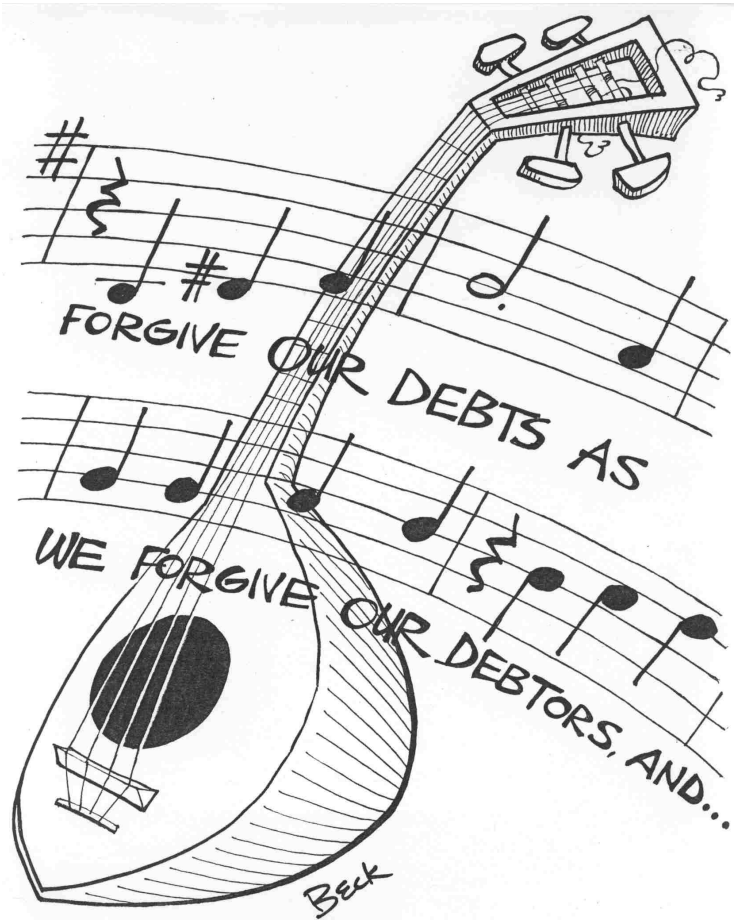
SUNDAY HOMILIES

Liturgical Year Cycle A 2017

by

Rev. Robert R. Beck



Homilies given in the year 2019
Mt. St. Francis Convent, Dubuque, IA

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Acknowledgments

The present volume includes the homilies given at Mt St Francis Motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa, in the the A Cycle of the Liturgical Year, from Advent 1015, through 2016. Again I must thank the congregation that makes these possible, eliciting from the homilist ever-renewed engagement with the Sunday Scriptures. My practice is to follow the advice attributed to the great theologian Karl Barth—prepare the sermon with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. The idea is to confront the world we live in with the Gospel.

I thank my proof readers, Srs. Jean Beringer OSK and One Wingert OSF, who again agreed to help me prepare this text. The circumstances of writing a weekly homily favor content over copy-editing, results over close reading. I appreciate the help.

Fr. Robert Beck

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5	Swords into plowshares
Psalm 122:1-9	Up to the house of the Lord
Romans 13:11-14	Time to awake
Matthew 24:37-44	As in the days of Noah

We begin Advent and a new year in the church
with Isaiah' vision, Paul's admonitions,
and Matthew's words of warning to be vigilant.
Dreams and vigilance. Each has its place today.

Vigilance is often a theme at this time of the year.
We are invited to think upon final things,
the end times and our own mortality.
This year we have additional motivation.

It is hard to talk about vigilance
without thinking about the uncertain times in which we live.
We are always in between the times,
but this Advent season even more so, as we find ourselves
between two political worlds,
one known, and one deliberately kept unknown,
with a president-elect who likes to keep us guessing.

For some, it is a question of lowering the tone of public discourse
to crude and rude standards.
It is a matter of undermining the level
of acceptable interaction among people.

For others, it is a question of justice
and the fair distribution of our common goods.
Seeing a lack of concern about separation of government and private business,
they worry about official looting of the public treasury.
They worry about allocating sensitive information
to those who might exploit it for their own gain.

For others, more seriously, it is fear for the vulnerable in our society.
And their own fears.
Having a candidate who threatened most of those on the margins,
those without special protections,
there is a special anxiety, even fear, for their safety.

So today the theme of vigilance takes on a special meaning,
as we are invited to pay attention,
and defend those without defenses,
advocate for those without advocates.

For others, there is fear for the very democratic structures and institutions
that we take for granted,
that protect not only the vulnerable but also us
who do not often think of ourselves as vulnerable.

And yet we are, preserved by a consensus of expectations
that maintains a democratic society.
And many fear that even this is under threat.
And I would be among them.

So there is fair reason this Advent to heed the call to be vigilant.
And that vigilance takes on a very specific character.

And yet, there are also other reasons for us to be vigilant.
As we find ourselves in a time of coarsened discourse,
and a time of harsh partisanship,
we might be vigilant in ourselves,
taking care not to join in the urge to destroy those who disagree with us.
Even while we are uncompromising about opposing the damage.

And we keep vigil for signs of promise, as well.
And here we find ourselves in a posture of faithful waiting.

In the Christmas stories that we will again
be hearing at the end of this Advent season
we find the villagers named Zachary and Elizabeth,
Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna.
And they are described as waiting for the consolation of Israel,
for the deliverance of Jerusalem.
They are waiting because they are among the powerless
who cannot bend history to their will.
They are waiting on the Lord.

And we will hear, among the Christmas stories,
of a young couple about to have a child, traveling to a distant city
in the middle of winter under harsh conditions
because of an edict from a distant emperor.

And the young mother having the child under most difficult conditions.

And also among the Christmas stories,
we will hear about a young couple and their child,
escaping to Egypt because of the violent purge of children
who are seen as a threat to an unstable and autocratic king.

But behind all this is their steadfastness in waiting on the Lord.
And that brings us to the other theme in this liturgy.
Here we come to the remarkable poem of Isaiah
that begins the liturgy of the Word for today,
that begins the season of Advent,
that even begins the entire book of liturgical scriptures,
as we begin Cycle A, this year.

The poem is inscribed on a wall across from the UN Building in Manhattan.
It takes the image of Israel gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai,
with Moses bringing them the Torah, the instructions from God,
and applies this image to Zion, the Temple Mount.

But now it is all the nations that come streaming in for instruction.
And because of that oneness among the nations,
the boundaries and walls that divide them are no longer separating them.
And there is no more need of war.
And so their swords are bent into plowshares.
And they study war no more.

This is sometimes called God's Dream for us.
This dream finds other expressions in the Scriptures.
Micah favors the images of everyone resting
under his or her own vine, their own fig trees.
There are other passages depicting the time of Shalom, the era of Peace.

God's dream for us is said by many to be the fundamental truth of the Bible.
It is a dream into the future that exceeds
any of our attempts to make it a reality in our society.
It is a dream that envisions every member of society
as a full human being, a special child of God.

We need the dream in order to know what we need to do.

We learn slowly and we repeatedly fail.
It took us centuries to understand that slavery was not acceptable.

And we apparently needed household appliance and farming machinery
to take over the slave work, to allow us to understand that clearly.

We understand that Jesus was telling us in his dealings with his disciples,
that women are on a par with men,
his disciples later modified it, as cultural patterns overtook the gospel.
But it is still part of God's Dream.

Repeatedly we fail. This Thursday, as we were celebrating Thanksgiving
as a commemoration of cooperation
between the European and the American indigenous peoples,
we were simultaneously continuing the war
against the Native Americans in North Dakota.

And yet we return to the Scriptures to remind us.
We read Isaiah and the Gospels,
and realize we are not there yet.

Advent begins today. It is a season of expectation, of hope.
We are like the humble villagers of Galilee and Judea,
waiting on the Lord.

We look forward this season, with
anticipation.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2017

Isaiah 11:1-10 A shoot from the stump of Jesse
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17 Justice shall flower in his days
Romans 15:4-9 Scriptures written for our instruction
Matthew 3:1-12 John the Baptist comes with an "axe"

Each year, Advent brings us a theme.
Two years ago it was the Pope's encyclical, Laudate Si',
and the promise it held for the future of the planet.
Last year it was the beginning of the Year of Mercy,
and the promise it held for the community faith,
and the human family itself.

This year, in dramatic contrast,
it is about how one half of the American people
expressed their feelings of hopelessness and anger
by sending the other half of the population into a deep depression.

And doing so by the simple expedient of electing as president
a person who mocks handicapped persons,
threatens minorities and refugees,
disrespects women,
and embraces conspiracy theories and mock news sites
without appearing to recognize them for what they are.

And so this year, instead of signs of promise,
we enter the season of hope with a clear eyed sense of our need for it.

And in this spirit, we look at the word of God in the scriptures
for any sign it might offer us of promise.

And whom do we encounter today,
but John the Baptist, and his scorched earth policy.
The axe is at the root; the winnowing fork is at hand.

John is the man of the desert,
and his imagination tends toward scenes of defoliation,
the arid lands stripped of trees.
The axe is at the root.

John has his reasons. He lived in difficult times.
The land of Judea, along with Galilee, was suffering.
The emergence of cities meant that small villages were losing their lands,
and village life and families were under stress.

Small farmers were now either working the land they used to own,
but now as hired labor,
or they were out of luck entirely.

Lawlessness and banditry were increasing,
as some were trying to seize back their own.
Ordinary people were raising armies
and presenting themselves as messiahs.

Life was changing.
And on top of that, now there was a world power, the Roman Empire,
invading their land and adding taxation and surveillance.

Among the signs of the times were the appearance of prophetic figures,
today often called the "signs prophets,"
because they were known to take a group of pious and nonviolent followers
out to the desert, awaiting a sign from God.
For certainly something needed to be done.

They signaled a need to begin again,
and it was in the desert that Israel began its story.
But the Roman army, who did not allow any appearance of opposition,
would follow them out there, to slaughter them.
Offering a sign of their own.

Or like Theudas, mentioned in Acts, they went to the Jordan,
where Joshua first crossed into the land.
Or like the so-called Egyptian, also mentioned in Acts,
they gathered to the walls of Jerusalem,
commanding the walls to fall as in Jericho.

John the Baptist was the most famous of these prophets,
and he called for a new beginning.
And today we hear about his scorched-earth tendencies.

We learn that Jesus, after the baptism with John,
left the desert and turned to the villages,

where he devoted his time to healing them.
But that is next week's story.

What we hear today is a word from Isaiah.
The passage about Jesse's tree, the Advent symbol
that represents the Royal Family of David, Jesse being his father.
The passage speaks of the stump of Jesse, the root of Jesse.

Here too we find images of trees broken or chopped down.
Here too is the sign of the axe.

When these lines were written,
it appears that the tree of Jesse is only a stump, a root.
The royal family is no longer a living presence, a present power.
It has succumbed to the Babylonian onslaught,
which destroyed the Jerusalem as well as Solomon's temple.

And here we see in the history of Israel, a devastation
comparable to that which plagued the time of the New Testament.
And the imagery of chopping down trees
also suggests itself to the prophetic imagination.

But Isaiah's tree is promised a new shoot,
and unexpected growth from the root.
It will be a ruler to come, commonly known as the Messiah,
who will restore the lost glory and regain Israel's place in the world.

The New Testament fulfillment of this promise,
in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is something of a surprise.
But that is still to come.

For the moment, we have the prophet's wish list
for the coming leader, the true and authentic King.

He presents his program under three headings:
the gifts of the Spirit,
the sound judgment of the true king,
and the peaceable kingdom that results.

The gifts of the Spirit describe a pious and wise king,
one who guides his people in the light of God.

The sound judgment of the king favors the poor and the afflicted,
and has no time for the ruthless and unlawful.
This king will be a voice and arm for justice.

The peaceable kingdom that results is a dream of shalom.
It has been made famous by the paintings
of the American folk artist, Edward Hicks,
showing the lion with the lamb, the child with the wolf.

Isaiah's program for the authentic ruler
is one of justice along with compassion,
care for the vulnerable along with a model for the nations.

That is the word of promise for this Sunday,
the second Sunday of Advent.

And here I want to add one more note.

A few weeks ago I raised the question
of why we should pay attention to these ancient writings,
written in another culture,
in a distant land, centuries ago.

At that time, my answer was that this is the record of the people of God,
a journal of sorts, showing the history of damage and reclamation.
And we are a part of that people.
The record shows that we have been here before.

Today I would like to take that further.
The two passages about fallen trees speak
to two periods of devastation in the Bible.
These two periods are the result of imperial invasion and Israelite loss.

The first was the Babylonian invasion which destroyed Jerusalem,
leveled the temple of Solomon,
and ushered in a time of imperial colonization for Judea.
The second was the Roman invasion,
which destroyed rebuilt Jerusalem, leveled the Second Temple,
and ushered in an era of dispersal throughout the world of the empire.

Yet each of these traumas were times of creative energy.
Most of the bible was written during these times.

Under the Persian empire which succeeded the Babylonians,
the writings were gathered, edited, and supplemented,
to become what we call the Old Testament.

Under the Roman dominion,
the writings that became the New Testament were written and shared.
Out of the devastation came the promise.

In the imagery of today's promise,
from the root of the cut down tree a shoot appears,
the hope for the world.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2017

Isaiah 35:1-6A, 10	The parched land will bloom
Psalm 146:6-10	The Lord sets captives free
James 5:7-10	As the patient farmer waits for rain
Matthew 11:2-11	Tell John what you hear and see

Shakespeare's play, "Richard III,"
begins with the main character speaking:
"Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by the sun of York:…"

For Richard, the reviled king of York,
the long absence of his family from power is now ended,
and with his ruthless ascent to the throne,
the families fortunes are now looking good.
At least for the first part of the play.

In this Advent of our own discontent,
we have been looking to the message of the Scriptures,
and our guide has been John the Baptist.

We have seen his word of judgment, it is the time of decision.
The axe is at the root of the tree.
We have witnessed his imagination at work,
with the forest reduced to arid deserts,
his scorched earth policies.

He returns today, having been arrested in the meantime.
Having earlier singled out Jesus of Nazareth
as sent by God to be the solution to their problems,
he now seems to have second thoughts.
"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Where is the axe that would level the landscape?
Where is the destructive fire that would scorch the earth
to make room for a more just society?

Jesus' answer invokes the authority of scriptures,
citing passages from the book of Isaiah that include today's first reading.
The scriptures texts describe a people renewed,
using the image of healing its members.

"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing."

In addition, we ought not ignore the imagery of renewal
that accompanies these examples of healing.

"The desert and the parched land will exult;
the steppe will rejoice and bloom.
They will bloom with abundant flowers,
and rejoice with joyful song."

The images of re-greening the desert
exactly reverses those of John with his axe.
Something new is happening here.

Although John remained in the desert, preaching a coming judgment,
Jesus himself returned to the villages of Galilee
and began his mission of renewal,
healing its broken and alienated members,
and rebuilding the spirit of their common lives.

The entire first part of the gospels
show his work among the villages of Galilee.

New growth is appearing where there previously was devastation.
Green is the color of hope.

We have had our own scorched earth moment in our public life,
our own winter of discontent,
as a large segment of American citizens have decided to risk everything
in order to dismantle the political establishment they no longer trust.

We have been buried under a flood of analyses about why this happened.
One popular theory is economic,
that an entire class of blue-collar, white workers have been passed over
in the growing inequality of wealth today.

Others would point to an urban/rural divide,
with the latter resenting changes in our society.

These would seem to have some merit.
Though in Iowa, the income of the rural population
is almost twice that of the urban,
    so the economic gap doesn't seem to apply here.

But the comparison of a renewed nature with the renewal of society
has prompted some thoughts of my own concerning our present situation.

The effort of Jesus toward renewing
the devastated rural life of the villages of Galilee,
not only economically damaged, but also culturally threatened,
    has got me to thinking about those left out
    of the new era of globalization today.

One can contrast the modern move toward globalization
with a reaction, seen in many parts of today's world.
    We might call it globalization versus tribalism.

This sets it up nicely, with an implicit prejudice toward our own position
of seeing ourselves as one universal family, one planet.
    We might, in our prejudice, view those we call tribal
    as failing to grasp the beauty of the moment.

But the comparison with the natural world, favored by Jesus and Isaiah,
has its own modern equivalence, in ecological thinking.

Ecological systems make organic wholes.
    You cannot save the tiger without preserving the ecological network
    of interrelated life forms of which the tiger
    is simply its most spectacular member.
        You cannot preserve the National parks in western America
        if you remove the wolves, for they are part of the balance.

Nature exists in niches, and each niche is a complete system.
Globalization in our modern day has taught us about invasive species.
    When the Japanese beetles invaded my yard and garden,
    there was nothing there prepared to deal with them.
    They had a free pass to anything green they desired.

Today we are living in a time of rapid extinction of natural species, of all kinds.
But sociologically, we are also living in a time
of the rapid disappearance of hundreds of human languages.

There seems to be a comparison here.

It would seem that social life also flourishes in niches, in local backwaters,
in Galilean villages as well as small towns in the Midwest,
the hamlets of rural England as well as the Muslim traditions of the Mideast.

It is possible, in my view, that what we have witnessed in these last few weeks
is an outcry of protest at the extinction of the varied lifeforms
of American—and in fact world-wide—social reality.

We can call it tribalism, but it is also the outcry of endangered species,
not dying naturally, but by invasive cultures,
borne by social media and ease of international travel.

Of course, the move toward globalism is not going to fade away.
It is a permanent evolution toward a recognition of our human oneness.
We celebrate it, and we support it.

But it has a cost, and that cost needs to be recognized and attended to.
It needs to have a tolerable pace of change.
It needs to value and honor individual cultures.
Perhaps it must take the form of an international society
of human cultures as well as of human persons.

But however, it is done it needs to be a greening of the desert,
rather than the defoliation of the earth.

This perspective is offered here
not as if I were an expert on social change, or even ecology of nature.

It is simply an exercise of imagination,
thinking by the light of the gospel toward those
with whom I find myself in disagreement,
proposed in the fond hope that we can begin to assess
what they who disagree with us find of value in their disagreement.
There is no hope, I think, without mutual respect and understanding.
That, actually, is the only argument I am trying to make.

In the end, we are disciples of Jesus,
not of John the Baptist.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2017

Isaiah 7:10-14	A virgin shall be with child
Psalm 24:1-6	The Lord is king of glory
Romans 1:1-7	Son of God through the Resurrection
Matthew 1:18-24	Joseph's Dream

We gather today in the coldest weather we've known yet this year.
The days are at their shortest, the nights are longest and darkest.
We are in the heart of Advent.

Today the angel says to Joseph, "Be not afraid."

"Fear not" is an common refrain
in certain prophetic utterances called salvation oracles.
Some prophecies are prophecies of doom.
They were uttered in times of complacency.
Others were salvation oracles, uttered in times of despair.
They were promises of God's support in the difficulties that lie ahead.
So Joseph hears the words, "Be not afraid."

"Be not afraid to take Mary as your wife."
Why should he fear that?
I suppose you could say that there is a way in which
he could be apprehensive about public opinion.
If he were concerned about Mary's reputation,
that may have dictated the angel's assurance.

Or perhaps the angel is looking ahead into the story.
It turns out there is much to fear
as a result of moving forward with this marriage.

First the Magi alerting Herod.
Then the need to leave Bethlehem before the agents of the king arrive.
Then the time in distant and unfamiliar Egypt.

Then the return, only to find
that they could not go back home to Bethlehem,
but instead turned to a distant village in the north,
Nazareth of Galilee.

It turns out there was much to fear, if Joseph only knew.
Matthew supplies a scripture text for the story:

“All this took place to fulfill
what the Lord had said through the prophet:
    ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
    and they shall name him Emmanuel,
    which means “God is with us.”’”

There is a story here too, of course.
    Isaiah is talking to the young king Ahaz,
    who took the throne when his father suddenly died.

What was disturbing about the sudden turn of events
was that there were two armies at the gate of the city at the time.
    Ahaz's father, Jotham of Jerusalem, found himself in a bind
    when his two neighbors, the king of Damascus and the king of North Israel,
        and decided to form a local alliance
        against the rising empire in the east, Assyria.

Jerusalem was the third piece of the puzzle, but Jotham was reluctant.
    Hence the appearance of the other two kings with their armies, at the gates,
    threatening to depose Jotham and replace him with one of their own.

And then Jotham died, leaving the predicament to the young Ahaz.
What is a young king to do?

The older wiser prophet Isaiah says he should trust in God.
    Isaiah always calls the king "house of David,"
        as a not-so-subtle reminder that God has made a promise
        to the family, or house, of David, that it will reign secure.

It is one way to say that these two firebrands at the gate
will not succeed in replacing the David family king, Ahaz.
    If he only trusts in God.

Ahaz is not so sure, and so he takes things into his own hands,
appealing to the emperor of Assyria
to come to his aid against these two armies.
    Tiglathpilezer III is only too happy to have an excuse to invade.
    And does.

And that is the beginning of the years of decline,
as the northern kingdom is dismantled first,
and then later even the south, the kingdom of Ahaz himself.
But he brought it on.

Ahaz was afraid.
Isaiah was saying, in effect, fear not. God can be trusted.
But Ahaz decided to trust in the emperor instead.

So today we hear Isaiah's response.
The gist of this many-layered passage is that Ahaz will be replaced
by a successor who actually does trust in God.

When the angel appeared to Joseph, in the Christmas story,
he was promising a future that was vague and unknown.
But Joseph did exactly as he was told.
His trust was complete.
One “son of David" did what the other could not do.

Among of the themes of the Advent and Christmas season,
especially around this final week
as Advent slides into the Christmas season,
the theme of the new birth takes precedence over the others.

It is a theme of promise in the face of the unknown.
The biblical tradition invoked is that of radical newness.
The Scripture repeats again and again
that God specializes in the absolutely new, and has always done so.
And the lesson is that we should expect no less.

In our own experience we have seen this as well.
To take two church examples,
for me the unexpected newness appeared in the Second Vatican Council.
Who would have anticipated this?

The second was the recent election of Pope Francis,
a surprise that keeps on happening.
Who would have guessed this?
He was 80 years old yesterday.
Happy Birthday, Francis.

Today we have our own time of apprehension,
and hear the words, Fear not.

Last week, when I was first thinking about this,
the crisis of the week was Standing Rock.
But events move quickly these days.
This week it is the caravan of buses
taking civilians from Aleppo in Syria,
as the government forces have dislodged
the last stronghold of the rebel forces.

Then there is the ongoing anxiety produced by the presidential election.
The group of electors vote tomorrow,
though the results will not be published until January 6,
which is for us the traditional date of the Epiphany.

We have come to expect newness, not continuity.
We tend to equate security with continuity, and with good reason.

But that is not the case today.
Instead we are at best consoled with the biblical assurance
that in newness is hope.

Today the same country, Syria,
which was part of the coalition in Ahaz's day,
is now in violent turmoil again.
That is sameness, not newness.

In this season, we await the birth of the newborn.
Waiting on births is always a mixed time of anxiety and tempered joy.
So much could go wrong; so much could go right.

As we gather here in the cold,
with the days at their shortest, and the nights at longest and darkest,
here in the heart of Advent,
we are three days from the solstice,
when the darkness will begin to recede
and the days begin to lengthen.

We are one week from Christmas,
with its message of hope and its assurance of God’s love for us.
We wait with anxiety and tempered joy.

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Mass during the Day

December 25, 2016

Isaiah 52:7-10	How beautiful upon the mountains…
Psalm 98:1-6	The ends of the earth have seen…
Hebrews 1:1-6	In the past, God spoke in partial…
John 1:1-18	In the beginning was the Word…

Where is God in the Christmas stories?
Yes we all know it is the babe in the mangers.
But still. Where in the world does God appear?

The Bible stories are full of travelers.
The Holy Family is on the road to Bethlehem, before the child is born.
And they are again on the way to Egypt, after the birth of the child.
Magi appear and disappear.
Shepherds come from the hills, and return to them.

Where is God to be found in all of this?
The stories also tell of messengers making their announcements,
telling us the answer.

Luke's Christmas story speaks of the angels announcing peace on earth
to the shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem.
This is a surprise.
Why tell the world news to the obscure shepherds,
far from the meeting rooms of decision-making and the corridors of power?
But Luke has his reasons.

His Christmas story is full of the simple people who are overlooked.
Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph
—they are described as righteous and faithful, and waiting upon events.
[Simeon] awaiting the consolation of Israel;
[Anna] awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem;
[Joseph of Arimathea] awaiting the kingdom of God.

They are among the powerless, unable to shape events to their own needs,
but patiently awaiting the initiative of God,
for God to enter the world with justice and bringing peace.

They are those some count as losers,
disdained for their lack of leverage,
lack of influence, it is thought, among those who count.

The angels speak of Peace on Earth.
The young couple in the stable are there
because of a census required by Caesar Augustus.
The census is a consequence of what was known as the Pax Romana,
the world peace enforced by the Roman army.

The census identified who and what were available for taxation,
for military conscription, and for forced labor.
Into this Roman peace came the word of the angels to the shepherds.
Who, their work done, return to the fields.

Matthew's story speaks of the Magi—not kings but astrologers.
Wise men we call them.
What passed for academics in the ancient world.

They too bring an announcement into the world of Judea,
a message about the Messiah to come.
The Magi come from the outside, from the wider world.
They bring an awareness of the God of the universe,
for they have seen a star among the vast heavens.

With the arrival of the Magi, life changes for the Holy Family.
Herod the king is alarmed, as we have so often heard.
Then followed the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem,
and the flight of the family to Egypt.

And the Magi too return home.
But Matthew adds a quiet little note about their departure.
He tells us that they were warned in a dream not to report back to Herod,
but to leave quietly, without notice, by an alternative route.

The same God who alerted them to the birth by a sign in the heavens
now alerts them to danger ahead.
I think about the ways of such a God,
who keeps his people out of the way of the dangerously powerful.

Herod seems to worship another God,
as he makes his will known to Bethlehem,
reducing potential threats through deadly force.

But the Magi are spared by the God who cares for the defenseless,
and they return safely.

God is among the defenseless, we learn,
assisting those who are vulnerable,
and prey to the ruthless who see them as easy victims to exploit.
And so we come to the gospel of John,
who provides the message for Christmas day, as we just heard.
And John reminds us about what we knew at the beginning,
when we first asked the question,
Where is God in the Christmas story?

Of course, God is in the babe in the manger.
But John's language is majestic, evoking the theology of Incarnation.
The Word became Flesh.
God took on the flesh of human vulnerability.

We do not often think of the babe in the manger as helpless, I suspect.
We have images of the Infant of Prague, for instance,
picturing a powerful presence under the cover of being a baby.
And yet, this is a baby, who like any baby is helpless without constant care.

There is no better image of divine care for the vulnerable
than to realize that God has personally entered that precarious condition.

In the gospel, that defenselessness, that weakness,
would lead to a humiliating crucifixion.
In Paul's words, he emptied himself unto death,
even death on a cross.

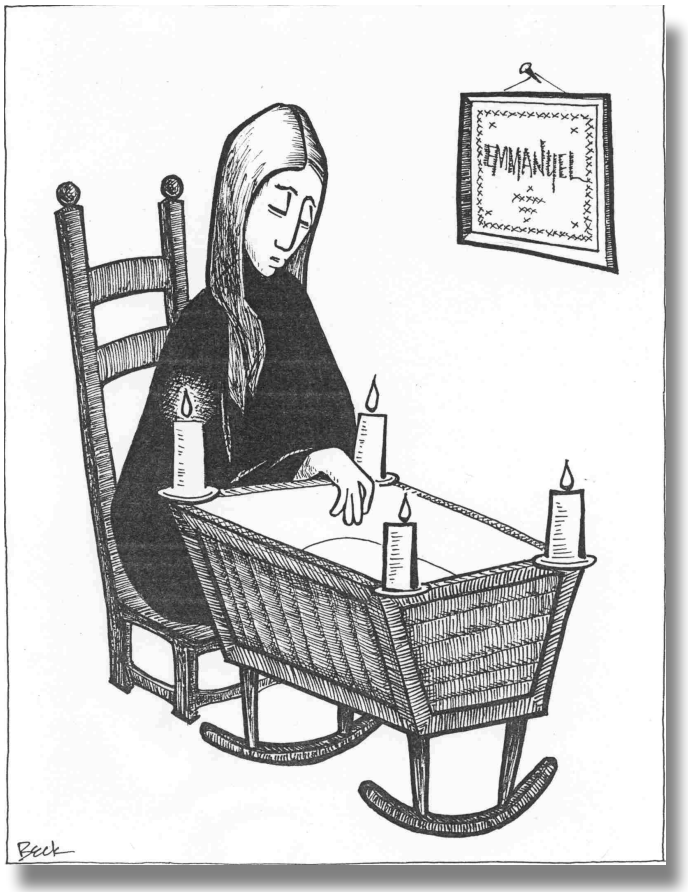
But that is where God is, in the Christmas stories.

> Michael Gerson, *WaPo*, Dec 24 2016:
>
> By any standard, this is an odd scenario for the entrance of divinity — to an occupied country, of disputed parentage, forced to flee as a refugee, living and working 30 years in silence, eventually betrayed by a friend, judicially tortured and dying in utter abandonment. On a small planet, near an average star.
>
> But this form of arrival does something important. It dusts off and reclaims every aspect of human experience and reorients our sense of low and high, weak and powerful. It is poverty given preference. It is the possibility of transcendence breaking in on any common day. It is the unexpected humility of God.

Where then is God making an appearance today?
If we are to believe the gospels,
we are to look to the margins and edges and corners,
among the neglected and the lost.

We might look in the devastation of Aleppo
as well as the refugees risking drowning in the crossing of the sea.
We might look to the neighborhoods
where poverty and gun violence dictate the rhythm of life.
We might look to the quiet lives of those who are faithful,
even while powerless to shape events to their own needs.

But because God is present there,
that is also where the new seeds are planted,
the small voice heard, the announcement is made,
where ears are actually listening, waiting for a word.
It is where the child is born.



The Octave Day of Christmas
Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

January 1, 2017

Numbers 6:22-27	The blessing of Aaron
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8	May God bless us.
Galatians 4:4-7	We cry out, "Abba, Father!"
Luke 2:16-21	The shepherds visit the stable

As we begin the New Year, we mark it with a Holy Day,
the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

We honor the New Year with the blessing of Aaron.

> The LORD bless you and keep you!
> The LORD let his face shine upon
> you, and be gracious to you!
> The LORD look upon you kindly and
> give you peace!

It almost sounds Irish. Or maybe Franciscan.
> Clearly it stands in a long line of proper blessings,
> and the new year may need it.

> The feast of Mary the Mother of God celebrates
> her role in the economy of salvation.

The Council of Ephesus pronounced Mary "Mother of God" in 431 A. D.

Its intent was to insist on the divinity of Christ.
Mary was not the mother of his divinity, but his humanity.

But he was also God,
and to make that clear in a nicely concise phrase,
> Mary was called Mother of God.
> It is as much about Christology as Mariology.
>> And today's feast is as much about a conciliar definition
>> as it is about stories of Mary.
> But the scriptures are more about stories
> than they are about definitions.

So what story of Mary should we choose to celebrate?
Perhaps the story of the shepherds coming to the manger
is a surprise choice.

It is true, there is a sense of amazement prevailing in the story,
an amazement that would be proper to this feast.
But there is not so much about Mary, Mother of God.

The shepherd story is the last part of the Christmas story of Luke,
sort of an addenda, a supplement at the end.
It is proclaimed in the Christmas Mass at Dawn,
as a follow-up to Midnight Mass.
Of the three Masses of Christmas, these two and that of Christmas Day,
the Mass at Dawn probably gets the least attention.

But that is probably not the reason we are hearing it today.
More likely it is a matter of following-up on the meaning of Christmas.
In fact, today's celebration might be seen
as a theological reflection on the Christmas story.
And that might be the clue to the message for today.

Which brings us to the second reading, by Paul.
You do not often hear much about Paul from me, which is a shame.
But there is only so much that can be said,
and the Gospel and its relationship with the Old Testament reading
is usually so central to the message
that Paul frequently gets passed over.

And besides, his writing is so condensed,
it usually requires more explanation than one has time for.
But today let us try.

Today's scripture reading is from an important passage in Galatians.
It serves to celebrate today's feast in that it says that God sent his Son,
born of a woman, though it doesn't name her.
It sounds like the definition of the Mother of God.

But the scriptures prefer stories to definitions,
and this too is part of a narrative.
Aristotle said that narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end.
And what Paul is saying here has all three.
It is a narrative, though we hear only part of it today.

This narrative appears twice in Galatians.
And most impressively, Paul uses it to shape
the doctrinal part of his masterpiece, the letter to the Romans.

Anyone who has spent some time with me
in a Bible class or discussion will know that I talk about
this three-part narrative of Paul's under three headings.

The key phrases are "We were" / "But now" / "If so, then."
Paul says "we were" enemies of God,
slaves to the elemental spirits, bound by law.
That was the beginning.

"But now" the Christ has come, faith as has come,
we are now adults in faith.
That is the middle, and the first part of our reading for today.

"If so, then" we are adopted children of God
and can cry out, "Abba, Father."
That is the rest of our reading for today.

I think of this as the master narrative of the New Testament.
It is what makes it a New Testament.
It is the key insight.

It is a story of reconciliation.
It begins with our alienation from God, which it takes seriously.
Many who are profoundly affected by evils in our world
find it difficult to believe.
They ask why God allows such to happen.
Others wonder if God is good.

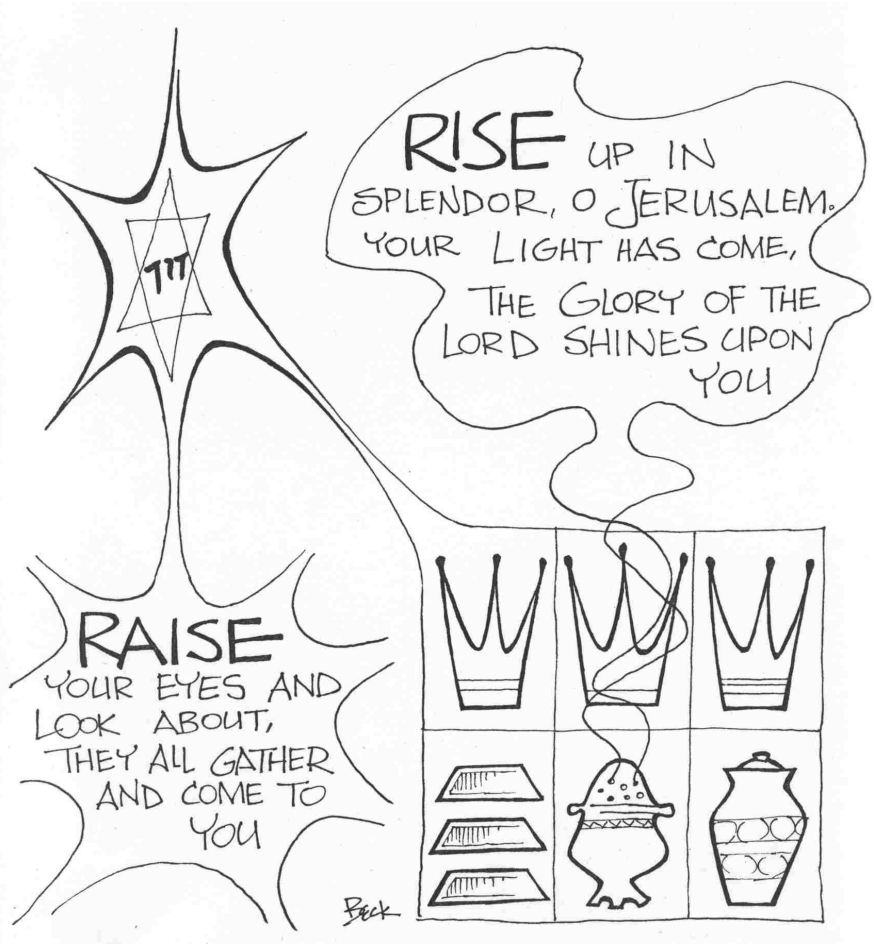
But the response to the presence of evil
in the world in the New Testament, is this master narrative.

Rather than explaining how God can be good,
it shows God reaching out to close the distance
between ourselves and the divine.
Taking for granted our own complicity in the evil that exists,
it doesn't assign blame, but opens a path toward reconciliation.
Instead of accusing, it invites us home.

And the way it is done is by God joining us first,
becoming part of our story in the Incarnation,
begun at Christmas, but not completed in Paul's view,
until Christ has emptied himself, unto death, even death on a cross.
It is the full experience of being human,
of the human condition.

This is the fuller meaning of Christmas.
It is in this way that today's liturgy celebrates
the feast of Mary, the Mother of God.

Not with a definition, but a narrative, a story.
It is a story of reconciliation,
and of love strong enough to give one life for another.



The Epiphany of the Lord

January 8, 2017

Isaiah 60:1-6	Jerusalem, your light has come!
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13	All kings shall pay homage.
Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6	The mystery revealed
Matthew 2:1-12	The coming of the Magi

We know all about the Epiphany.
We know about the Wise Men, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
We know the story about Herod and the killing of the Bethlehem children.
We are familiar with the thought of Christmas for the Gentiles.
The familiar is comfortable.

But Epiphany means revelation.
An epiphany comes as a surprise.
Where is the surprise?

Perhaps we can glimpse the surprise if we ask a question:
Where is God at work in the story we just heard?
Yes, of course, the child is divine, and that is where God is to be found.
But is that all?

What about the disruption it causes?
What do I mean by disruption?
Well, when we come upon them, the child is sleeping.
The entire world of Judea is sleeping.
But God has entered their world, and it will not be the same.

The Magi have been studying the skies.
They have discovered a sign in the skies.
God who manages the universe has given them a sign.
It brings them to Judea, the kingdom of Herod.
Everyone is asleep, but the coming of the Magi wakes them up.
All of them. Their world is disrupted.

The passage from Isaiah paints a verbal picture
of a city lit from above, amid a surrounding darkness.
But then there is a rustling in the distance,
and it can be faintly heard on all sides.
And then the caravans emerge out of the darkness,
as the peoples of the world are coming into the light.
The Magi are the early warning signal that this is about to happen.

Where is God at work in the story?
First of all in the disruption.

Then there is the response.
Herod is alarmed.
And because he is alarmed, the family has to flee.
The angel of the Lord appears to Joseph
and instructs him to pack up and leave for Egypt.
The angel comes from God,
for that is another place where God is active in the story.

We might compare the reaction of Herod with the instruction to Joseph.
We think of the king's reaction as extreme, over the top.
Why would he be so vengeful
as to kill all the male children of Bethlehem under a certain age?

What we fail to see is that this was the usual way
of reinforcing one's place in power.
It was standard practice to eliminate any and all threats to your regime.
It was the price you had to pay for ruling.

There were always threats by disaffected rivals.
Ruthlessness was an unfortunate by-product of royal leadership.
So goes a certain story of kingship.

Herod is the vassal king of Rome.
He made a deal with the Roman emperor
to rise to the place of kingship in Judea.
He was their man Friday, their proxy,
their friend on the Judean throne.

Herod's theory of power was the standard of the day.
It was the local face of Roman power politics.
But was it the God at work in the story of Christmas,
and Epiphany?
It doesn't seem so.

Matthew, the evangelist, doesn't seem to endorse what Herod is doing.
Who then is Herod's God?
Could it be the god of the Romans?
Jupiter, perhaps?

When we compare Herod to the story of Joseph and the holy family,
we see something quite different.
There is no killing here.
There is no force, either.
The family is on the run.

It is common today to see here a family of refugees.
But where is God at work then?
What is God doing for this family?

The angel of the Lord, sent by God, alerts them to flee.
God is taking care of them by warning them to depart, to save their skins.
Why can't God do for them the kind of thing
that Herod is doing against them?

Why can't God defend them with force and finality?
Why this fleeing, like frightened children?
Why not fight?
Why not raise up an army to defend the child, his mother,
and the story of salvation now entering the world?

And then there are the Magi.
They come following a signal from the God of the universe.
But they leave secretly, warned in a dream.
This is truly mysterious.
Is this the best God can do? Warn them about dangers,
send them away on a back road that isn't monitored?

Here God is active in the story, assisting the defenseless
in staying out of the way of the ruthless machinery of power?
Helping them get out of town, unnoticed and unmolested?

The God of the Gospel, of the holy family, of the Magi,
spends time making sure that the God of Herod doesn't harm them.

The God of the Gospel does not seem to be
a God of emperors and military generals, kings and coercion.
It seems rather to be a God of the marginal and defenseless.

So we wonder, where is the God of the Gospel at work today?
It is perhaps too easy to point to the political scene,
and cite the revival of strong man politics.
Seen, for instance, in the return of persons like Dick Cheney,

who proposed that it is better for America to be feared
than for America to be loved.

Perhaps it is more revealing, more of an epiphany, you might say,
to consider the workings of God in our church.

The gospel story signals a clear tension in the church today,
and it is a tension inhabited by Pope Francis.

The pope has a double identity.
He is a bishop, the bishop of Rome,
and he is the head of state, the monarch of the Vatican.

The history of the Vatican has been a negotiation of these two roles.
One of the things that has characterized Pope Francis's tenure
is the way he has made the role of bishop his priority.
This disturbs some who feel that it is neglecting
the duties of the head of state.

Along the way, the pope has opened a gap
between those who favor the pastoral role of bishop
and those who favor the authoritarian role of monarch.
That is what I think about when I think about the story of the Magi,
and Herod, and the holy family on the way to Egypt.

For as we all agree, in the story God is in the child.
God is with us as one of the vulnerable.
If the Gospel is to be believed.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 15, 2017

Isaiah 49:3:5-6	The Third Song of the Suffering Servant
Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-10	He put a new song into my mouth
1 Corinthians 1:1-3	Greetings to Corinth
John 1:29-34	Behold the Lamb of God

This week we enter a time of uncertainty.
Our new president likes to keep people guessing
and matters in suspension.
My impression is that this is an advantage in certain business circles.
But I think it may not work so well at the level of national governing.
It seems unwise to keep a nation on edge,
not to mention an international community.
And so we enter this time of uncertainty.

And we come to the liturgy of the Word.
When we turn to the scriptures to gain insight into the issues of the day,
we are not consulting a horoscope, or a fortune teller.
We are not seeking a magical sign to answer our questions.
Rather, we are drawing upon the history of the people of God,
who have faced any number of dilemmas and disasters,
and have prevailed, their faith intact.
They have weathered crisis after crisis,
but have learned and grown in the process.

So, when we turn to the repository of wisdom
found in the history of God's people, as represented in today's scriptures,
what advice do we find?

Granted there are many lessons to be learned in these scriptures passages.
But here, in my view, is a word from each of the readings for today:

The *first reading* for today is from the prophet of the exile, Second Isaiah.
It is the second of his three Servant Songs.
The prophet has been trying to support a dejected and disillusioned people.
Their world has collapsed on them.
The prophet is helping them find purpose in their predicament.

In the second song, he speaks to the Servant,
which is most probably a figure representing those Israelites
who remained faithful under the duress.

In this instance he tells them that they have a mission,
not only to the others among the Israelites,
but also to the world at large.

They are to be a witness to ways of God,
a witness to a world that sorely needs such a witness.
Captive to a power that worships power,
sojourners in a strange land, they are to witness
to an alternative to the values that prevail in that alien culture.

The values they encounter there are a worship of display,
of leverage over others,
of celebrating the embarrassment of their enemies.
It is not to be the same with Israel.
They are to be a light to the nations, a witness of their God,
who is a God of compassion and support for the oppressed.

The first reading from Second Isaiah, then,
tells us to be a witness to that God, in our personal lives
and in the work we do in the world.

The *second reading* is simply the greeting
at the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.
He is easing into what he has to tell them.

We will be hearing from Paul's letter in the weeks to come.
We will find that he is concerned about the factions
that have developed in the Corinthian community.
He will look at many ways in which that community
is in danger of coming apart.

Among them are problems with the liturgical assemblies,
problems with the spiritual gifts,
especially the gift of tongues, and more.

But at the root of their problems is a rift in the community
between two factions, what he calls the strong and the weak.
The strong are those who are in the right and know it.
The weak are those whose consciences are ill-formed,
so they are wrong, but do not know it.
They are scrupulous and ill-prepared
to face the future of the freedom of the children of God, as Paul sees it.

But his words are not so much for them as for the strong.
His concern is that they are not considerate enough of the weak.
Confident in their own correctness, they are dismissing the weak,
and even scandalizing them,
causing them to act against their consciences,
ill-formed as they are.

While the weak need to form their consciences correctly,
the strong, who know better, should not insist on their rights first,
but rather consider first the needs of the community
and its need to survive and grow.
Paul will give himself as an example. He is all things to all persons,
depending where they are in the journey.

The second reading from First Corinthians tells us
that we cannot afford to abandon the common effort
in favor of our own correctness.
Witness to the values of the Kingdom
needs to be a common and concerted effort.

The *third reading*, from the gospel of John,
shows the Baptist pointing our Jesus as the Lamb of God.
This is the second of four days with which this gospel begins.

In the first, John appeared on the scene,
and immediately vigilant authorities from Jerusalem appeared also,
asking what he was doing.
He was under surveillance, and they let him know that.

Today, he points to Jesus of Nazareth, the lamb of God.
On the next day, John will send two followers of his to Jesus.
On the fourth day, we see the new movement under Jesus
begin to take shape.
We get a picture of a movement that is coming into being
among the same circles in which John the Baptist also moved.

Sociologists have called this movement of Jesus
as depicted in John's gospel similar to what they term an "antisociety."
This has been described as a counter-cultural group,
whose members "remain in the society
but are opposed to and in conflict with it
(in John's terms, they are in the world but not of it)."

Bruce Malina, one of the more prominent of such scholars,
makes the provocative comparison to a city gang,
which is also a parallel social structure,
apart from the official established authority.

One is also reminded of recent talk
among some conservative religious people
about the "Benedict Option."

This would take its cue from St Benedict,
seeing him as providing an island of Christian culture
in a sea of collapsing values during the fall of the Roman Empire.
The parallel to today is that we are in a post-Christian world.

It seems there are other options than the Benedict Option.
But the reading from John tells us
that we need to live a community life that is counter-cultural,
preserving a set of values that are not widely honored.

So there are the lessons that I see today.

John describing Jesus and his movement as counter-cultural.
Paul writing to the Corinthians
about avoiding ruptures in the community.
Second Isaiah in the exile promoting an attitude of witness
to an alien culture.

In other words, it advises us to continue our allegiances.
But to clarify them and double down in our commitment to them.
The firmest response to the turmoils in our times
is to be explicitly Christian in the gospel sense.
Advocates for the endangered, the poor, and the homeless.

We need to flaunt our values,
the values of the Servant.
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Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 22, 2017

Isaiah 8:23—9:3	The loss of Zebulun and Naphtali
Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14	The Lord is my light
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17	Rivalries in the Corinthian church
Matthew 4:12-23 (12-17)	Jesus begins his life mission

Well, it's a new day in America.
We have a new administration in the White House.
I wish I could agree with the hopeful Tri-State residents
who were interviewed yesterday in the Telegraph Herald.
I am not so hopeful.

I tend to agree with those sincere and thoughtful observers
who see American democratic institutions and traditions under threat.
I realize that many who are not so disturbed as I
consider this to be over-reacting and alarmist, and I wish they were right.
But I think not. I think they have not been paying attention.
I do not think this is a normal transition of administration.

But having said that, where do we go from here?
I think there is hope in the new commitment that is being evoked
in people who for so long have taken things for granted.
We are being invited to return to our roots,
our basic convictions, even our religious convictions,
and reminding ourselves why we believe what we do,
and how strongly we believe it.

We are invited to clarify our ethical beliefs
and decide what we are willing to stand up for.
It is this reassessment that is the real meaning of repentance.
It is what Jesus was talking about when he said,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

It means coming to grips with who I am and what I stand for.
It is a clear cold look in the spirituality mirror.

It is with that glimmer of hope that I come to the scriptures for today.
I have been struck by how the events of the day open up vistas of meaning
in the biblical passages that were not so compelling in the past.

Perhaps when we read or hear passages from Scripture
we think of them as fine moral examples.
Or maybe nicely poetic ways of stating a position.
But what has struck me this past few weeks
is the historical significance of the readings.

You might say that looking at the conditions in which the passages were written
adds a third dimension to the message.
Instead of a flat picture, it has depth.

In the last few weeks, we have been reading from the works of Second Isaiah,
the prophet of the exile.
The words of encouragement and hope
take on new meaning when we realize that they were written
in a time of desperation, a time when all seemed lost.
We see a prophet who is fashioning a sense of purpose
out of broken pieces of a lost future.
That also gives us courage, especially for a time of deep uncertainty.

This week the readings are again constructed around a time of crisis,
but it is not the Babylonian exile.
As you know, there were two major crises in the history of Israel
—the loss of the the northern kingdom of Israel,
and then a century and a half later,
the loss of the southern kingdom of Judah, which issued into the Exile.
This week the first of these is the lesson from the past.

The destruction of northern Israel,
which later would become Samaria, and today, the West Bank,
did not happen all at once.
There was an early warning, some 15 years previous.
The rising empire of Assyria invaded, putting Israel on alert,
and in the process, stripped it of its northern tribal territories.
These were the tribes of Zebulon and Naphthali.
This was the beginning of the loss, the first erosion of innocence.

The prophets on the scene were Amos and Hosea. Micah and Isaiah.
This was the original Isaiah,
and not the later anonymous figure we call Second-Isaiah.

And this original Isaiah gave us the passage for our first reading for today.
We associate it with Advent, but Isaiah knew nothing about Advent.

He did know that they lost the territory to the north,
and then he also knew that the entire northern nation of Israel was lost.
And he looked to the future.
He imagined a king to come that would restore the lost kingdom.

He likely was placing a burden of hope
on the young king about to be crowned, named Hezekiah.
But when that didn't turn out, and when the kingdom itself was gone,
that hope was shifted to the coming Messiah King.

Then the restoration would occur,
and the kingdom would be once again integral and intact.

Why bother with talking about all this?
Because this is what was in Matthew's mind
when he wrote today's gospel passage.
This history, and not simply the passage from Isaiah, is what he had in mind.

In the gospel, as appropriate for this time of the year,
we are at the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry.
This is how Matthew begins it.

I suppose the usual thing to do is go
with the call of the first disciples, by the lake.
That is known, and that is safe.
We all know the homily that comes out of that,
and we can even work it out in our heads.

However, what is pertinent to Matthew
is the strange part about Zebulon and Naphthali, the part about Galilee.
And with that we come closer to what Matthew is doing
with his story of Jesus.

Matthew is serious about seeing Jesus as the son of David.
That is, he is the true Messiah, the King to come.
Later, he will redefine what that means.
But for now he is drawing a picture of the restoration,
the rebuilding of the kingdom.

He cites the promise of Isaiah,
because the lost northern tribal territories, now known as Galilee,
is where Jesus is beginning.

His mission will eventually take him to Jerusalem,
but he begins in this remote and unimpressive backwater.

And Matthew gives the reason:
the restoration begins where the first defeat began.
The first to be lost will be the first to be regained.

Matthew reaches back to the beginning of the failure
when he announces the new beginning which is the good news.
We see then what he means by repent—it goes all the way back
to where things first went wrong, and works from there.

It goes deep and is therefore most authentic.

With that said, I might return to what I began with today
—the glimmer of hope, the clear cold look in the mirror.

Today we begin the story of Jesus,
which will be our story for the coming year,
with a far look into the past and a deep look into the present.
We are invited to reconsider our resolve,
to test the quality of our faith and the commitments it asks of us.
We begin a new year in a spirit of hope,
a hope that has learned to take nothing for granted.

But that hope is grounded, for us, in the promises
—the promise of making a future out of the lost present,
the promise of a God who remains present—

and that is what we are invited to remember today.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2017

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13	The remnant shall remain
Psalm 146. 6-10	The Lord keeps faith
1 Corinthians 1:26-31	God chose the lowly
Matthew 5:1-12	The Beatitudes

The following is a poem I composed
for the funeral memorial of Ken, my youngest brother.
It is an interpretation of Matthew's gospel, the reading for today.

"A Benediction Based On The Beatitudes Of Matthew

In Matthew's Gospel the first words Jesus speaks
are those we call the Beatitudes.
Like a manifesto of compassion,
this list of blessings sets the mark for his entire work—
his ministry and his death, and his resurrection.
It is an immediate word of assurance to the ordinary citizens around him,
who are leading their lives without being rich, or celebrities,
or influence-brokers in the halls of power.

—Blessed are the poor in spirit,
who in their own ways have quietly kept faithful,
who with the resources given them, work among friends and neighbors
to help build a more livable world,
who live for truth rather than for advantage.
    The kingdom of heaven is theirs,
    not the princes and hangers-on in the courts of the capital cities.

—Blessed are they who mourn,
for they know the price of loving.
They have cared for others beside themselves,
nurturing the needful and not simply their resumé.
    They have known loss, and they shall be comforted.

—Blessed are the meek,
the gentle among us,
those who lack leverage, but are rich in life's promise, rich in vision,
who cannot coerce events in their direction,
who live their lives in hope.
    They are the ones who will inherit the land,
    apart from those who make it their project.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice,
who view the injustices around them and reject them,
who do not find it sufficient to direct their complaints to the TV screen,
but must makes moves to bring about change,
who recognize, often enough, their own complicity,
but who nonetheless believe in equal treatment and a just God,
and look for a day when justice will prevail.
They will find satisfaction.

Blessed are the merciful,
the kindly who act with compassion,
who do not insist on attending only to the deserving,
or only to the innocent,
but rather, anyone who happens to be hurting,
understanding that the only credential for deserving compassion is need,
and so it is that their own needs will be known.
They will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart,
who maintain a vision of what we are about, what we are made for,
who long for the day that vision will be fulfilled,
who keep that vision like a burning lamp,
despite the angers and cruelties of the world.
For they will see God,
and are seeing God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
who bring the jagged ends together to rebind the knot,
who learn the lessons of remorse and division,
and commit themselves to repairing the damage they see strewn around them. The peacemakers who do the work of God
against the promoters of division and conflict.
They, doing God's work,
will be called God's children."

(*And then, expanding upon this, just for Ken*:)

"Blessed are the wise and wise-cracking,
who gifted with a razor wit refuse to use it against people.
Not cut others down to size
but rather to cut away the nets and veils of insincerity, innuendo,
that some use to wound;
who instead combine humor with consideration,
for theirs is the chuckle of sudden insight,
which is what they live for.

Blessed are the large and large–hearted,
who stand firm as a rock in the center of their own convictions,
but still stand open to the wisdom of others
who are standing in quite different places;
those who welcome the give and take,
the exchange of the individual minor truths that construct our worlds.
For theirs is the deep integrity of the one truth.

Blessed are the gentle and gentlemanly,
who see insightfully into the pain and frustrations
that prompt some to act rudely and with cruelty,
and yet who apologize for their own rudeness when they are in pain;
those who make a cause and campaign for courtesy,
who prize civility in their dealings with friends
and those not so friendly.
Theirs is kingdom and the glory and the standing ovation."

The words can easily go on beyond these, and so does the work.
But the common message is simply that God loves.
God loves, and we can count on that love,
and we are expected to count on it.

God loves more and farther than we can.
We cannot comprehend our own love at times.
But the love of God reaches beyond ours.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 12, 2017

Sirach 15:15-20	Keeping the commandments will save you
Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34	Blessed those who follow the Lord's law
1 Corinthians 2:6-10	Not a wisdom of this age
Matthew 5:20-22, 27-28, 33-34, 37	Rereading the law of the Lord

We have come to that part of the Sermon on the Mount
that many of think of when we use those words, "Sermon on the Mount."
And when people speak of the radical statement made by this sermon,
it is often these passages that they have in mind.

In the spirit of Moses giving the law,
Jesus is shown reinterpreting it.
Rather than revising it, or changing its direction, or even annulling it,
he is doing something more basic.

If we realize that law is designed to regulate actions,
we see that Jesus is doing something else entirely.
He is going behind the actions to the motivations
that make laws necessary.

There is a difference between,
say, stealing packages from people's porches before they get home,
and just thinking about doing it.
On TV yesterday it showed someone
caught by security cameras doing just that.

No one caught someone thinking about it.
There is a difference between getting angry
at someone tailgating you on Dodge St,
and actually getting into an altercation with that person.

There are no laws against thoughts of doing harm,
since only actions can be legislated, not thoughts.
But, Jesus is suggesting here,
if we would be rid of our anti-social impulses,
we would not need laws to hold us in.

The three that are picked today
have to do with violence, adultery, and lying.

Each of these is detrimental to the health of society.
Each gnaws away at the fabric of mutual regard and trust
that makes society work.

But Jesus takes it back to the impulse behind the law.

There are laws against killing.
Leading off the series, it alerts us to the issues at stake in the law.
Doing harm to one another is the most basic of antisocial actions.
It clearly strikes at the heart of the mutual trust
that any kind of social existence requires.

But Jesus points out that the root of mutual harm
is in the attitudes and impulses that drive mutual harm and violence.
By identifying anger as the cause,
he is inviting us to look at the causes of our actions,
and work to correct them at that level.

In addressing the matter of adultery Jesus
is also engaging the imbalance between men and women
in the society where men can easily get divorces
and women have no such option.
This leads to abuse of marriage on the part of the men,
and undermines the institution of marriage itself.

But Matthew shows Jesus dealing with that aspect later in the gospel.
For now he is looking at the causes of adultery, in the roving eye of lust.
If men could get that under control, Jesus suggests,
this would go a great way toward eliminating the need for divorce laws.
Once again, it is the impulse behind the actions that require the laws
that becomes the focus of Jesus' attention.

The third instance
—and one gets the impression that these are just instances
that could be expanded to other categories
—the third instance is the matter of lying.
Of course, it puts it under the category of false oaths.
Taking God's name in vain.

But Jesus is suggesting that the reason we use such language
is to swear that this time we are telling the truth.

That is the reason for swearing on a bible in court.
It is saying that for once we are not lying.
So if we developed a closer relation to truth-telling,
we would not need a way to distinguish lies from truth.
And of course, sometimes we invoke the oaths
in order to make our lies more convincing.

Lies also undermine the social fabric,
insofar as mutual trust is essential to living together.
Of course, TV spots and and Internet memes
are constantly warning us about scams and schemes
to trick us into revealing our online identities and our bank accounts.

However, these are exceptions to a necessary foundation of mutual trust,
without which our life together would quickly disintegrate.
We trust one another at nearly every move we make,
from mutual respect in our daily interactions
to traffic signals in our daily commute,
from ordinary conversations to life and death instructions.

Telling lies strikes at the heart of this trust.
We rely on one another, or we fail.

So Jesus is reminding us of the need to attend not only to the law,
but to the impulse underlying it, making the law necessary.
And this is not simply a matter of personal virtue,
it is a matter of social necessity.
It not only affects my personal character,
it affects the possibility of living a life in respect to one another.

As a matter of personal virtue,
the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount seems impossible to achieve.
How can we avoid anger,
even if we are not inclined to murder someone?
How can we control a roving eye?
How can we manage to tell nothing but the unvarnished truth,
always and ever?

Isn't anger involved in the outrage against blatant injustices?
Isn't another side of lust simply the dark side
of the human response to beauty?
And how can we avoid hurting people
without telling some harmless white lies at times?

Considerations like these have caused some observers
to regard the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as ideals,
unattainable personally, but something to strive toward.
We need the ideal there, even if we never reach it.
That is possible, for the personal ideal of a virtuous life
always finds us coming up short.

But as we have seen, there is more than personal virtue involved here.
There is the social reality of living our lives together
in a respectful and mutual manner.

This seems to be behind the revisions Jesus is making
in the recommendations he offers in the Sermon.
Each of his examples strikes at the heart of antisocial activity.
Not only is it a matter of my personal behavior,
it is a matter of community and society,
and this offers a guide to the meaning of his criticism.

It is, in fact, the reason we find ourselves critical
of some of the signals emanating from our nation's capital in these days.
The three themes today, of violence, adultery, and lying,
seem of little concern in official circles.

But this is not simply a concern
about personal virtue lacking in any apparent form.
It is something deeper, identified in the Sermon on the Mount.
It is about the foundations of social reality,
the success of our life together.
It is about an attack on the possibilities of living in trust of one another.

When we object on Christian grounds to what we are seeing, it is this,
and not simply the lack of personal virtue.
It is the lack of the civic virtue that underlies society that alarms us.

Jesus may be setting the bar high in the Sermon on the Mount,
but we should not want it any other way.
If he did anything else, he would be selling us short,
and expecting too little of us.

He does not make that mistake.

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 19, 2017

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18	Love your neighbor as yourself
Psalm 103 1-4, 8, 12-13	As a father has compassion
1 Corinthians 3:16-23	You are the temple of God
Matthew 5:38-48	Turn the other cheek

"When someone strikes you on your right cheek,
turn the other one as well. …
"I say to you, love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you,

We have come to that part of the Sermon on the Mount
that concerns the matter of dealing with conflict.
It is likely that no verses are more often quoted in this regard than these.
The Law of Talion, originally designed to limit the extent of retaliating impulses,
is now overturned by Jesus.

In refusing to allow retaliation for wrongs done,
he ushers is a new era of resolving violent disputes.
In calling us to love our enemies, and to pray for them,
he asks us to consider even our enemies as fellow members of the human family.
And this despite what may be our honest differences with them.

Nonviolence is a principle and value that is embraced by his community.
As you or anyone who has been engaged in this conversion knows,
the debate on Christian principles of violence versus nonviolence
is traditionally waged on the level of competing scripture verses.

But that is not the only way to address the matter.
My own approach, as many of you know,
is to look to the gospels in terms of their overarching statements
—the arc of conflict and conflict resolution
as reflected in their narrative plots.

Since you have been hearing me talking about this,
and since today that theme is front and center,
I thought I would share with you my conclusions
about this theme as witnessed by the four gospels.
The following statements are from the conclusion of the book.

—In the end, Jesus of Nazareth is recognized as a nonviolent person involved in a violent story. How are we to understand that? The Gospels offer four scenarios, related by distinctly different. In the dynamic of the narrative plot, each depicts a Jesus entering into conflict and resolving that conflict nonviolently. Each finds a way to resolve conflict in a manner that offers instruction to the treader.

It is not uncommon to hear instances of instrumental violence justified by appeals to the Gospels. Perhaps it is a verse from Luke, arguing Jesus's approval of the disciples' possession of two swords. Perhaps it is the image drawn from John's account of the Temple cleansing, involving a whip of cords. Many are eager to find verses that justify their own violence. The Gospel plots show that the underlying meaning of Jesus's life is otherwise however. It is a witness to nonviolence.

Or, on the other hand, we might hear some say that "the Gospel teaches an ideal love that stands apart from the real world," that "we need not take literally its lesson of non-retaliation," the "Gospel teaching is just for inspiration, just an analogy for acting in the real word, where things are not so forgiving. "Despite such thinking, despite the appeal to isolated sayings of Jesus, the Gospels in their narrative plots portray Jesus's nonviolence was active and engaged in struggles of the day. His nonviolence is not abstract. The testimony of the four Gospels in terms of their narrative plots is clear:

Entry into conflict
and its resolution through nonviolence
is the praxis of Jesus and the will of God.

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 26, 2017

Isaiah 49:14-15	Can a mother forget her infant?
Psalm 62:2-9	Only in God is my soul at rest
1 Corinthians 4:1-5	Servants of Christ and stewards
Matthew 6:24-34	Do not worry about your life

In a time in which we are called to be afraid,
Trust in God is an act of resistance.
Trust in God, which is the biblical definition of Faith,
is always counter-cultural.
But even more so is it in times in which we are told to be afraid.

When we hear the words of the Sermon on the Mount today
—the last time we will hear from the Sermon for quite awhile—
we recognize that its advice will be seen as unrealistic by many.

That would include not only those who are skeptical of Christianity,
but even some Christian theologians themselves,
such as Reinhold Niebuhr, who called the words of the Sermon
a necessary ideal, but an ideal.
It may be needed as a guiding star, but it is not realistic.

All the readings for today take trust as their theme.
The passage from Isaiah explains why we should trust in God.
In one of the few places in the Bible that compare God to a mother,
we are told that we have nothing to fear.
In the reading from I Corinthians,
Paul notes that ministers need to be trustworthy.
They need to reflect the trustworthiness of God.

The Sermon says that we are to trust in God
even for what we commonly called necessities of life
—food, clothing, and shelter.

Do not worry, it repeats.
If God cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field,
who are you to be anxious,
since you are worth so much more?

The admonition not to worry does not say
that we cannot work for our needs,
but that we are not to lose hope when it is difficult,
or the route to our goal is not so apparent.

The theme of "Don't Worry"
might be restated as "Don't Be Afraid."

In the Gospels, the opposite of Faith is not Doubt, but Fear.
In the Gospels, the meaning of Faith
is not so much the intellectual adherence to a list of faith truths in a creed
as much as it is the existential act of placing your life in the hands of God.

But this implies belief in a God who can be trusted with your life.
The words of Isaiah, the words of the Sermon on the Mount,
invite us to consider that this is not only possible, it is life-giving.

Faith as Trust is not Naïveté, but Courage.
Faith as Trust is not finding comfort in a divine mercy
that depends on not realizing what is going on in the world.
It does not consist of finding comfort in a cocoon.

Rather, it is a dependence on a merciful God
in full awareness of the dangers and diminishments
that make their way in the world.
In a way, it is only when the risks of life make themselves known
that faith as trust comes into its own.
It is only when faith seems risky that it is needed.
Which is why we can say that Faith as Trust is not Naïveté, but Courage.

In other words, the theme of "Don't Worry"
might be restated as "Don't Be Afraid."

We are unafraid not because we do not recognize the danger,
as a child who wanders out on a highway might not realize the perils involved.
Or as a high schooler might not understand the consequences
of his or her risky behavior when partying late at night on a weekend.
It is not for lack of awareness that we are not afraid.
It is because we have placed our lives in the plans of God.

And truly we are invited to be fearful today.
We are called to be afraid of refugees, even if they are escaping for their lives,
for who knows?, maybe some of them are disguised killers.

We are invited to be fearful of Muslims,
because despite all evidence they are seen as pledged to eradicate Christians.

We are repeatedly hearing cries of Wolf, or the Sky is Falling,
as if to put us on edge,
and thereby make autocratic measures excusable.

But against Steve Bannon, the advisor to the President
who is devoted to returning us to the cultural crusades
that match his apocalyptic visions,
we have Pope Francis who is reaching out to his Muslim friends.

Against the warnings about the dangers of immigrants,
we have Pope Francis welcoming the refugees flooding into Europe,
trying to illustrate something about the Gospels.

Against the call to hide, we have the call to mercy.

We are urged, prodded, pushed to be afraid.
We are told that we should cower in fear,
and there is only one person, the President, who can save us.

But against that we have the Sermon on the Mount,
and the gentle urging not to be afraid, not to worry.
In living without worrying, in refusing to be afraid,
we are no longer susceptible to the fear-mongering barrage of alarms.

And while we find courage, it is not in our own all too recognizable frailty,
but in the confidence we have in a God who loves us,
even more than the birds of the air and the flowers of the field,
which are pretty remarkable when you stop to notice.

First Sunday of Lent

March 5, 2017

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7	The most cunning serpent
Psalm 51:3-6, 12-13, 17	Wash me of my guilt
Romans 5:12-19	Sin entered the world
Matthew 4:1-11	Tempted by the devil

Lent begins with making choices.
And today Jesus rejects three that are offered him.
We are familiar with the story of Jesus in the desert, tempted by Satan,
and maybe we can hear it afresh if we place it in the setting of Jesus' times.

These were troubled times in the villages of Galilee and Judea.
Families had lost their ancestral holdings to large landowners,
now being forced to work as hired hands on the lands they used to own.
Or else they lost them entirely.
There is a general malaise, expressed in illnesses that cripple the population.
People have lost their livelihood and their places.

I am put in mind of something perhaps similar.
And that is the mortality rate of white middle-class men in America.
While the rate for other groups is declining, that of white males is rising,
due to various causes—drugs, suicide, and a general lack of self-care.
Here too it appears we have a sense of lost livelihood, purpose,
and place in society.

In Galilee and Judea it resulted in certain desperate reactions.
An influential book examining this situation is called
"Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus"
(Richard Horsley and John Hanson).
Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs.

For me, it is helpful to think about these three
in terms of the traditional three-fold division of social reality.
Some scholars speak of economics, politics, and ideology.
That is, Wealth, Power, and Knowledge.
The last includes the spiritual dimension as well.

In those days, some of the dislodged villagers formed gangs of social bandits.
This was the *economic* reaction.
Like Robin Hood, they tried to rob the rich to help the poor.
And maybe get some of their own back.

Even Herod the Great could not clean out
the bandit caves in the cliffs of Arbel, in Galilee,
though he pretended to have done so.

Others pursued a *political* program.
Popular messiahs, armed resistance movements,
rose up with an intent to overthrow the leadership in Jerusalem,
who cooperated with the Roman invaders.
Royal pretenders rose up to challenge the authorities
throughout the years before and after the time of Jesus.
They were put down brutally by an efficient Roman military force.

And then there were those that are sometimes today known as "signs *prophets*."
These were non-violent protesters acting on religious grounds.
They typically would take a group of followers out to the desert,
and await a miraculous sign of deliverance from God.

They were re-enacting a return to the origins of Israel, a new beginning.
But here too, before a sign from God could appear,
the Roman army, brooking no resistance,
would follow them out, and exterminate them.
Theudas, mentioned in Acts of the Apostles by Gamaliel (Acts 5:35),
was beheaded, like John the Baptist.

Three signs of desperation in the times of Jesus—
the economic revolt of the social bandits,
the political uprising of the popular messiahs,
and the religious rebellion of the signs prophets.

It is worth noting that the Gospels make explicit comparisons
of each of these with Jesus.
He dies between two thieves
—the same word that is used of the social bandits.
And Barabbas, who is released at Jesus' trial, is called an insurrectionist,
like the popular Messiahs.
The fact the one can be exchanged for the other—Jesus for Barabbas—
suggests that they are in some way comparable.

And the story of Jesus begins with John the Baptist,
a famous example of a desert prophet.
And so it is we find him today, after his baptism,
in the desert, tested by Satan.
The tests offer Jesus options

for how he will conduct his program that is about to begin.
They are messianic temptations, if you will.

And it is no surprise that the three tests follow along the same lines
as those in the days of revolt in Galilee and Judea.
But all three are refused by Jesus.

The economic option to turn the stones into bread
addresses the plight of poverty in the land.
It speaks to the same problem that drove the social bandits to acts of violence.
Jesus acknowledges that bread is necessary, but it is not enough.
Not be bread alone do we live.
There is also need of a spiritual renewal, a restoration of God's dream.

The spiritual option to perform a spectacular stunt at the central religious shrine,
the temple, recalls the signs prophets.
The historian Josephus mentions an unnamed prophet
who led his followers to the walls of Jerusalem,
expecting them to fall, like the walls of Jericho.
But Jesus refuses the second test as well.
He will not tempt God.
He will not require God to act, without taking action himself.

The third option has to do with taking action, political action.
At this point, the Roman empire is on display.
When the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world,
and promises control over them,
he is describing what the Roman Empire has actually done.
He is offering a vision of universal kingship for the Messiah,
in the manner of the Roman occupation,
one enforced by strict surveillance and harsh reprisals.

But Jesus refuses this as well.
After all, as the devil himself points out, the only price for this is to worship Satan.
This is not part of Jesus' sense of his mission.
The tests of the Messiah, we can be sure, are presented in the Gospel
because they are also a test of the Messiah's followers.
They are rejected as options for the messianic program,
as instructions for the community of followers
who are to carry out that program.
Rejected by the Christ, they are to be avoided by Christians,
who are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

So what does Jesus do?
First of all, unlike the desert prophets,
he leaves the desert and returns to the villages.

There he attends to the needs of the villagers, like the social bandits.
But unlike them, he addresses both social and spiritual needs.
He heals the desperate from their physical and spiritual depression.
He brings the marginal, lepers and others, back into the mix of life, enriching it.
He preaches good news to the poor, enabling mutual care,
as symbolized by the desert sign of the multiplied loaves.

Unlike measures taken by others,
he rehabilitates the life of the villages without force or coercive measures.
That will come, when he later turns
from dealing with the symptoms of a disordered society
to confronting the causes, taking him to Jerusalem.
There he will die as a political threat,
a Messiah that will not be allowed to disrupt what they have going for them.

We will go there as well, at the end of Lent.
But for now, he offers us a program.
Our Lenten renewal returns us to the
values of the kingdom of the Messiah.

Shortly, he will articulate those values
in the Sermon on the Mount.
But we have recently heard them in the
Sundays leading up to Lent.
We are invited to adopt them for
ourselves.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 12, 2017

Genesis 12:1-4	The Covenant with Abraham
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22	He loves justice and right
2 Timothy 1:8-10	He recalled us to a holy life
Matthew 17:1-9	Jesus transfigured on the Mountain

Here in the second Sunday of Lent
we climb the mountain with Jesus,
along with Peter and James and John.
    While we are there we are included in seeing a vision,
    and hearing a voice.

The vision of shining light looks ahead beyond the difficulties ahead
to the triumph of resurrection glory that will prevail.
    And the voice returns us to the baptism of Jesus,
    and allows us to renew the commitments that sent us along this way.

Here in the second Sunday of Lent
we are invited to consider the mountain of Transfiguration
as a metaphor for Lent itself,
    as we pull away from the tensions and anxieties
    that drive our lives in the daily round,
        and take some time to recall our commitments
        and what they were made.
We pause to take a long look at the way ahead,
and remind ourselves what we are moving toward in a spirit of hope.

    Drawing away from the changing scene,
    we consider the vision and the commitment.

What is the vision?
To what is the commitment?

For some, the vision is a deposit of truth that must be guarded.
The faithful must guard the light from the darkness,
like the Olympic torch that must by carried into the new day intact.
    This is a vision of preservation.
    It imagines a world that is hostile to the truth, and must be opposed.

For these, the mountain speaks of the true home, away from the world.
The world represents danger and hostility to the truth.
For others it is a mission to the raw corners of the world,
bringing solace to the injured, the dismissed.
    This is a vision of rescue.
    It is a commitment despite risk.

It imagines a world that is damaged and in need of deliverance.
It is a world loved by God,
and in need of emissaries of God's love for its deliverance.
The world represents injury and cynical loss of hope,
which is actually a cry for help.

In Jesus' day these options were alive among the Jewish believers.
There were those who looked on the world in which they lived
and felt they had to remove themselves from the struggles of the day.

Notably among these were the Essenes of the Qumran community,
whose Dead Sea scrolls were the books of their library
which they hid in caves, as the Roman army drew near.
They did not survive the coming of the Roman army.

In their own way, the Pharisees did something similar,
drawing away from any influence or engagement
that would render them unclean.
They would preserve the purity of their community
by withdrawing from contact with the contaminating world.
Although in practice they compromised.

There were others who made it their purpose,
following their leader, Jesus of Nazareth,
to reach out to the needs of those around them,
despite the risks that may entail,
and the misunderstandings it might mistakenly cause.
In touching the leper, conversing with the widow, lifting the dead,
Jesus engaged the unsafe world, and it was transformed.

As it was in Jesus' day, so it is today.
Perhaps you have heard of the Benedict Option.
It is the title of a book by the blogger, Rod Dreher.
The book is described in a blurb:

"In a radical new vision for the future of Christianity,
NYT bestselling author and conservative columnist Rod Dreher
calls on American Christians to prepare for the coming Dark Age
by embracing an ancient Christian way of life."

Here is how it is advertised:
"The light of the Christian faith is flickering out all over the West,
and only the willfully blind refuse to see it.
The West, cut off from its Christian roots, is falling into a new Dark Age.

"In <u>The Benedict Option</u>, Dreher calls on traditional Christians
to learn from the example of St. Benedict of Nursia,

a sixth-century monk who turned from the chaos and decadence
of the collapsing Roman Empire,
and found a new way to live out the faith in community.
For five difficult centuries, Benedict's monks
kept the faith alive through the Dark Ages,
and prepared the way for the rebirth of civilization.

However dark the shadow falling over the West,
the light of Christianity need not flicker out.
It will not be easy, but Christians who are brave enough
to face the religious decline, reject trendy solutions,
and return to ancient traditions
will find the strength not only to survive,
but to thrive joyfully in the post-Christian West."

This certainly has echoes of the Essenes,
with its intent to preserve the traditions by withdrawing from society,
and the when in crisis, hiding them among the cliffs of the Dead Sea.

One wonders how withdrawing from the world
will help change the world.
If the christian influence is withdrawn, how will the world be saved?
Or is it not to be saved, in this vision,
but allowed to play itself out in confusion, violence, and suicidal despair?

Where in this vision do we find the meaning of the words,
"God so loved the world that he sent his only Son"?

So against the Benedict Option we can position the Francis Option.
What we see in the mission of Pope Francis,
enacted against great opposition,
is a resurrection of the gospel vision,
reaching out to the endangered, the hopeless,
the damaged and hurting at the edges of the social carousel.

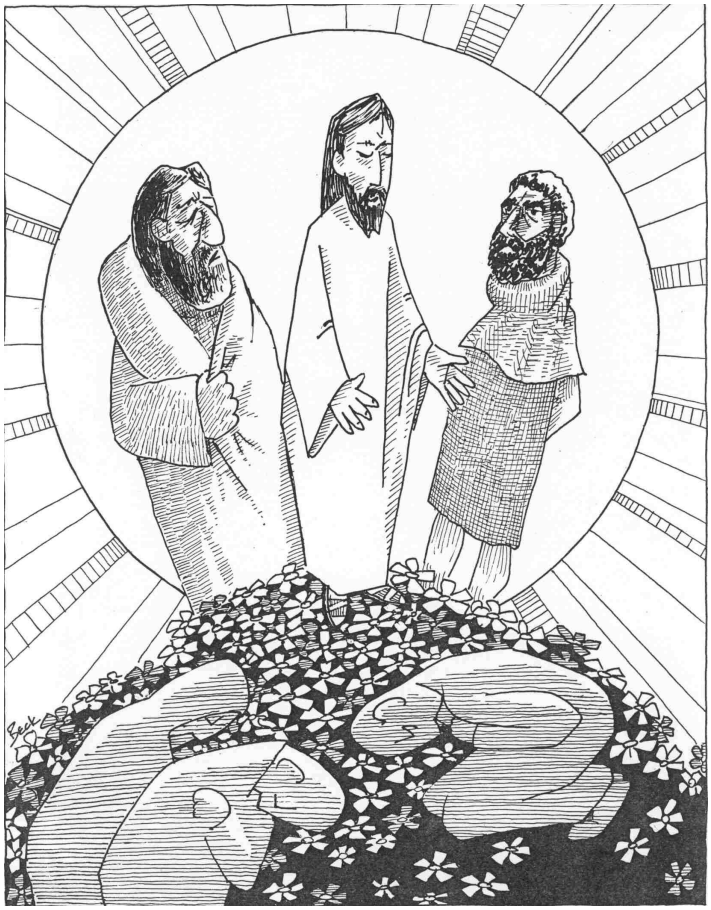
It is not hard to find examples,
and I am sure that you have your own.

It may be his advocacy for the refugees
fleeing for their lives from danger zones.
It may be his plea for the planet,
as the common gift and trust of us all.

It may be his attempt to bring back into the faith community
those who have been excluded, such as the divorced and remarried.
Or, most recently, his tentative proposal
that married men be ordained as priests.

In each of these, there are some who feel that the deposit of faith
being traded away for concessions to a secular society.
But in each case, it would seem that we have instead
a vision of reaching out to the victims of a disturbed world,
in a spirit of solace and liberation.

Today, in the second Sunday of Lent,
we are with Jesus on the mountain.
Peter wants to build a shrine.
He plans on staying there.
But no, they have to come down from the mountain.
There is much more to be done, more of the story to pursue,
more of the darkness to engage in liberation,
before the time of glory is to come.



Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2017

Exodus 173-7	Water in the Desert
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9	Harden not your hearts
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8	While we were still sinners…
John 4:5-42	The Woman at the Well

It is increasingly hard to ignore the news.
This week even moral theologians were making statements
as public as they could make them.
    The budget is immoral they were telling us.
    The arts and sciences would be defunded.
School lunch programs and heating assistance would go.
And Meals On Wheels is now more famous and well known than it ever was.
    Meanwhile, military budgets would be expanded significantly.

The *NYT* columnist David Brooks has conjectured
that what the President cares most about is testosterone:
"He wants to cut any part of government
that may seem soft and nurturing, like poverty programs.
    He wants to cut any program that might seem emotional and airy-fairy,
    like the National Endowment for the Arts.
        He wants to cut any program that might seem smart and nerdy,
        like the National Institutes of Health.
But he wants to increase funding for every program
that seems manly, hard, muscular and ripped,
like the military and armed antiterrorism programs."
    That seems fairly accurate, to me.

Of course, the budget is simply a proposal.
The art of the deal would set out the most extreme version,
and then bargain, knowing that some will have to be dropped,
    but a large number will make it through.
    And we will be grateful it is only these.

Meanwhile the public discourse is getting rough.
Partisanship is notably sharpened in opposition.
One wonders how we can talk anymore with those who may disagree with us.
    Apparently calling calling a person an idiot
    doesn't help that one come to agree with you.
And at the same time there are many
who are deeply regretting the way they voted, and are willing to change,
    except they are not inclined to when they are mocked.

With that in mind, I looked at the story today
of Jesus and the woman at the well.
That would seem to involve a seriously partisan dispute.
So how did that interchange go?

As the story goes, Jesus and his disciples are passing through Samaria
and come to the ancient site of Jacob's well.
The disciples venture into town for supplies, while Jesus waits at the well.
We don't know why.

But here come a woman. A situation occurs.
Like two people in an elevator,
required to spend some time together in an artificial togetherness.
So how are they to respond to the situation?

One option is to say nothing.
That, by the way, is what I probably would do.
But it will not work. Jesus is on a mission.

He might say something like, "Have you had a personal encounter
with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"
People have asked me that.
This actually will happen later in the conversation,
but it is not a good opening.

Or he could open the conversation abruptly by announcing,
"You people worship what you do not understand;
we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews."
This actually does get said, later on in the exchange,
but it is not a good place to start.

Instead, he simply asks for a drink.
Not exhibiting power, but simple vulnerability.
We are reminded of a passage in the other gospels, (such as Mark 9:41)
"Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ,
amen, I say to you, will surely not lose (their) reward."

She responds.
We discover she has objections that need to be addressed.
One has to do with Jews and Samaritans.
Another concerns men and women talking in public.

Here again we hear an echo of a typical scene in biblical literature.

The patriarchs are always meeting their future brides at the city well.
Isaac did it (Gen 24).
Jacob did it, meeting Rachel at the well (Gen 29).
Moses met Zipporah at the well (Exod 2).
Everybody knew this, and the story of Jesus assumes that they know.
John, however, is thinking larger, of an alliance
with the entire nation of Samaritans, and the mission to Samaria.

Her objection leads him to say that if she knew "the gift of God"
and who was asking, she would be asking for water, too. Living water.
Her curiosity is piqued. She is also a little put off,
and wants to know why this talkative stranger
thinks that he knows water better than that of the famous well of Jacob.
The well is the central shrine of the northern kingdom of Israel,
and now at the heart of the Samaritan people,
also believers in the one God, who have inherited the land.

Jesus answers in kind, brag for brag, riposte for riposte,
saying that the water he knows is better
because it eliminates thirst permanently.
No need to keep coming to the well.
So, at this point, his request for water is answered by her request.

At that point, he speaks specifically to her objection
about the man and woman thing.
If she thinks that they should not be talking to one another,
maybe she should get her man,
and then they could have a man-to-man talk instead.
This suggestion is not welcome.
It seems that the conversation is going too well for her to abandon it.

She says she has no husband.
Then we hear that remark about her having five husbands.
At this point, the narrative makes another swerve toward the symbolical,
as the woman, now representing Samaria itself,
is reminded of the history of Samaria.

According to the prophet Hosea and the second book of Kings,
when Assyria captured the northern kingdom,
and dispersed the Israelites there to other countries,
they brought in pagans from five different nations.
What Hosea described as the marriage between God and Israel
was now broken, and others had come.
John knew his readers would remember that.

The outcome of this exchange is that the woman calls Jesus a prophet,
which brings him finally to the point
that neither here at Jacob's well nor in Jerusalem
is the future of God's relationship with his people to be pursued,
for something more is here.

And that leads to her recognition of Jesus as Messiah.
Which leads in turn to her return to the city to spread the news,
resulting in the conversion of Samaria,
and the declaration that Jesus is "Savior of the World."
So there it is. Mission accomplished, for now.

Meanwhile, the disciples return from the city with supplies.
There is a conversation between Jesus and the disciples,
which has some levels to it, I think.
He is talking about food, ostensibly, and it moves towards harvest talk.

The implication, never explicit, but looming there
as the woman converts Samaria as they talk,
is the contrast between their visit to the city and his visit at the well.
The harvest is dramatically different. "One sows, and another reaps."

And so we come back to the question of polarities and conversations.
What is the best way to come to a conversation
with those with whom we disagree?

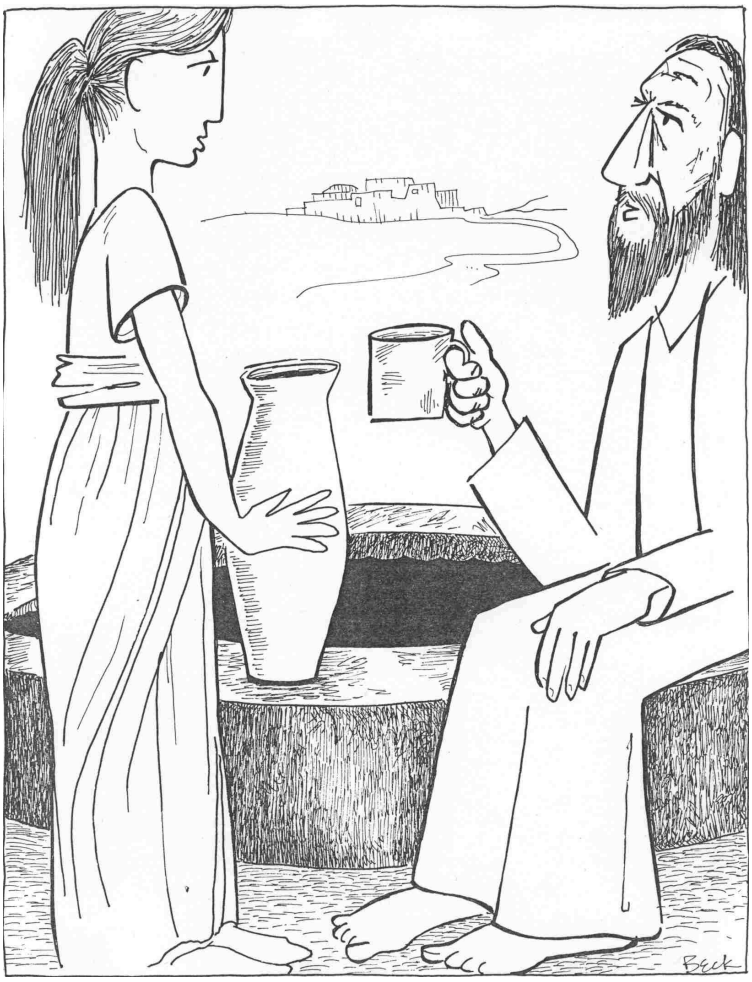
And how do we reach the "nones"?
(Not "nuns," but those who list their religion is "none.")
In particular, how do we present the faith so that it is not caricatured,
as is so common today.
The possibilities that discipleship offers
of compassion, solace, humility, commitment, are sorely needed,
but cannot be heard, apparently.

I hear three things in the story of the encounter at the well.

First of all, the conversation opens
with an expression of one's own humility and vulnerability,
rather than a loud claim of my own correct position.
The woman imitates Jesus' approach when she talks to the townspeople.
"Could he be the Messiah?"

Secondly, during the course of the exchange
we see a respect for the other's agenda,
as Jesus attends to the concerns of the woman, addressing them each.
He has an agenda, but so has she, and he attends to it.

Lastly, there is the comparison of the two approaches,
Jesus and the woman on the one hand, and the disciples on the other.
One approach risks crossing the partisan barrier separating two sides.
The other doesn't.
The risk is taken in humility and trust that God will cover for us,
as well as lead the way. `



Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 26, 2017

1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13	Samuel finds David
Psalm 23 1-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
Ephesians 5:8-14	Awake, O Sleeper!
John 9:1-41	Drama of a Man Born Blind

Lent is our opportunity for opening our eyes
and seeing ourselves and the path that we are on.
And to help us out, today we have the story of the Man Born Blind.
This is another of John's amazing stories.
It begins with Jesus and his disciples
encountering a blind man, and healing him.

If this were the gospel of Matthew or Mark or Luke,
that would be the end of it.
It would be seen as an act of renewal
and a sign of the messianic age opening on the scene.
But no, this is John's gospel, and the healing is just the beginning.

What keeps the story going is that the neighbors get involved.
Of course, neighbors are always watching
what is happening in the neighborhood.
And sometimes this is just nosy,
and sometimes it is the neighborhood watch,
against dangers and unknowns.

And then, because of the neighbors, the Pharisees get involved.
And now, with the entry of the religious experts,
we find out for the first time that the Sabbath was involved.
Their attention shifts everything away from a man gaining his sight
to a fear that Sabbath regulations were violated.

And then, because of the Pharisees, the parents get involved.
Not too involved, it turns out.
But we do learn something—that speaking up too loudly
can get you into trouble.

When the Pharisees turn back to the man they seem to have changed their view.
Before they were divided in their assessment of Jesus,
torn between his loose attitude toward the Sabbath
and his ability to heal a man born blind.

One suggested to them he was irreligious,
the other that he was from God. It was confusing.
But now, the second time around, they have no doubt.
Jesus must be a sinner.
And they come to this conclusion without any further information.
They get settled in their opposition to Jesus
just because, well, they are opposed to him.

Only at the end of the story, when Jesus reappears on the scene,
to affirm the man's decision and give him support, that we realize
that Jesus hasn't been in the story since the very beginning.
We are glad he has shown up, and think it is only right,
considering what he has put the man through.
And the man never asked to be healed,
let alone put through the ordeal of the past few days.

When I look at this story, I think of change agents.
Agents of change.

The story has an array of them.
First of all, Jesus himself gets things going,
with an act of compassion, whether or not it was asked for.
Not only the man himself, but society as well
is repaired in the healing of its members.
And we learn that a good deed does not stop there.

And the neighbors also are agents of change,
in not letting the incident die where it lies.
On the other hand, the parents, not so much.
They pretty emphatically insist on not being part of this story.

However, the Pharisees and the man are the main causes of change.
Each party produces a change in the other.

The Pharisees, as noted, get set in their obstinacy,
and the only reason would seem to be
their interaction with the man born blind.
Finding him difficult to convert to their purposes,
they double down on their contrary view of things.

When Jesus says "I came into this world for judgment,
so that those who do not see might see,
and those who do see might become blind,"

we can be sure that the Pharisees
represent those who see and then become blind.

But the more interesting is the journey of the man himself.
His insight grows after his sight is repaired.
First, in response to the neighbors, we find he knows nothing.
Asked where the miracle-worker is, he said, "I do not know."

But it is in dialogue with the Pharisees that his insight grows to revelation.
In their first interview he simply answers their questions.
He describes the healing, and when prompted to characterize Jesus,
he calls him a prophet.

But it is in the second interview that he comes into his own.
He moves from awareness to advocacy.
Up to now he simply reports what Jesus did.
But now he defends what Jesus did.
He takes a chance, and it is a severe one, as his parents just told us.
But he has come to see not only that he is more
than a person who can now act on his own, having his vision now.
He is also a person who is a free agent and is asked to enter the struggle.
And so it is that he speaks up in advocacy
concerning this Jesus who changed his life.

When Jesus returns, at the end of the story,
we begin to understand that he is also an agent of change.
Not only at the beginning,
where he healed the man's physical blindness,
but even now at the end.
It is now that we see him put a seal on the action that has proceeded.
We discover that he has propelled this man into his freedom,
and he rewards his use of it.

It is my sense that this is a message we can use today.
It is my sense that this is a message we can use today.
Faith vision, like adversity, calls us beyond enjoying the goods we have
to the work of advocacy, of being agents of change.
I see this happening today in a new way,
and to a new generation, it seems.

When people across the nation rise up in protest
against a set of regulations criminalizing immigrants,
arbitrarily targeting Muslims,
a populace that seemed asleep seems awakened.

An older generation that had devoted their energy and lives
to missions in Latin America, and other marginal communities,
had been wondering if their concerns were ever to be remembered.
But now that they see a new movement
in advocacy for the immigrant poor and endangered refugee,
they are reassured.

And the move from adversity to advocacy continues.
On the one hand, we see the all male House Freedom Caucus
meeting with the Administration to discuss the future of women's health plans.
A picture of around 50 men in suits sitting around a table
has been widely circulated on the internet.
On the other hand, we see that over 10,000 women across the nation
have filed to run for various public offices.
They are stirred out of their somnolence,
moved from taking things for granted.

And most recently,
a devastating replacement plan for the Affordable Care Act
that would punish the poor and elderly without justification
was turned back with a large part of the reason being
that a multitude of persons moved by a sense of compassion and advocacy
made their voices heard.

Not only that, they have discovered they are not alone,
and it would appear that a new age of attention matters of social justice
and even the preferential option for the poor may be dawning.

These are perhaps only straws in the wind,
temporary fits of activity that will fade away when the temperature changes.

But perhaps not.
The example of the man born blind is that when one's eyes are opened,
the world has changed, and you cannot go back.
The gift of sight leads to further commitment.

And the appearance of Jesus at the end, to confirm the new vision,
is a welcome word not only for the formerly blind man, but also for us.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 2, 2017

Ezekiel 37:12-14	Them bones gonna rise…
Psalm 130:18	Out of the depths I cry
Romans 8:8-11	The Spirit dwells in you
John 11:1-45	The Raising of Lazarus

Today we come to the third of John's Gospel dramas.
After the Woman of Samaria and the Man Born Blind,
we have the Raising of Lazarus.

And during this time of Lent,
when it is customary for us to draw back
and review our progress in the journey of discipleship,
we have noticed that the dramatic stories of John
invite us into engagement as well.

And so it is today.
John's story of the raising of Lazarus unfolds in three locations.
It begins somewhere else, away from Judea.

Jesus and his disciple are there
because people have been trying to stone him to death,
and while he had escaped thus far, it seemed best to leave the area.

But while they are in the distant place,
they receive word from the sisters of Lazarus
that their brother, whom Jesus loved, was dying.

Put yourself in the place of these sisters, Mary and Martha,
who knew that he had left the area because his life was in danger.
And now they have this news for him.

Should they tell him? If he returns, he might be killed.
And, in fact, that is what happens, since it is the raising of Lazarus
that the authorities put a price on his head.
But the sisters decide it is best to let him decide.
And not to decide for him.

Jesus knows that if he returns, he will pay this ultimate price.
He hesitates and delays.
We do not know when we will die.
We do not know what will be the cause of our death.
But someday we will.

And this is what Jesus discovers now.
He is trading his life for that of Lazarus.

Later he will say at the supper, "No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends." (15:13)
He could be talking about this moment when he decides to return to Judea.
Thomas responds, "Let us also go to die with him."

The second location in the drama is at the edge of the village of Bethany,
where Mary and Martha lived with their brother Lazarus.
As we see so often, John plays through the scene twice,
once with each sister, each of whom brings the same accusation—
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And each time Jesus responds, but in sharply contrasting ways.
First, with Martha, he makes the clear announcement:
"Lazarus will rise. … I am the resurrection and the life."
This is positive and clear.
And still, somewhat, remote and abstract.

When Mary comes to Jesus and makes the same accusation,
his response is entirely different.
He is "deeply moved in spirit and was troubled within himself,"
John tells us. And in the shortest verse in scripture,
we hear, "Jesus wept."

Two encounters, two themes.
With Martha, life; with Mary, death.
We learn that although resurrection is the truth,
that doesn't take away death.
Death is real.
It radically offends against our human purposes, our persons,
the mystery of our personal existence.
It requires mourning.

John is leading his reader into the reality of the occasion.
We move from the theological theme of resurrection
to the experience of death.
For most of us, even knowing that death is inevitable,
it remains for most of our lifetimes as a remote and abstract truth.
But then, when someone dear to us dies,
it leaves that distant place to which we banish it most of the time,
and comes every close.

I think of high school or college students
who experience the death of a classmate.
Those who never yet had imagined they would die,
abruptly and rudely are stripped of that illusion.
And in the midst of that reality, we send in counselors to ease the pain.

The third location in John's narrative is at the tomb of Lazarus.
Once again, for the second time, Jesus is "deeply moved within himself."
For now he is face to face with his friend's death.

And we realize that this concrete experience of the death of Lazarus
not only reminds him of his own death, but in fact,
what he is about to do will be the actual cause of his own death.
Those who plot against his life will see this as the tipping point,
where they can no longer tolerate what he is doing,
and will have to take steps.

Despite Martha's concerns,
Jesus asks them to remove the stone from the door of the tomb.
And then Jesus says something surprising.
"Father, I thank you for hearing me."
We can imagine a pause before he adds,
"I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here
I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me."

For this is a test. He has been confidently affirming
that the Son does what the Father does,
that the Father has life in himself, and gives the Son to have life in himself,
that an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs
will hear his voice (5:19-29).
And now the moment of truth is come.
Jesus passes the test,
and Lazarus leaves the tomb, to live another day.
And with that, Jesus seals his own fate.

And yet, at the same time, he assures his own resurrection.
For the lie of death has been unmasked.
Death's reputation for being the last stop, the end of everything,
is now proven false, for Lazarus has returned.
He has come back from somewhere, even after the four days.
Death is not the final story, and the end of stories.

And so Jesus, in coming face to face with his own impending death,
also sees the powerlessness of death
to vanquish and subdue him, and us.
He has passed the test,
and only through that has come to the assurance
that his death will be given in love of his friends.

Which is perhaps why he can speak so bravely to his friends at the supper.
Perhaps this is why, in John's account of the Passion,
Jesus can move so affirmatively, even so calmly,
through the stages in the way of the Cross.

In taking the risk, he has succeeded,
and emerged in the life
and faith in life to be found on the other side.

In the Sundays of Lent this year,
we have followed John's Gospel through the dramatic progress
of Jesus as the Word entering into and becoming Flesh.
It involves risk and jeopardy, and it is not yet finished.
But the promise of already assured.

We are conscious of Lent as traditionally being a time of retreat,
withdrawing from the engagements and conflicts of life
to assess our progress, our direction.

And early in Lent we considered, under the image of the Benedict Option,
of a permanent withdrawal from the struggle
in order to preserve the tradition,
like a golden treasure, away from the world,
until the world passes through its present dark age,
as some consider it.

In these Sundays we have followed the stories of Jesus
that show him engaging in the struggle, not avoiding it.

With the Woman of Samaria, we discovered ways
to overcome our paralyzing polarities,
finding a way to come into conversation
across what seem unbridgeable chasms.
With the Man Born Blind we saw how adversity
can move a person from complacency to advocacy,
from taking things for granted to actively defending them.

And now, we see the way into life is through the risk,
and not in flight from it.
But the way forward, into the struggle,
is also with the support of God
and the example of Jesus.

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

April 9, 2017

At The Procession With Palms

Matthew 21:1-11 Jesus enters Jerusalem

At The Mass

Isaiah 50:4-7	Third Song of the Servant
Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24	Why have you abandoned me?
Philippians 2:6-11	He emptied himself unto death
Matthew 26:14—27:66	Matthew's Passion

Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the most prominent
American political theologian of the 20th century,
is again in the news.
Niebuhr gave us the Serenity Prayer,
which is often attributed to St Francis by those who aren't Franciscan.

As you remember, the prayer says,
"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference."

Niebuhr is in the news because it was discovered
that James Comey, head of the FBI,
uses the name "Reinhold Niebuhr" for his Twitter account.

Niebuhr is also famous for his views of the Gospel
as an important but unrealistic ideal.
It is necessary for guidance, but in the real world
it can never be applied as is.

It is in the spirit of Niebuhr that hard decisions
are being made in the nation's capital.
Here as we enter into Holy Week,
we are entering into an internationally unstable situation
with the act of war in bombing Syria, the suffering nation.

What is notable is that this decision received great support
among our national leaders, on all sides.
We can imagine no more appropriate response
to the tragedy in Syria than to answer it with bombs.
In the spirit of Reinhold Niebuhr we are making hard decisions.

And yet it is peculiar that we are moved
by the plight of the children of Syria
even while we refuse to welcome them as refugees.
Something here does not add up.

Alongside Niebuhr,
perhaps the most famous American Catholic of the 20th century,
is the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day.
In contrast to those who felt the gospel an unrealistic ideal,
she thought it could be put to work.
She did not accept the view that it could not be applied.

Today at the beginning of Holy Week,
we hear the Passion account of Matthew.
This is the same gospel that gave us the injunction to turn the other cheek.
We should avoid the practice of claiming
an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.
We should avoid retaliation as the Christian response.

Today we heard something else from this gospel
—the Sword saying, which tells us
that those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword.

In itself, it is a saying similar to karma.
Those who live by violence will likely find their end in violence.

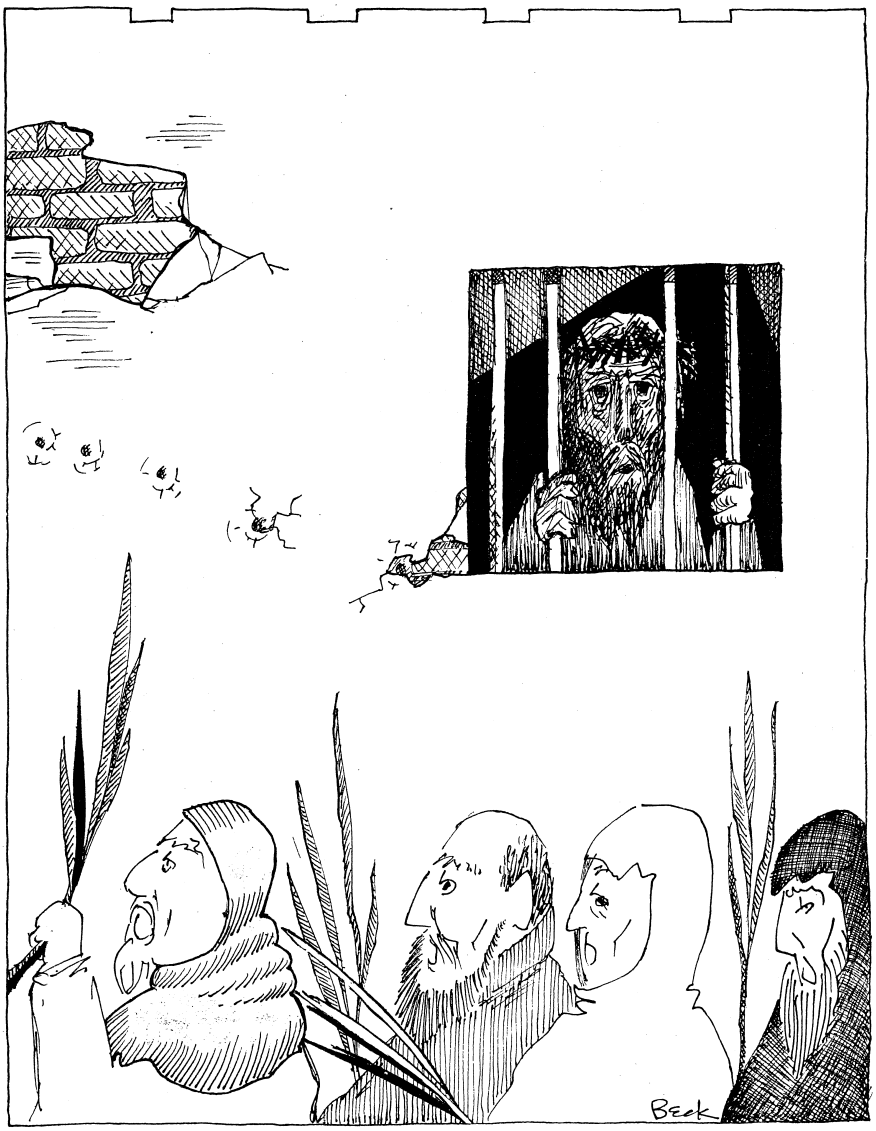
In context, it is a nonviolence teaching.
For Jesus, the teacher who told his disciples never to retaliate,
is now at that moment in his story
when retaliation is demanded by many.
In fact, responding to the occasion, one of those with him
drew a sword, prompting Jesus' remark.

And yet the story we just heard ends with the execution of Jesus
as one who refuses the order of the day, including that of retaliation,
fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

A German-American theologian I am reading now, Brigitte Kahl,
speaks of the politics of love.
She says, "Love means continual mindfulness
in discerning, disobeying, and unfreezing
the antithetical law of self versus other
that is set in stone and cast in iron everywhere."

It is love alone that breaks the grip
that order as dominating power has upon us and our world.
This love is acted out in the refusal of Jesus, in the story we just heard.

Easter is the promise that it will win out.



Holy Saturday
At the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night of Easter

April 15, 2017

The readings which are said to be a history of salvation
actually show the bible reading itself.
And the theme that trails through the texts is the water.

The separation of waters in the creation story of Genesis
becomes the division of waters in the Exodus story of crossing the sea.
For this is a new creation, the creation of a people of God, called Israel.
This week we are sharing that member with the Jewish community,
as they celebrate Passover.

The prophet we call Second Isaiah,
writing during the trauma of exile in Babylon
took the image of the divided waters of the Red Sea,
with its message of a new people, and reversed it.
He accounted a New Exodus, a new beginning for a lost people in a second birth,
by describing the return as following a green belt across the Arabian desert.
Instead of a dry path through the sea,
we have a well-watered path through the arid desert.

The Gospel writers picked up on the message of Second Isaiah,
and again made it new.
The prophet had announced a voice crying out:
In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord.
For him, the way of the Lord was in the desert,
providing for the exiles a smooth journey home.

But the Gospel writers phrased it differently
—A voice cries out in the desert: *Prepare the way of the Lord*.
But for them it was the voice that was in the desert,
and the way of the Lord was metaphor.
And the voice in the desert was that of John the Baptist.
But the water is not forgotten,
for in addition to the voice and the desert is the baptism.
For the story of the waters leads to baptism.

Water is life. We have begun to appreciate how true that is.
When astronomers are looking for life on other planets,
what they look for is evidence of water.

When the aquifers of the Midwest are threatened with contamination,
we suddenly become aware of the crucial significance
of pure water for sustaining lives.

When Flint MI must live without clean water,
we learn what damage can be done.
With the Sister Water Project of this community,
this awareness is put to use in bringing water, that is, life,
to arid places in the unprivileged places in the world.
Water, we realize, is life.

In the New Testament, the water of baptism is life.
Today we renew our baptismal vows.
In parishes, baptisms take place beginning a new life.
In his letters, St. Paul shows the he understands
a new kind of life begins at baptism,
for through those waters one enters into the body of Christ,
and shares the spirit of Christ.

And it is those in the spirit that rise to new life.
For the waters of Baptism, for him, lead to Resurrection life,
and the renewed community of the risen.

And so the circle is closed.
The waters of baptism bring us into Easter,
and its new life.

Second Sunday of Easter (or Sunday of Divine Mercy)

April 23, 2017

Acts 2:42-47 The early faith community
Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24 His mercy endures forever
1 Peter 1:3-9 A new birth to a living hope
John 20:19-31 "My Lord and my God!"

It has been a big week in the religious news.
Easter and Passover were able to provide human interest pieces.

And then Msgr. Tom Zinkula was named bishop of Davenport,
to general surprise and approval.
And Cardinal Dolan came to town,
visiting with Loras students and personnel,
and headlining the fund raiser for Divine Word College.

In the one case, we get encouraging signals
about where the church is headed today;
in the other, we witness the traditional church
attempting to adjust course in the new direction.

And then there was the religion-related incident in Galena
that caught my attention.
Last week, 44-year-old Andrew Steil of Scales Mound, Illinois,
was disturbed by a self-proclaimed street Evangelist from Davenport,
named Tony Miano,
and proceeded to nearly run him over with his pickup.
This is a method of intimidation we've seen quite a bit of lately.

Apparently undaunted, the preacher managed to capture
the entire incident on cell phone video,
including even the truck driving directly at him,
swerving at the last possible moment.

It is an interesting case study for our times.
We can presume that Miano has had a life-giving experience
that has prompted him to share it with the world.
We honor that, for we do the same, in our own way.

And yet, we find ourselves entirely understanding
the motivation behind the truck driver's move,
even while rejecting his dangerous and anti-social behavior.
It is almost a parable for the conflicted role of religion
in our contemporary world.

Recently I read a piece online concerning the political polarity today,
between the secular left and the religious right.
Its main point was that there was no future role in politics for religious liberals.
Their day has passed with the 1960s.
The new generation of social activists are unchurched.

Maybe it is just me, but the online posts that come my way
include a lot of pro-science, anti-religion sentiments.
Also, rather aggressive pro-atheistic messages
expressing dismay at the influence of religion in the public arena today,
which is often caricatured as irrational and superstitious.
Like the recent definition of "blasphemer"
as "A human who contradicts idiots."

Of course, it is to the advantage of the secularists
for religion to be consigned to literalist fundamentalists,
some of whom are prone to insist
on strict biblical timelines for creation, for instance.

But not all religion is like that,
and the Catholic church does not experience
a fundamental conflict between religion and science.
One wants to remind people
of the Political Academy of Sciences at the Vatican.

One also thinks of Nicolaus Copernicus and Gregor Mendel.
The first was a canon at the cathedral church,
who revolutionized our perception of the universe.
The second was a monk and abbot
whose work with pea plants and genetics
laid the foundation for the theory of evolution.

In other words,
among the perceived social polarizations in our world today
is that between religious faith and secular reason.
And the possibility that there is a long-standing position of religious reason
is lost in the mix.
And today we find ourselves on both sides of the divide.
We are both Miano, the preacher, and Stiel, the truck driver.
The proclaimer and the skeptic.

Which brings us (finally!) to the story today of Thomas the Doubter.
He is a skeptic. But he is also a proclaimer.
In fact, his skepticism makes his proclamation all the more effective.
It is one thing for the easily impressed to cry out "Alleluia."
But it is another thing for the had-bitten skeptic
to proclaim, "My Lord and My God."

Today we have a keen appreciation for Thomas, the skeptic.
With the withering of the Catholic ghetto,
    where our assumptions were supported at every turn,
    where we could rest assured that we had it right—
with the fading of this environment, not unlike a cocoon,
we find ourselves confronted with contrary and often convincing visions
that can challenge those long-held assumptions.
    We are skeptics within our own faith.

And with this, I am reminded of the concept of the Christian philosopher
    (for Christians can be philosophers),
    Paul Ricoeur, who spoke of a "second naïveté."

The first naïveté is simple faith, as yet unchallenged.
    But once this is challenged, once we begin to have experiences
    that prompt us to question our beliefs,
    we come to a place of doubt. Or, perhaps, skepticism.

It is only after this awakening
that it is possible to achieve a second naïveté
—the informed act of belief, an act of trust in full knowledge of the costs.
    It is a post-critical faith.
    It is the second naïveté of Thomas,
    the Easter proclamation of the skeptical apostle.

And what is the Easter proclamation of the Thomas disciple?
From observing religious women in this time,
    I have concluded it has certain characteristics.
    Three of these are **joy**, **care**, and **witness**.

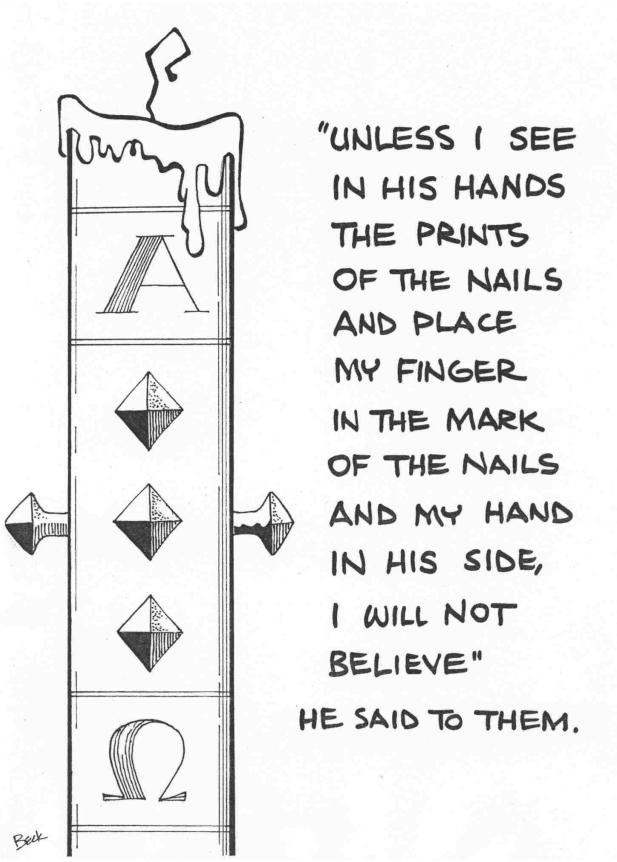
By **joy**, I am referring to a spirit of rejoicing
that expresses itself in certain communal celebrations, for instance.
    It is a spirit that could be taken for an example of simple naïveté,
    if one didn't realize that these are the same people that are busily working
    in some of the most difficult places in our damaged world,
    where one would be dispirited and depressed.
That is, if there were not a certain belief in life that sustains them.
It is an Easter testament.

By **care**, I am thinking of that very work of missionary activity,
bringing hope and water to those without.
    It is a belief in possibility that expresses itself
    in making possibilities come true.
It is both global and local.
It is global in its view of the human family.

And it is local in attending to specific small instances of need,
villages and communities that otherwise go unnoticed.
It is what we at one time called building the Kingdom.

By witness, I am speaking of the work of prophecy as well.
It is a lifting up of those very ones who might go unseen.
It is the activity that keeps on record
the needs that still remain unaddressed.
It is a light on a hill as well as a warning to a complacent world.
It is a witness to the life announced at Easter.

It is the second naïveté of Thomas,
the Easter proclamation of the skeptical apostle.



Third Sunday of Easter

April 30, 2017

Acts 2:14, 22-23	Peter's Kerygma speech
Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-11	You show the path to life
1 Peter 1:17-21	You were ransomed not by gold
Luke 24;13-35	On the road to Emmaus

The story of the encounter of the two disciples
with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus
is one of the best loved in the Gospels.

So probably you have already noticed that it has a liturgical shape,
with the liturgy of the Word taking place on the road,

as Jesus explained the Scriptures to them,
and the liturgy of the Eucharist taking place
at the breaking of the bread upon their arrival.

But in case you missed it,
the reaction of the disciples draws your attention to it.
Their comments are memorable.

Concerning the Scriptures: *"Were not our hearts burning within us*
while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?"

And then: *"The two recounted …*
how he was made known to them in the breaking of bread."

It occurs to me that this turns our usual way of thinking around.
After all, knowledge is something we get from reading of a book.
And "heartburn" is something we associate with eating a meal.

I am not trying to be irreverent, but only to notice
how it causes you to wonder what they are telling us.

How is it that their hearts are burning within them
at the reading of the Scripture?
How is the meal a revelation of new knowledge?

I have a sense of what they mean about the Scriptures.
I remember when I was in the seminary,
exposed to all the varieties of theology
to which we were introduced at that time.

I remember thinking, what part of all this would fit me,
as an English major with an affection forliterature and poetry?
And it became clear that it was the scriptures.

My discovery after that
was that it did indeed result in your heart burning within you,

if that means finding there an unending and renewable
source of meaning for one's life, a purpose for one's personal project.

For an example, we might draw on the remark of Jesus in the story:
"Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things
and enter into his glory?"
What is the meaning of the cross of Christ?

A powerful devotional lesson is seen
in the divine participation in the human condition.
Suffering is made more bearable when we are among those who understand it.
We join support groups of those with similar struggles.
How much more comforting to know that God's son
has shared the same struggles of that human condition?

Paul's hymn in the letter to the Philippians says of Christ,
"Though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
… he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death,
even death on a cross."
In that, we discover the compassion of God.
And our hearts burn within us.

At another time, we may become more alert
to the contrast between this self-emptying
and the prevailing values of pride and self-assertion
that control human cultures, both then and now.
The need to dominate others to prove one's own worth is turned upside down.
And it is this self-emptying, this refusal to push others down,
that is rewarded in the exaltation of resurrection.
And we discover the nonviolent power of God,
and how that power is to be exercised yet today.
And our hearts, finding a method along with a purpose,
are burning within us.

Or we may be impressed by recent realizations
of how the imperial authorities of Rome used the cross as a deterrent,
a way of controlling unruly populations.
How they used the humiliation and suffering of this form of death
as a political instrument to quiet dissent.
And that taking up the cross was a way of defying
that effort to suppress the prophetic voices.
And we discover the fiery zeal of the God of justice.
And our hearts, burning with a desire for a just society,
needing to act to bring that justice to those denied it,
again find purpose and meaning in the Word.

And it is not simply a set of instructions, but a life project.
Not just a good read, but a life journey.

And Emmaus becomes a vantage point that invites that new project.
And so the disciples make the return journey to Jerusalem,
with their announcement of the risen Christ.

But if "breaking the bread" of the Scriptures enlivens the heart,
how does breaking the bread of the Eucharist bring about new knowledge?
How is the meal also a lecture, a reading that reaches the truth?

I think of this.
There is a moment before communion when the celebrant holds up the host,
and says, quoting John the Baptist introducing Jesus,
"Behold, the Lamb of God."
I am always struck by this.

For it isn't the image of the human being, Jesus, like an icon.
It isn't even a Lamb.
It is bread.
It is saying that the Son of God comes to you in the form of bread.

Bread is broken for one reason: to be distributed, to be shared.
I am reminded—and this again is not to be flip, or disrespectful,
but rather to see how this comes into our lives.
I am reminded of the new customs or practices
that have entered our lives with the new ways of treating death.

In particular, cremation.
There seems to be a tendency to distribute the ashes,
or cremains, as they are now called.
I have friends who want their ashes to be strew in areas they love.
My own father, who remarried, was cremated.
The children of his second wife wanted to share his ashes
with us who were his own children.
We favored keeping them together.
But the impulse behind the offer was one of generosity.

One is reminded of the impulse behind honoring relics,
especially first class relics.
There is a sense in which the person no longer with us
is still present among us.

But in the Eucharist it is bread we break and share, not ashes.
In the breaking of the bread,
in the sharing of the body of Christ under the form of bread,
we learn about God's desire for us.
In the bread we not only have nourishment,
and the sign of God's feeding our needs.

Also in bread for the hungry we have something of the Christ
who emptied himself, the Word becoming Flesh,
to provide for those without bread, the hungry in need.

And again we encounter the God of compassion,
the God of nonviolent power,
and the God who calls us to be advocates of justice.

In the Emmaus story, Clopas and his companion
were witnessing to the resurrection of Christ.
Our own Easter witness is to the life
that we experience in the Word and the Eucharist,
and which find expression in the meaning we find there,
serving God in serving others,
and helping to bring about the just society
that God's Son has taught us to dream toward.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 7, 2017

Acts 2:14, 36-41	Peter calls for baptism
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my shepherd
1 Peter 2:20-25	You had gone astray like sheep
John 10;1-10	The Good Shepherd

It is Good Shepherd Sunday.
And around the nation, even the world, sermons will be given
on the correct nature of true leadership,
perhaps employing contemporary examples of the opposite.

It is not hard to imagine such a homily,
contrasting the service of the shepherd with the venality of the false authority.
We do not need to look far for object lessons.
Citing the example of dictatorial types rising to power around the world,
not excluding our own, would be hard to resist.

However, if one wants to preach on the Gospel we have,
and not the Gospel we would like to have, we need to notice
that this Sunday doesn't mention Jesus as the Good Shepherd.
That will come at this time next year.
This year we hear Jesus say that he is the Gate.
That is something different.
What does it mean to be the Gate?

For some, it is obvious.
It means that only through Jesus is life possible.
We are familiar with this insistence from certain serious Christians.
But others find this annoying.

In our expanded global society, in which we are in touch
with many different cultures and faith expressions,
it seems wrongheaded to say that my religion is the true one,
and yours is not.

The newspaper cartoon this week showed three figures holding signs.
One was a Catholic Bishop,
one was a Muslim Imam,
and one was a Jewish Rabbi.
All the signs said the same thing:
"My religion beats your mythology."

We can sympathize with the message of the cartoonist.
But there remains a problem.
If your religion is as good as mine, why do I hold onto mine?
Only because I am used to it?

Many of the young people we call "nones,"
because when filling out forms they mark their religion as "none,"
have decided that it doesn't make sense to hold onto one religion.
Others have abandoned the religion in which they were raised.
And they want to know why we stay with it.

Meanwhile, among the committed
who are appalled at the diversity in the world
have reacted with hard, intolerant responses,
from local Christian nativism to militant Islam.
So — what does it mean to be the Gate?

Let's begin by supposing that the key to this metaphor for Jesus
lies in what Jesus stands for.
Let us suppose that it is what he shows that is the key to the Gate.
And the metaphor opens up with that.

On the one side of the gate are the thieves and robbers,
who cannot find their way through the gate.
On the other side are the sheep,
and the shepherd who enters through the gate.

Outside the gate are the predators. They are the false leaders
who are shown to be false by their predatory behavior.
Examples present themselves.
In the religious world, those megachurches
that make millions off their subscribers are here.
But so also are those clergy, and other caretakers,
who abuse their position by sexually preying upon the sheep in their flock.
This is blatant predatory activity.

And because we shouldn't think that the Gospel
is only talking about religious authority, we might include the national news,
which this week includes the new health care bill.
It is said to exclude treatment for pre-existing conditions.
One list I saw had 96 examples of pre-existing conditions no longer covered.
It is said that Obamacare taxed the healthy and wealthier
in order to treat the poorer in poor health,
and for that reason was resented,
and also for that reason its elimination amounted to a tax break for the wealthy.
But the gate doesn't only keep out the predators,
it also secures the sheep, and admits the shepherd.
There is a relationship.
The shepherd calls the sheep by name, and they recognize his voice.

The shepherd calls them by name.

He knows them, personally and individually.
In the current debate about the health care bill,
it doesn't help to see the group photo of the sponsors
and see a gathering composed exclusively of white males in fine suits.

The arguments in opposition tend to feature individual cases of severe need,
now being abandoned.
This approach leaves itself open to the complaint that it anecdotal evidence,
that it is using suffering people to make political points.

However, something large is being said here.
These news spots are saying that the shepherds do not know the sheep by name.
They have not gone to the sheep, and witnessed their predicaments.
They have kept their distance.
If they had risked moving among those affected by their decisions,
they may have made different choices.

Because the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd, trust is possible.
In this week's *New Yorker*, James Carroll, the novelist and former Paulist,
has an article on Pope Francis.
We recall that this Pope, as bishop in Buenos Aires,
moved among the slums of the city.
There they celebrated his selection as pope
by saying that one of their own had been lifted up.

Carroll speaks of two events—
the Pope's recent TED talk, aired at their convention in Vancouver,
and also his trip to Egypt, setting aside special protections.

Carroll notes that the Pope speaks out on issues of world concerns.
And what is more remarkable, the world listens.
He says hope is possible.
Carroll adds, "or so this old man insists.
He speaks, yes, as a Christian, but also as a moral voice
that history has wondrously lifted up."

So there we have another example of the Shepherd.
And it applies not only to religious matters, but also to issues of world concern.

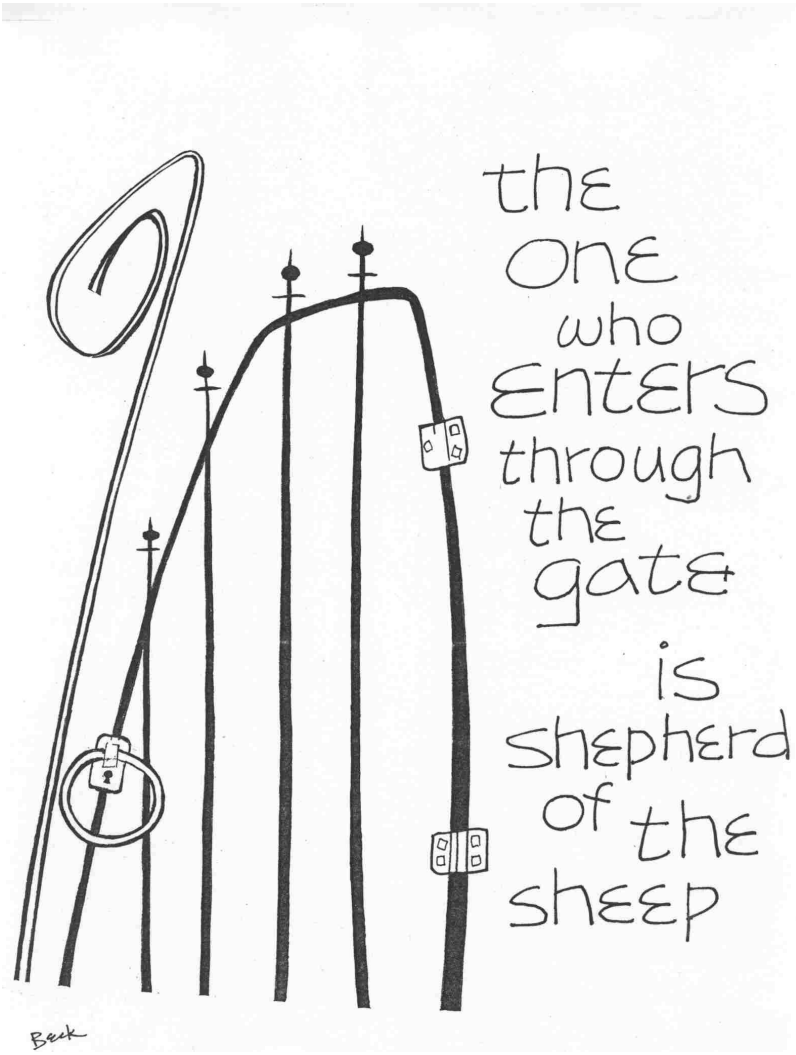
Francis is getting a lot of opposition, which doesn't seem to bother him that much.
He is, after all, a former Jesuit superior, with all that requires.
This week I have been thinking, concerning his increasingly vocal opposition,
that he is dragging us, kicking and screaming, back to the gospels.

And so we find out something about the Gate
that Jesus in John's Gospel proposes as an image.

What is the true Gate?
It appears it is that which keeps out the predators
and allows an authentic relationship trust
and involvement in the difficulties of each others' lives.

It is not who owns the Gate, to decide who is in or out.

Rather, the decisions made about the sheep,
their care or exploitation,
determines which is the true Gate.



Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2017

Acts 6:1-7	Seven are named to serve
Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19	He loves justice and right
1 Peter 2:4-9	A living stone, rejected
John 14:1-12	Many dwelling places

In today's gospel, we hear about, in the traditional translation, many mansions.
We cannot help but think of the President with many mansions.

Some people think that I talk a lot about President Trump. I do.
In my defense, I would say remind us that
responsible persons tell us our nation is in a state of crisis,
and not to recognize that is to be an enabler.
We need to be vigilant.

When a suspicious person enters the neighborhood,
you pay close attention, you keep him in sight.

In the alternative translation of the passage that we use now,
Jesus speaks of many dwelling places.
Pope Francis is someone who has championed the cause of the homeless,
and provided not only dwelling places, but even free laundries.

Some people think that I talk about Pope Francis a lot. And I do.
It has been said (by James Carroll)
that his is "a moral voice that history has wondrously lifted up."
It would not be wise to ignore that voice.

Today in the Gospel Jesus says that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
What does he mean?

Thomas the Apostle asks, How can we know the Way?
Here President and Pope can help us out.

In the President we see modeled one Way of being *an American:*
An authoritarian patriarch of a family business,
transferring his privilege to public office.

It is said that he demands loyalty,
and then surrounds himself with ambitious people to compete for his favor.
His is the way of winners, not losers.
He doles out enticements, and jealously guards his image.

On the other hand, we have a pope who walks the slums,
and refuses fancy limousines, such as favored by cardinals.

He walks among the losers, supposedly, calling them God's children.
He too is image-conscious, favoring simple black shoes, and econo-rides.

Jesus says he is the Way and the Truth.

The President has become famous for abandoning the truth
in his public statements and tweets.
He seems to regard the need for the moment as the only criterion for truth.

This is Marketer's Truth.
The truth of the marketer is whatever will get the product sold.
It is the salesman's pitch.
There is a reason that the slogan "Buyer Beware" has become a common idiom.
It is expected that when a sales pitch, such as a TV commercial, is sent our way,
we are wise to be skeptical.

The only truth that is honored is that which makes the sale.
Marketing Truth is not real truth.

The Pope is also being attacked for abandoning the truth.
Some of his critics are concerned that he is departing from the truth
in matters of faith and morals, as with his proposals on divorce and communion.
They believe he is abandoning what they see as his primary rote
—guarding the deposit of faith, understood as a set of beliefs.

The Pope's truth we might call the Mercy Truth.
The truth of mercy, in contrast to the truth of marketing,
embraces those without funds,
funds that the serious marketer would want to solicit and appropriate.
There is no gain to be had from embracing the penniless,
thinks the marketer.

Jesus says he is the the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

The President lives the Good Life,
in a certain American way of thinking.

The President lives a life of privilege. Is he happy?
He has embraced a life of what we might call unvirtuous power.
He has replaced love and honor with envy.
He strives to excite envy among others,
and instead of being loved, wishes to be envied.

That is, by making people compete for his favor, he allows no one close.
His marriages are for display.
His life is for display,
and his sense of wellbeing is confused with gold-plated display.

The Pope is embarrassed to live in an opulent setting,
and prefers a simple apartment.
He preaches and exemplifies a life for others
—for the poor, for the planet itself.

His way of life can also be described as life-giving.
He welcomes refugees from Africa and the Middle East,
anguished about their safety, and the deaths that have occurred during their flight.
He welcomes them and calls others to welcome them.

In contrast, we have someone who calls for a wall against Mexican refugees,
and who bans Muslim refugees from war-torn countries
for which America is in part responsible.

The Gospel we read today gives us a moment in the final days of Jesus' life.
He is speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper.

Soon the powers that be, the Roman authority
that embraced the law of winners over losers, will crucify Jesus,
using a form of execution it reserves for those it deems losers.

From the cross Jesus will die in solidarity with those
who have been banished from the halls of envy,
and will die what the bible calls an ignominious death.
It is an emptying unto death, even death on a cross.

But from that dishonored death comes resurrection.
And in that resurrection, God tips his hand to the fact
that it is the dishonored among us that he favors.
It is the crucified that rise, survive, and prevail.

Theirs is the Alleluia; theirs is the Glory.
That is the meaning of Easter,
the Easter we are celebrating in these days.

On this Mother's Day, we want to remember mothers,
our own mothers, the mothers present here,
and those among our family and friends who deserve to be so honored.
There is a heroism in taking upon this role, and it should be recognized.
They are included in our prayers today.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2017

Acts 8:5-8,14-17	Philip in Samaria
Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20	Shout to God, all the earth
1 Peter 3:15-18	Better to suffer than do evil
John 14:15-21	Another Advocate, the Spirit

As we come closer to Pentecost we begin to hear about the Holy Spirit.
In the story of Philip in Samaria, the community is visited
by apostles from Jerusalem, Peter and John,
and then by the Holy Spirit.

In his farewell speech to his disciples, in today's reading from John's Gospel,
Jesus speaks of the Paraclete, or Advocate.
"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate
to be with you always."

The disciples are anxious about Jesus' departure from them,
and he is reassuring them. "I will not leave you orphans."
They need words of assurance in precarious times.
We too are in precarious times,
and we welcome the words of assurance in the Gospel.

But what is precarious about the times?
What is the need that the Gospel provides a response for?
I am often inclined to speak about it **politically**,
since it would seem that we are in a crucial moment in American history.

But the political is part of something larger.
Another threat is the **cultural** shift we are undergoing.
For some it is symbolized by liberalism.
It is too permissive, too inclusive.
People who aren't from our culture aren't to be trusted.
We don't know how they operate, what they are saying.
By definition. If they are not for us, they must be against us.
If they are not our neighbors, they must be threats.

For others, it is **generational**, it is the **Millennials**.
It is the daily reminder of the loss of the world in which we grew up,
when we knew the rules, and no longer do.
An example might be the common dilemma for many
of operating digital equipment.
When it isn't working, the joke is to find someone's grandchild to fix it.

Nationalism is another expression of the matter.
In this we have something similar, but now it is confronted with other cultures,
and the need to deal with that.
    This is seen, I think, not only in the response of nativists
    in America, Britain, and France,
    but also among the people they fear.

The Arab Muslim world is exposed to western values,
which seem for many absolutely disorienting,
far from what they understand as the world and its rules.
    And just as we see here, some respond with a violent rejection,
    hoping to erase from their view this strange, and even obscene, spectacle
    that is another culture, completely independent and different from one's own.
        A problem especially when one thought one's own culture
        was the only one in all the world.

There arises the fear that another culture,
different from ours, which we picture as at the center of the world,
is confronting us with information we can't process.
    It is easier to deny it. Silence it. And if necessary, remove it.

Then there is the **planet** itself.
Often our narrow perspective makes it difficult to take seriously
the larger vision of the planet itself.
    We tend to extrapolate from our own experience.
    If it snows out of season, we think cries of global warming are wrong.
        For after all, our neighborhood is the only world that exists.
        Or so we always thought.

So it is hard to be a citizen of the world,
without getting out into that world.
    Without trailing into its different neighborhoods, and seeing for ourselves.

And finally, we shouldn't forget the rise of the **secular**,
in a world in which we can no longer take *religion* for granted.

One manner of response is the Benedict Option.
In this view there is a religious truth that needs to be preserved,
kept in seclusion until the secular madness passes.
    Something like the underground vaults
    that preserve seeds against a future famine.
    Like that in the Arctic that was just recently breached, and flooded.

I am more vividly reminded of the parable of the talents, however.
    And the one servant who failed to venture forth, but buried his talent,
    and was not favorably recognized for doing so.

But today the Scripture **readings** promise the Spirit,
as we close in on Pentecost.
The story of Philip taking the message to Samaria
is just one stage of the journey out to the larger world.
Acts is about *going out into the world*.

At the same time, the Gospel says
this is a Spirit that the world *does not know*.
There might be a clue here.
The Spirit drives us into the world,
but the world does not recognize the Spirit.

The lesson from Acts is that the Spirit calls us out into the fray,
out of hiding in the upper room, into the world.
At the same time, the call to mission to the world is not without its risks.

The fact that the world does not recognize the Spirit,
is another way of saying that it does not recognize the word of the Spirit
in the missionaries, the emissaries of the Spirit.
This is not to be a source of discouragement.
The Spirit is there as support.

Some examples come to mind.
I think of the Latin American missions. The struggle in the 80s,
with Reagan funding the persecution of the American missionaries.
The awakening that this occasioned in the American church
(that was paying attention).
This was the beginning of Liberation Theology,
and of Orbis Books, bringing Liberation Theology to the States.

I think of the link with the American faith resistance movement
as personified in Dorothy Day, and the Catholic Worker.
The merging of these in Robert Ellsberg,
convert, and former editor of the New York Catholic Worker newspaper,
and also son of Daniel Ellsberg, of the Pentagon Papers
—Robert Ellsberg, who is now editor-in-chief of Orbis Books.

I think of its continuing mission of this Franciscan Community,
and its history among the communities of Latin America, and elsewhere.
Here too the risks and precarious times are well known.
I think of the present pope, a product of that Latin American church,
a damaged survivor of the Argentinian purge.

Acts of the Apostles features the Spirit
taking the message "to the ends of the earth."
The present pope is the return message,
coming back from the ends of the earth, to report in.

And the message gets altered in the transition.
It comes back from the margins of the world
with a need to identify with the marginal in society.
Like a sound wave sent by sonar,
it returns an echo with the message that something is there.

Today we hear promise of the Paraclete, the Advocate.
There are many ways to visualize this presence of the Spirit.
One which I favor is prompted by the term "Advocate."

This is what we commonly call the person
who accompanies you to the ER in an emergency.
It is the person who goes with you to the difficult doctor's appointment,
in order to hear the instructions and explanations
that the crisis may make you too distracted to hear clearly.
The Advocate is the one who explains to the emergency personnel
the necessary information that you may be unable to articulate clearly at the time.
The Advocate is the one whose presence
is the assurance that things will be carried through
as thoroughly and safely as possible.

Today we hear these words:
"I will ask the Father,
and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always,
the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept,
because it neither sees nor knows him.
But you know him, because he remains with you,
and will be in you."

Or, in the words of Bert Brecht, author of "The Three Penny Opera,"

"In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times."

The Ascension Of The Lord

May 28, 2017

Acts 1:1-11	The Ascension
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9	God mounts his throne
Ephesians 1:17-23	Seated at the right hand
Matthew 28:16-20	The Final Commission

What do we think about
when we think about the Ascension?

For some, it is a celebration of victory, the task accomplished,
the Son returned to the Father in triumph.

But there is another side to the story.
For the disciples, it is a time of anxious concern.
It resonates in their last question—

"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"
This was what the Messiah was expected to do,
and the time seems to be running out.

And then his departure,
and the mildly reproachful words of the two men in white garments:

"Galileans, why are you standing there looking at the sky?"

And why would it then not be?
The meaning of their lives, as they have now committed them,
has just moved out of sight. What now?

Some time ago I wrote a poem about the disciples' loss and bewilderment
upon the departure of Jesus.

It was written more specifically about the time
between the cross of Friday and the appearances on Easter Sunday.

But it applies here as well.

It reads:

Stones. Stars. Silence.
(The Centurion's Report)

"When Jesus left the tomb behind, he paused
upon the edge of Palestine and night,
then traveled on alone; where he has gone
everyone must go, yet no one had
quite, and no one of his friends would yet.

They, his friends, had scattered under stars
of salt, of mica. Or so at first, but now
they felt the mute imperative to hide
clustered underneath some smoky lamp
up a footworn stone stair behind a vine.

Destinies may alter, planets shift
to new and preferable alignments, soon.
But that is still unknown; meanwhile the night,
riveted across a vacant sky,
glitters above the twelve gates of that city."

The sky is closed for them.
All that matters to them seems to belong to the past.
The future is closed.

These thoughts came to me after I read an anguished plea
from an anonymous person on the social media.
The message said, "God, where are you?"

This cry is not unbiblical. It echoes the cry of Psalm 22,
a prayer that is also on the lips of Jesus on the cross:
"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

A number of things have happened in the past week to elicit the cry.
The President met the Pope, in an exercise of incongruity.
28 Coptic Christians in Egypt were killed on their way to church,
in the ongoing attempt to get the Christians out of the land.

And in Montana, a reporter from the Manchester Guardian
was body-slammed and choked by the candidate for US House of Representatives.
The candidate was later elected, and apologized,
saying that this was not the person he was.
He did not say what person it was instead.
Some have called it "toxic masculinity."
I tend to think of it as a testosterone overdose.

But it was none of these that prompted the cry calling on God to come out of hiding.
No, it was the massacre in Manchester, UK,
that brought this anguish out into public outcry.

As everyone knows by now, a suicide bomber, apparently representing ISIS,
bombed a concert of a singer popular among young girls.
The majority of the killed and wounded were children, young girls.

Not only was this outrageous in the extreme;
it also seemed so cynical and nihilistic
as to deny any positive motivation behind it.

What do these terrorists want, that they would target a concert for kids?
Do they simply want to destroy civilization,
or do they too want a better world?

Trying to understand this, I started reading about the concert and its singer.
I had never heard of Ariana Grande (if I am pronouncing her name correctly).

This is not surprising, since I, as an old, celibate male,
am probably as far out of her target audience of preteen girls as one could get.
However, some things seemed to connect.

An article in Atlantic Magazine ran a sub-headline, that read:
"Her career of female self-determination demonstrates the rights
of religion, sexuality, and expression that much terrorism seeks to undo."

A lot of things are mixed together here,
including women's rights with sexual liberation.

I am reminded of a friend, both a mother and a feminist,
upset last year about the tawdry sexualized Halloween costumes
promoted for little girls going out for tricks or treats.
There is a way in which this version of supposed gender liberation
still doesn't manage to escape the old categories.

At this point, I began to imagine
a strict Wahhabi religious reaction to Western libertinism,
crystalized in what they see as a singer teaching little girls to be sexy.
And they responded in the manner of toxic masculinity, with violence.

So again, I thought of the lines of the poem:

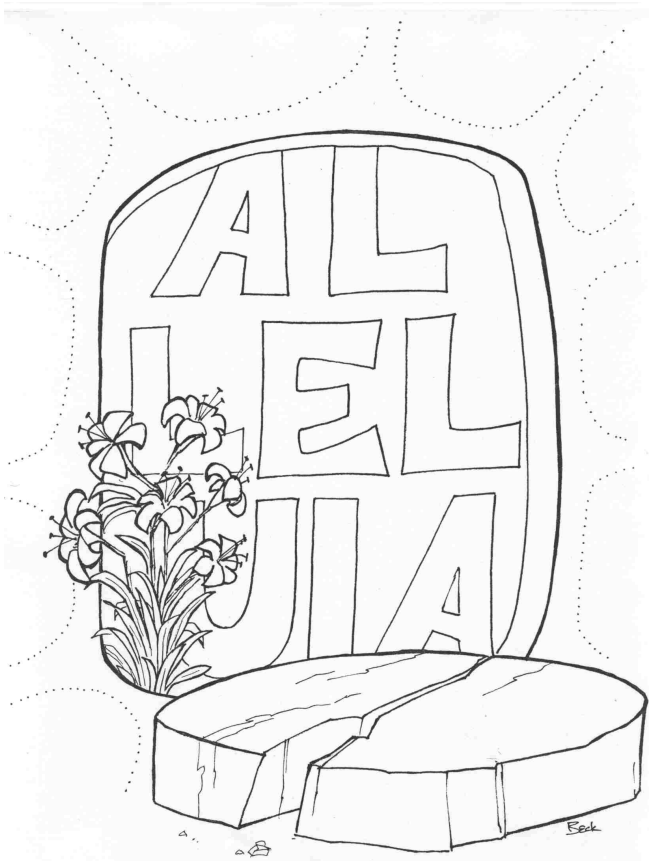
> Destinies may alter, planets shift
> to new and preferable alignments, soon.
> But that is still unknown; meanwhile the night,

riveted across a vacant sky,
glitters above the twelve gates of that city."

Today we are in the place and posture of the disciples.
We hear the promise at the Ascension—
"Galileans, why are you standing there looking at the sky?
This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."

Like the disciples, we are invited to return to the city.
We are invited to give witness,
finding a way to affirm the full human dignity of women,
and in fact all human persons.
It is a witness that respects the conscience of the person.

It is a witness that invites rather than condemns,
and certainly does not take judgment into its own hands, violently or not.
Placing that judgment in the hands of God,
it keeps vigil, striving to show in hope and love
the life of the Christian community of faith.



Pentecost Sunday — Mass during the Day

June 4, 2017

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

The images of Pentecost are wind and fire.
The wind shakes the upper room;
the fire that will consume the earth with love
comes upon each of the persons in the room.

But behind, underneath, these images are others.
The word for wind is the same as Spirit.
And it, in turn, is the same as "breath."
And so John tells us that Jesus
"breathed" on them, and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Also, it is strange language to speak of "tongues" of fire.
Our author, Luke, clearly wants us to think of the tongues, as well as the fire.
And shortly, the disciples will leave the upper room
and speak to the gathered multitudes in tongues, or many languages.

But breath and tongues are bodily images.
They are images that we feel as well as picture.
Our breath and our tongues are part of reality
as we personally experience it.

They also are the components of speech, of proclamation, of witness.
The breath provides the force and the tongue shapes it.
Spoken language is a matter of the teamwork of breath and tongue.

When the disciples leave the upper room to greet the gathered multitudes,
they begin to proclaim, through the gift of the Spirit,
the good news of resurrection.

Leaving the upper room to go out into the public forum,
we have the first step into the wider world,
which will be the topic of Acts of the Apostles.
Outside, in the public space, we hear of the proclamation
to the Jews from many nations, the Diaspora, or Dispersion.

It has long been known that this story is very simple.
It is made of only two elements.
One is the list of nations.
The other is an announcement that repeats three times, like a refrain.

Luke insists that we understand that each national group
heard the Galileans speaking to them in their own "tongue."

It is very possible that Luke is not interested in a realistic description
but rather is arranging a vision for the future of the book of Acts,
as it ventures out into the wider world in the chapters to come.

After all, realistically, how do we envision this happening?
If each is locked in his or her own language,
how do they know that the others have the same experience,
in their own language?

And beyond this, how do they share this information?
Do they understand each other's language as well?
It would seem that Luke is making a point, and emphasizing it three times.

We might object, maybe they all were speaking Greek.
After all, Greek was the common language of the Diaspora Jews.
But if that is the case, it simply sharpens the point the Luke is making.
If they have Greek in common, why is it so important
to note that each hears the proclamation in their own language?

People who are involved in translation tell us
that they are involved in more than two languages.
Two cultures are also part of the equation,
and successful translation moves between the two cultures
as much as between the two languages.

I remember getting a hint of this
watching two Iowa friends who also spoke Spanish.
It was striking to witness.
When they were speaking Spanish,
their hands were waving around enthusiastically.
When they shifted to English (Iowa variety)
their hands dropped to their sides,
unable to contribute to the conversation.

Even if you couldn't hear them,
you could tell which language they were using.
Two cultures here, as well as two languages.

Perhaps Luke knows this as well.
When he insists that each hears the message in his or her own language,
he is proposing a program for the mission into the world.
Luke is saying that the message is to be incarnate—
not imposing a single culture over the native cultures of the world,
but rooting the message in each.

We sometimes speak of thinking globally and acting locally.
This slogan recognizes the tension that comes between the two.
Each culture has its own life and authenticity.
Just as each has its own shortcomings, as well as strengths.

In our historical world mission we often forgot this principle of Pentecost,
and allowed the missionaries to be instruments of European imperialism.
And is not the "universal" language of Latin
actually taking a single cultural expression to be adopted by all.
Where is the respect of the local, living culture then?

We are a universal church.
But we have learned there is a false universalism,
imposing the manners of a dominant culture upon a living but subordinate one.
There is need for the universal to respect the regional,
the global to honor the local.

And we are learning also that there is a false regionalism.
A more common term we hear today is "tribalism."
The term is usually used by those who do not share its values.
It is used to evoke a backwoods ignorance, a narrow-mindedness
that refuses to look beyond its neighborhood to the larger world.

And there is some truth to this, or it could not continue to attract notice.
In the past week, the term has been applied to the narrow set of interests
that has resulted in the rejection of the Paris Accord addressing climate change.
Global worming deniers tend to base their rejection
on the good weather that is happening in their neighborhood,
since that, for them, is the only world that counts.

Pope Francis has spoken out on this planetary issue in his encyclical, Laudate Si'.
He gave a copy to President Trump,
but I believe that the President didn't read it.

But what the Pope is saying is that there is an authentic universalism
and there is also a true regionalism.

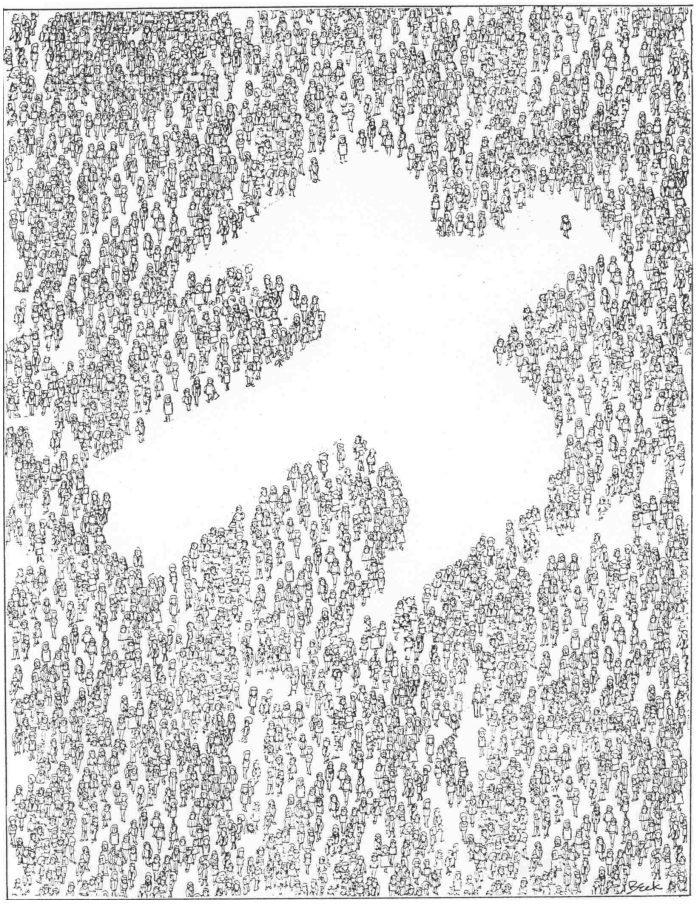
It means participation of the local culture in the welfare of the whole,
and the whole extending due respect for the local.

For the church, this is the gift of the Spirit,
given on Pentecost.

With this in mind, it seems appropriate to cite
the Pentecost vision of Ignatius of Laodicea
in the statement he made famous:

"Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away,
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church is simply an organization,
authority a matter of domination,
mission a matter of propaganda,
liturgy is only nostalgia,
and Christian living a slave morality.

But with the Holy Spirit,
God is with us,
the universe is resurrected and groans
with the birth pangs of the kingdom,
the risen Christ is here,
the Gospel is a living force,
the Church is a communion
in the life of the Trinity—
the body of the living Christ—
authority is a service that liberates people,
mission is Pentecost,
the liturgy is memory and anticipation,
and human action is
God's work in the
world."



The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

June 11, 2017

Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9	After the Gold Calf episode
Daniel 3:52-56	Song of the men in the fire
2 Corinthians 13:11-13	Doxology at the end of the letter
John 3:16-18	God so loved the world…

Like a doxology, a burst of praise,
like the "Glory Be" at the end of a decade of the rosary,
the Feast of the Holy Trinity concludes the specials seasons of the year,
before we return to the Ordinary Time.

And although we name the Trinity every time we make the sign of the cross,
we are still puzzled by it,
and maybe dismiss it by saying it's a mystery, after all.

So maybe it will help to begin by sorting out
three historical phases of Trinity awareness:
The Old Testament, the New Testament,
and the Trinitarian Councils of the fourth century.

The Old Testament doesn't speak of the Trinity.
Its message is the One God,
carrying this revelation into the world like a sacred treasure
amid the many gods of the world around them.

The New Testament reveals the persons of the Trinity,
and how they relate to the human community, their effect in our lives.
Where the New Testament is interested in the effect
of the different Persons on our lives,
the Trinitarian Councils reflect on the three Persons
in their relation to one another,
in the inner life of the divine mystery.

It is the last of these, I think, that people find difficult.
However, when we turn to the effect of the different Persons in our lives,
the message of the New Testament,
we are on firmer ground for understanding.

After all, our relationship to God is many-sided.
God relates to us in different ways—creation, social justice, community support.
The vastness of creation,
the struggle of human history,
and the mutuality of the human family.

But today, we have Paul's word for it.
Our second reading comes from the end of his second letter to the Corinthians.

Again, it is a doxology.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Let that be our guide for today.
The love of God, the grace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit.

The love of God is shown in his creation, an expression of goodness.
In the passage from Exodus today,
telling about the aftermath of the episode with the Golden Calf,
we hear about God's faithfulness to the Covenant,
and willingness to let the past be past, and begin again.

It is an account of the repair of a breach in relationship.
Despite our common Christian caricature,
God is not a God of wrath in the Old Testament,
but one of fidelity and loving-kindness—the marks of the Covenant.
Despite frequent violation, and disappointment,
God is always willing to begin again.
That is the hallmark of God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the New Testament, with Paul's help,
we see this expanding to the history of human community.

As Paul looks at the world in his letters, he envisions a world gone astray.
Following upon the deviation of the first couple, Adam and Eve,
the human race has gone astray.
Inauthenticity has left its mark on the human race,
and we are helpless to correct it.

Each generation consolidates what has gone before,
and makes it increasingly difficult to fight against
the evil that began in freedom
but soon became embedded in the very structures of society.

But God's love reached out to us,
as he sent his Son to renew relations and heal the gap.
This is what I think of as the Master Narrative of the New Testament.
It is a story of reconciliation, of conflict resolved.

Especially in the early part of the fifth chapter of Romans,
Paul speaks of God's love as reaching across the divide
to restore our relationship again.

Three times he makes the point, in three different images.

When we were *helpless*,
when we were *sinners*,
when we were *enemies*,
—God reached out to close the gap the separated us.

We were sinners.
Here Paul is not thinking of a sin list,
but rather of a radical separation from the circle of God's love,
of the original creation.
Like the Prodigal Son, we have gone our own way.

We were enemies, for we had constructed a counter-society.
We had elaborated an inauthentic society
instead of the authentic community.

We were helpless, not able to change things on our own.
It is here that the *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ* enters the picture for Paul.
Because we are helpless to change the pattern, God makes the first move.

Grace literally means Gift.
It is gratuity, an unearned benefit.
It cannot be paid for, but it invites a response.
It can be refused, as when we feel that we are being put it debt.
Or it can be gratefully accepted.
Being the recipients of generosity, we may become more generous ourselves.

It is this gift of reconciliation, despite our not deserving it,
that gets John's attention in the Gospel reading for today.
It is this Master Narrative that he has in mind, when he says,

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

The love of God has expressed itself in the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
And the *fellowship,* or communion, *of the Holy Spirit* follows upon this.

Last week I quoted the words of Ignatius of Laodicea.
They are worth repeating here.

But I realized that it was hard to compare two long statements,
and so I am going to break the statement down into its component contrasts
—without the Spirit, and with the Spirit.

"Without the Holy Spirit,
God is far away,
But with the Holy Spirit,

God is with us,
the universe is resurrected and groans
with the birth pangs of the kingdom;

"Without the Holy Spirit,
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
But with the Holy Spirit,
the risen Christ is here,
the Gospel is a living force;

"Without the Holy Spirit,
the Church is simply an organization,
authority a matter of domination;
But with the Holy Spirit,
the Church is a communion
in the life of the Trinity—
the body of the living Christ—
authority is a service that liberates people;

"Without the Holy Spirit,
mission is a matter of propaganda,
liturgy is only nostalgia,
and Christian living a slave morality.
But with the Holy Spirit,
mission is Pentecost,
the liturgy is memory and anticipation,
and human action is God's work in the world."

So, in Paul's words for today:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

June 18, 2017

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16	A food unknown to your ancestors
Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20	With the best of wheat he fills you
1 Corinthians 10:16-17	We all partake of the one loaf
John 6:51-58	I am the living bread

Today is Father's Day,
and we need to recognize the importance of this role,
and those who have embraced it —our own fathers
and those among our friends and families who are fathers.

It is also Corpus Christi, or, as it is called today,
The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.
And that also calls us to reflection.

There is a moment in the Eucharistic liturgy that never fails to stop me short.
The priest holds up a fragment of the host and says,
"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

The words are from the opening of John's Gospel,
spoken by John the Baptist as he introduces the Messiah Jesus
to the readers and the disciples.

But in the Mass, what are we to behold?
Not a Lamb, nor even a human form.
Behold means to see, but what do we see?
It is a fragment of a host, a piece of bread.
How is this the Lamb of God?

The ready answer to my question will be to point out
that of course it is about the real presence.
God is in the bread.

But this short sentence can be spoken in two ways.
The emphasis can be on the first word—GOD is in the bread.
That reminds us that the divine is present in the Eucharist.

But the emphasis might be changed to the last word: God is in the BREAD.
Which is to say that God comes to us as bread.
Not as gold, though we might wish to surround the bread with a gold monstrance.
Not as a prince, though we might want to place the bread
in the center of a royal ceremony of deference and fealty.

God comes to us as bread.
We think about it, and say, of course, this is a symbol for nourishment,
and it refers to spiritual food to sustain us.

As the reading from Deuteronomy reminds us, we do not live by bread alone.
And so we are reminded of the importance of a spiritual devotion.

And yet one can wonder if this is enough.
In the Exodus story, God came to Israel in the form of bread.
God came as Manna in their time of need.
Bread has many meanings, and one of them is the response to hunger.

And while there are many hungers,
the original is simply that which signals starvation.
It signals a basic human need.

In other words, when God comes as bread, God comes to the needy.
The bread is a promise to the poor,
that they will not be forgotten, not abandoned.

In our political culture today, there are not many advocates for the poor.
We witness a struggle of the middle class versus the very wealthy.
This is a bitter, strongly-felt struggle,
but the poor do not have a stake in the game,
even though they may be the most affected by it.
They lack the leverage to force their demands.

In TIME magazine's list of the 100 most influential people on the planet in 2017,
you find few advocates of the poor.
I found one: Pope Francis.
He has become the emblem of God's promise to the poor,
that they will not be forgotten or abandoned.
The Archbishop of Chicago wrote the short essay that accompanied the photo,
and pointed to Francis's advocacy of refugees.

When we turn to the Gospel reading for today,
we find language that many will find the strongest statement
of the real presence in the Eucharist.
It supports the idea that the way to celebrate this feast
is to emphasize that it is GOD who is in the bread.

And yet, we find that this passage is from the discourse on the Bread of Life
that accompanies the miracle of the loaves in John's sixth chapter.

It is not the Last Supper.
For John has given another emphasis to the Supper.
It is in his gospel that we have the Washing of the Feet, an emblem of service.
Jesus acts out God's promise to the poor as acts of service.

And in that first scripture from the book of Deuteronomy,
we have the words of Moses as he stood on the far shore of the Jordan,
knowing that he would not enter the Promised Land,
but that he still had some words for those who would.
In today's passage he is warning about the risks of prosperity, and complacency.

Now, he tells them, you have the manna for your needs,
but when you become settled, and eventually prosperous,
you will be tempted to move beyond God,
to take for granted the promises in the days of need and of manna.
But it is not by bread alone the we live.

Israel kept this warning on the books,
inscribed here in the book of Deuteronomy,
because, of course, that is what happened.
And it continues to happen.

Once the crisis is past, the religious fervor isn't felt so strongly.
Faith is no longer fashionable.

Which allows us, I think, to return to the two meanings of the phrase,
God is in the Bread.
Both are true.

But the truth is by way of the realization that God comes as Bread,
that God has a promise for the poor
as is not very well represented in the priorities of society.
A Eucharistic spirituality that fails the service-to-the-needy test is suspect.

On the other hand, the piety of the poor, as the pope loves to point out,
is uncomplicated and heartfelt.
It is because of God's promise to the needy
—that God is in the BREAD—
that their spirituality, or faith, is so genuine
—that GOD is in the bread.

We can take our cues from them,
if not from Moses and the prophets.

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 2, 2017

2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16	The prophet repays a kindness
Psalm 89:2-3, 16-19	In praise of the king
Romans 6:3-4, 8-11	Baptism into death
Matthew 10:37-42	The cost of discipleship

Whoever receives a righteous person
because they are righteous
will receive a righteous person's reward.

The words conjure up images of a just and peaceful universe,
in which the righteous are rewarded and all is well.
It is a picture-book image right out of a Norman Rockwell painting,
fit for the wholesome and patriotic season of this five-day holiday.

But then, there are these other words:
Whoever receives a prophet
because he is a prophet
will receive a prophet's reward,

And here we wonder about the prophet,
and who are the prophets,
and what constitutes a prophet.

So, for our benefit, the first reading presents us with a prophet,
the prophet Elisha.

(And here I must say something about the pronunciation of his name.
I say E-LIE,sha, while others say E-LEE-sha.
As a brief recourse to online sources will demonstrate,
advocates take a position on both sides of this debate.
But I will stick with how I have long pronounced it.)

All the conversation about Elisha tends to focus on his spectacular miracles.
This is more interesting, perhaps.
But there is another side to this historical figure,
and that would be the political involvement at the core of his story.

Most notably, in this department, was his role in instigating
the revolution that overthrew the dynasty of Omri in Israel,
and launched that of Jehu, as recounted in the ninth chapter of 2 Kings.

He was a man of some consequence.

And so that is one dimension of the prophetic
—intervening in the name of truth and faithfulness.

As Christians, we are called to be righteous persons.
But there is also a prophetic side to Christian discipleship.
It is not always noted, or honored.
Christians are commonly expected not to rock any boats.
However, there is still a Christian prophetic tradition, though often ignored.

And here in the extended weekend of July 4,
the prophetic community finds itself
in its usual conflicted feeling about that holiday.

Although Independence Day honors the common commitment
marked by signing a piece of paper
—a declaration (not unlike Elisha in his day)—
nationally, we celebrate the violence of war,
with the violence of explosives and military display.

And if we need further instruction on the meaning of the prophetic calling,
we have those words in the gospel for today
that spell out rather decisively the costs of discipleship.

Whoever does not take up his cross
and follow after me is not worthy of me.
Whoever finds his life will lose it,
and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

But if Elisha tells us what the prophetic vocation is,
the Shunamite Woman tells us something more.

Prophecy can be a lonely business.
Besides the prophet, who often stands on the front lines,
there is the *prophetic community* that supports the prophet.
It is a calling to what is sometimes referred to
as the care and feeding of prophets.

So while there is a Christian prophetic tradition, one often ignored,
this is not the case with certain communities of witness,
such as certain congregations of religious women
and justice communities, like the Catholic Worker.

We all know examples.
Out of the many, I think of one—Sr. Dorothy Marie Hennessey.
And of the many memories, I think of the time she was transferred
from prison to the Elm St. Correctional Facility,
and her wry comment that at one time
she was on the board of directors for that place.

For me that captures much of the witness role of prophecy,
with its struggles and its ironies.

And insofar as she was not acting on her own
but as a witness to the common faith of a community, despite its differences,
this was also a witness of the prophetic community.

Whoever receives a prophet
because s/he is a prophet
will receive a prophet's reward,

But what if the prophet's reward is to be rejected?
What if it involves losing one's bearings, if not exactly life itself?
What it means losing one's place in society,
becoming a pariah, dismissed and discounted?

That is, of course, until things turn out as you said,
and so afterward, when you are gone, you get honored.

But the reward in the gospel is not that, for:

Whoever finds his life will lose it,
and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The reward is actually that of finding your life,
finding yourself,
finding what it was you thought you were losing.

So it is of the prophet;
and so it is of the prophetic community.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 9, 2017

Zechariah 9:9-10 Procession of the Prince of Peace
Psalm 145: 1-2, 8-11, 13-14 I will praise you, my king and God
Romans 8:9, 11-13 The resurrection life of the Spirit lives in you
Matthew 11:25-30 I am meek and humble of heart

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am meek and humble of heart …

What do we think of when we hear the word "meek"?
I expect that we conjure up a vision of the person who seldom speaks at parties,
the wall flower who watches the others mingle.
It is the person who seldom speaks up when the conversation gets lively.

It is this image of the meek, I think,
that has prompted a number of images of Jesus,
looking not so much gentle as timid, not so much kindly as compliant.

But the English word differs from the Greek word it translates.
Matthew owns this word in the New Testament.
Of the four instances in the New Testament, three are in this gospel.
In the Greek, the word means gentleness, and more.
It combines this with forcefulness—"strength in gentleness."

So when Jesus says *"I am meek and humble of heart,"*
we are to include a certain strength of purpose and effect,
a strength that is exercised with consideration and kindness.

In another place, Matthew shows this more clearly.
As Jesus enters Jerusalem at the conclusion of the gospel, leading into the passion, Matthew quotes a passage from the prophet Zechariah:

"'Behold, your king comes to you,
meek and riding on an ass,
and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

And of course, this is today's first reading.
So we know that the liturgy wants us to think of it,
and the quality of meekness.

In his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is going to make a claim
for himself and for the kingdom of God.

You will remember that as a child, he and his family
were banished from the territory by King Herod,
who saw him as a rival, the Messiah King
that Israel had been expecting for generations.

Jesus has never returned until now, and so he comes to make his claim.
And upon entering, he clears the temple.
This is what Matthew views as a king coming in meekness.
It also includes assertion.
And while it knocks over some tables, it avoids harming persons.

This kind of action is reminiscent of the campaigns of Mahatma Gandhi.
Even more, I am put in mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.,
who brought Gandhi's vision to America,
and showed how it was also in the gospel.
It was part of the Gospel message itself.

In his letter from the Birmingham Jail,
King is defending his nonviolent campaign in that city
against his fellow African-American pastors,
who are criticizing him for disturbing the fragile equilibrium.

They charge him with raising tensions. He writes,
"I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension."
I have earnestly opposed violent tension,
but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension
which is necessary for growth."

They charge him with extremism.
He cites the Biblical and Christian precedents.
He mentions Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace.
He mentions the early Christians facing the lions in the arena.
And he cites the example of Jesus.

"In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified.
We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime
—the crime of extremism.
Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment.
The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness,
and thereby rose above his environment."

And so Martin Luther King, Jr., by his actions as much as by his writings,
has shown us what the Gospel dramatizes about Jesus,

who returned to confront the powers,
in the name of love, truth, and goodness,
and who refused to abandon those values despite fierce opposition.

Martin Luther King translates into action
that which Matthew the Evangelist tags as "meek and humble."
A form of fierce, firm love.

This is a love that includes a sturdy care for those who are loved.
It does not back away from "tension,"
but it refuses to harm, even those who oppose it.
It will not compromise the well-being of those in its care,
but it is willing to listen to the other side.
It looks for a larger truth that will include
the hopes and dreams of those on all sides of the struggle.

There is one more instance of the word in Matthew's Gospel, and we all know it.
It is one of the Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount.
There are eight of these, and the third one says,
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Up till now, the meekness refers to Jesus, but here it refers to his disciples.
They too are meek, and humble of heart.
They too are to exhibit strength in gentleness.
A prominent feature of the divisions among us today
is the anger and dismissiveness with which we, on each side, stigmatize the other.

A standing presumption, in the social media that rules the discourse in our day,
is that those who disagree with us are fools,
or that we are fools for disagreeing with them.
A primary objective in the twitter world
is to say things that make the other side angry.
When we do that, we win.

One could go on. And on.
That is enough, I think, to evoke the contemporary world of discourse.
The simple point I am making here
is that we are far from the world evoked by Matthew's word, "meek."

Where at one time we might have asked the gentle to be more assertive,
in order to fill out the meaning of the word,
today we might see a different need.

Today we might want to ask the assertive, ourselves included perhaps,
to be more gentle in our assertion.
Of course, that would deprive us of the delight in zinging the other.
But perhaps that is the point.

Again in the words of the Letter from Birmingham Jail:
"Was not Jesus an extremist for love:
'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you,
do good to them that hate you,
and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'"

As Gandhi was showing us,
as Martin Luther King was trying to tell us,
as the gospels, including Matthew, show Jesus modeling for us,
it is only through strength in gentleness, and gentleness in strength,
opening to the other's cause even while holding firm to our own,
that reconciliation comes about.

And that perhaps adds a meaning to the rest of the beatitude:
Blessed are the meek, *for they will inherit the earth*.

The earth is indeed at stake,
and inflicting injury without a chance of healing will not save it.
Only the outrageous, counterintuitive remedy of love can do that.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 23, 2017

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19	You judge with clemency
Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16	Lord, you are good and forgiving
Romans 8:26-27	The Spirit himself intercedes
Matthew 13:24-43	The weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast

Flannery O'Connor is coming to be acknowledged
as among the more important American authors,
and certainly one of the most important *Catholic* American authors.
Living on a farm in Georgia with her mother and a flock of peacocks,
she died early, a victim of Lupus.

I think of Flannery when I come to passages in Matthew's Gospel
like the ending of the story of the Weeds and Wheat:

"… they will collect out of his kingdom
all who cause others to sin and all evildoers.
They will throw them into the fiery furnace,
where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.
Then the righteous will shine like the sun."

Flannery's novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, takes its title from Matthew 11:12
—a passage that is found only in this Gospel.
Her view of Christianity was uncompromising
and she favored violent action as a way of shocking us out of our complacency.

And yet, when Jesus delivers that line, he is talking about John the Baptist.
Why should that matter?
Well, when we focus on the individual stories,
we tend to miss the larger story that makes sense of the whole.
Matthew has a special way of telling the story of Jesus and John,
and this is part of it.

Jesus, after his baptism, preaches and teaches along the lines favored by the Baptist.
His message is that the divine judgment is soon,
a time of radical decision for those who would survive.

De-cision literally means cutting-away,
and John favors images of cutting and burning
—the axe lies at the root of the trees,
and every tree without fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

While Jesus continues to use this language and imagery,
he makes three significant changes in what he learned from John.

First, he moves from John's desert, the site of warning and apocalyptic fire,
back to the villages of Galilee, where he begins a mission of retrieval,
restoring individuals and reclaiming communities.
Still warning, but also working to renew.

Secondly, Jesus makes the hallmark of his mission works of healing,
both of individuals and of villages.
This is a surprise for John, who later will send messengers from prison,
where his efforts have landed him, to ask Jesus
if he is the one who is to come, or should they look for another.

Jesus answers with images from the prophetic book of Isaiah,
which speak of healing, and restoring the deserts to the green life of forests.
Just the opposite of John's defoliating axe.
It is on this occasion that Jesus utters the line
that Flannery O'Connor uses for the title of her novel.

Thirdly, while Jesus keeps the language of judgment,
he postpones the time of judgment indefinitely.
John is talking about God's judgment coming tomorrow.
The winnowing fork is in his hand.

Jesus, however, talks about God's judgment at the end of the age.
The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.
Just as weeds are collected and burned up with fire,
so will it be at the end of the age.

But in this parable of weeds and wheat, we find a fourth thing, a further message.
The owner of the wheat field tells the servants
who are eager to pull up the weeds that they should let them stay.
Harvest time is when the sorting will take place.
They themselves are not to make the judgment.
That will be God's, at the end of the age.

But what does this leave for the servants of the farm,
or to make the translation, the disciples of the kingdom?
If they are not to call out the false weeds, what is there for them to do?

It is here that we understand why Matthew has gathered
two more parables in this place: the mustard seed and the yeast.

The parable of the mustard seed is a humble comparison for the kingdom of God.
In fact, mustard is an invasive plant, then and now.
For farmers, it is a weed.

So there is irony in Jesus' speaking of the mustard plant
as providing shelter for the birds, who dwell in its branches.

That line is from the Jewish tradition about the cedars of Lebanon,
the grand evergreens that provided a suitable image for the great empires,
which offered shelter and a place to flourish.

But Jesus' kingdom is not like the empire of the Pharaoh of Egypt,
or of Nebuchadnezzar of Mesopotamia.
It is more like a weed, a humble mustard plant.

And so we understand better why the servants are not to pull up the weeds,
for it is a matter of perspective.
To the "world" the kingdom of God may appear to be a weed.
And for those who take their cues from the standards of the world,
they may be uprooting the true plant,
mistaking the empire for the kingdom of God.

But then, how can the humble kingdom change the world?
What is the work of the kingdom for the disciples,
if it is not creating another empire
in the image of the powerful kingdoms of old?

It is at this point we come to the parable of the yeast.
For the people of Judah, yeast was a handy symbol for corruption,
because it worked silently and secretly, and still changed everything.

It is for this reason that, for instance, leaven, or yeast,
was cleared out of the house for Passover,
and they ate unleavened bread.

And so when we come to this parable,
which Jesus said a woman "hid" in three measures of wheat flour,
it represents silent and unassuming work that transforms everything.
The kingdom of God is like this.

From the point of view of the "world," it is akin to corruption
because it works its alternative set of values into the culture,
quietly changing that culture.

There is, then, work for the disciple.
It is not force, but persuasion.
Not coercion, but invitation.
It leaves the judgment up to God in the final sorting-out.

It is this, I think, that we respond to in Pope Francis's vision of Christianity,
that also sets his opponents at odds with him.
It is this vision that brings us to question the ambitions of Christian power
in the halls of government.

This kingdom of God doesn't so much work from the top down.
Rather, it works from the inside out,
changing everything.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 30, 2017

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12 Solomon's True Treasure
Psalm 119:57, 72, 76, 77, 127-130 More precious than gold
Romans 8:28-30 Conformed to the image of his Son
Matthew 13:44-52 A Treasure, a Pearl, a Net thrown in the sea

Images of treasure and great wealth crowd the readings today.
It raises questions of what we value, what we desire.
And behind this, I think, lies another question, and that is about prayer.
How do we ask God for what we desire?
And, with this, how do we think about God, the giver of gifts?

The story of Solomon's dream is a familiar one, and a favorite.
Solomon asks for wisdom, rather than riches, or a long life,
or (and I would not pass this over) the life of his enemies.
These are all the marks of an ancient monarch.
And God, pleased that Solomon has asked for wisdom instead of these things,
decrees that Solomon should have them all
—wisdom, riches, a long life for himself, and the life of his enemies.

The person telling Solomon's story is using techniques of ancient storytelling
—the dream, the wish that is granted, and so forth.
And it appears that he placed in the mouth of Solomon words addressing God
in the manner that Solomon's subjects would address the king himself.

In those days, it seems, one approached the king
with caution and carefully chosen words.
And so Solomon speaks to God.
It comes very close to flattery.
And we find this impulse to use flattery in prayer elsewhere, as well.
Sometimes the words of the liturgy itself come very close to flattery.

I have often been puzzled by flattery.
Does anyone is power actually want this?
I did not need to search far for examples.
Our present administration in Washington DC provides ample example.

I think of when the President assembled his cabinet for the media
and made each of them utter fawning praise for the cameras.
I think of the fate of those, such as Attorney General Sessions,
attacked for failing to provide adequate perceived loyalty to the President.

So yes, it appears that there is a place for flattery in some circles of power.

This helps me understand the role of flattery in history,
among ancient rulers and oriental potentates.
    It is entirely possible that flattery was required and rewarded.

But flattery seems a poorly chosen mode of speech for prayer.
Consider some of its features.

It is *manipulative*. It tries to get what one really wants by indirection,
talking up the boss, in hopes that the boss will deliver.

It is *condescending*, in that it seems to believe
that the boss is clueless about what the seeker is up to.
    Or else that the boss is so ethically disabled as to want the flattery,
    even knowing that the praise is not genuine.

It is *less than candid*, in that it harbors a hidden agenda that lies beneath
the flowery words that are served up for the boss's consumption.

All of these seem to suggest that flattery is not the best mode of speech for prayer.
    After all, who is being fooled?
    What is the image of God at work
    that would suggest that flattery works in this situation?

And furthermore, whose agenda is in charge here?
How is it that we know better what is important to us,
and we are required to cajole God into recognizing our need?
    Something is amiss here.

Sometimes in our official prayer, I have the sense
that we are speaking like subjects of an oriental potentate,
and are asked to relate to God in that way.
    Perhaps that made sense when potentates were the order of the day.
    But the questions remain.

In this sense, I am reminded of another passage from Matthew's gospel.
In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of prayer.
    His advice is "when you pray, do not multiply words,
    as the Gentiles do." (Matt 6:7)

When we come to the parables for today, we again encounter treasure,
items of value, like the great pearl.

The treasure finder is not seeking a treasure.
The pearl merchant is seeking, but his find far exceeds his expectations.

The image of God is one of bestower of gifts,
gifts far beyond what the seeker on non-seeker expected or thought to desire.
God, in this setting, is not one who needs to be wheedled for favors.
And the response of the finder is one of total response to the gift.

To be fair, the story about Solomon is saying that he does something similar,
though couched in terms that may raise questions for us.

Jesus's parables are about the Kingdom of God.
The word "kingdom" also reminds us of Solomon, the great king.
But there is something different happening here in the parables of Jesus.

In the Kingdom of God, the discovery is also one of self-discovery.
There is a way in which the total response to the finding of treasure or pearl
signals a change in the finder's life,
and in turn, a rediscovery of purpose and mission in that life.

Focus enters the picture; commitment turns out to be total.
The totality of the response is such that it leaves the past behind.
After all, if the pearl merchant sells all for the one pearl,
has he not said farewell to his pearl business?
Has he not embarked on a new stage in his life?

Here the relationship with God, that is signaled in the parables,
is one of relinquishment to the program of one who can be trusted,
ultimately and completely.
In Paul's words for today,
"We know that all things work for good for those who love God."

This posture of the believer has abandoned the pose
of setting the terms for the relationship.

The discovery that God cannot be fooled,
but whose knowledge, in fact, runs ahead of our own,
has a plan for us, a task, a role,
allows abandonment of my secret plans for talking God into what I want.
So much for the methods of flattery.

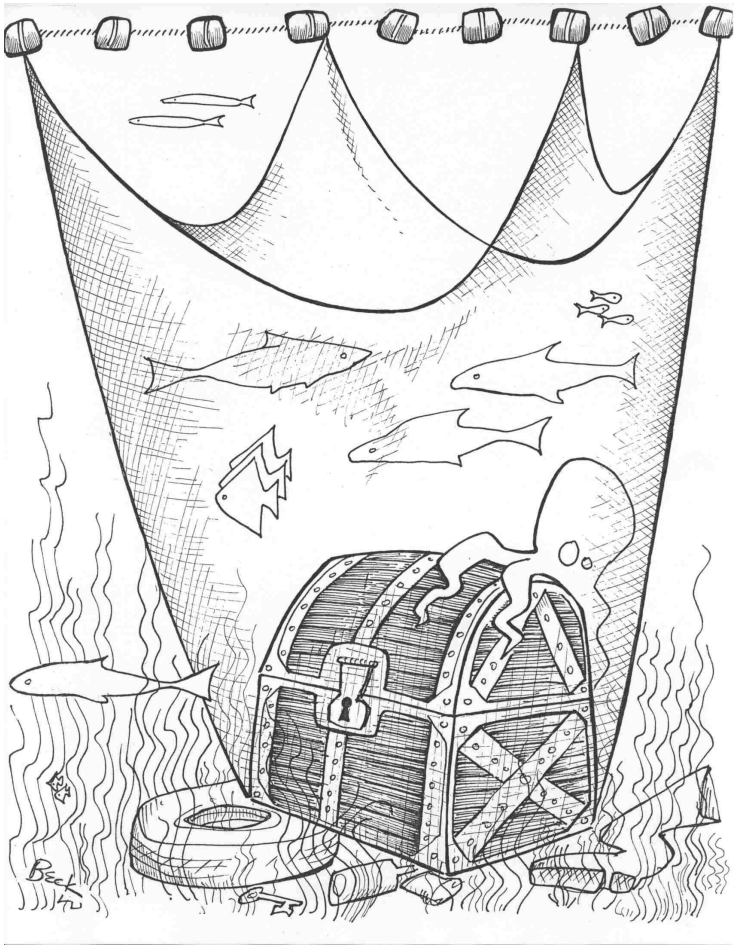
Another passage from this gospel comes to nag at us.
As Jesus completes his ministry in Galilee,

and turns toward the task ahead in Jerusalem,
he tells Peter, "For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:25).

We might replace the word "life" in this saying with the word "self,"
and see a fuller dimension of Jesus's invitation.

Perhaps that final parable about the net can also be read
as another word to Peter, the fisherman.
Do not be surprised that not all you invite will accept the invitation.
After all, there is human freedom.

But allow the sorting out to come later, at the hands of God,
not you.



Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

August 6, 2017

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14	The Son of Man coming on the clouds
Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 9	The Lord is king; the clouds surround him
2 Peter 1:16-19	This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased
Matthew 17:1-9	Jesus is transfigured on the mountain

Some four decades ago, Bishop Maurice Dingman of Des Moines
gave a homily on this day that forever fixed in my mind two memorials
—that of the Transfiguration and that of Hiroshima,
the first instance of atomic weapons used on human populations.
There would be one more, three days later, that of Nagasaki,
and there would be no more after that.

A comparison between these two memorials might draw out
the contrast between the diabolical and the divine.
And certainly the ethical questions force themselves upon us.

But we might look deeper into how each of these teach us about the other.

First, the diabolical, Hiroshima. It should not be forgotten.
It should not be passed over as if mentioning it is somehow in bad taste.
It is part of the reality that makes us what we are as Americans.
The atomic experiment was followed by nuclear tests, notably on the Marshall Islands.
A direct consequence of that are the Marshallese living among us,
and working here at this motherhouse.

In marking this anniversary we mark a moment
in which human history turned a corner, with no going back.

It was a revolution in awareness.
We learned that the building blocks of ordinary matter—atoms—
contained the power to obliterate us.
Beneath the ordinary daily surface of life there was an inferno.

The sun, in fact, is an example of an ongoing nuclear explosion.
Energy is the hidden face of matter.

At one time, being the chaplain on site during the Clarke fire,
I reflected upon that experience in a poem,
entitled “The Clarke Fire as a Drill for Global Conflagration.”
It made a similar point about this sudden shift in awareness.

> … and we learned how every surface was a shell
> with something possibly hot beneath it

and how at any point could blossom out
without reason or need of explanation,
maybe at a touch with abstract flame,
for all the familiar world was hidden fire.

And certainly, in this new awareness
we acquired the burden of a considerable responsibility.
We discovered that we human beings controlled
the very existence of the human race itself, to exterminate if we wanted.
This realization condensed into a single experience a truth
that was always true and continues to be. But the realization was stunning.

And with this, we were saddled with an overwhelming ethical question.
What were we to do with this knowledge, this new condition?

The bombing of Japan is sometimes justified on the basis that it ended the war.
But if 150,000 deaths can justify the end of the war,
how many deaths would it take before we would overstep this boundary,
and declare the action unjustified?
When we think about it, we know that the answer to this question
would be to admit no limit.
In other words, no ethical judgement is allowed.

We have strained ethical thinking to its limits.
And knowing this, you and I have lived most of our lives in the nuclear shadow,
knowing how fragile this world is,
and how just beneath the surface is a fire,
just behind the veil is a path to destruction.

In addition to the diabolical, we mark the divine.
Today we also celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration.
There are similarities in the manifestations of fire and brimstone,
and in that, the glimpse of ultimate reality.

In the Transfiguration story, we look behind the veil.
We go up the mountain, away from daily reality, closer to the heavens,
where the veil is taken away, and we stare into a different dimension of reality.

In the theophany, the divine is seen as the underlying, ultimate presence.

At one level, this vision is similar to the nuclear awakening.
We see beyond the surface of ordinary reality.
But now, God is the ground of being, and the world is charged with that reality.

I am reminded of another poem,
a sonnet by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins,
titled "God's Grandeur." It begins:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed.

In the Gospel, the Transfiguration occurs just when the gospel narrative
turns from the villages of Galilee toward the long journey to Jerusalem
and the events destined to take place there.

Dark days lie ahead, but on the mount of Transfiguration
the disciples are given a promise that the trauma is not the last word.
Resurrection life stands on the other side
of the devastation they are about to experience.

We ourselves are sometimes doubtful about the Resurrection.
We have questions.
We are caught up in the dailiness of our lives, with the rugged physical world
which preoccupies us as we work out our destinies.

This glimpse behind the screen is for us as well.
Hopkins' poem continues:

> Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

This promise of the Transfiguration
stands at the opposite pole of the threat of the Bomb.
It promises a living future, beyond the trauma.

But it also contains the ethical question.
(Here too we have a parallel with the new almost paralyzing awareness
given by Hiroshima.)

In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has become human.
One of the corollaries of that truth is that we as a human family
are given responsibility for the creation, for the world in which we live.

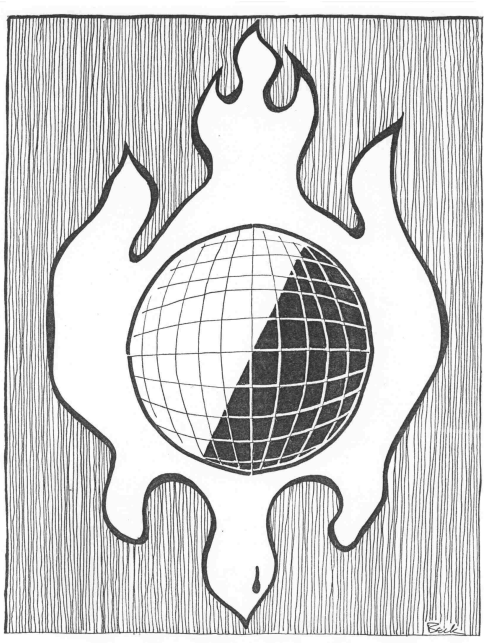
But now the new responsibility is seen differently.
No longer is it a matter of being thrust unwillingly and without preparation into a world of ultimate risk.
For now we see that the responsibility is ours by assignment.

We are children of God.
In Sanctifying Grace, we share in the divine nature.
And as disciples of Jesus we are accountable to the welfare of the world, in the created world of nature as in society
—something P. Francis has so insistently pointed out.

But the Transfiguration is not only the burden of awareness and responsibility, it is also the promise of final assurance.

Or, to complete Hopkin's sonnet:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.



Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 20, 2017

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7	A house of prayer for all peoples
Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8	Let all nations praise you
Romans 11:13-15, 29-32	A word to the Gentiles
Matthew 15:21-28	Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

Tomorrow the sun will darken,
night will come in the middle of the day,
birds will sing their twilight songs,
and people will stare at the sun with special lenses.

In the Middle Ages it would be considered a dire omen.
But in today's world it is a natural event,
involving the orbits of the moon and earth in their circuit around the sun.

In light of recent news events, coming almost hourly,
some will claim to see tomorrow's eclipse as an omen, in the old manner.
Much has happened in the two weeks since I last spent Sunday morning here.
White supremacist marches, persons injured and killed,
the refusal at the top levels to repudiate these happenings
—all of this calls out for signs from heaven.

It is reported that what they call the "alt-right"
is planning demonstrations in nine cities this weekend alone.

Among the statements published in defense of the marches
is a call to preserve the endangered white European culture
that has brought civilization to America, and to the world at large.
It imagines a coming age in which this culture will blink out,
and darkness cover the face of the earth.

Recently, some Catholic commentators have referred to the old distinction
between Christendom and Christianity. This seems useful.
Christendom refers to the Christian political culture of the Middle Ages;
Christianity refers to the Gospel and its values.
Christendom is about exerting control over society to ensure certain values;
Christianity is about attending to the needs of the marginal.
One is about power; the other about the poor.
One is kingship; the other, servanthood.

Steve Bannon, recently departing from the White House staff,
a Catholic and a friend of certain parties at the Vatican,
might be described as favoring Christendom without the Christianity.
These are broad generalizations, to be sure.
But perhaps they make the point.

And today, while others are consulting the heavens,
we find ourselves consulting the scriptures.
Some would see these two searches as similar,
considering us to be searching ancient writings for signs from the heavens.

But I prefer to think of our appeal to scripture as something else.
I tend to see it as the people of God looking back into their history.
I tend to see the scriptures as the journals of the people of God through time.
We find lessons there, warnings and encouragement for a community of faith.

And today we find evidence of tensions similar to our own.
The passage from Isaiah promises that one day, the day when God's will is fulfilled,
the excluded will be allowed into the sacred precincts of the temple.

The ancient language of inclusion and exclusion was that of the holy and the unclean.
The Holy of Holies was at the center of their world,
in the holy place that was the temple.
This was in the holy city, in the holy land of Israel.
And the farther you went from the holy, the more you entered the unclean.
Until you reached the outsiders, the Gentiles, the unclean.

But on the great day, says the book of Isaiah,
the foreigners will join the chosen community.
Welcoming the foreigners was to bring them into the fold.

This part of Isaiah was written after the exiles returned from Babylon.
They were given a mission to the world, to bring the vision of the one God
to a cluttered pagan confusion of deities and sub-dieties.
It was their gift to the larger world.

But there were many who were unnerved by this responsibility.
They saw themselves as entrusted with a fragile flame in a dark world.
They had to keep it lit.
They felt vulnerable, and had a vision of being overwhelmed.
And so after the return to the land, they circled the wagons.
They guarded the flame against the darkness, against the outsiders.

The passage from Isaiah opposes this vision.
In the fullness of God's plan, the house of God
"shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Clearly, the operative words here are "for all peoples."
The words sound familiar because the evangelists show Jesus quoting them.
At the culmination of his career in bringing the excluded and vulnerable into the fold,
he turns to Jerusalem, the heart of the holy,
and he cleanses the temple saying these words.
"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

This is the background to the gospel story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman.
Matthew chose that name "Canaanite" to remind Israel
of their ancient roots and hostilities, for it was a title out of the past.

Matthew's Gospel was written by a Jewish scribe who became a Christian,
and his views reflect that heritage.
He tells the story of Jesus in terms of the mission to Israel.
Jesus says "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

And it is not until the very end of the gospel, after the resurrection,
when Jesus sends the disciples out to the rest of the world:
"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit."

But that is not yet.
Today we hear about a non-Jewish woman with a daughter with a demon,
a daughter that has her mother beside herself with worry.
There is much about the outsider, the unclean, in this story.
The Gentile world, the unclean spirit, the kosher food laws
—all these are integral to the story.

And then there is Jesus' objection about overreaching his call, his mission to Israel.
His remark bothers us:
"It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."
This seems downright rude, and unwelcoming.
But maybe we need to see it as part of the larger story.
Jesus is shown citing the narrow tradition that he will oppose in the manner of Isaiah.

Or, put otherwise, he cites the Law.
If humans are not to eat unclean food,
but rather throw it to the dogs, as the covenant law has it (Exod 22:30),
then the converse is true—dogs should not eat food fit for humans.

But her response, her quick and witty answer, wins him over.
If the dogs are generally fed outside, they sometimes come in and begs for scraps.
As she—also coming from the outside—has done.

Matthew tells this story because he knows
that the Jesus movement went out into the world,
following the vision of Isaiah 56,
and he wants to show that it was part of Jesus' own vision.
But the time was not quite yet.

We might wish that the Gospels were a little more forthright
in telling us what we are to do.
We might wish that direct commands were given:
welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless.

Well, actually we do have those words,
as in the story of the Sheep and the Goats, also in Matthew's gospel.

But we also have stories,
that tell us about fear and retrenchment,
and the courage to move beyond them.
Stories walk us through the risks,
through the dangers and the demons,
and show us how to get to the other side, beyond them.

Ultimately, the vision is one of welcome.
Or, as today, "O woman, great is your faith!
Let it be done for you as you wish."

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 27, 2017

Isaiah 22:19-23	The holder of the keys of the palace
Psalm 138:1-3, 6, 8	I will give thanks
Romans 11:33-36	Who has known the mind of God?
Matthew 16:13-20	The holder of the keys of the Kingdom

There is a poem by Lord Byron that begins with these words:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

It is called "The Destruction of Sennacherib,"
and reimagines a moment related in the book of Isaiah.

Sennacherib, the Assyrian emperor, had devastated the cities of Jerusalem,
and then turned his attention to the central city of Jerusalem.

But amazingly, overnight the tents of the besieging army surrounding the city
were mysteriously stricken with disaster.

A plague-like illness passed through the camps,
and the army had to withdraw without capturing the city.
It was considered a miracle.

Byron puts it this way:

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

As Isaiah tells the story, two representatives of King Hezekiah
in the negations with the Assyrians were named Shebna and Eliakim.
They were dominant figures in the political scene of the day.

Shebna is thought to have encouraged an alliance with Egypt,
which drew the wrath of Sennacherib in the first place.
And so Isaiah, against the policy, was not a fan of Shebna the Scribe.

But in the passage we heard this morning, that is not the issue.
Shebna was the "master of the palace."
This was something like a Secretary of State, or Royal Chamberlain.
He was in charge of finances and official organization in general.
His symbol was a large key, which hung around his neck like a medal.

But his ambition prompted him to over-reach his place, in Isaiah's view.
His plans for a grand tomb put personal ambition above service.

This little excursion into the world of eighth-century Judah
is prompted not only by the desire to make an obscure reading clearer,
but also because this passage has a subsequent history in our tradition.

For instance, you may have recognized it as the source
of one of the O Antiphons of Advent:
"O Key of David, and scepter of the house of Israel,
you open, and no one shuts, you shut, and no one opens…"

Like the other O Antiphons, this title is given to Jesus, about to be born.
However, as we have just seen, it is not the title of the king,
but rather of the king's chamberlain, his right-hand man.

And with this, we also realize that the Gospel passage for today
does a better job of reading Isaiah.
For the person with the keys is Peter,
the right-hand man of the Messiah-king.

And so, with Peter we return to what Byron called the blue waves of deep Galilee.
But in the Gospel narrative, today's event
brings us to the end of the mission to Galilee,
as Jesus now turns toward Jerusalem, and the final confrontation there.

Peter has capped this part of the story
with his recognition, finally, of the messianic role of Jesus.
In turn, he is recognized as the Rock,
and the person with the Keys.

But now Jesus introduces a new note.
They are not to tell anyone of his status as Messiah.
Immediately he speaks of the need to head toward Jerusalem,
where he will suffer and die, and on the third day, rise.
Peter, speaking for all of them, points out
that this does not fit their expectations of the Messiah.

All Israel expects that the Messiah for whom they are waiting
will turn away the oppressive presence of the imperial powers,
and return Judah to its independence as God's free people.
This talk of suffering and dying will not do.

As we will hear next week, Jesus then rebukes Peter,
for the messianic role as God wants it
is not to be one of conquest and slaughter of the enemy,
but rather one of forbearance and nonviolent response.
Like Shebna, he is confusing roles
—looking to domination of enemies instead of service.

Of course, we are very familiar with this Gospel passage,
having grown up with it as signifying papal authority,
with Peter as the first of the popes.
We always emphasized the authority,
but not so much the temptations of authority.
Yet both are suggested in the words of Isaiah and Matthew.

And this, in turn, brings us to the present person occupying the place of Peter.
And we find that in today's setting, two sides are on display.

For instance, the papacy has two aspects, frequently in conflict.
On the one hand, the pope is a monarch,
a head of state in the oldest continuous monarchy in existence.
On the other hand, he is the bishop of Rome.
The first concerns the exercise of political power;
the second is a pastoral presence.

Power and service.
The one issues commands, expecting compliance.
The other responds to the needs of the dispossessed as demands to be obeyed.

Pope Francis has received resistance against his pastoral efforts,
even his pastoral mindset.
Some feel he is abandoning his role as guardian of the truth.
They distrust his instincts for the poor,
believing that they cause confusion among the faithful.

This past week he invoked his "magisterial authority"
to declare that the liturgical reforms following the Second Vatican Council
are "irreversible."
He has also said that "to speak of 'the reform of the reform' is an error."

This directly confronts those who continue to feel that the Council was a mistake.

In Pope Francis, we are allowed to revisit the tension in the church between alternative visions.

We are allowed to see that tension at work in the highest office.

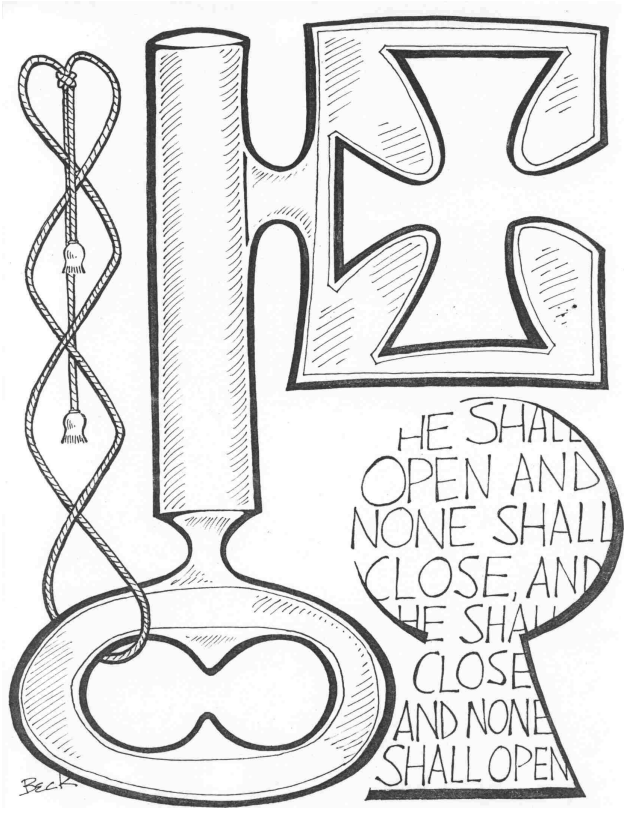
We might have seen this from the beginning.

When he was selected, he chose to wear simple shoes,
giving phrase "shoes of the fisherman" new meaning.

He chose to ride in a Fiat, rather than a limo.

And he chose a name never before adopted by a pope,
yet a name with certainly a distinguished history in the church.

The latest successor of Peter, it turns out, is both authority and servant, both a Pope and a Francis.



Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 3, 2017

Jeremiah 2:7-9	You duped me, Lord
Psalm 63:2-6, 8-9	My soul thirsts
Romans 12:1-2	A living sacrifice
Matthew 16:21-27	Denial and the Cross

"A case can be made that any permanent commitment is actually
a series of recommitments made in the face of changing circumstances."
It is true of marriage; it is true of faith allegiance.

A couple to which I am related comes to mind for me.
Their second child, a son, died in his second year.
This shock alerted them to the need to care for their marriage.

They worked at it,
and for a time were active in the Marriage Encounter movement.
Meanwhile, their own parents went through divorces and remarriages,
to the extent that at one time there were seven grandparents for that family.

And there is the matter of faith commitment.
The late Michael Crosby, a friend of this community,
in his book, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes,*
borrows from the Latin American theologian, Juan Luis Segundo
to describe the faith journey as a "circle of meaning."

I can reframe my faith life upon reaching adulthood,
and either embrace or distance myself from the simple faith of childhood.
In college, perhaps, I become more serious about the faith,
needing to seek deeper, trying to determine what my life is about.
Perhaps I volunteer for a service mission.

Or perhaps, after college, take a year to do service work,
maybe in Africa, or an inner city in America.

But coming face to face with devastation, with profound hunger and neglect,
the situation administers a profound shock to my uncomplicated faith,
and I wonder how God can allow this,
how can God-believers allow this,
or even, how can there be a God?

At this point there is a fork in the road,
one leading to abandon the faith,
another to look more deeply into it.

Turning to the scriptures and questioning the gospel,
I discover that God is a God of the poor.
And I decided to commit my life.

Perhaps I devote my life for awhile in a organization
devoted to advocacy for the disadvantaged.
Perhaps I enter a religious order, with a new commitment,
and so the cycle begins again.

Today's scripture readings re-enact the faith journey as a series of recommitments.
The prophet Jeremiah is making a bitter complaint.
"You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped."

He was called to prophecy in Judah's darkest hour.
The city of Jerusalem and its Temple were about to be destroyed and dishonored,
and it was his task to warn the people.
He did not mince his words, and they did not want to hear them.
They mocked him; they abused him.

The experience brought him to the words we heard today.
And yet, despite the mistreatment, he returns to his task,
confident that God will support him.
But now it is with a full awareness of the cost.

And then there is Peter.
Just a moment ago he declared Jesus as the Messiah,
and was rewarded by special responsibilities by Jesus,
naming him the Rock and the One with the Keys.

But now, when Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem,
announcing the suffering and death that will occur there,
Peter adamantly objects.

Rebuking Jesus, he explains that the Messiah everyone is expecting
is not a weakling, not a loser who allows defeat.

The Messiah is one who will forcibly take control of the situation in Jerusalem,
and return Judah and its people to freedom under a free God.

It will be the end of foreign rule.
It will be the end of humiliation at the hands of pagan warrior gods.

But Jesus responds with knowledge
that was imparted by the Voice at the Baptism, before the disciples were called.
The promise of the Messiah has been revised;
God wants a Servant-like king, who will not come to crush enemies,
for "a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
but he will faithfully bring forth justice."
Peter's ways, and his expectations, then, are not God's ways.

And then comes the shock of renegotiated discipleship.
Before, by the lake, Peter heard,
"Come after me, and I will make you fishers of people."
But now he hears this:
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me."
Now he hears about a cross, and denial of self.

Where was this information back by the lakeside?
Furthermore, would Peter and his friends have followed Jesus
if they heard this version of the call back then?

It will take Peter and the disciples a length of time
before they adjust to the new conditions of discipleship.
Peter, asked to deny himself and take up the cross,
will find himself eventually in the high priest's courtyard,
as Jesus is being condemned to the cross.

And Peter will make a denial, but it will not be of himself,
but of the one taking up the cross.
And we realize that the other disciples have left the scene long before Peter,
who alone has followed Jesus this far.

And yet, this is not the end of the story.
For it is Peter who gathers the disciples after the events of Good Friday.
He is the "rock" who supports the Easter community.

One of the things that distinguishes the human species over all others
is the ability to make a vow.

A pledged commitment requires both the knowledge
of a future narrative stretching before one,
as well as a complete lack of knowledge
of what that future might require of one.

The vow promises to travel that unknown road,
whatever it may bring.

The permanent commitment as an ongoing series of recommitments
takes us to places that draw upon resources we did not know we possessed.
It takes us beyond the world as we imagined it at our earlier lives,
which now seems to us so naive.

In calling us forth into new, unforeseen territories, requiring us to respond,
it transforms us, revealing the fuller person God has created us to be.

When Moses came down from the mountain, after communing with God,
his face shown with a great intensity.
He did not see it, but everyone else did.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 10, 2017

Ezekiel 33:7-9	The watchman
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9	If today you hear his voice
Romans 13:8-10	Love one another
Matthew 18:15-20	Resolving conflicts

Amen, I say to you,
whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

WE have heard these words since we were young. We grew up with them.
And they were always associated with Peter, as in the liturgy a few Sundays ago.
And now we hear them again, but in a completely different context.

Now we hear it as part of a process of conflict resolution.
There is no appeal to authority, but instead
a process of personal reconciliation, face to face.
And if that is fruitless, try it again with one or two others.
And if that is still without resolution, take the matter to the full assembly.

There is no talk of authority figures here.
No mention of the one in charge settling things.
It is rather a community decision.
What this meant in Matthew's time
is a topic of great discussion among the biblical scholars.

But of equal interest is the legacy in the Catholic church.
Two passages, one concerning Peter, the other concerning the Assembly.
Both announcing, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

There are two tendencies in the history of our church.
One focuses on the authority of the pope, and cites the passage about Peter.
The other has received little emphasis in much of recent history.
It focuses on the authority of the church in assembly,
or more specifically, in councils,
and it points to the passage we heard today.

For centuries the emphasis has been on the pope's authority.
But in the Second Vatican Council, the other voice was heard,
that of the larger church.

The Council defined the church as "the People of God."
And in its action it demonstrated the meaning of that definition.

The Holy Spirit was in the larger church as well as in the central authority,
and it needed to be listened to as well.
It was decentralizing, and we welcomed it at the time.

In the aftermath of the Council, there was a dramatic pullback,
reacting against what was seen as the excesses of the council.
The council itself was placed under suspicion by some.
I remember a young cleric at the Vatican announcing
that the bishops had no right to do what they did at Vatican II.

There was a return to an emphasis on papal authority.
Scholars of church history tell us that under P. John Paul II authority was centralized
to a degree exceeding any previous period in the church.
I remember when John Paul announced that he alone
was to make decisions about politics, and we were to follow his lead.
At that time, he demanded all religious who were involved in politics to withdraw.

The current pope has championed the cause of Vatican II
and has worked to decentralize authority.
Just recently, "He insisted that the Second Vatican Council
and its "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy"
"must be carried forward as they are" and declared furthermore
that "to speak of 'the reform of the reform' is an error!"

In his program of decentralizing authority,
he has instituted structures of global representation,
such as the global Council of Cardinals,.

Meanwhile, he has encountered blowback from those who disagree.
These often are those who regretted the Council in the first place.
But those who favor the absolute authority of the pope over conciliar authority
have to deal with the Council of Constance.
You will have heard of the Papal Schism in the 14th century,
when three persons claimed to be pope.

In 1415, the Council of Constance was convened to settle the matter.
They deposed all three popes, and named a new one, Martin V, in November, 1417.

Almost immediately, Martin asserted the absolute authority of the pope.
However, that "absolute authority" itself derived
from the council that had named him,
representing the will of the church.

And still, the contest between papal and conciliar authority continues.

At issue in a one-sided emphasis on centralized authority is authoritarianism.
There are many who take solace in the certainty that it promises.

The oft-stated concern today,
that P. Francis is causing confusion among the faithful, reflects this.

It dreads people thinking for themselves,
and it locates security in an appeal to fixed, unchanging teachings.
Francis, with his pastoral approach,
seems to be favoring other values, such as compassion,
and thus threatening unquestioning agreement of minds.

The primary virtue in the authoritarian perspective is obedience,
as Fr. Jim Barta once noted in an aside:
These three remain, faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is obedience.
It trumps any other virtue, including compassion.

A model for authoritarian command is the military (and the militant church)
for in the army, if you are sending people into palpable risk of death,
strict obedience is necessary. Free thinking is not allowed.

The affection for authoritarianism has risen again in our world,
but now in the arena of politics rather than church.
Trump favors authoritarian leaders in Turkey, Philippines, and Russia.
His model is not democracy, nor is it medieval monarchy, as with the church.

No, his model is the corporate business world.
In the corporate workplace there is no discussion of options.
One obeys or one gets fired.

This is not a model for democratic, or even a fully human, society.

An item in this week's news illustrates this corporation mindset.
Steve Bannon, former counselor to the president, was quoted
as saying that the Catholic Church is taking the side of the Dreamers
because "They need illegal aliens to fill the churches."
Economic interest is what drives corporations, not a sense of compassion.

But that is only part of it.
Bannon's white supremacy is showing, in the implication
that only whites are proper Catholics.
Apparently he thinks that immigrants are substitute worshippers,
and not part of the human family.
He shows no sense of their inherent value.

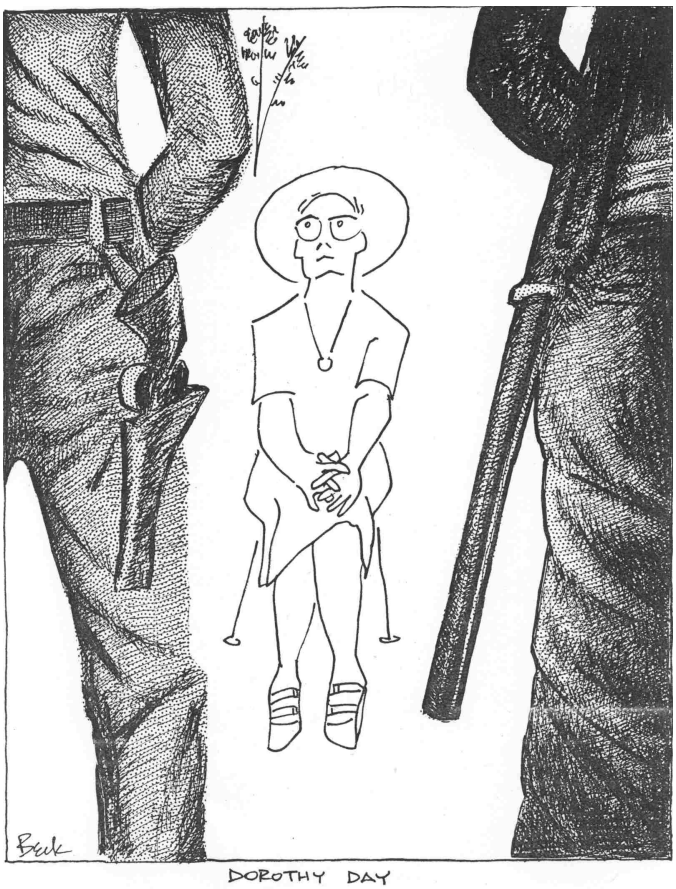
But where are we in all of this?
When we return to this remarkable gospel text,
we are reminded of personal accountability.
We are invited to personal discipleship.

There is a way in which the reading from Matthew asserts this.
Our ingrained reaction in seeing problems is to avoid getting involved,
and letting the authorities take care of it.
This is part of the authoritarian mindset, now filtered down to the members.

When Pope Francis addressed the US Congress,
he mentioned Dorothy Day, among others.

For Dorothy, personalism, in the form of personal accountability,
was the mark of the Christian.
One did not notify the authorities about problems,
hoping that they will take care of matters.
No, one got personally involved, face to face,
sometimes involving two or three others.

There is no need to remind anyone here about the importance taking the initiative.
That is what you do.
However, it is useful to know that such a move is a vital part of our tradition.



Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 17, 2017

Sirach 27:30–28:7	Forgive your neighbor
Psalm 103:1-4, 9-12	The Lord is kind and merciful
Romans 14:7=9	We live and die for the Lord
Matthew 18:21-35	Forgive seventy times seven

Forgiveness is a major theme in our Christian faith.
We repeat that every time we say the Lord's Prayer:
"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

But it is not something that our American culture will tolerate very much.

In our world, "amnesty" is a dirty word, most recently tagged on the President,
called by some "Amnesty Don," as a way of shaming him
for taking up the cause of the Dreamers,
the immigrants who were brought to this country as children.

And it is not only on one side of the political spectrum.
The pardoning of the notorious Arizona sheriff, Joe Arpaio,
has created a hailstorm on the other side.

In our culture, people are not allowed to change,
or to recover from mistakes made when they were young.
Especially if we do not like them.

And the permanent record that social media provides us
makes this refusal to forgive almost absolute.
Something can always be found somewhere online
to assassinate the reputation of people you want to demolish.

So what a surprise it is to discover that God favors forgiveness,
even to the extent stated by Jesus in today's gospel—seventy times seven.

We forget that everyone has faults.
None of us can escape the need to be forgiven.
So when we hear the parable of the unforgiving steward,
we think about how each of us has been in his position.

We are reminded of the "Our Father."
But is the Lord's Prayer saying
that we should forgive *because* we have been forgiven?

This is what one often thinks.
Because I have been forgiven, I know what it means to forgive,
and so I am more likely to do so.
This is where the steward goes wrong.

Or is it saying that *unless* we forgive we will not be forgiven?
This is what the parable suggests in the last part:
because the steward refuses to forgive, he is not forgiven.
This is not the same thing.
And the parable seems to be saying both.

And there is one more thing.
It is something you don't notice right away.
The parable interprets the saying of Jesus
about forgiving seventy times seven times.
The parable is offered as an example of what the saying means.

But there is a big difference between the saying and the parable.
The first is about injury and the second is about debts.
These are different.

When someone sins against you, they harm you.
In the saying, someone has harmed me.
In the parable, someone has generously loaned me money.
When someone loans you money, you have to pay it back.

So the parable talks about debt, and the saying talks about injury.
But it seems the parable interprets the injury as a debt.

This is not inevitable. Harm does not necessarily involve a debt.
Injury is not a debt.
If I am struck by lightning, I am simply injured.
There is no question of trying to pay it back.
(Unless, of course, I am angry at God, for they do call this an act of God.)
But injury by itself is not a debt.
Yet somehow I want it to be.

We can see this in the scriptural background of the saying of Jesus.
In the fourth chapter of Genesis (4:24)
we encounter Lamech, a descendant of Cain.
He wants us to know that he is someone to take seriously.
Lamech's boast is given in a short poem that ends —

"If Cain is avenged seven times
then Lamech seventy-seven times."

Here we find vengeance to be the opposite of forgiveness.
With vengeance, the wrong done me is interpreted as a debt owed.
Vengeance is a matter of paying back a wrong, as if it were a debt.
"I owe you."

But if I forgive, I do not interpret it as a debt. I let it go.

But even if I let it go, it still feels like a balance unpaid.
Why is this?

It is perhaps because the injury is personal?
Perhaps it is as much a message, as an injury, a statement of animosity.
Perhaps we simply do not want to think
that injury can be arbitrary and impersonal.
If it is personal, it has meaning, even if it is one I do not like.

Perhaps it is because we want to find someone else to blame for our troubles.
It is someone who has it in for us.
Striking back helps to make that case.

Perhaps it is because we are afraid we are not respected,
and we are fearful that we never will be.
And so we want to establish our claims to righteousness.

In any case, it seems I am eager to turn an injury into a debt.

On social media, I frequently encounter the advice that says
forgiveness is not only for the sake of the one who is forgiven,
it is also good for the one doing the forgiving.

On the face of it, this seems a selfish motive for forgiving
—I am forgiving you because I love myself, and I want to feel better.

But maybe there is something similar going on here.
Maybe this is what the online advice is getting at.
Maybe having a forgiving attitude is a refusal
to interpret everything that happens to me
as either a debt owed or a debt earned.

That seems to be an improvement in my own spiritual health.
It means letting go of the need for vengeance.

Maybe it means that I have abandoned the practice
of maintaining a mental ledger of sorts
every interaction I have with others,
especially those in which I feel I have been unfairly diminished.

Maybe it means to give up on the idea that all social interchange
is a matter of winning or losing.

That would be a great advance.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 24, 2017

Isaiah 55:6-9	Our God is generous in forgiving
Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18	The Lord is near to all who call
Philippians 1:20-24, 27	Life is Christ and death is gain
Matthew 20:1-16	The Parable of the Vineyard Laborers

The parable of the Vineyard Workers includes a number of theological issues—
distributive justice, that says that goods should be equitably distributed;
contract justice, that concerns the ethics of keeping a contract or covenant;
the need in a just society for a living daily wage; and more.

But perhaps the parable itself focusses our attention on its main concern
— the resentment of the daylong workers.

Note how the parable sets it up.
The owner deliberately pays the last hired first and the first hired last,
and makes sure that the latter can see what is going on.
It is almost as if he is trying to elicit resentment, or envy.

But we might think of this as the ways of storytelling, managing things
so that the issue of resentment is guaranteed to come to the fore,
where we can notice it, and make a point of it.
"Are you envious because I am generous?"

So maybe it comes down to the tension between justice and mercy.
And that particular kind of tension that happens
when someone else receives mercy, and I do not think they deserve it.
And so I resent their happiness.

It is hard sometimes to rejoice in another's success.
I find it is a lot easier to applaud their success,
if it is something that I never would have considered or be able to do.
In these situations I am comfortably objective,
and can recognize their accomplishments with all due enthusiasm.

But when it is something that I myself do, and would have done, it is another story.
Then I can be critical, and resent the fact that they did
what I would have wanted to do, that I think I could have done better.
Or, even worse, something that I know I could not do as well.
In any case, they get all the credit, when it could have been mine.

The literary critic and philosopher, René Girard,
has a theory about envy that might help to shed light on this pattern.
He notes that we learn our desires from observing others,
and what they want.

Someone has compared this to a nursery school,
where a number of little kids are playing together.
One notices that another seems to be enjoying a toy
with an intensity and absorption that gets others' attention.

Noticing the kid's happiness, the onlooker decides that he wants that toy.
For he too wants that happiness.
And so he makes a scene, trying to wrestle the toy away from its present owner.
And so conflict happens, and this is the way of human society.
According to René Girard.

Of course, the most prominent advocate of mercy in today's world is Pope Francis.
This too has created tension.

This past Thursday, the feast of St. Matthew,
Pope Francis mentioned this in his homily.
He said it was interesting how many Catholics today seem to be scandalized
when God shows mercy to someone.
He said, "we often hear faithful Catholics who see mercy at work and ask, 'Why?'"

Speaking of the call of Matthew by the lake,
Francis elaborated. "That man knew he was a sinner," the pope said.
"He was liked by no one and even despised."
But it was "precisely that awareness of being a sinner
that opened the door to Jesus' mercy.
He left everything and followed."

In the Gospel story, Matthew celebrates by inviting Jesus for a meal.
But, the pope said, the Pharisees saw Jesus with Matthew
and were scandalized that he would eat with tax collectors and sinners.
"God saves us, Jesus Christ saves us and these men did not understand.
They felt secure; they thought salvation came from them."

The Pharisees were people who continually repeated,
"The law says this, doctrine says that," the pope said.
"But they forgot the first commandment of love
and were closed in a cage of sacrifices,
(saying), 'We make our sacrifices to God, we keep the Sabbath,
we do all we should and so we'll be saved.'"

In today's parable, presented to us by Matthew, we see this pattern in operation.
Those who worked the entire day, though they are receiving what they agreed for,
are envious of those who are generously given a full day's wage.

Currently in our church there is a public commotion
around Fr. James Martin, Jesuit, and an editor of America Magazine.

It is occasioned by his new book, *Building a Bridge:*
How the Catholic Church and the L.G.B.T. Community
Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion and Sensitivity.

Fr. Martin is attempting to open a conversation. But not everyone is having it.
Most recently, due to a campaign by Church Militant,
a vigorously retro-orthodox watchdog group,
the national Diocesan Seminary, the Theological College of Catholic University,
withdrew a planned lecture of Fr. Martin,
even though the talk was to be on another topic.

Bishop Robert McElroy, ordinary of San Diego, went on record concerning this.
He speaks of a cancer in the church.
His words were: "The concerted attack on Father Martin's work
has been driven by three impulses:

1. homophobia,
2. a distortion of fundamental Catholic moral theology
3. and a veiled attack on Pope Francis
and his campaign against judgmentalism in the church."

But we can look beyond the specific issue
and see the pattern working in our own lives.
Mercy is a blessing when we need it.
But it is a heavy burden when someone we do not like needs it,
and receives it.

Returning to the Pope's Thursday sermon,
we get a sense of how it fits together.

Today, he said,
"we often hear faithful Catholics who see mercy at work and ask, 'Why?'"

There are "many, many, always, even in the church today," the pope said.
"They say, 'No, no you can't, it's all clear, they are sinners,
we must send them away.'"

But, Francis said, Jesus himself answered them when he said,
"I have come not to call the just, but sinners."
So, "if you want to be called by Jesus,
recognize you are a sinner."

But this is a hard admission.
For one thing, it takes away our bargaining position,
the vantage point from which we can condemn the sinfulness of others.

But maybe that's the point.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 1, 2017

Ezekiel 18:25-28	Are not your ways unfair?
Psalm 25:4-9	Teach me your paths
Philippians 2:1-11	He emptied himself
Matthew 121:28-32	A man had two sons

Apparently it was St John Chrysostom who first interpreted
the parable we just heard, about the Two Sons,
as an allegory about the Jews and the Christians.
By this he was able to explain
that the Christians were saved and the Jews were lost.
This was a comforting message to the Gentiles,
despite aligning them with the tax collectors and prostitutes.

More recently, under the weight of 16 centuries of anti-Semitism
culminating in the systematic slaughter of one third of the world's Jews,
Christians have been forced to take a closer look at the gospel.
Including this parable.

A couple of realizations came clear.
First, Matthew wasn't talking about Gentiles,
since the command to go forth to the world, baptizing them,
doesn't appear until the end of the Gospel.

Secondly, the person in the story who is causing the division is not Jesus,
but John the Baptist. It is referring to a split in the world of Judaism.
It began with John.
Something new was in the air, but not everyone could see it.

So it is today. And there are so many ways to talk about it.
We might go with John and his warnings.
Today we have no shortage of warnings.

The hurricanes on one side of the country
along with the wildfires on the other side,
are confirming the warnings about climate change,
though we prefer not to notice.

Or we could speak to the struggle
between the party of the chief priests and elders, on the one side,
and the sinners, on the other.

It occurs to me that similar to the gospel struggle
is the debate within the church today between our own the chief priests and elders
versus those who are in need of rehabilitation,
the repentant divorced and remarried, who want to start a new life.

Just this past week another accusation was leveled against Pope Francis,
calling him a heretic because of his pastoral commitment to compassion.

Here I find myself noting the similarity
between the accusations made against Jesus and those against Francis.
Francis does indeed seem to be the vicar of Christ.

But today there is a third possible homily for this parable.
We might look at the failure of the leaders to respond either to John or to Jesus,
and we can wonder why.

Why, when John came in the way of righteousness, did they not believe him?
Perhaps it was because of their place in society.
When you occupy the center, it is difficult to appreciate the need for change.

And here I think of the Sunday protests occurring across the country,
stimulating the wildest of debates.
I am not talking about protests in church.
No, I am referring to that other Sunday ritual—professional football.
And I am not talking about kneeling in church,
but "taking a knee" during the National Anthem.

The tremendous backlash against the symbol of resistance
that was initiated by Colin Kaepernick,
seemed to prove that it was a perfect venue to make a protest.

The desire expressed by many that it was the wrong time
and the wrong place for this,
that people just wanted to enjoy a ballgame without politics,
the fact that they wanted to have a space
where they wouldn't have to think about such things,
simply that this is what separated them from those
who have no liberty not to think about such things,
since they live with it everyday.

In other words, the issue here is white supremacy.
And the inability to recognize it is not so different

from the chief priests and elders in the gospel story,
who recognize no need to repent.
They are the norm, and therefore are normal.

Once upon a time, I thought about a book about white male supremacy.
The title would be "Like the Sun, I See No Shadow."

Perhaps the title is enough.
From where I stand, I cannot see the shadows, and those who live in the shadows.
This is the plight of the white male American.
We live in the center, and cannot understand easily
why people think there are problems. It takes an effort of imagination.

Perhaps you are white, but not a male.
Then you know the shadow.
You can take that experience and apply to others, in different parts of the shadow.
Or you may decide to hang onto the part
that places you above those in the deeper shadows.

If you are an American who is neither male nor white,
you know your own particular kind of disregard.
Perhaps you are an American living in Puerto Rico.

If you are none of these, neither male, nor white, nor American,
you are almost invisible to me in the center.

I cannot appreciate your need to protest.
I call it ingratitude, unaware of the condescension in this remark.
I want you to protest at some other time, some other place,
where it will not bother me.

Someplace out of sight, where no one will notice you.
Although that is the problem you are protesting in the first place.

Because I cannot see you in the shadows,
I must depend on an act of imagination.

Let's call it holy imagination, because it delivers me from dismissing you,
and also allows me to see my own faults,
including the tendency to dismiss others.

It is holy because it allows me to see the need to believe John,
when he comes in the way of righteousness.

It allows me to see my own need for rehabilitation.
It teaches me that I too am a sinner.
And it further teaches me the character of the affliction
that those in the shadows experience.

And this is called, in its better form, compassion.
And having discovered the need for compassion,
I may finally stop complaining about those who disturb me
with their attempts to get my attention.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 8, 2017

Isaiah 5:1-7	Isaiah's Vineyard Song
Psalm 80:9, 12-16, 19-20	A vine from Egypt
Philippians 4:6-9	The peace of God, and the God of peace
Matthew 21:33-43	Parable of the Vineyard Tenants

In his commentary on this Sunday's Scriptures,
Ched Myers notes that ecological concerns this Sunday
follow upon the feast of St. Francis, this past week.

Myers writes:

> "Isaiah's story realistically describes the social setting
> of early Iron Age highlands Israel
> and the dry-farming viticulture that was so central to it.
>
> The first step was construction of terraces,
> which were designed to minimize erosion
> and to provide sufficient farming space to meet the needs of small villages…
>
> By the time of Isaiah… the slopes had been harvested of their lumber
> and were badly eroded.
>
> To counteract the damage, farmers built retaining walls
> and brought in new topsoil from elsewhere to fill the terraces.
>
> Next the ancient Israelite farmer would lay out the precious vine cuttings,
> planting them carefully, because the future depended upon their survival.
>
> What followed was the laborious process
> of keeping the vineyard free of weeds and briars,
> and years of hoeing and pruning mature vines.
>
> The "watchtower" was to protect the vineyard from predation
> by both large animal and humans;
> the stone structure also provided shelter for laborers.
>
> A hedge or stone wall would also have been erected around the vineyard
> to screen out smaller wild animals and browsing herds.
>
> Finally, a wine vat would have been carved out of soft limestone of the hillside.
>
> This signaled a communal operation,
> where the whole village would gather for the annual grape crushing."

It is this elaborate process, so central to Israelite society,
that provides a prominent metaphor for Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

> Psalm 80 today makes the comparison,
> "A vine from Egypt you transplanted; you drove away the nations and planted it."
>
> The psalm details the planning and work
> that went into God's settling of Israel in the land.

Isaiah builds on the same image.
But in both cases the writer accuses the caretakers,
the leaders and people of Israel, of failing to perform their task,
leading to the ruin of the vineyard.

The first chapter of Genesis elaborates that same kind of image
in describing creation of the world.
Six days of laying the groundwork, setting out the parameters and filling them in,
are followed by introducing the human couple.
They are to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air,
and all the living things that crawl on the earth."

As with Israel, the human family are presented
as custodians and caretakers of the green garden given them.
They are to guard and cultivate it.

As Matthew indicates, Jesus took up the parable of the vineyard,
and reworked it for his own day.
Here the tenants of the vineyard represent the failed managers of the day.

What was their problem?
They were keeping an unfair share of the produce, not paying what they owed.
And in the final analysis, they attempted to appropriate the whole vineyard.
It would appear that their concern was more for obtaining a profit
than for maintaining the vineyard.
They do not seem to have a feeling for the vineyard.

In the ecological comparison we have been pursuing, we can find parallels.
Naomi Klein has written extensively about the problem
of corporate profit getting in the way of care of the earth.
In today's world, there needs to be a way to monetize the matter,
if it is to be successful.

When we look closely at the conflict between profit and progress,
we find a contradiction.
The parties that would exploit the earth for profit,
even to the reduction of its lifetime, are thinking that they are gaining something.
And yet, if the cost is despoiling the earth, where will they go?
Where will they gather to enjoy their gains, if the earth is not sustained?

There is no shortage of dystopias describing this dilemma.
I have not seen the current version of the movie, "The Blade Runner,"
but the first version made a deep impression on me.
The elites of society had moved somewhere off-planet,
and left the earth to devolve into warring gangs in crumbling cities.

More recently, the Pixar animated film, “Wallee," took a similar view.
Machines maintained the planet,
while the human population circled the earth in large satellites,
where they watched moving images on large screens.

Christian theology often flirts with this division
between the earth and an off-planet home.
Among fundamentalist churches, a fascination with the book of Revelation
has taught many that this earth will be left behind to perish
while our true home is elsewhere.

Even in our own Catholic vision this often takes hold.
It often appears, for instance, in the prayers derived from the old Latin liturgy,
that promise a true home in heaven, not here.

And against this we have the witness of Scripture,
where Genesis insists we are to treat this place as our home.

And of course, these realizations have come home to us
with the urging of Pope Francis, who speaks to us of “our common home,”
and the need to take loving care of it.

Matthew reports Jesus’ parable of the vineyard
in terms of his own times and troubles.
In the post-temple, post-Jerusalem time of Matthew,
he was criticizing the leaders of Judaism as continuing the policies
that resulted in the destruction.
He was proposing the alternative presented by Jesus.
The stone that was rejected is the cornerstone for Matthew.

The way of Jesus for Matthew is seen
in the opening manifesto of the Sermon on the Mount.
Turn the other cheek, love your enemies,
worry not about what you eat or wear,
do unto others as you would have done.

And those who do this are building their house on rock, not the shifting sands.
Travel light,
do not make undo claims,
live by what life offers.

“Care for our Common Home.”

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 15, 2017

Isaiah 25:6-10	The mountain feast
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my shepherd
Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20	My God will fully supply
Matthew 22:1-14	The Parable of the Wedding Feast

It has been a strange week in America. Once again.
But maybe it could be worse.

Leonard Bernstein, composer of "West Side Story,"
earlier made a musical called "Candide," after Voltaire's Optimist.
It began unappreciated, but has gathered an audience.
Candide is famous for assuring us that this is the best of all possible worlds.
After all, to have the good, we must have the bad, for contrast.
We cannot have freedom without its abuses.
We cannot have winners without losers.

So, is it the best of all possible worlds?
The prophet Isaiah disagrees.
We are looking for a better world.

He dreams of a world in which all tears are wiped away.
He imagines a great feast, to which all are invited, a celebration,
"a feast of rich food and choice wines,
juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines."

Isaiah is writing at a time of bad choices made by the leaders of Judah.
It was not long ago that we encountered Shebna, in these Sunday liturgies.
He was one of the disappointments for Isaiah.
Through his bad decisions he helped to bring about
the descent of Sennacherib upon Jerusalem,
with the sacking of the cities and towns of Judah.

Isaiah can imagine a better time, as he does today,
when the Lord will remove "the reproach of his people."
Isaiah can imagine a better time, a better possible world.

The past weeks do not seem to have given us the best of possible worlds.
Recently we have careened from difficulty to disaster.
The massacre of the music concert in Las Vegas,
with the complicated reviews that followed.

A president who wants to increase the nuclear arsenal times ten,
because he found out other nations may have more,
and it makes us look weak.

But most riveting for our attention these weeks seem to be natural disasters,
with four hurricanes devastating American states and territories,
followed this week by raging fires in the California wine country.
We call these "acts of God," as if they were outside our control,
as if we are entirely victims of nature.

But none of these happen independent of our own participation.
We elect our presidents.
Guns laws allow our society to be flooded with guns.

And with the natural disasters, we are also in denial.
Floods and firestorms are exactly what global warming predicts to happen.
Warmer atmosphere and oceans hold more moisture in the air,
holding it longer, causing droughts,
and eventually dumping it more suddenly and copiously.
Firestorms and floods.

But we are in denial.
And so the dream of Isaiah is deferred.

Many years ago, the poet Langston Hughes asked about a dream deferred.
He was thinking then about American racism,
and so his words are still pertinent:

> Dream Deferred
> by Langston Hughes
>
> What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> Like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore--
> And then run? …

Today Matthew tells about a parable of Jesus, who picks up Isaiah's dream,
and offers us a theory of why it was deferred.
Those invited to the feast refused.
They did not invest in Isaiah's dream of a possible better world.
They had excuses, but were more concerned about their businesses and farms.
So others were invited—as Isaiah said,

On this mountain he will destroy
the veil that veils *all* peoples, …

But among those invited again, there is one (perhaps more),
who did not respond fully to the new day.
The one without a wedding garment—it is presumed that such was available—
represents those who continue the policies of those previously disinvited.
They do not stake a claim in the feast.

And while their harsh conclusions seem unfair,
it is also true that they brought it on themselves.

They too are in denial. The consequences of their actions play out.
One of the key statements of Matthew's gospel
is that those who live by the sword will die by the sword.
The way you live has its consequences. They show us that.

But thinking of firestorms and floods, the "natural" disasters of our day,
I am reminded of primitive elements—fire and water among the ancients.

But it occurs to me that there is also something sacramental evoked here.
I am thinking of the waters in the east, and the burning vineyards in the west.
Water and wine—sacramental elements.

We celebrate the waters of death and rebirth in the evening of Holy Saturday,
with its theme of baptism.
As for the "choice wine," we have the Eucharist.

The lesson of the sacraments is that God works through humans and human activity.
Just as in the Incarnation itself, where the divine is found in the human,
so it is with the sacraments in general.

In the sacraments, we have the natural, or social, elements,
but the sacrament is in the actions, not simply the elements.

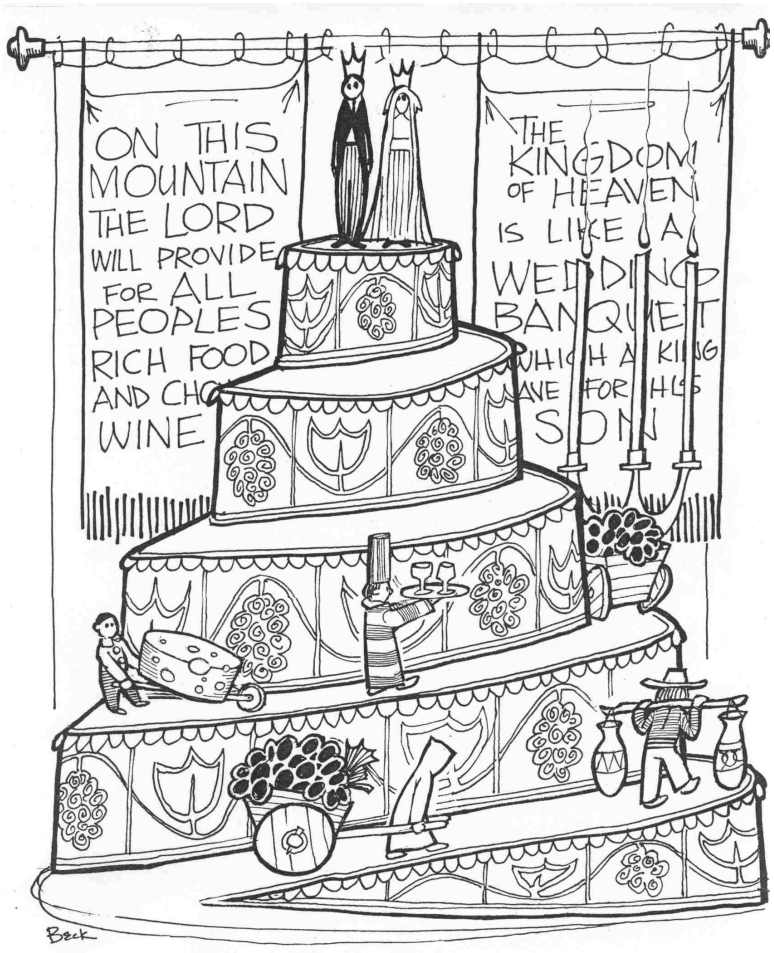
It is the pouring of the water, the breading of the bread, the sharing of the cup,
and the words and discourse that accompanies them.
The sacraments celebrate not only the divine action,
but more fully the divine impulse behind the human actions.

Today we are accustomed to having someone take care of things for us.

If something is wrong, there is always someone to call.
But the habit of allowing others to solve our problems
can keep us from ourselves acting.
The sacraments teach us otherwise.

Bernstein is said to have thought his most significant work his Mass.
It breathes of 60's sentiments, and is hardly liturgical.
But it expresses the hope of Isaiah in the midst of the disarray of the late 60s,
with the Vietnam War,
and the sudden deaths of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy
—times we are reminding ourselves about today.

When we gather to worship, it is around a table,
and the feast is provisionally celebrated here.
Our meal is a foreshadowing of the great feast.
But we are also taught of our own participation,
in life as in liturgy.



Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 29, 2017

Exodus 22:20-26	The Cry of the Poor
Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51	The Rock of Refuge
1 Thessalonians 1:5-10	A Model for Believers
Matthew 22:34-40	The Great Commandment

Who is my neighbor?
That is the follow-up question that the lawyer asked Jesus
in Luke's version of this gospel story.
It turns out that this was a lively debate in Judea in the time of Jesus's day.
The passage in Leviticus that mentions love of neighbor
offers it as a substitute for revenge.

Some fifteen verses later, it mentions that stranger in the land
as also included among those considered to be a neighbor.
So some said that it only meant those foreigners who converted to Judaism.
And other said it included all strangers in the land.

Some were even more strict about it.
The Qumran community of Essenes said
that only those who belonged to their community were neighbors.

So who is my neighbor?
Is it anyone who says, "I am a Dubuquer"?
Even if they are not born here?

Does it include people with whom I seriously disagree on social media?
Does it include foreigners?
Even those from countries under the immigration ban?

In Luke's gospel, Jesus answers this question with the parable of the Good Samaritan.
It shows how one can be a neighbor of anyone.

But in today's liturgy, featuring Matthew's story of the Great Commandment,
the readings provide their own answer, in the form of the law from Exodus,
which can be called the Cry of the Poor.
The passage is from the Covenant Law Code.
That is, it is part of the law of the land.
We are to understand it is telling the Israelites who is their neighbor.

The passage goes by twice,
each time beginning with an example of those

who are to be given special attention
—first the stranger in the land, along with the widow and orphan,
and then, in the second round, the poor person.

What these have in common is their vulnerability.
They are without the conventional protections that their society had to offer,
whether it was the protection of the home tribe,
that of the family patriarch,
or the material resources one can use to pave one's way.

In each case, the Lord says, "If they cry out to me, I will hear them."
I don't know if this is the original passage about the cry of the poor,
but I do know that it is an important one.

Then, in conclusion of each turn, the Lord provides motivation.
In the first case, he warns that he is a God of wrath.
This probably got your attention, because it sounds so harsh.
It seems to confirm our prejudice
that the God of the Old Testament is a "God of wrath."
But then, at the end of the second turn, he says that he is compassionate.

God of wrath. God of compassion.
Clearly, the old stereotype doesn't fit. But what then?

Certainly, the wrath is directed toward those who would take advantage,
who would molest the vulnerable, because they can.
The compassion is directed toward the powerless
who depend on others for their well-being.

I am fond of citing the book of Ruth as an elaboration of Exodus 22.
Ruth and Naomi were both widows, they were poor,
and each of them, though at different times, were "strangers in a strange land."

And yet they survived, through their own resourcefulness,
along with the patronage of a model Israelite name Boaz, who serves in the story
as a representative of the ideal dictated by the law of the land.

The book of Ruth ends with a short genealogy,
which indicates that Ruth, from Moab,
was the great-grandmother of King David.
In other words, the values of the book of Ruth
are literally "embodied" in the kingship of Judah and Israel.

I think that one can assume that,
insofar as this passage is part of our scripture,
encoded in the Exodus covenant,
read in the Sunday liturgy everywhere,
it applies beyond Israel.

It applies to us as well.
It is the model of the true society, then and also now.
Care for the vulnerable is its hallmark.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that that social reality today in our world
does not welcome the stranger easily.
Barriers, bans, and border walls are for us the order of the day.

We hear about John Kelly, a four-star general, berating a war widow
during the time of her grieving, in order to please his boss.

We read about a person named Bannon
who is aggressively mounting a campaign to restore white male dominance,
a population which is perceived by them to be discriminated against.

We learn of a person named Stephen Miller
who is actively working from the White House,
to put in limbo some 700,000 "dreamers,"
undocumented immigrants who were brought here as small children.

We know that hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans still lack water,
most are without electricity,
and are treated as if they were from a foreign country
—which is to be translated, "not our neighbors."

We also know that this is just a small sampling
of closing the door to those seeking refuge or help.

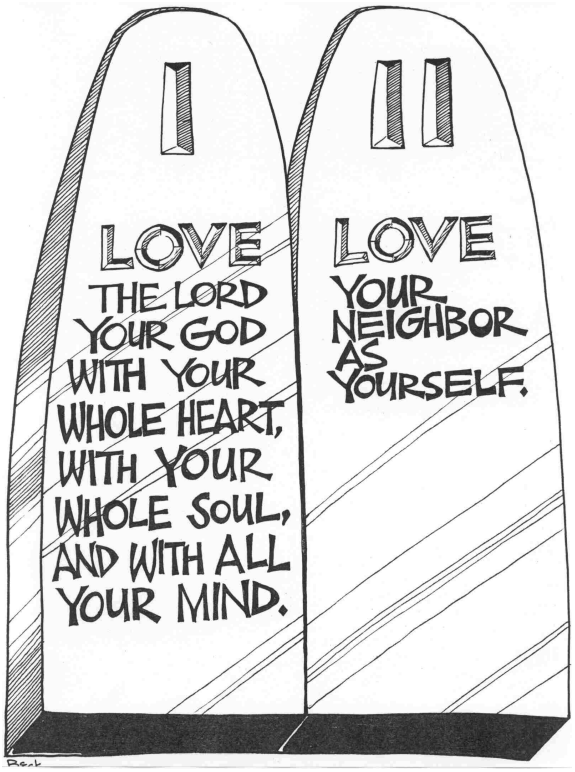
It seems safe to say that we share a conviction that this social trend,
toward discrimination of those who are counted as "other" than us,
is not a truly Christian position.
Even though many might claim it to be so.

We may protest these trends, insisting this is not the Christian way,
taking our stand on a general sense of what it means to be a disciple.
But now we find support in the scriptures for our protest.

The Sunday liturgy comes to our rescue
with arguments and clear, definitive teaching.
    Care of the vulnerable is the proper response to the cry of the poor.
    And the poor are all who are vulnerable.

Our faith is countercultural.
And as counterculture to the prevailing tenor of the times,
we are to maintain the vision of the scripture.

We are called—required—to be advocates.



Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 5, 2017

Malachi 1:14–2:2, 8-10	A warning to the priests
Psalm 131:1-3	Lord, my heart is not proud
1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13	We were like a nursing mother
Matthew 23:1-12	Follow their words, not their example

How are we to be Christians in an increasingly post-Christian world?
How can we be church when our neighbors and even our families
are increasingly unchurched?
The scriptures today talk to the problem from both sides,
good and bad, yes and no.

Malachi is taking to task the priests of his day.
The passage we heard doesn't get into the issues that concerned him,
but he does make a case of it.

He is concerned that they are offering inferior sacrifices.
They are sacrificing the animals that they would want to get rid of
—the pained and sickly.
In other words, they are using the sacrificial liturgy to cull their flocks and herds.

Malachi points out that they would not dare to do that
with their annual tribute to the governor.
And yet God is King of All the Earth,
and so their current tribute to God is a disgrace.

Malachi is telling us something about the quality of our worship.
Are we faithful out of our own convenience, or is there something more?
And do others see that something more,
and learn that a faith commitment is something to take seriously?

And in Matthew's account, Jesus is accusing the scribes and Pharisees.
He is not saying that they are pursuing a religion of convenience.
He is rather saying that they are using their faith as an opportunity to be admired.
They like the showy aspect of their place in the religious world.

Unlike the complacent, who are churchgoers out of convenience,
and do *not* make a show of it, apparently unaware of the image they project,
these scribes and Pharisees are very conscious of their image.

However, it is not calculated to persuade others of the value of their faith,
but rather to persuade them of how important they themselves are.
However, they may possibly be confusing the two objectives,
thinking that their own glory gives glory to God as well.

On the other side is the example of the devoted servant,
seen today in Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church.
His entire concern is for them, not for himself.

He is gentle, he holds them in affection,
and he works day and night on their behalf.
His generosity counts as an entirely different approach
to the problem of revealing the faith life in its true attractiveness.

But the readings today do not stop there.
They drive the point home by vivid language for both kinds of faith life,
the "yes" and the "no."

First, the "No." Recurring in the readings today,
which no doubt you noticed, is the word "burden."
Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees
of laying heavy *burdens* on people's shoulders, without lifting a finger to help them.

On the other hand, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he worked hard
in order not to be a *burden* to them.
Even Malachi, in part of the passage that today's selection skipped over,
notes that they find it a *burden* to offer their finest animals for sacrifice (Mal 1:13).

Often our faith has been about burdens, rather than joy or delight.
We have been told, or told others, to offer up their burdens,
as if that is the whole of being a faithful person.
We may have viewed religion as a set of constrictions,
rather than a response to the gifts that have been given us.

We may project to others a doleful image of what it means to be a person of faith.
Of course, offering up our suffering is an aspect of it,
but we needn't hide from others
what it is in the faith commitment that gives us life.

On the other side, opposite the "No," is the "Yes."
And here we find another kind of language that dominates the scripture readings today.
I am speaking of the family language of fathers and mothers.

There are two sides to this as well.
While Malachi and Matthew warn against
diminishing God our *Father* with human alternatives,
the Psalm and Paul's letter promote the example of the *Mother*.

We may be surprised that the gospel advises not giving any human being
the title Teacher, or Father, or Master.
We don't seem to have taken this literally.
And that is probably correct.

Jesus is protesting those who eclipse the glory of God,
by putting their own glory in the way.
God is the true Teacher, Father, and Master, and we should remember that.
We should act in such a way as that is apparent to others, as well.

But, perhaps more surprisingly,
Paul claims to have acted toward his community like a mother.
In fact, a *nursing* mother.

And this too is the disciple presenting an image of God.
The psalm makes this clear,
when it uses the image of the weaned child on its mother's lap
as an image of the believer in the presence of God.

The life of faith is being a member of a family.
That can be either clearly seen, or obscured.

The disciple, then, is an image of God.
We can be windows, allowing a clear vision of the one we believe it.
Or we can be mirrors, showing only ourselves.

And those who are undecided, who are skeptical about religion,
or the Christian faith, or the Catholic church,
we benefit—or not—from the image they see.

But here is something else, related to our special gathering here today.
When I think of the words "burden" and "family" at the same time,
what I think of is the common concern of the elderly
—"I do not want to be a burden on the family."

None of us wants to be a burden,
because we have been brought up as good Midwesterns.

And yet, being family means being there for one another.
Sometimes we are the caretaker, and at other times we are taken care of.
That's the way it works.

In our gathering today, we share our family concern
for those who have gone before us, joining the greater family of God.
Even as members of our own families.

We pray for them. Meanwhile, they are advocating for us,
as those who have run the race cheer on those still running.
They are our inspiration as much as the object of our prayers.

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 12, 2017

Wisdom 6:12-16	The Resplendence of Wisdom
Psalm 63:2-8	My should is thirsting for you
1Thessalonians 4:13-18	Those who remain will be caught up
Matthew 25:1-13	Ten virgins, five wise, five foolish

This week and next the Sunday liturgies feature women in prominent positions.
Today we hear about the ten virgins, five wise and five foolish,
who attend the wedding of the bridegroom,
some to great success, others to their considerable loss.

Next week we hear about the Worthy Wife.
Since I will not be around next weekend,
and since the Parable of the Talents will likely take center stage next week,
I thought I might speak to both of these today.

There is another reason—
the remarkable events of the last week or two in the nation's awareness,
generally contained under the rubric, *#Metoo*.

Following the disclosure of abuse of women co-workers
by the major movie producer, Harvey Weinstein,
women across the country have found their voices.
A deluge of accusations has shown the world
that sexual insult and assault of women by prominent males
is a part of our cultural fabric.
And the chorus of voices seems to indicate a watershed,
suggesting that this kind of misbehavior and intimidation will no longer be allowed.
Or so one would hope.

The example of others has provided the necessary courage
to speak to a problem despite the pressure to keep silent.
That pressure was itself part of the message.
It was part of the implicit instruction that women should not attempt to excel
in careers in ways that put their male counterparts in any diminished status.
Nothing lower than what they are accustomed to.
Otherwise humiliation can be expected of those who dare to speak up.
One more barrier to equal treatment.

But now that may have changed.
A considerable part of change is raising consciousness concerning an issue.

That seems to be underway.

And with that, we come to the biblical portraits of women, this week and next.
The parable of ten virgins speaks to the radical value of wisdom
as Matthew perceives it in his gospel.

It refers back to the fundamental shift in values articulated
in the Sermon on the Mount that is Jesus' opening statement in this gospel.
It concludes with the parable of the Two Builders,
one building on rock, the other on sand,
which finds a parallel with today's parable of the Ten Virgins,
which is in turn part of Jesus' final speech in this gospel.

My sense is that this parable has a notable past history
in the vocation spirituality of religious women.
You know that better than I.

I am also conscious of recent criticism of the image of women given here
as finding meaning in their relation to the male bridegroom.
And yet there I am also thinking about how religious life
has pioneered the possibility of professional life among women in this country.
I am always conscious, for instance, of the accomplishments
represented by the women in this community.

The criticism that biblical women are typically presented
as deriving meaning from their connection to men
will again be seen next Sunday, with the portrait of the worthy wife.

And yet again, this is not telling the whole story.
One noticeable feature of the reading is the tendency
reflected in the selection it makes of the passage.
It makes much of her value to her husband and his success.

It does, however, speak to some of her accomplishments,
especially her care for the poor and needy.
Nonetheless, there are aspects that our liturgical selection omits.
I would like to share some of these with you.

As regards her successful enterprises, the passage reports this:

> 14 Like a merchant fleet,
> she secures her provisions from afar.
> 16 She picks out a field and acquires it;

from her earnings she plants a vineyard.
18 She enjoys the profit from her dealings;
her lamp is never extinguished at night.
13 She seeks out wool and flax
and weaves with skillful hands.
24 She makes garments and sells them,
and stocks the merchants with belts.
20 She reaches out her hands to the poor,
and extends her arms to the needy.

Concerning her stature in the community, we hear this:

17 She girds herself with strength;
she exerts her arms with vigor.
25 She is clothed with strength and dignity,
and laughs at the days to come.
26 She opens her mouth in wisdom;
kindly instruction is on her tongue.
28 Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband, too, praises her:
29 "Many are the women of proven worth,
but you have excelled them all."

And finally, in terms of household management, we have this:

15 She rises while it is still night,
and distributes food to her household,
a portion to her maidservants.
21 She is not concerned for her household when it snows—
all her charges are doubly clothed.
22 She makes her own coverlets;
fine linen and purple are her clothing.
27 She watches over the affairs of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

What we see reflected here is the ancient division of labor,
in which the husband interacts with the outside world,
and the wife is in charge of the household.

It is in this way that the mother leads the Sabbath ceremony,
which is a family prayer.
In its own way, this picture affirms
the strength and value of women in biblical society.

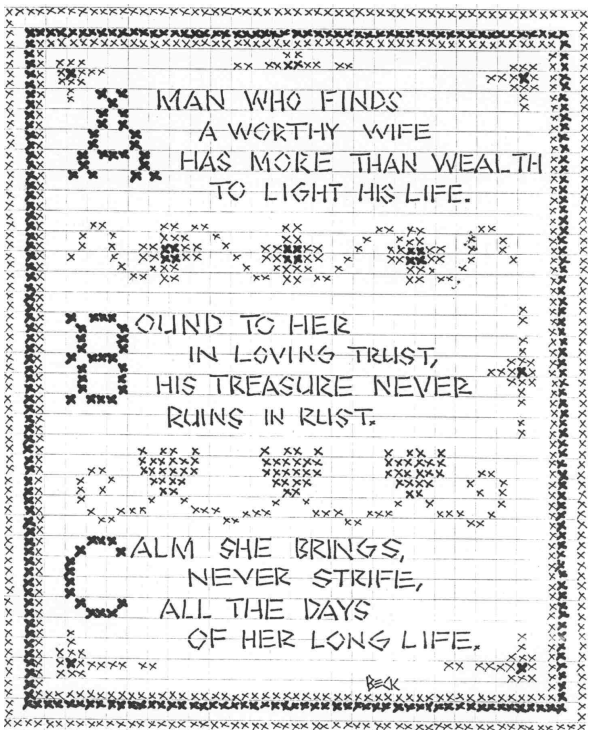
In our world the impulse toward equality moves beyond separate areas of expertise,
to claim an equal right to activities even in the same field.

Women are not only nurses and elementary teachers,
but also astronauts and marines, scientists and business executives
—areas once thought to be the exclusive domain of men.

Among positive signs this week was the election of a record number of women,
who have decided to run for public office, both at the local and national level.
Each of us has our list of these.
But the larger meaning is that the cultural norm is continuing to shift,
and decisions will change with the shift in decision-makers.

With that in mind, I would like to close these remarks
with a poem that I wrote some time ago,
based on the image of the wise woman.

It is inspired first of all by the sisters of my own family,
the strong women with whom I share a history.
But it has continued with the example of many of my friends.
It tries to speak to the contribution that one half of the human race
can contribute to our common wisdom,
not to mention our common survival.



WISDOM THE WOMAN

You seem not to know about
the lamp set in your forehead
like a miner's third eye; but of course you do,
it being your gift to the world.

You shape the world to your passage;
your friends are grateful for it.
On the raw corners of their minds
you lay your words like smoothing hands.

The bird song you hear we the deaf cannot
except where it leaps in your gestures
and calms us with your knowing;
thus do you translate the stars and winds.

Some incandescent need claims you, say,
and that energy heats the lives that circle
you in a dance of the ringed planets.
Your comets spray prodigious fire.

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

November 26, 2017

Ezekiel 34: 11-12, 15-17	The Divine Shepherd
Psalm 23:1-3, 5-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28	The firstborn from the dead
Matthew 25:31-46	The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats

Today we celebrate the Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.
The feast is one of the most recent in church history.
It was established as "Christ the King" by P. Pius IX, in the encyclical, *Quas Primas,*
issued in 1925, in the aftermath of WWI,
and in response to the surge in secularism and anticlericalism
that followed upon that war.
As is typical of many such statements,
it cherry-picks the scriptures in support of its teaching.
While it doesn't explicitly endorse a theocratic state,
P. Pius was known to be inclined in that direction.

Today many have a certain reluctance to use the language of kingship.
On the one hand, it presupposes a priority of male dominance,
that has come under question more recently.
On another front, there is the problem of kingship itself.
Does the feast adopt the cultural trappings of power for the church?
Or does it challenge and reject those cultural trappings as alien to the Christ?
The surge of churches and chapels named "Christ the King"
as at Loras College, for one,
would appear to be an expression of Church Triumphalism,
in an effort to make a claim by a church feeling ignored.

It was in the reorganization of the liturgy following Vatican II,
that a more recent pope, Paul VI, put it at the end of the church year,
and renamed it "Christ, King of the Universe," in 1969.

The horizon expanded immensely with the new name.
And there are theological implications,
when we wonder if there are other populated planets,
and whether they have similar salvation histories.
And whether they experience a similar Incarnation of the Word,
but in their own setting. And so forth.

And certainly, it would seem to expand almost infinitely
the claim to power that is implied.

And yet the question remains.
Is this the message of kingship in the Scripture?
Is this the lesson of the readings for this feast?

Today we are reluctant to speak of the Kingdom,
with its overtones of male domination and its damages.
However, to eliminate this language prematurely
is to short circuit the critique mounted by the biblical texts themselves.
For "kingdom" as discussed in the Bible, is under judgement, under scrutiny.
It is not a neutral term, but an interrogated term.

The image of the king as shepherd is ancient.
For instance, Hammurabi in his famous law code styled himself a shepherd—
"the shepherd of the oppressed and of the slaves"
were among the epithets heading the Code.
It signaled the king's attention to the most vulnerable in his realm.
This was around 1800 BC, some six centuries before Moses
and the settlement in the land.

We see other shepherds mentioned as regards biblical leaders.
Moses himself spent time as a shepherd.
David was a shepherd before he was king. And so forth.
What these are telling us is that these are good shepherd-like kings and leaders.

Ezekiel, however, has had it with the kings.
His notion is that the kings of Judah have not managed
to live up to the required standard.
His judgment (and that of other prophets) upon them is harsh.
They are accused of abusing their sheep.
Or they are accused of not simply shearing the sheep,
but skinning them, roasting them, and eating them.
They are abandoning their responsibility to the vulnerable in their charge.

Ezekiel places against the condemnation of the leaders of his day
the image of God as the authentic Shepherd of Israel,
the one who truly leads the people,
and whose authority is delegated to the kings.
But the kings are not meeting that responsibility.
In Ezekiel's notion, they will pay.
But there will be a cost, as the sheep are scattered into exile
and the diaspora, beyond the land.

This is the sentiment behind the image of the Good Shepherd in John's Gospel.
It too is a prophetic claim agains the leaders of the day.
They are mere hirelings, not concerned about those in their care.
Or they are actually thieves and rustlers, robbers of the flock.
Jesus criticizes their leadership, but affirms that there is a Good Shepherd,
one who actually cares for the sheep,
and in fact will guard the sheep at the risk of his own life.
He will lay down his life for the sheep.

In the gospels, kingship is service, not lordship.
It comes with a cost, and it places itself on the line for the vulnerable

This is the tradition behind Matthew's parable of the Sheep and the Goats.
In a drama of culling the flock, he pictures the king as shepherd.
This parable of the judgment is Matthew's last word in his gospel,
before the Passion account begins in the last week ofJesus' life.
This is his promise for the future.

We are familiar with how this parable we just heard
runs through its course four times, first with the sheep, and then with the goats,
and with each the elaborate question followed by the literal response.

There are two things to notice.
The first is that those summoned as witnesses of sorts,
the hungry and thirsty, the homeless stranger and the unclothed naked,
the person in prisoner and the sickly,
have become honored in Christian tradition as representing the works of mercy.

We call them the corporal works of mercy,
but these are the only works of mercy given in the gospels.
Tradition has supplied us with the spiritual works of mercy as well,
but it should be noted that these were devised later,
and assigned scripture verses in support.
They are not actually listed in the Bible like those in the parable today.

And that is fine, so long as we do not enlist the spiritual works
as a way of downgrading the corporal works, for these are the original.

A second thing to notice is that the characters in the story, whether sheep or goats,
are not following a command, an implied order.
They are following their hearts.
In each case, they do not know
that in ministering to the needs of the needy they are serving the king.

The story runs through the list four times in order to drive that point home—

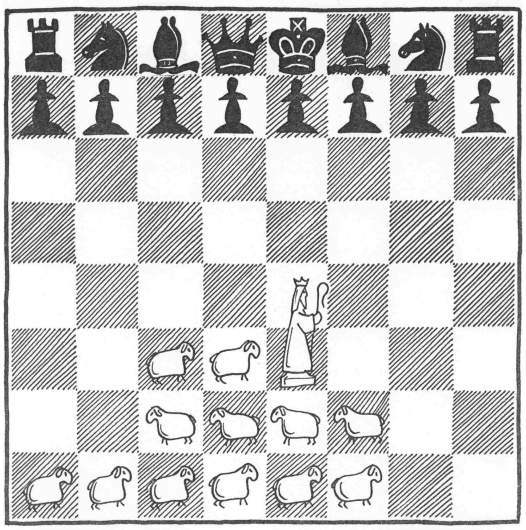
> "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,
> or thirsty and give you drink?
> When did we see you a stranger and welcome you,
> or naked and clothe you?
> When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?"

They are not working to gain an advantage.
They are not trying to impress.
They are simply serving needs as they see them.
This is commonly called compassion.

It is almost too easy to make comparisons with today,
when it comes to the quality of leadership, and the motives of leaders.
It is all too easy to itemize the works of mercy
and list the violations in our own world of leadership
and even wistful longings for kingship.

But the point of the parable is not to judge others, but to look at ourselves.
How do we fit the standard that is given there?
How are we responding to the diminishments of our day?

The scriptures were not written to help us judge others,
but to allow us to take a fresh look at ourselves.



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