housewife scouring the house for her lost coin.

Or like the Father of the Prodigal, vigilant for his return
and rejoicing unrestrainedly when it actually happens.

As he announces to his servants—
‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
Then let us celebrate with a feast,
because this son of mine was dead,
and has come to life again;
he was lost, and has been found.’

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 22 2019

Amos 8:4-7	Judgment on the Merchants
Psalms 113:1-2, 4-8	The Lord lifts up the poor
1 Timothy 2:1-8	Pray also for those in authority
Luke 16:1-13	An Enterprising Manager

There are many things happening in our world at this time.
Massive demonstrations of young people around the world
demanding attention to climate change. `

On the national scene, an apparent act of extortion by our president,
withholding military aid to force the Ukrainian president
to gather damaging information against a possible opponent
in the upcoming election.
This could be a turning point.

But apart from all this,

the liturgy invites us to look at the place of money in our lives and society.
And that, after all, is also a pressing issue in our time.

In one of his more famous passages,
the prophet Amos charges the merchants with greed.
But not simply greed alone, but also the effect that has
on damaging the poor and vulnerable in society.

Of course, we understand that the term “merchant” means “businessmen,”
and the practices Amos disparages are unjust business practices.

He makes a list.

They cannot wait until church is over,
so that they can get back to what really matters. Making money.
There is a hint that their religious devotion is a part of the same picture,
since many people will not patronize irreligious sellers.

Then he excoriates those who falsify the amount or the price.
And he adds an interesting example of exploiting the poor,
in that now he can sell what he formerly threw away as worthless.

The poor can't afford the decent goods,
so he can unload inferior and even worthless products.
So Amos delivers damning criticism of greed,
but also the social injustice that it causes.

But in the gospel, Jesus takes it further.
For him it is not simply a matter of greed as a vice, but something deeper.
In contrasting God and Mammon,
he raises the question of what it is we live by,
what gives our lives meaning.

The parable of the clever manager, who apparently sacrificed his commission,
that part of the profit that he could claim for himself,
in order to secure future favors,
this illustrates how certain basic decisions are required in life,
to live successfully.

While he failed in the short run, he gained in the long.
But that again raises the question of what is a successful life,
what gives life meaning?

In our society, money is a key indicator of success.
Salaries are compared, to see how persons are valued.

In pro sports, superstars compete for the highest multimillion dollar salary.
They do not actually need that much money,

but they have to show that they are better athletes than their competitors.

In the academic life, professors compare the high salaries of tech instructors to the much lower income of liberal arts teachers, and conclude that the traditional form of education is disrespected, and even perhaps disappearing.

And don't even ask about the income of theology teachers.

Even in areas of justice we use money as the criterion.

For instance, the relative value of male and female employees is gauged by how much less women bring in for the same amount of work.

While this is a fairly accurate indicator of the value of each, it assumes that all work is valuable only to the degree that it is financially rewarded.

And yet, women have been doing absolutely essential work for millennia, but work around the home doesn't have a paycheck, and is not included in our sense of valuable labor.

And yet it is crucial to maintaining a viable social life and living community.

One occurrence this week illustrates the matter.

The President condemned homeless shelters in California, which he said were ruining their cities.

While there is a valid argument about reducing housing costs to allow more to buy homes, he seemed to stigmatize the homeless themselves, as distastefully cluttering up the landscape.

This perspective would be consistent with the other policy decisions coming out of his White House.

And here, I would suggest, his tenure as chief executive provides us with an unexpected benefit.

That benefit, as I see it, is this.

Now we have a vivid image of the business model of life, unvarnished by moderating measures.

Everything hangs on whether it gains a profit, no matter what happens to those involved.

Loyalty lasts as long as it is profitable.

Relationships are calculated.

Society is reduced to winners and losers.

Usually, the economic process is softened by outside influences, some of which come from standards of justice or morality.

Apart from those moderating influences,
the economic world has its own standards of what is right or wrong.
And these have to do with what brings financial success.

Again, in our society, money is a key indicator of success.
Economists, standing a long way off from the gospel,
use self-interest as their criterion of rationality.

Anyone operating out of the virtues of altruism or generosity
is considered irrational.

Or, in plain words, crazy. Maybe even dangerous.

Phrases like “the bottom line,” applied to any line of action,
show how economics pervades our culture.

We who adopt a point of view apart from this,
who take to heart what the gospel recommends, are then counter-cultural.

For our culture does not endorse this view.

Just the opposite.

But if not Mammon, what?

What other scale of values can organize our lives?

The Gospel suggests there is an alternative to the children of this world,
and calls them the children of light.

Here are three thoughts.

The self-interest of Mammon is answered by a larger awareness
that takes us out of our ego bubble, in which we are locked.

It is the discovery of the transcendence, of a reality beyond our little world.

It is faith in God, and with that a community of believers.

In this discovery we also discover ourselves.

We find our place in the world,

and it is not in the center, but as a part of the whole.

Secondly, we find the meaning of life in dispersing goods
and not in accumulating them; in giving not getting.

I am not a black hole that draws everything to myself
only to be swallowed up in nothing.

Rather, I am a part of a community, the human family,
that exists by mutual generosity, gift giving to gift.

Life supporting other life.

And last of all, there is the question of what is success,
how do we measure the successful life?

And here it seems to me that it is the life
that is finally emptied, rather than amassed.

It culminates in a personal story of discovery

how letting-go is the path to success.

It is to end the journey with nothing,

to be light as a feather, floating in the the air, lifted away.