Cycle B 2015

First Sunday of Advent

November 30, 2014

Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7	You are angry, we are sinful
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19	Show us your face
1 Corinthians 1:3-9	I give thanks for you
Mark 13:33-37	Be watchful, you know not the time

This year the Advent season comes to us as a five-act drama,
with each of the four Sundays part of the unfolding story,
and concluding with Christmas.
The first act, this Sunday,
begins with the common plight of our human condition.
The deep lament of Isaiah 63 is the opening cry of the season.

We enter imaginatively into the negative,
the darkness that the season of hope will lighten. We hope.

But this exercise in imagination invites us to place ourselves
in the contemporary frame of mind,
the place of darkness that is ours.

For this reason, I turned to the book
that has been making the reviews this week,
the account of environmental disruption by Naomi Klein,
This Changes Everything.

There is one problem, however.
The disruption of climate change, of global warming,
is not imaginative; it is real.
It is not a mental exercise to place ourselves mentally
in the space of the liturgical moment.
It is not hypothetical, but actual, and pending.

In the book, Klein spells out the difficulty in depressing detail.
But this is not new.
It is this catalogue of potential disasters that prompts us to look away,
to ignore the situation as being hopeless.

But some of her examples make the point.
She tells about the plight of Flight 3935,
scheduled to leave Washington DC for Charleston, South Carolina.
When the passengers boarded the plane
they discovered they were going nowhere,
since the wheels of the US Airways jet

had sunk into the paving of the hot tarmac.
The passengers disembarked, to lighten the load. Didn't help.
The tow truck couldn't move it.
Finally, a larger, more powerful machine was able to pull it loose,
and the flight was able to continue.

She notes the irony:
"the fact that the burning of fossil fuels is so radically changing our climate
that it is getting in the way of our capacity to burn fossil fuels."
It did not stop the flight, of course.

Without getting into a detailed list, one point will suffice.
One of the most alarming aspects is the prospect
that gradual change will suddenly convert to systems collapse,
almost overnight.

This has implications in many directions,
for instance, the redirecting or stalling of ocean currents.
A system can take only so much stress
and then it will suddenly give way.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' closing words of his public life
tell us to Watch and Be Alert, for you know not the time.
It will come suddenly,
when you are expecting smooth, gradual change.

The Gospel gives an example.
It is like a man traveling abroad, leaving the servants in charge.
We remember other versions of this parable that mention
servants neglecting their duties while the master is absent.

It doesn't take much imagination to relate this
to the first chapter of Genesis with its story of creation,
and the task of stewardship assigned us.
But as stewards we have responsibilities,
the neglect of which may overtake us suddenly.

In her book, Klein writes of her experience as a reporter
covering the 2009 Copenhagen UN climate summit.
They received their daily reports
from a confident and brisk young spokesman.

But after all his confidence, the striking scene came later.
She writes: "Once it was all over, however, and the pitiful deal was done,

he fell apart before our eyes.
Sitting in a overlit Italian restaurant, he began to sob uncontrollably.
'I really thought Obama understood,' he kept repeating."

Obama facilitated what was politically feasible,
but not the one that was needed.
And without sanctions, so even that much is not being heeded.

What is at issue here is political will, not possible action.
We are in denial.

In her earlier book, *The Shock Doctrine*,
Klein chronicled how over the past four decades
corporate interests have made use of different forms of crisis
to benefit a few—lifting regulations, cutting social spending,
privatizing the public sphere, cracking down of civil liberties.
This could happen again with climate crisis.

But that is not the only possibility, for we have another history
of rising to the occasion as a people—
the New Deal after the stock market collapse,
the various social programs after WWII.
In these the wishes of the people prevailed.
And it could again, given the political will.

It seems hopeless, and we prefer not to think about it,
since there is nothing we can do, we feel. It seems hopeless.

But Advent is the season of hope in the face of hopelessness.
The lament from Isaiah is a bitter lament,
written in the dark circumstances of exile.

It was uttered at a time when there seemed
little sense of a future for this people.
A new day would open for them,
but at the moment that is still unknown.
That will provide the messages from Scripture
in the coming Sundays of Advent.
But for now, we are invited to enter into the negative moment.

The lament addresses Israel's need to repent.
Only then will the new day begin.
Repentance means more than confessing a list of sins,
though it may include that.

It envisions putting on a new mind and a new resolve.
It means a change of course in the direction of one's life.
As an individual. And as a people.

There is an uncanny similarity
to our own situation with climate degradation.
We lack the will to change because it seems impossible.
But, of course, without the will to change it,
changing it will be impossible.

Paul addresses the Church of Corinth
in a letter whose opening words we heard today.
When he thanks God for their spiritual gifts,
he is making a sly reference to something he will get around to later
—their competition over spiritual gifts,
circling especially around the gift of tongues.

Paul understands a new reality entered the world,
a new creation, that had taken hold in the communities of Christ's body.
But Corinth, in its divisions and inequalities,
was frittering that community spirit away.

His concern was to keep the spirit of the community alive,
for only then would there be a new day.
But first they had to face squarely the threats to that new life,
and in the letter to come he would lay it before them
in the most explicit way.

Only when they see clearly can they repent,
and only when they repent can they act.

The season of hope first calls us to open our eyes,
to assess the world around us,
despite the obstacles that rise up to prevent that attention.

Today, in the first Sunday of Advent,
we agree to hope against hope.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 7, 2015

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11	A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way
Psalm 85:9-14	The Lord proclaims peace to his people
2 Peter 3:8-14	The Lord does not delay his promise
Mark 1:1-8	A voice cries out in the desert: Prepare the way

The laments of last week called us
out of our usual numbness into reflection.
We reflected on our inability as a people to come to grips
with the threat to our planet generated by our own energy policies.

We noted, following Naomi Klein, that our difficulties
were not so much from the lack of physical possibility
but rather from our own lack of imagination and willingness.
Our prayer is not to move physical obstacles,
but rather to change peoples' spirits.
Including our own, should we be giving up in resignation.

That was last week.
Today the liturgy stirs us out of our doldrums
with a first stirring of possibility.
It is the leading edge of hope that stirs us.
Not so much the actual call, but the first awareness
that there can be a call coming.

The call comes out of the memories recorded in the scriptures.
Today those memories unfold with deeper memories behind them.

Mark's Gospel begins with a notice
that John the Baptist has appeared on the shores of the Jordan River,
and the entire Judean countryside is going out to be baptized.

Mark selects a scripture passage to support this announcement.
It is the passage in our first reading, the first words
from the prophet we call Second Isaiah.
This is the prophet who was entrusted with announcing
to the people in exile that the time had come for them to return home.
His task was to motivate them,
after they had settled in for some 50 years.

In his message, he pictures God announcing the return,
sending instructions for the different preparations for the return.
One is sent to Jerusalem, to prepare for the returnees.

Another is to prepare a road in the wilderness to facilitate a swift return.
A highway for our God and his people.

It is this that Mark selects for his own announcement.
But he alters the punctuation.
Where 2nd-Isaiah spoke of a voice crying out:
"In the desert prepare a way,"
Mark deftly alters this to: "
A voice cries out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"
Now it is not the road that is in the desert, but rather the voice.

Mark is entirely aware of what he is doing.
He is saying that something like this has happened before,
but this one is different.

He is working within a tradition.
Second-Isaiah himself did something similar.
He spoke of the return from exile in Babylon, in 539 B.C.,
as another Exodus—the Moses event in the dim past
that liberated them as a people and first set them up in the land.

He too made his point with some literary slight of hand.
Where the Exodus culminated in crossing the Red Sea
along a dry path through the water,
the return from exile would be marked by a linear oasis of sorts,
a highway bordered by a continuous greenbelt—
a wet, watery path through the dry desert.
The image of the Exodus is inverted.

And before that, of course,
the creation of the people Israel in the Exodus event
is described in language that echoes
the separation of waters in the story of creation of the world.

So what is the point of all this word play?
There is a continuous theme going on here.
In each case something new, even unprecedented, is announced.
But at the same time, it is linked to a previous event,
which is itself seen as unprecedented, like nothing before.

Our God, it is saying, has a record
of producing something new out of nothing.
Not only in the beginning, but in the recorded history of our own story.

This is a test of faith.
For it is just when things no longer seem possible
that the newness appears. This is part of the record.

Hope emerges from a history of hope answered.
It is trust in the possibility of hope beyond hope, as a gift of God.

We come back to the predicaments of our own time.
And we wonder about the possibility of changing in time.
And we find in our own history evidence of rapid change.

To take one, perhaps less serious, example,
society's views on marijuana consumption seems to be shifting rapidly.
Will this begin to have an effect on the drug wars in Mexico?
It seems it might.

In another case, some have pointed out
that the social ostracizing of gays and lesbians
has dramatically turned around in the last ten years.
A radical reversal.

And yet, is this at the expense of others,
now filling our need to have social lepers?
One thinks of the banishment of sex offenders
to colonies at the edges of our cities and towns,
grouping together a vast range of offenses.

And in these times we are thinking of the destiny
of young black males in America.

The election of an African-American president
would seem to have marked a similar turnaround,
which recent events appear to contradict.
However, it is possible that lancing this wound
is also a part of further progress,
since there is likely no healing without it.

Society has its dizzily rapid turn-arounds.
But it also happens in our church,
insistent about and proud of its unchanging traditions.

As I have mentioned before, the teaching on Jews
has made a complete, 180-degree reversal.

Between 1933 and 1965 we turned from 20 centuries of condemnation,
insisting that the Jews were cursed,
to acceptance of Jews and their tradition,
as a covenant adequate for their needs.

We suddenly revived the recognition that this is our own heritage,
with its rituals, symbol systems, communal memory,
and belief in the one God.
A complete reversal, virtually overnight.

To rely on this history,
in its secular account as in its faith traditions, seems too facile.
We return to Naomi Klein and the predicament of the planet.
The refusal to accept this seems to doom us.

The predicaments that produced the scriptures evoked today
also marked times without hope.
Or so it seemed to them at the time.
Hope, here, is hope when all seems hopeless.
Optimism may see the light at the end.
Hope sees no light, but believes it will come to it.
Sometime, somewhere.

What is faith, when things are just fine,
when all is certain and comfortable?
Where is the trust of faith
when we feel we can take care of things perfectly well, thank you?
Does not faith come into play where trust is all we have to move on?
Is not faith a trust walk?
The spirit of hope is to move ahead, as if we could see a way out,
even while knowing that the easy answers are not available.
And that way out is not particularly clear.

This Sunday we recognize the predicament.
But we have not arrived at an answer.
We have not even heard an announcement that there is an answer.
We only trust that the answer will come.
We only remind ourselves that we believe in a God
who prompts us to the radically new,
as has happened in the past.

Our trust is not naïve, but fully considered.
It realistically recognizes our dependence on one another,
and on the creator God who made us and preserves us.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 14, 2014

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11	Proclamation of Jubilee
Luke 1:46-50, 53-54	Mary's Magnificat
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	Rejoice always
John 1:6-8, 19-28	A man named John, sent from God

This week we turn to John's Gospel.
And as we know, the first thing John the Evangelist says
is, "In the beginning…"
He evokes the creation story, the creation of the world.
The creation of the world, he believes, is God's gift.
For it was good, as Genesis repeatedly reminds us.

During this Advent, we have been thinking of this creation,
entrusted to us in this planet,
and increasingly dependent for its wellbeing and even existence
upon our caretaking and maturity.

John continues on, to tell us that, "In the beginning was the Word."
The Word was with God, and in the Word everything was created.
The gift of the good creation was already present in the Word.
And now the Word has come.

And John the Evangelist tells us that the other John, the Baptist,
came giving witness to the Light.
He was not the light, but witnessed to the light.
John the Baptist says of himself that he is neither the Messiah, nor Elijah,
nor the Prophet like Moses, that many were expecting.
He is the Voice, and that alone.

The Voice comes to present, and make present, the Word.

In the beginning of the story of the Nazarene was the Voice,
and the Voice proclaimed the Word,
and the Word was spoken through the Voice.

The Voice was that of one crying out in the desert.

Where is the desert?
In the Gospel it is at the margins of the social world,
outside the run of daily commerce.
Outside the stories of our daily lives.

It is the wilderness, the wild that does not yet know
our planning and ordering.

Naomi Klein, author of *This Changes Everything*,
Capitalism vs. the Climate, has been our guide this Advent.

She is a voice calling from the wilderness, a desert of our own making.
She points to the mechanisms of our economic system
that have put our planet at risk.

Privatizing the commons, the public world we hold in common,
has moved matters from the common good to private investors,
with all that follows from this.

Globalization allows the demands of one part of the world
to veto the ecological needs of another,
as when certain nations sued Canada, claiming
its anti-fracking proposals cut into their own ability to make a profit.

The mythology of endless growth means that
we dig deeper and more precariously to feed the engines
that power growth, without a clear end to the matter.

The voice also comes to us from the desert,
of the world beyond the First World that we know—
of, for instance, Latin America.

In her book, Klein speaks of the moment when her own life
was changed by hearing the voice of witness. She writes:

"I remember the precise moment when I stopped averting my eyes to the reality of climate change, or at least when I first allowed my eyes to rest there for a good while. It was in Geneva, in April 2009, and I was meeting with Bolivia's ambassador to the World Trade Organization (WTO), who was then a surprisingly young woman named Angelica Navarro Llanos.

"Bolivia being a poor country with a small international budget, Navarro Llanos had recently taken on the climate portfolio in addition to her trade responsibilities. Over lunch in an empty Chinese restaurant, she explained to me (using chopsticks as props to make a graph of the global emission trajectory) that she saw climate change both as a terrible threat to her people —but also an opportunity.

“A threat for the obvious reasons: Bolivia is extraordinarily dependent of glaciers for its drinking and irrigation water and those white-capped mountains that tower over its capital were turning gray and brown at an alarming rate. The opportunity, Navarro Llanos said, was that since countries like hers had done almost nothing to send emissions soaring, they were in a position to declare themselves 'climate creditors,' owed money and technology support from the large emitters to defray the hefty costs of coping with more climate-related disasters, as well as to help them develop on a green energy path.”

Navarro Llanos called it a Marshall Plan for the earth.

I thought of this when I read in the *National Catholic Reporter* that our Latin American Pope had sent a message to Lima, Peru, this week.

If you might excuse another lengthy quote, they write:

Acting now on climate change “is a grave and moral responsibility,” Pope Francis said to international negotiators at the United Nations climate conference in Lima, Peru.

In the message, addressed to Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, Peru’s environmental minister and president of the 20th Conference of the Parties (the U.N. climate summit’s official name), Francis said the current debate about climate change affects all humanity, particularly the poor and future generations.

“It is a grave ethical and moral responsibility,” he said.

The message comes on the second-to-last day of the Lima climate conference, which began Dec. 1. High-level negotiations kicked into gear Monday. Delegates representing 196 countries are working to draft an outline text of a binding international agreement -- one that includes commitments from each country to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and also financial pledges from developed countries -- that could then be signed at next year’s meeting in Paris. …

The pope is expected to publish an encyclical in the first part of 2015 on the environment and human ecology, and presumably, discuss climate change. In his message Thursday he offered a blessing for all those in Lima and the countries represented. In particular, he expressed his closeness to the work toward a global climate treaty, that it “be carried out during these days with an open and generous spirit.”

At the same time, he acknowledged what scientists and environmentalists have repeatedly stated: a global response to climate change must come sooner rather than later. ...

According to Vatican Radio, the pope also referenced the conference's proximity to the maritime current of Humboldt, which he said not only unites the peoples of the Americas, Oceania, and Asia in a symbolic embrace but also plays an important role in the planet's climate."

During the course of this Advent,
we have been following the drama of the unfolding season.
In succession, we have first been urged to lament,
recognizing the reality before us, leaving behind denial.

In the second week, we were called to allow ourselves to hope,
putting aside the tendency to yield to the paralysis of despair.

This week, we hear the voice that calls us to present ourselves
as advocates, as taking sides,
open to what consequences that means for us.

This Franciscan community has committed itself to a three-fold mission
—to the poor, to nonviolence, and to the earth.
The last is shown in the flag that flies at the entrance to the property.

All three of these are urgent today.
The poor are in our awareness through immigration policy struggles,
and in the plight of marginalized black American males.

The issue of nonviolence enters our consciousness today
with the Senate publication of torture procedures of the CIA,
as well as the plight of brutalized black American males.

Denial, hopelessness, and desperate need
are also part of these issues in our world,
just as is the equally urgent and less conspicuous matter
of the threat to our environment and planet.

And yet the Advent season is one of hope.
And today, one of the Word, The Voice, and the Call.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 21, 2014

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16	The promises to David
Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27-29	I have sworn to David, my servant
Romans 16:25-27	The revelation kept secret for long ages
Luke 1:26-38	Gabriel appears to Mary

This week one of the last vestiges of the Cold War ended
with the opening of relations with Cuba.
As the news stories pointed out,
P. Francis was involved in bringing it about.

I was reminded of the Bay of Pigs crisis with Cuba,
and the role that P. John 23rd had in resolving it.
It was during the first year of the Council, and the convened
bishops noticed what the pope had done,
and decided that maybe this pope was a person of some consequence,
and maybe the council he convened had something significant to do.
The rest is history.

The years of the Cold War are memorable for many of us.
Because of the precariousness of the threat of nuclear war,
the world clock was continually set at a few minutes to midnight.

There was a hopelessness felt among many about the future.
I remember discussions about the uselessness
of bringing children into this world.
The lack of a future was palpable for many.

Naomi Klein, with whom we have been walking through this Advent,
gets personal toward the end of her book, This Changes Everything.
She talks about her realization,
after time spent in a career of writing and reporting,
that her time for having a family was passing.
What she and her husband encountered, however,
was nothing but disappointment.

Three miscarriages later, she was giving up hope.
All her research into ecological disruption and industrial poisoning
led her to suspect that her condition was somehow related
to what we had done to our world and ourselves.

Eventually, she carried a pregnancy to full term,
all the while expecting that this time too it would not happen.
Now she has a son, in whom she clearly rejoices.
But she wonders who this one escaped the dangers.
And she still has her questions and doubts.

Today we come to the Fourth Sunday of Advent.
We have traveled through the drama of the first three weeks.
We went from lament and hopelessness
through hints of possibility to hope, hope against hope.

Something was happening, where nothing seemed possible,
newness somehow opened up,
and a future appeared where is seemed closed.

Today the Angel Gabriel visits Mary,
and we have a powerful conversation between the two of them.
Gabriel does most of the talking.
Mary ponders, questions, and then says, "Yes."

This last is probably the most important statement
in the entire conversation.

As for Gabriel, most of his end of the conversation
consists of setting out the terms and consequences
of the decision Mary is about to make.

Part of that has to do with what we have come to know as the Virgin Birth.
The child to come will be the Son of God.
And, in our terms, God Incarnate.
That part of the conversation takes up most of our attention.

But Gabriel spends a considerable bit of time on another topic.
That is the fulfillment of the promises to David.
We heard those promises in the first reading today,
from the seventh chapter of 2 Samuel.

Sometimes called the Covenant with David,
it shows God Yahweh promising David
that his family will reign upon the throne in Jerusalem
in perpetuity.

That promise held true for over 400 years,
which seemed like an eternity for those alive during those centuries.

However, when Mary encountered the angel Gabriel,
the royal house of David had been lost to history
for another four centuries.
And with it was lost the hope of a people.

True, they had returned to the land from their time in captivity,
but the full return to self-determination was denied them.
It was as if the exile had never ended.

Or worse, it was continued, but in their own land, in their own homes.
The promise seemed lost, yet here was Gabriel,
announcing its pending fulfillment.
The only requirement at the moment was that Mary,
this young woman in Nazareth, say Yes.
And she does.

And now Mary's condition changes.
In biblical language, she is said to be "with child."
In our day, we would say she is pregnant.
But in our common parlance, she is "expecting."

And with that we see that our journey through Advent
has taken a decisive turn.
We have gone from hopelessless to hope.
And now from hope to "expecting."

We have gone beyond the longing of hope
to the confidence of expectation.
A people finds it possible to look into the future once again.

Today's image is not the birth, but the pregnancy.
Not the realization, but the confidence in a future realization.

A world in which new births are happening
is a world that once again believes in the possible.
It is a world in which faith in a future, often despite misgivings,
is once again affirmed.

And here we come to an affirmation of faith
—of belief in a God who actually does care for us,
and is willing to extricate us from the binds
in which we have entangled ourselves.

We look to the God who promised David,
as earlier he had promised Abraham.
We look to the God who sent Gabriel to Mary,
and we think of promises fulfilled,
though perhaps not in the manner we had anticipated.

This is not a faith that believes that God
will magically take care of the messes that we make,
like a mother who picks up after inconsiderate children.

Rather, this is a God of the Incarnation,
who works though human agency,
enabling us to do what needs to be done.

It is a God who asks us to say, "Yes,"
and assists us in making that decision.

During this Advent we have looked to the past,
to the record of God's promise and human response,
bringing peoples back to life
and an entire world to salvation.

And with that, we turn to birth of the child,
the event by which we date the world's calendar.
All is new.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 28, 2015

Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3	Abraham's descendants
Psalm 105:1-6, 8-9	Covenant with Abraham
Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19	Abraham's faith
Luke 2:22-40	Simeon and Anna

The feast of the Holy Family was instituted by Leo XIII in 1893,
though it has a long history, as seen in the history of Christian art.

It would seem to be intended to counter the influences
that impact the family today.

In America, it inevitably promotes the ideal nuclear family
that is represented by the suburban family
of parents, children, in a single family house.

There seems to be an unspoken consensus
that if the family were only reinforced,
society's troubles would be addressed.

There is no question that the family today
is undergoing dramatic changes.

Gays wish to marry, preferring fidelity to promiscuity,
even while marriage among straights is in crisis,
with a 50% divorce rate, even among Catholics.

Young Americans seem to take it as the standard practice
to live together before getting married. Or even without marrying.

It is no surprise that there is a desire
to shore up the traditional nuclear family,
with the implicit hope that this will cure things.

But maybe the nuclear family is part of the problem
—or at least a symptom of it.

Hillary Clinton famously said that it takes a village to raise a child.
The Bible, however, was way ahead of her on that.

The small village, such as Nazareth, was typically interrelated,
with one or two clans. That is, in fact, true today of Bethlehem.

When we look at the portraits of the Holy Family in the New Testament,
the evidence is no different, in fact.

Today's story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple
seems to have been chosen because is shows the three of them together.

But the passage is not really about the family;
it is about premonitions of the story to come.

As for the family, in the very next story in Luke,
the account of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple,
we hear about his parents not noticing
that he was missing from the return caravan, until
"they started to look for him among their relatives and friends."

When you look around the gospels
for representations of the family of Jesus,
what you usually find is a group of people.

In Mark, the earliest of the gospels,
we first hear of the family in chapter three,
where it speaks of his mother and brothers and sisters.
In the only other mention of them,
in the rejection at the synagogue of Nazareth in chapter six,
we hear the townspeople dismiss him as the son of Mary
and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon.

Matthew, chapter 13, follows Mark,
with a slight change of the names:
James and Joseph and Simon and Judas.

In the seventh chapter of John's gospel,
we hear about his brothers taunting him
about going up to Jerusalem for the feast,
"for not even his brothers believed in him."

These passages have troubled us Catholics for some time,
since we have doctrinal difficulties with the idea
that Jesus had brothers and sisters.
Usually, we understand that to mean that these people are cousins,
not actual blood brothers and sisters.
But if this is so—especially if this is so—
when the bible considers the family,
it is the extended family it has in mind.

However, there are two places in which
the family is described as only the three of them.
One of these is Luke's account of the census and the need
to travel to Bethlehem during a difficult time in Mary's pregnancy.
The other is Matthew's story of the flight into Egypt.

In both cases, the reason the family has been reduced to the three of them
is because of the crisis at hand.

In Luke, they are vulnerable travelers
forced into a distant place for bureaucratic needs.
    In Matthew, they are refugees, fleeing for their lives.
In each case, the difficulty they face is the absence of the village,
    the clan which is their family,
    now left behind as they travel into a precarious future.

In the gospels, then, the nuclear family is not an ideal,
but rather a result of crisis.
    It is an unwanted last resort, not a model.

The question it raises is one of causes.
What is it that is pressuring the family that causes it to become distorted,
    to lose its role as home and safe haven?

And here I come to an example for me today.
I am a Facebook friend with someone I do not really know.
    Somehow he got on the list.
    I think he went to Loras at one time.

He is a blogger by the name of Michael,
and he posts things on my page many times a day,
and even through the night.
    Gradually, I have pieced together some of his personal story,
    from hints only, since he is mainly obsessing about church politics.

It appears he was a speech writer for a major political figure
in Washington, D.C., where he lives.
    But he lost his job.
    Also, his wife left him, and I suspect took the kids.
    They got divorced.
Now, it appears, he has no heat in his apartment,
and most recently, the space heater broke.
    This week he got a line on a job through the Internet,
    but I see some people are warning him against that.

I would have long ago dropped him off the list,
except that it seems to me that his blogging
is the thread holding him to some sense of normal life.
    Perhaps being willing to listen is a version
    of giving shelter to the homeless.
        In any case, I push the “Like” button once in a while,
        in response to one of his rather lengthy opinions,
        to indicate I am still listening.

I find myself wondering about Michael's family.
I find myself thinking that it has succumbed to social structures of the day.
Unable to sustain itself in the face of certain pressures,
it developed fracture lines that finally splintered it.
At least as I imagine it.
As I have seen so many times elsewhere.

It seems to me that again it calls us to look
for the sources of family disintegration,
and not assume that firming up the family by itself
will clear up damaging social structures.

When we see refugee children
arriving at our borders without their parents,
we might wonder what social structures
are causing this rupture of families, and try to address them.

When we see a rash of single mothers in poverty,
we might wonder why, and what has happened to the fathers?
Lack of jobs? Wholesale incarceration of black males?
Why should this be happening?
It is clearly not a collection of individual decisions,
but a wider social problem.

When we talk about abortions, we might question the reasons.
Is it selfishness? Why should this be?
Poverty and lack of resources?
A culture of rape without consequences?
Why are these things happening, and what might be done
to change things at the source?

In the gospel today, we find not only Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,
but also Simeon and Anna.
They represent the past as heritage,
yet they also look to the future.

Simeon, in fact, anticipates the story that is to come,
with its sword and its gentile mission.
That story will unfold with the year that begins this week.

It is the story of Jesus,
a story that addresses the very questions that are raised today.

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

January 1, 2015

Numbers 6:22-27	The blessing of Aaron
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8.	Let his face shine upon us
Galatians 4:4-7	God sent his son
Luke 2:16-21	Shepherds and Circumcision

Today we hear about the circumcision of Jesus, as well as taking one last look at the shepherds. It is as if we are here at the end of the Christmas story, and only this bit is left for us to consider. The shepherds come to the manger, and then leave. And we never see them again. They disappear from the gospel story.

What are we to make of these people? What did Luke want us to think about? Or, what did the editors of the lectionary have in mind for today?

Perhaps these shepherds represent a marginal class in society, now given the honor of bringing the news of the angels and giving their own respects. Maybe it is as Garrison Kieler once said of the shepherds—that they occupy a niche in society so low that it guarantees that they are ignored, such as the people who work in the car wash today.

Or maybe Luke wants us to think of another shepherd in the neighborhood of Bethlehem. You will remember the story of Samuel going to the farm of Jesse, near Bethlehem, looking for the next king. Jesse paraded his sons before Samuel, who finally asked if there wasn't someone else he should be considering. Jesse answered that there was only David, out looking after the sheep. But surely David wouldn't be the one he wanted. But Jesse was wrong.

The shepherds disappear into the hidden corridors of history, and we do not know anything more about them. They are not the only characters who leave the scene abruptly. In Matthew's account of the early life of Jesus, we hear about the Magi. They leave rather suddenly, too. Having been warned in a dream, they left by another route. Then they are gone, and we hear nothing more about them. And this, after they have stirred things up with the arrival, resulting in the holy Family heading off to Egypt and Herod off to Bethlehem to execute his slaughter.

Phyllis Zagano wrote a reflection last week on another sudden departure. After delivering the news to Mary at the Annunciation, with her assent, and then the sudden burden of this new responsibility, the passage ends, "And then the angel left her." But what, we might ask, did Mary do then? How did she manage?

Sudden departures are not rare. One thinks of the end of Luke's gospel, and the beginning of Acts, when the disciples are gathered with Jesus as he ascends to his father. Shortly after that, an angel appears with the pointed question: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?" The strong suggestion is that they have work to do. This is not simply an end to one period; it is also the beginning of another.

Although the liturgy will tell us that the Christmas season continues now for some time, that opinion is not widely shared. Already the Christmas trees are out by the curb. Already some of the decorations have been taken down. Christmas is important, but it can't always be Christmas.

A few days ago Garrison Kieler's "Writer's Almanac" published as its daily poem online a father's reflection on the departure of his daughter, after the Christmas gathering is over. The poem is by Mark Perlberg, and is entitled "The End of the Holidays."

> We drop you at O'Hare with your young husband,
> two slim figures under paradoxical signs:
> United and Departures. The season's perfect oxymoron.
> Dawn is a rumor, the wind bites, but there are things
> fathers still can do for daughters.
> Off you go looking tired and New Wave
> under the airport's aquarium lights,
> with your Coleman cooler and new, long coat,
> something to wear to the office and to parties
> where down jackets are not de rigeur.
> Last week winter bared its teeth.
> I think of summer and how the veins in a leaf
> come together and divide
> come together and divide.
> That's how it is with us now
> as you fly west toward your thirties
> I set my new cap at a nautical angle, shift
> baggage I know I'll carry with me always
> to a nether hatch where it can do only small harm,
> haul up fresh sail and point my craft
> toward the punctual sunrise.

Christmas is important, but it can't always be Christmas. There are other important matters that need attending to, as well.

A few days ago, as well you know, we said our farewell to Fr. Bob Vogl. Nativity Church was filled with women religious, in quiet tribute to his untiring ministry among them.
Fr. Barta spoke about Fr. Vogl's quiet and humble generosity, the gift that he brought to us. And then he ended his homily with an urgent question: Who will take his place? Who will carry his presence forward? Will it be you?

Today the shepherds of Bethlehem bring the good news of Peace on Earth from the angels on the hill to the stable at the edge of the town. They have taken message this far. We must take it from there.

The Baptism of the Lord

January 11, 2015

Isaiah 55:1-11 Come to the water
Isaiah 12:2-6 The springs of salvation
1 John 5:1-9 The water and the blood
Mark 1:7-11 The Baptism of Jesus

We begin the Ordinary Church Year as we begin the Gospel of Mark,
with the Baptism of Jesus.
The story is crowded with rich symbols.
And today the passage from the book of Isaiah helps us explore them.

The passage concludes the collection of prophecies
from the time of Second-Isaiah, the prophet of the Babylonian Exile.
And that experience colors the language.

The passage today takes up three topics in turn.
First, the **Water**. "Come to the water."
Then, the water is expanded to include the banquet.
In other words, we are speaking about sustenance, the support of life.
In the desert, survival depends desperately
upon knowing where to find water.

When I was in Israel,
I spent ten days in the desert of the Sinai peninsula.
And all I have to show for it is a poem.

The poem begins:

black goathair tents bloom
like bracket fungi in the elbowcrook
of two steep terraces

in the arid wadi where
acacias remember a pool was
a sink for runoff.

It describes Bedouin planning a wedding in the desert, at an oasis.
A wadi, w-a-d-i, is what they call an arroyo in the American southwest.
It is a dry water bed that floods during a rainstorm but is usually dry.
Acacias are the shrub trees growing where water can be found,
usually below the surface.

Water is universal in its necessity
and democratic in its distribution to whoever is in need of it.
Water is life-giving, and its symbol is that.
In the baptism story, new life is signaled by the water of the Jordan.

After the water comes the transcendent **Heavens**:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
As high as the heavens are above the earth
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts."

With the high heavens comes the dimension of mystery.
Like Job encountering the God who overmasters him,
with mystery beyond his comprehension,
the prophet learns that the ways of God reach
beyond anything we can plan or predict.
Beyond a certain point, the only response is trust in a loving God.

In the baptism story, the heavens opened and a dove descended.
The dove, we know, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, come upon Jesus now,
and staying with him through the story to come.

The story will show Jesus working among those in the margins,
bringing them back into the social community
from which they have been estranged.
He will be working with acts of power that open into mystery.

And the story will take him into places where he seems to be lost:
"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"
And here too the mystery prevails,
and only trust carries the moment forward.

And thirdly, after the image of the Water
and the image of the Heavens,
the prophet combines both of these to discover an image for the **Word**:

"For just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
and do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,

giving seed to the one who sows
and bread to the one who eats,
so shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
my word shall not return to me void,
but shall do my will,
achieving the end for which I sent it."

For the Prophet, this is the assurance of the promise of the new day,
the return to the land.
God does not promise without following through.
God does not lie.

In the Baptism story,
the Voice from heaven speaks a word to the occasion,
identifying the task that Jesus has ahead of him,
and projecting the Gospel to come in the process.

It is perhaps ironical that the Voice says nothing new,
but instead quotes from passages from the Bible—
Psalm 2, about the Messiah to come;
and Isaiah 42:1, about the suffering Servant.

In citing these passages,
the Voice from heaven sketches for Jesus the task to come.
He is the Messiah, yes.
But he is to pursue that vocation in the manner of the Servant
who suffers rather than causes suffering.

Later Jesus will call this a bath of pain,
bringing together the Water and the Mystery
into one intense focus.

And yet, the story to come is one of triumph and lasting joy.
It succeeds by passing through mystery into mystery.

Just as the Church Year, like the Gospel, begins with Baptism,
so does the life of the Christian.
On this day, we celebrate the truth that we would not be here,
without the experience of Baptism,
both the call and our response, the word and the water.
And we know that this leads, and has led, into mystery.

And the coming year lies ahead of us, as well,
as call and as mystery.
    We are in the position of Jesus at the Jordan,
    heading into a time sketched only in general strokes,
    but calling for trust and faithful response.

At this point, I am conscious of the fact
that earlier I introduced a poem, but failed to finish it.
    It is not long, and it does paint a picture of social life
    animated by water and breath.

So I thought I would end with it:

BEDOUIN

black goathair tents bloom
like bracket fungi in the elbowcrook
of two steep terraces

in the arid wadi where
acacias remember a pool was
a sink for runoff.

dry acacia leaves stir dryly
in the breath of angular flute
statements knotting greetings

among tribes gathered by the wadi
to negotiate the ass and camel
dowry for a privileged wedding.

dust shifts and the veiled tent
wearily exhales above its rugs
where buzz unceasing flutes.

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

January 18, 2015

I Samuel 3:3-10, 19	Young Samuel Called
Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-10	Here I am, Lord
I Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20	Your body is not for immorality
John 1:35-42	Behold the Lamb of God

It used to be called discernment. Maybe it still is.
I mean the determination about what you should do with your life.

Our presence here indicates we have made a decision about this,
probably repeatedly.
How did that happen? Did you hear a voice?
Does anyone actually hear a voice?

Well, actually I did, or something very like that.
I was in college, in Rohlman Hall, the seminary.
At Mass on Sunday in Christ the King, I seemed to hear someone say,
"You will never be a priest."
I do not know what that was. It seems it was wrong.
I took it as a false voice, trying to dissuade me.
Or maybe it was a true voice, wisely using reverse psychology,
counting upon my typical stubbornness.
In any case, it taught me
that you can't always depend on hearing voices.

Most likely, discernment comes through other people whom you trust.
Perhaps friends with whom you shared visions
of possible ways of spending your lives
in ways that might make a difference.
Perhaps it was with a spiritual counselor,
exploring the possibilities of following a call to personal discipleship.

How do people decide what they are to do with their lives?
Some, I think, simply fall into what they devote their lives to.
There is something to be said about assessing the options,
and accepting what is given you.
It may be a case of turning a brute fact into a personal choice.
Some may only discover what their lives are about
as it comes around full circle,
and they look back to find a thread that follows
through the many turns and corners of the journey,
giving it a coherence that it didn't have along the way.

Sometimes you can look back and single out a moment
that turned out to be pivotal,
even though it didn't seem like it at the time.

What gives meaning to a person's life?
Our culture has monetized this question,
using personal wealth as the gauge of success.
This has the advantage of being measurable.
We can compare degrees of success.

Others would point out that this doesn't necessarily make a person happy.
For them, apparently, achieving happiness is the sign of the successful life.
This goal is open, however, to a dispute about what real happiness is.
Some would say that it is more than a life of pleasure.
They would say that such a goal suggests a life of self-interest,
and this will never satisfy us.

Or perhaps it will, much of the time.
But there are those times when we wonder what good we have been
to the world, to others, maybe to anybody.
Some would say that the goal in life is to avoid
troublesome questions like these. They only get a person upset.

Many would agree that the key to a successful life is that it be meaningful.
And, of course, this simply leads to the next question,
what gives meaning to a life?

It is my prejudice to think that a faith life
offers the possibility of a meaningful life.
But in these current times, perhaps especially with the help
of the forum given by the internet,
the dissenting voices of atheism are heard more and more often.
Frequently, their charge against religion is that it provokes violence.
Of course it is easy to show that religion has no monopoly on violence.
And at the same time, all religions caution against violence.

Another charge is that religion is superstition,
a palliative for the gullible.
Here too it is easy to show that there are people,
both brilliant and courageous, who are believers.

But that, of course, is not the point.
The point, I think, is that discipleship calls for a leap of faith.

And this leap involves much more
than simply considering the value of an abstract hypothesis.
It is a matter of committing one's entire life
to the consequences of making such a leap.
It means living beyond proof, in a life marked by trust.
Trust in God, first of all. But also trust in others.

And, as a matter of fact, it can be shown
that living in trust of one another is the only reasonable way of living.
And it is, in fact, unavoidable.

This week a fire occurred in the Metro in D.C.
The train was trapped in a tunnel.
Smoke was engulfing the passengers.
It took 25 minutes for responders to arrive.
One person died. 84 were hospitalized.
The reports that filtered out showed an accidental group
that had become a community, helping one another to water, for instance.
This seems to be the common story we hear in disasters.
It is so different from the story the survivalists tell.
Theirs is the vision of a people turned savage,
preying upon one another, each for his or herself.

This is the life without trust.
It begins there, and apparently ends there.
But it is not, it would seem, the wisdom of the race.
Nor is it the wisdom of the gospel.

In the readings today we have accounts
of people being called to service,
something that is common at this beginning time of the church year.

The story of Samuel, in the selection we have for today,
emphasizes the call, and his willingness to accept it.
We see this in particular when we realize that the story stops
right when we are about to hear the message
that is behind all this urgency.
But we never find out.
We only hear about the willingness of Samuel.

The gospel also dwells on the call to discipleship,
with a surprising story of how Andrew came first,
and only then alerted his brother Simon, soon to be called Peter,
to the presence among them of what John calls the Lamb of God.

And Simon's decision to follow Jesus is confirmed with a change of name.
With that, it suggests he has taken on a new identity.

But there is more to these two stories.
In fact, I suspect that this further dimension
is what recommended their being taken together.
What I am referring to is a pattern seen in both stories,
a pattern in which persons in a leadership position
sends their followers away toward another.
Eli recognized, as Samuel didn't, that he was being given a special call.
It was a call in which Eli had no part, and he was wise enough,
and humble enough, to send Samuel in the right direction.

And John the Baptist, after having identified Jesus
as the Lamb of God on the previous day,
now makes the same identification
for the benefit of two disciples of his.
One of them is Andrew.
Upon hearing John, and processing this information,
the disciples turn away from John and begin to follow Jesus.
In fact, they not only follow, but they recruit others.
In this case, specifically, Simon Peter.

Two things strike me about this.
One is the commitment shown by Eli and John the Baptist,
a commitment to authentic discipleship, to truth.
It requires a clarity of discipleship in their own experience,
that they are able to recognize the limits of that service,
and express that service in turning people elsewhere.

The second thing is how the call, for Samuel as for Andrew and Peter,
comes through the mediation of other people.
For them discipleship is more than following,
it is guiding others as well.

In eastern thought, this is the vocation of the bodhisattva.
"Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings
who have put off entering paradise
in order to help others attain enlightenment."

In the stories today, Eli is as important as Samuel.
And John the Baptist, as much as that of Andrew, Peter,
and the other unnamed disciple.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 25, 2015

Jonah 3:1-5, 10	Jonah's Commission
Psalm 25:4-9	Teach my your paths
1 Corinthians 7:29-31	The present form is passing away
Mark 1:14-20	Peter and Andrew, James and John

It has been pointed out that today's reading from the book of Jonah
is different in the Bible, where it says,
"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."
    It turns out that we are in chapter three,
    and the first time Jonah was called to take a message to Nineveh
    was at the beginning of chapter one.

But the first time, Jonah avoided the call of the Lord,
and instead of heading east to Nineveh,
he got in a boat and headed west.
    It seems that he, along with many Israelites, despised Nineveh,
    and wanted nothing to do with any possibility
    that the city might be saved.

We all know the story of how he caused a storm
and was dumped overboard, where he ended in the belly of the fish,
    and eventually was dumped back at the place he started from,
    ready to begin again.

And that is where today's passage comes in.

Thinking of second chances and repeated calls
    reminds us that today's well-known Gospel passage
    about the call of the first four disciples also has a second moment.

Halfway through Mark's Gospel,
at the end of the time spent in Galilee
    and about the time they head toward Jerusalem
    for the final chapters of the story,
    Jesus asks the disciples about how people think of him.
        When he asks, "Who do you say I am?",
        Peter answers, "the Messiah."

But then, to the dismay of Peter and the others,
Jesus announces a fresh approach to that role
    by speaking of his destiny in Jerusalem,
    where he will be rejected, and killed, but rise on the third day.

And not only that, he expects something similar from his followers,
when he renegotiates the call by the lake, heard today.

Then, he says, "Whoever wishes to come after me
must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

This takes following to a whole new level,
and the disciples are caught by surprise.

Peter argues with Jesus.
What happened to the simple call by the lake?
Now, it seems, that call has been deepened
and taken in new directions.

So maybe today's message is not so much about vocations and calls
as it is about second vocations and revised calls.

One thinks of friends and family members
who have moved from ordained or religious life to marriage.
If we are to love God by loving our neighbor,
for some this means marriage as the sacramental love of intimacy,
with all its rewards and trials.
This is a call, with its own demands.

In his seventh chapter of I Corinthians
Paul addresses the issue of Christian marriage.
His theme is long and closely argued,
and so the lectionary editors have been able to break off
only a few passages that can stand alone. As today.

Paul's basic position is that newly converted Christians
need not void their marriages to pagans,
nor need they avoid marriage though the time is short.
In effect, you can be an authentic Christian
in whatever place your find yourself.

But here again we find the question raised again:
What does the call demand?
What happens when circumstances change?
Following the call to discipleship seems not once for all,
but is more like keeping one's balance on shifting ground.

This week over 500 employees
of the John Deere plant in Waterloo were terminated.

However, 50 have opportunity to take jobs in Dubuque.
The news accounts tend to emphasize the economic implications.
But what does that mean for those families?
Will any move to Dubuque? Will employees commute?
What kind of a toll will it take on them?
What decisions have to be made?
Will their families survive those decisions?

The call to discipleship never stands still, never finishes.
Here are a few examples.

For this community, we have only to think of Mother Xavier Tehrmer,
and her story of repeated new beginnings.
You know the story better than I do,
and I am not going to risk getting the details wrong.
I only wish to point out that there is no better example
of the call undergoing repeated revisions,
and repeated decisions about following it.

I find myself thinking of Janet Callawaert,
who arrived at Clarke University with her fresh degree in theology.
She had belonged to a religious order in Omaha,
but decided to pursue her vocation as a lay theologian,
seeing a need in a field dominated by clerics.

While at Clarke, she met Mike O'Meara, a confirmed bachelor.
After a courtship that involved many dancing dates, they married.
Mike died prematurely, a victim of a medical experiment gone awry,
at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester.

Eventually, Janet O'Meara retired from her teaching job.
Feeling a growing need for reflection and contemplation,
she entered the Trappistines.
Now, in her 70s, she is Sr. Anna,
a novice at Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey.

In the past, I would invoke at this time
the example of Bishop Oscar Romero.
He is still an important example of one whose answer to the call
imposed remarkable changes in direction.

But today another example from Latin America
presents itself in Pope Francis.
We know the story. How Jorge Bergoglio became a Jesuit

and was unexpectedly named head of the Jesuits of Argentina
at the unripe age of 36.
We know how he found himself leading the community
at a time when the most brutal repression was happening,
the time of the disappearances.

We also know that he exerted his authority in a way
that eventuated in his being removed from the post.
In something of an exile, he experienced a conversion
that led him, as a bishop, to be called the Slum Bishop.
And now he brings that experience to the Vatican.

The call to discipleship never stands still,
and seldom, for many, is without its questions and doubts.
It may demand a commitment frequently, maybe even daily.

But most certainly, one will come in one's life to a crossroads
where it becomes apparent that many of the original reasons
no longer make their case,
just as much of that former world no longer is present to us.

But we find that new needs show themselves,
and other demands call out.

And often it takes us deeper into places
we never expected to go.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 1, 2015

Deuteronomy 18:15-20	A prophet like Moses
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9	Harden not your hearts
1 Corinthians 7:32-35	Paul on marriage
Mark 1:21-28	The Capernaum Demoniac

(Forty years ago, the Steelers defeated the Vikings,
16-6, in Super Bowl IX.)

Forty years ago this week I was engaged
in what seemed an unlikely project.
I had the somewhat bizarre idea to write a musical
based on the Gospel of Mark.

We produced it at Aquinas that spring semester.
Later, at the urging of some theater people,
I looked more closely at the dramatic conflict that drove the story.
As a result of that I added some new songs,
including one to start off the action.
I will not sing it, but the words went something like this:

He went into Capernaum
and went into the synagogue
and there he saw a man with an unclean spirit.
Right inside the synagogue
He found the poor demoniac
and brought him back to health.
What's it all mean?
I don't know but I'm sure it's gonna be trouble.

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

The crowd in great astonishment
saw the spirit's banishment

Saw the man released from his enthrallment;
He teaches with authority,
it isn't like the Pharisee.
They wondered what the devil it all meant.
(What's it all mean?)
I don't know but I'm sure it's gonna be trouble.

This, of course, is today's Gospel reading.
The recurring refrain warning about coming trouble
was an attempt to honor this story's role
as the beginning of the conflict in the Gospel.

But there was a chorus, as well as a refrain, and it went like this:

Who is this man?
Why does he do the things he does?
He does what no one can.
He wanders ways, and wonders whys,
and wakes a world that never was.

This also was part of the story,
since it showed a new world opening up,
to the astonishment of those present.

For there is a peculiar thing about this story.
On the one hand, the people respond to his teaching:
"He teaches with authority; it isn't like the Pharisee."

On the other hand, when we look at the episode,
it isn't a story about teaching, but rather about expelling a demon:
"He said to the spirit: Demon, get out of him."

Jesus' message reached people in their lives, not just in their minds.
The opening story of his ministry is a metaphor for the rest.
Those influences that bedeviled their lives and communities
were lifted away.

This week, reading *Commonweal Magazine*,
a couple of examples presented themselves to me, in a pair of book reviews.

The first is by Luke Timothy Johnson,
the celebrated Catholic NT scholar at Emory University in Atlanta.
He is cheerfully dismantling a book by Bart Ehrman,
called *How Jesus Became God*.

You maybe have never heard of Bart,
but he is everywhere in the Biblical publishing world.

Once an instructor at the fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute,
his entry into critical biblical study turned him toward agnosticism,
and a new mission.

In Johnson's words: "he has vigorously, perhaps even obsessively,
sought to exorcise others of the demons of Evangelical faith
that once also held him captive."
Johnson faults him for his narrow treatment
of the New Testament conviction of Jesus' divinity.

This did not ultimately depend upon historical accounts of the empty tomb, but
rather their experience of what they called a "new creation,"
or, as Johnson says, "a new creation at work through the presence
of a personal, transcendent, and transforming power
called the Holy Spirit."
They experienced it in their own lives.

Here we see the Word addressing them in their lives,
and not simply in their minds.

The very next review in *Commonweal* is by John Cavadini,
and the book reviewed is
The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope,
by Austin Ivereigh.
This is a glowing review, and makes me want to buy the book.

A central theme is that Jorge Bergoglio has always been a reformer,
and those who elected him pope knew what they were getting.
An interesting and telling incident
was his reformation of the Jesuit order in Argentina.

He took to heart the theme that reform begins with the poor,
and he began where they were,
finding in their own faith life and popular pious practices
the means for renewal.

The Ivereigh says,
"Bergoglio's idea was that only by sharing in the lives of the poor
could they discover the 'true possibilities of justice in the world,'
as opposed to 'an abstract justice which fails to give life.'"

Students found this deeply attractive, and the Jesuits,
who hadn't had a new member for years
suddenly found the place overflowing with vocations.

But there was an interesting backlash.
Again, Ivereigh:
"But Bergoglio's reform was eventually disowned
by the older, left-leaning Jesuits,
who did not believe it was sufficiently grounded
in a scientific analysis of the social situation of the poor,
and were offended to discover Jesuit seminarians
learning and praying the devotions of the uneducated."

The Archbishop that named him auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires
was both impressed by his success
and shocked by his ostracization among the Jesuits.

Once again, the word reaches the lives of people,
and not simply their minds.
The demons were lifted away.

It was only as I was preparing for this liturgy,
reflecting on this gospel story and its premonitions of the story to come,
and also thinking about how that story was rendered in music,
that I remembered that this spring the Mark musical of 40 years ago
is being produced in two different places this spring.

One is a Lutheran parish in Fargo, South Dakota.

The other is at Marquette, the Catholic High School in Belluvue, IA.
They had done it years ago, and now
one of the students at that time is now a teacher in the school.
Once in the play, she is now directing it.

Perhaps, in its own small way, it too shows
how the word is most effective when it reaches people's lives,
and not just their intellects.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 15, 2015

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46	Purity rules for leprosy
Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11	I turn to you in time of trouble
1 Corinthians 10:31—11:1	Avoid giving offense
Mark 1:40-45	Healing of a leper

The French philosopher, Michel Foucault,
begins his book, Madness and Civilization, with these words:

"At the end of the Middle Ages,
leprosy disappeared from the Western World.
    In the margins of the community, at the gates of cities,
    there stretched wastelands which sickness had ceased to haunt
    but had left sterile and long uninhabitable.
For centuries, these reaches would belong to the non-human.
From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, they would wait,
    soliciting with strange incantations a new incarnation of disease,
    another grimace of terror,
    renewed rites of purification and exclusion." (3)

A little later, he continues the theme, speaking of the leprosaria,
the large hospital structures that once housed the lepers:

"Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory;
    these structures remained.
Often, in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated,
    strangely similar two or three centuries later.
Poor vagabonds, criminals, and 'deranged minds'
would take the part played by the leper, ...
    With an altogether new meaning and in a very different culture,
    the forms would remain—essentially that major form
        of a rigorous division which is social exclusion
        but spiritual reintegration." (7)

The population of lepers was replaced by the insane.
Formerly, they lived in the community, but now they were housed apart.

Perhaps we always need our leper populations,
barred from the rest of us, helping us claim our identity.
    Telling us who we are, but showing who we are not
    by moving the others out to the margins.

Jesus went to the margins of society, as today,
bringing them a degree of dignity and restoration.

Where are our marginals, our lepers, today?
To find them it requires special attention,
since part of the process is to put them out of sight, and out of mind.
Still, they are not hard to name.

The gay and lesbian population used to provide this service for us.
But in recent years they have been welcomed into our midst.
So others have been recruited to replace them.

One obvious population is those we deem sexual offenders.
Despite the unanimous testimony of police departments
that this approach makes their work much more difficult,
we as a society has decided to solve this problem we have
by isolating them.

Also, as in the case of ancient leprosy,
which included a variety of skin diseases, serious and trivial,
we have clustered together a variety of offenders
under the label of sex offender,
from frightful predatory sex traffickers to the high school boy
whose girlfriend was slightly under age,
when they had an intimate encounter.

In a system of overlapping no-entry zones,
we in Dubuque have banished them to a trailer park
at the end of Peru Road.

Then there are our African-American males.
Just this week an article was published debunking the rumor
that there were more young black men warehoused in prison
than were attending college. It is not true.

But it is so bad that an article was written to show
that, while it is bad, it is not that bad. Or is it?
Why do we need slogans that say Black Lives Matter?
Why do we need to be told?
Is it because we need them not to matter, so that the rest of us can?
Is dark skin a kind of leprosy?

For that matter, why was it necessary for demonstrations this week
to display signs that said, “Muslim Lives Matter”?

We know the immediate reason—the murder of three Muslim students
by an unbalanced man who owned a small arsenal of weapons.

But isn't this also a group of people who have come to represent,
in our collective mind, a threat to our social well-being?
And here we can add the descriptive term "terrorist" as a self-justification.
Never mind that our Muslim friends and neighbors
are no more terrorist than we are.

Unfortunately for them, they are easily identifiable,
their women dress differently.
They help us say who we are
by naming others as those whom we are not.

Or maybe they are conspicuous by their language.
Maybe it is Spanish.
Our solution for immigrants without papers is deportation—
a national form of sending them out to the margins and beyond,
even if they have been here since childhood
and have nowhere else to go.

Meanwhile we have made the immigration process as difficult as possible.
Not to mention that we depend on
many from this marginalized community to move among us quietly,
performing the tasks that we are unwilling to do.

And of course, there is the universal plight of women in society,
traditionally selected to personify the other, the second-class,
the population that assures those in the center that they belong there.
While this is changing, it is so firmly structured in society
that we tend to lose hope.

Jesus traveled among the marginal, as we heard today.

Of the many surprises in today's story of the leper,
it is hard to decide which is the most outrageous.
Was it the boldness of the leper to come to Jesus
despite the laws forbidding it?
Or was it Jesus agreeing to meet with him?

I think it is actually something else.
I think it is found in the words, "moved with compassion,
Jesus reached out and touched him."

What does the untouchable need most, if it is not to be touched?
It is the touch that transforms.

It is in the image and imitation of Jesus
that we reach out and touch the lives of others.
And we experience how that touch transforms those lives.

Today we have a Pope who understands this.
He has been called "the pope of the poor" for more than his advocacy.
It is his willingness to place himself physically among the marginal
that has gathered the world's attention,
and has suggested they pay attention to him.

This, again, is the touch that transforms.

First Sunday of Lent

February 22, 2015

Genesis 9:8-15	The Noah covenant
Psalm 25:4-9	Your ways are love and truth
1 Peter 3:18-22	Noah and Baptism
Mark 1:12-15	Testing in the Desert

This Lent is a season of arks and covenants.
We begin this week with the covenant of Noah, famous for his ark.
Next week we will hear about the covenant of Abraham.
The following week will be the covenant of Moses.
It too has an ark, the Ark of the Covenant.

There is a third ark, for at the far end of the synagogue
we will find an ornate cupboard-like structure
in which are kept the sacred scrolls.
Functionally, not unlike the Tabernacle in Catholic churches,
though considerably larger.

This ark teaches us what an ark is.
It is a special container holding sacred objects.
In this case, it is the holy book, the scrolls.
In the case of the Ark of the Covenant,
it is the holy relics from the Exodus,
especially the stone tablets with the Commandments.

And then there is Noah, and his ark.
It is a container first, and a boat second.
Its function as a container explains why in all the pictures
it looks more like a box than a boat.

And what it contained was life itself, the sacred species,
the life that will be preserved, to ground itself,
to root and plant itself in a new place.

This image of an ark as a refuge for genetic survival,
of a cargo of life carried through barren stretches of time
to be allowed a new day and a new place,
is repeated today, in those biodiversity projects
taking place in certain farms and reserves
where threatened varieties of grains or vegetables, or animals,
are kept alive and nurtured,
as a sort of genetic information bank.

Modern genetic manipulation of hybrids has created
standardized crops and food stuffs that have served mightily
to feed the rapidly growing populations of the earth.
But there has been an unforeseen side-effect.
In standardizing the genetic structure of our food supply,
we are losing a large percentage of variation in species.
In other words, the library of genetic code is thinning out.

It is for this reason that certain individuals and associations
have taken upon themselves to preserve the genetic diversity
in special-purpose parks, farms, and reserves,
acting as an archive or library for "out-of-print" species.
In other words, an Ark.

In my imagining, the planet Earth is itself another version of Noah's Ark.
This planet, which in our lifetime
has been seen as a whole for the first time,
is traveling through space.

More specifically,
it is moving through the Orion arm of the Milky Way galaxy,
circling Sol, our sun,
which is in turn one of a small cluster of stars
in our neighborhood of the Milky Way.

One of the most interesting reactions of astronauts
who have had a chance to reach space and then look back on earth
is their strong impulse to recognize this blue planet as Home.
It apparently is a deep feeling
for those cruising around in distant space.

But those pictures of earth in space
also make a vivid case for the uniqueness of this planet,
and its relative solitude.
There is nothing for thousands, millions, of miles.
Except the companion Moon,
a beautiful but arid rock.

In the reading from Genesis today, we hear the covenant with Noah.
Never again will the earth be destroyed by a flood.

This is good news. But what does it mean?
Is it a barrier against nuclear warming and rising tides?
Probably not.

Is it, on the other hand, a free pass to do whatever we wish,
a blank check for use and abuse of the natural world?
    Also, probably not.
    What then?
It seems possible that the author of Genesis 9
had more than floods in mind.
    It may be that he had global catastrophe in mind,
    but that flood was the image that he used,
    maybe the only image he had at that time.

Today we have more.
    This week an internet magazine published an article
    listing the 12 things most likely to destroy the world.
        Without providing an exhaustive report,
        which would indeed be exhausting, some can be mentioned.

Catastrophic climate change could occur
if we raise the global temperature 4 or more degrees.
    Nuclear war is still a threat, as more nations join the nuclear club.
    Global pandemic is possible, for although medicine has improved,
    global transportation has become much more common.

Others include ecological catastrophe,
global system collapse, as through cyber attacks,
nanotechnology, expansion and complexity of artificial intelligence,
    as well as the old standards such as asteroids and supervolcanoes.

    One is all the more convinced
    that we need to hold on to this blue planet and keep it close.

I imagine it floating through the universe, carrying its cargo of life,
    like a milkweed seed pod floating through the autumn air.
    as imagined in a slight poem called …

FLOTILLA

Seedpods, seven of them,
cruising from one o'clock
across my windshield,
vertical, serene, self-contained:
a squadron of spaceships
on a colonizing mission.

Some call our blue planet Spaceship Earth.
For me it is the Ark.

And what this ark is carrying is "the gift of conscious reflection."
Not just life, but conscious life,
is what this blue planet ark carries as its cargo.
It is the only conscious life of which we know in the universe,
though we have been sending out feelers and signals
for many years now.

But it is this conscious awareness,
with its dexterity and its imagination, its math and its art,
its theoretical penetration and its practical know-how,
that has been given stewardship.
We are in charge, not only as shown in our experience,
but also as assigned in our faith.

Like a parent who gives a child free rein to ramble and explore,
God has entrusted us with freedom as well as responsibility,
guarded within certain limits,
signaled by the covenant of Noah.

We are both creatures and co-creators,
and the Ark is our trust.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 1, 2015

Genesis 22:1-2, 9, 10-13, 15-18	The Covenant of Abraham
Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19	You have loosed my bonds
Romans 8:31-34	If God is for us, who can be against us?
Mark 9:2-10	The Transfiguration on the Mountain

It is a strange story, the one we call the Sacrifice of Isaac.
It is not really a sacrifice, since Abraham doesn't go through with it.
But we still find it strange, almost abhorrent.

The Danish philosopher, father of existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard,
famously pondered this story as marking the difference
between ethical and religious behavior.
Ethically, Abraham was immoral.
But religiously he was justified in his trust
that God would not harm Isaac.

In the Jewish tradition it is called the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac.
No mention of sacrifice.
It is seen as the tenth and final test of Abraham.
The test concerns the Covenant with Abraham.

We are dealing with Arks and Covenants this Lent.
Last week we saw the Ark and Covenant of Noah.
This week it is the Covenant with Abraham.
The Covenant itself was earlier.
God promised Abraham many descendants
as well as the land in which he sojourned.

Since then, God has tested Abraham's trust
in the Covenant, in the promises of God.
This is the last of those.
How will Abraham have many descendants,
if the one through whom they will come is lost?

We know that Abraham has passed the test,
since the terms of the covenant are renewed
—his descendants will be as the stars of the sky
and the sands of the seashore.

For the editors of the lectionary,
who put together today's set of scripture readings,
    it would seem that sacrifice is prominent
    in their understanding of this event.

Particularly in view of the passage from Romans,
    to the effect that God did not spare his only Son
    in the effort to bring us back.

And yet, there may be something else here besides sacrifice.
    It may be that story of Abraham and Isaac
    is intended to dramatize as vividly as possible
    that the sacrifice of human life is forbidden,
        no matter how much the nations surrounding the Israelites
        might favor that ungodly ritual.

    It may be that the lesson is that God values human life,
    and that we who profess allegiance to God must do the same.

The mention of the only Son alerts us to a theme in these Scriptures.
It is found in the phrase "beloved son."
    The heavenly voice at the Transfiguration uses that phrase.
    So does the story of Abraham and Isaac.
In fact, the Abraham story uses the expression three times,
more than any other instance,
which suggests it is a primary text for this idea.
    Any subsequent use of the term would then be a reference
    to Abraham, his son Isaac, and their story.

And so it is with the voice on the Mount of Transfiguration.
And here too we need to look back earlier.
Just as the Akedah looks back to the earlier covenant with Abraham,
    so does the Transfiguration story look back
    to the earlier baptism of Jesus.

Then too the voice from heaven was heard,
saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
    At the Transfiguration the message is repeated,
    but with new emphasis.

Many see the reference to the beloved Son
at the beginning of the story of Jesus
as pointing to a theme of sacrifice.
They believe that God is sacrificing his only Son for our sake.

They speak of God's call for Jesus to suffer.
And yet, if this is so, how are we to understand
how God values human life as an ultimate good?
How would a good God require suffering?
Maybe we should look again.

The message of the baptismal voice,
sounded again today in the Transfiguration account,
calls Jesus to a mission.
He is to be the awaited Messiah, but with a difference.

The voice alludes to Psalm 2, with its royal messianic call.
But it doesn't stop there, since it adds to that
the theme of the suffering Servant.
That very much sounds like a call to suffering.

But what we see is that Jesus is called to perform a task.
It is to announce and inaugurate the kingdom of God beginning in Israel.
He is not passive.

He challenges, and changes things.
He provokes and in that way evokes a group of opponents
who try to stop him and are busy dismissing him
as one without credentials or authority.
He is not passive. Anything but.

He is called to make a difference, but there may be consequences.
There will be consequences. That is part of the call.
But it is not a call to suffer; it is a call to act,
with suffering only as a side effect, not the purpose itself.

After his baptism, on the way to the Mount of Transfiguration,
Jesus has done many things.
He heals the sick, dislodges the demons, forgives the repentant.
And he teaches his disciples to act in his name

and follow in his way.

The disciples do not always penetrate his meaning.
And so it is when Peter finally understands that Jesus is the Messiah.

However, Peter also interprets this in the traditional style
of one who is a dominant power figure,
one whom Peter is glad to have joined up with.

So when Jesus affirms the other side of the role, that of the Servant,
it precipitates an argument between the two of them.
In short order, the voice on the Mount of Transfiguration
settles that dispute in Jesus' favor. "Listen to him."

From this point on, as Jesus and his group travel toward Jerusalem,
he will teach the meaning of servant discipleship,
discounting dreams of domination, of status, of ambition,
despite the jockeying for position among the Twelve
and the dreams of advancement by James and John.

This is the mark of the New Covenant,
and of those who belong to it.

The call is to act on behalf of those in need,
with an understanding that there may be a price to pay for that action.
And the paradox
is that the commitment to working on behalf of life values
may involve a trade-off between life given and life surrendered.

Perhaps one can say that while the first covenant
prohibited the sacrifice of human life,
the second covenant took that beyond ritual
into the struggles of human living itself.

Or perhaps one can say,
joining two themes dear to the Dubuque Franciscans,
that if the Noah Covenant represented the ultimate expression
of the Sister Water Project,
the Akedah and the Mission of Jesus
point to the meaning of Nonviolence in the life of discipleship.

Third Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2015

Exodus 20:1-17	The Moses Covenant on Sinai
Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11	The decree of the Lord is trustworthy
1 Corinthians 1:22-25	God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom
John 2:13-25	Jesus clears the Temple

In the Lenten series of Arks and Covenants
we have come to the Covenant of Moses.
The stone tablets of the covenant were kept in the Ark of the Covenant,
something like a cedar chest on poles,
for carrying, as the Israelites moved from place to place.
And the Ark was in the Tabernacle,
a tent containing the holy Ark.

And in John's Gospel, the Word was made flesh,
and tabernacled among us.
And today, Jesus enters the old Tabernacle to proclaim the New,
his Body which is also the social Body of Christ.

It is a Christian prejudice
that the God of the Old Testament is a God of Wrath
and the God of the New Testament a God of Love.
It is as if there are two Gods, when of course there are not.

It is when we come in contact with the Ten Commandments
in their full glory that this idea comes out most insistently.
They are so demanding and so inflexible,
and God is a jealous God,
inflicting punishment to the third generation.
Meanwhile, the New Testament shows Jesus
reaching out to the helpless and the forgotten.
That, we say, is what love is all about.

But to indicate that this might be oversimplifying,
we need only look at the Gospel for today,
showing Jesus in a moment of justified wrath,
acting on behalf of God's interests, as he clears the temple area.

And on the other side, we might consider the covenant virtues
that the Jews associated with the Moses Covenant,
with the Ten Commandments at the heart of it
—mercy and faithfulness.

These virtues are stated simply in Psalm 117,
the shortest hymn in the Psalter, which quoted in full says:

Praise the LORD, all you nations!
Extol him, all you peoples!

His mercy for us is strong;
the faithfulness of the LORD is forever.
Hallelujah!

This does not sound like wrath.
So maybe there is more to the Moses Covenant
than we realize in our caricatures of it.

We call it the Moses Covenant,
but Moses is not a partner in the pact sealed at Sinai.
Moses is simply the person going up and down the mountain,
operating as a go-between
for the two actual parties in the covenant agreement:
God Yahweh and the people Israel.

And there is more to the contract than the Ten Commandments.
In Exodus, this chapter is followed by three more
with additional, more detailed laws.
These laws are proposed for Israel's agreement,
and when they say, "Everything the Lord has said we will do,"
it seals their agreement to enter into relationship with God.

Also, the laws are social as well as religious.
This is the law code of a people, and it is much richer than we realize.
The part that says this for me
is the part we call "The Cry of the Poor."

In Exodus 22 we read that God wishes them
to take special care of the vulnerable in their land.
Examples are given:
the foreigner resident in the land, far from his or her home;
the widow and orphan, left in a patriarchal society without a protector;
and the poor person who lacks the resources of most others.

For motivation, God says at one point that they are to take this seriously.
If they cry out he will hear them, and take punitive action,
for he is a God of wrath, just as we are inclined to suspect.

But at the end of this passage, he says something quite different:
If they cry out to him he will hear them,
for he is a God of compassion.

Both wrath and compassion.
And the compassion is for the vulnerable,
and the wrath is toward those who would see that vulnerability
as an opportunity for exploitation.

Furthermore, this orientation toward the welfare of the vulnerable
serves as the criterion of Israel's success as a society.
As its weakest members, they represent the common good,
and the law stands yet today,
as a clear sign of our own worth as a society.

But perhaps to best way to get a feel for the Jewish sense of the covenant
is to look at the book of Ruth,
and its dramatization of the Cry of the Poor.
For these two women, Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth,
experience it all.
They are each strangers in the land, widows, and desperately poor.

It has been ten long years since Naomi
and her husband and her two sons
left Bethlehem because of the famine.

Much had happened in that decade.
Her sons had married Moabite women in the new land.
Her husband Elimelech had died.
And then to their misfortune, her sons also died.
The three widows found themselves scrambling to survive.

Naomi came to a decision.
The famine was long over in Judah; she would return.
She advised her daughters-in-law to remain in the their homeland
while she returned to hers.

However, one of them, the one named Ruth,
despite Naomi's protests, refused to part from her.

"Wherever you go I will go,
wherever you lodge I will lodge.
Your people shall be my people

and your God, my God."

The two ventured back to Bethlehem to see what they might do.
Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem bitter, unblessed, and bereft.
Her former friends, the women of Bethlehem know it.
They see her diminished situation and ask: "Can this be Naomi?"

It is Naomi, and she laments her situation uninhibitedly.
She has no offspring to carry on the family tradition.
She has lost her ancestral home during that time she was gone.

She tells them, "Do not call me Naomi [which means 'Sweet'].
Call me Mara [which means 'Bitter'],
for the Almighty has made my life very bitter."

At this point, Ruth takes matters in hand.
And in order to support her mother-in-law,
decides to go gleaning in the nearby barley fields
owned by a certain Boaz, the very personification of the covenant ideal
—one who protects the vulnerable and punishes those who molest.

When she returns that night with a basket of grain
to share with her mother-in-law,
Naomi recognizes Boaz as her relative.
So to take care of Ruth, in turn,
she arranges for Ruth and Boaz to meet,
hoping he will take Ruth into his household
where she will remain, safe and secure.

But it goes beyond this, as the couple fall in love, and marry.
And now Ruth finds herself in a position to take care of Naomi,
through the intercession of Boaz.

All ends happily, as Naomi regains her ancestral land,
and Ruth's first son continues the lost line of the widow Naomi,
according to the covenant law of inheritance.

For me, what is striking about this story
is that it puts flesh and bones on the law we call the Cry of the Poor.
It shows the two women taking care of one another.
It shows the covenant law working
to protect the stranger, the widow, and the poor person.

It shows how they did not experience the covenant God as a God of Wrath,
but as a God of Justice and Mercy,
since the other side of wrath is compassion.

The first three Sundays of Lent feature Arks and Covenants,
and we have come to the end of that series.

If we relate them to the committed concerns of this community,
we might say, building on the words of last week,

that if the Noah Covenant represented the ultimate expression
of the Sister Water Project,
and the Akedah and the Promise to Abraham
points to the meaning of Nonviolence in the life of discipleship,
the justice and compassion of the Moses covenant
demands a commitment to the poor and marginal.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 15, 2015

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23	The Babylonian Captivity
Psalm 137:1-6	By the streams of Babylon
Ephesians 2:4-10	We were raised with him
John 3:14-21	God so loved the world he gave his Son

Lent is a time when we draw back and take a look at ourselves
and our relationship to God in the midst of a faith community.

The Truth-telling Look is a theme today.
We might think of those who know us well,
and our realization that when they give us the "look"
they know us as much, if not more, than we know of ourselves.
At least in certain areas.

This past Wednesday I was in Lawler, IA,
giving a talk on bible study to those in the parish cluster there.
In the question and answer period, Fr. Nick March asked a question
which focused this Sunday for me.
I will paraphrase and build on his idea.

He talked about the serpent in the desert,
referred to in the Gospel reading from John.
We know the story of the biting serpents
that plagued the people of Israel during their time in the desert.
Moses had them mount a bronze serpent on a stick,
and those who gazed on the image were healed.

Here the gaze is a healing look.

Jesus compares that image with his own moment
of what he calls his "lifting up."
In John, this means crucifixion, and more.
It includes the continuous movement into Resurrection
and Ascension to the Father.

When we focus on the cross itself,
we can say that those who look upon it experience a healing.
But it is not without its cost.

We are accustomed to hearing that a meditation upon the cross
indicts us of our own faults.
The shorthand way of saying this
is that we are the cause of his crucifixion.

We may have problems with this.
How can this be, since we were not around then.
    The Gospel tells of Pharisees and Roman soldiers.
    Pilate is involved, and the High Priest.
We are not in the story that shows how Jesus came to this moment.
    Or are we?

Another way to look at the matter
is to think about the world, the social conditions,
that make something like the crucifixion of Jesus possible.
    How have things changed since then?
    How do I stand in relation to those conditions?

In this sense, as I look at the cross, the cross looks at me.
It asks me where I stand.
    I ask whether I have willingly contributed
    to that heartless world,
    and I can think of the times that I have.

It asks if I have willingly failed to seize the opportunities
presented me to do something to change those conditions,
    and I know that I have at times definitely failed
    to take those opportunities.

And then it takes me further, and presents me with those moments
when I know that something should be done,
    and, although there may be times or there was a time
    when I could respond to that,
    I cannot now at this time.

It is beyond me, and I cannot act.
I cannot supply the need that calls out.

It is then I know the feeling of Peter at his call,
when he cries out from the boat,
“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”
    He knows his limits and his failings,
    and he has come to the end of those limits,
    and he can do nothing more.

He knows himself better he ever has, in all his stark vulnerability.
And yet he is still called.

In this raw self-disclosure, he comes to a truth about himself
that actually brings him into a new place,
a new understanding, a new relationship.

In the opening scripture reading today, we hear from Second Chronicles
—a book that seldom makes an appearance in the liturgy.
Today we hear from the end of the book.
It tells of the end of the kingdom, the end of Solomon's Temple.
The people are taken off into captivity in a foreign land.

The collapse of the kingdom and their forced exile
became a moment of disclosure for Israel.
They looked back at their history, and, while understanding
that their enemy was a rapacious and violent people,
they also realized that they were clearly not without fault themselves.

The history that concluded with their exile, as written in the book,
was a confession of fault as well as an account of events.

But the books of Chronicles were written afterward,
and today they end with a note about the people's return,
for they did return.

And they returned with a faith that was cleansed and clarified.
In the crucible of captivity among pagan peoples,
they came to a clear understanding of the meaning of One God,
ruler of the created world.

They returned to the land with a new understanding of their God,
and their role as witnesses and worshippers of that God.

The cross and the crucible are the passage
toward a new and deeper self-understanding.
In the realization of our own weakness
and complicity with wrong and wrongs,
we come to the end of our abilities,
and can only place the evidence on the table of offering.

And then it is when we discover that grace enters and carries us further, even to
the end of the story.

In the Gospel for today, the image of the serpent on the stick,
like the body on the cross, presents the illness as a part of the healing.
A way to the healing.

And those words are followed by the famous line,
celebrated by billboard and bumpersticker:
"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

The point it makes is that God's love reaches us
when we are away, when we are opposed.

This is not the love that rewards only best behavior.
Instead, it finds the stray, the prodigal, the people who have gone away,
and it brings them back.
It loves those who think they are unlovable.
It knows us better than we know ourselves,
and still remains our advocate, our sponsor and supporter.

Today is Laetare Sunday, that day in Lent that reminds us
that rejoicing is a part of this season's meaning.
In the look that leads to self-recognition, the admission of need,
we find the gift of grace that takes us further, into Easter.

The joy is that still and sober joy that knows the difficult truth
and yet sees that there is a land on the other side
that is our true fulfillment.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 22, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31-34	A New Covenant written on the hearts
Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15	A clean heart create in me, O God
Hebrews 5:7-9	When Jesus was in the flesh
John 12:20-33	Unless a grain of wheat dies

Perhaps it is a a strange place to begin,
but here is a poem about masks:

One October I devised a mask
though I never wore it. It was nothing
more than a face-sized photograph,
black and white, yet colored, of my face.

This, I thought, might be the true disguise:
only those who unmistakably
knew that it was I would be mistaken.
Just as the best lies are the true lies.

And I might just believe the face I saw
in the mirror looking back at me
my identity, identical
with that other mask I wore as me.

So the eye scatters in a hall of mirrors
as the refracted self attenuates
in other faces like in a family reunion
until in vaster space it disappears.

Another way to say this:

Is the face that we present in public the person we are?
Is the face we present to ourselves even the person we are?

Philosophers puzzle over the meaning of the self.
When I speak of myself, is the one speaking
the same as the one being talked about?

If I speak from within my "self,"
who is that I speak about from the outside
—that "self" I call mine?

I apologize for getting so deep this early in the day.
But these are the questions that are touched on in the scriptures today.
We are in that part of Lent that is nearing Holy Week,
and we are anticipating the changes that will take place there.

And the themes that come to the front
are those of repentance, conversion, dying and rebirth.

When Jesus first comes into Galilee, he calls for repentance,
a change of mind and heart.
A change of the person we are.

Jesus presents the image of the wheat grain
that must fall to the ground and die for it to produce much fruit.
Out of the ending comes the new, more fruitful beginning.

He is, of course, looking ahead to the events of the next week,
which in the view of John's Gospel
is a lifting up through cross and resurrection
to the new life in the new era.
It is the dying of the wheat grain that brings about
the lifting up of the new life of the plant.

And to this image he attaches the saying about loving and losing your life.
In the gospels this is commonly connected to following Jesus
through the transitus, the changes of cross and resurrection.

If you lose you self, you will gain it.
This is the witness of so much of our experience.
When you stop living for yourself,
when you let go of the need to gain your own prominence,
you find it coming to you without asking.

When you leave behind your focus of attention upon yourself,
and turn to another in love,
you discover the person you were looking for in yourself.

When you come to the moment of making your faith your own,
it means letting go of the personal project
of making yourself into something on your own,

and turning to trust—trusting in a God
whom you have decided can be trusted.

And in that letting-go to have discovered
what you were striving for previously, now come into your life.

So much of life depends on letting go.
And so often it is seemingly impossible to do.

We are like the child learning to swim,
holding desperately to the edge of the pool,
not wanting to let go for fear of the depths that loom below,
not believing that we can be buoyant,
that we can float, if we just let go.

And yet that is the paradox.
Sometimes letting go is the way to come to the end we desire.
Sometimes letting go of the desire itself brings about the new.

In this season of late Lent, we come to the changes of Holy Week.
This is the drama of the wheat grain fallen to the ground.
It is the story of the new growth.

In the Easter Baptisms the conversion that is called for
finds its place among us.
The newly baptized have let go of what has gone before
and are now entering into something new
that they have yet to learn about.

In this season of early spring,
seed catalogs are being examined,
and garden plots are planned and growing plans are plotted.
New seeds are being cultivated under lights,
being readied for transplanting.

When the grain of wheat falls to the ground,
the old husk falls away
and the new life germinating inside it sends out a tendril,
a small green probe into the new world.

Finding it congenial, it reaches out farther
and gradually rises into the air
with its many branches and the new life planned for it.

Second Sunday of Easter

(Sunday of Divine Mercy)

April 12, 2015

Acts 4:32-35	Early faith-based communism
Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24	His mercy endures forever
1 John 5:1-6	One came through water and blood
John 20:19-31	Thomas's faith affirmation

In John's Gospel, Thomas the Apostle speaks up, three times.
We might call them the three words of Thomas.

The first is in the story of the raising of Lazarus.
Jesus and the apostles are somewhere else
when word comes that Lazarus is dying.
The costs of returning to save him are high.
Since his enemies are looking for him in Judea,
by going back there
Jesus would be trading his life for that of Lazarus.

So when he decides to make the journey back,
Thomas is the one who says,
"Let us also go to die with him." (11:16)
Thomas has no illusions about what will happen.

We can call him Thomas the Realist.
He represents those of our friends
who refuse to see things with rose-colored glasses,
who will not be distracted by overly-optimistic scenarios of the future.

He is that side of ourselves, as well,
that side that keeps us paying attention to the facts of the case.

The second instance Thomas speaks up is at the supper,
when Jesus is discussing things with his followers.
When Jesus tells them that where he is going they know the way,
Thomas replies, "Master, we do not know where you are going;
how can we know the way?"
This, of course, gives Jesus the chance
to pronounce those timeless words,
"I am the way and the truth and the life."

Here we see Thomas telling us he does not know.
Here we can call him Thomas the Agnostic.
He is clear about limits.

He knows what he doesn't know.
He represents those of our friends who are clear-headed
and persistently honest in their critical thinking,
who will not be persuaded of visions and possibilities
that are not grounded in some kind of firm reason.

They are that part of ourselves
that keeps bringing us back to ground
when we get particularly optimistic without having good cause.
It is our ruthlessly honest side,
with a special emphasis on the ruthless part.

A third moment for Thomas to speak up
occurs in the gospel reading for today.
We do not know why Thomas was not with the rest
on Easter Sunday night. We can only guess.

But when he does show up, he is told by the rest
about their encounter with the risen Christ.
His response is unforgettable:
"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands
and put my finger into the nail marks
and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Here we see Thomas the Skeptic. He needs proof.
He is not going to jump to unsupported conclusions.
He retains a healthy skepticism that will always call for proof
before it is willing to put everything on the table.
He represents our friends who seem excessively reluctant,
who always point out the differences
between private devotions, say,
and the official worship of the church.

This is that side of ourselves that holds back
and doesn't commit readily,
that wants more research done,
more evidence that this is the case.

If you look up in a Thesaurus for a synonym
for Agnostic, or for Skeptic, you will find the word "Doubting,"
as in "Doubting Thomas."
And among other things, Thomas illustrates
the value, the often hidden benefits, of doubt.
We tend to think of it negatively,

but that is not necessarily the case.

The influential systematic theologian, Paul Tillich,
once put out a little book called *The Dynamics of Faith*.
In it he made the case that doubt is an intrinsic component of faith.
We offer our belief in the face of doubt.
Doubt is what makes it faith, rather than sure knowledge.
Doubt is the reason there is a leap in faith.

We sometimes think that the opposite of faith is doubt, but it isn't.
The opposite of faith is fear.
Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but its partner.

We can see this in Thomas.
I have talking about the three Words of Thomas,
but you know that there is another.
As we heard today, a week after Easter, which would be today,
Jesus reappeared to the disciples,
and this time Thomas was with them.

Upon being confronted with the wounded hands and side
of the Risen Christ, Thomas uttered perhaps his most famous line:
"My Lord and my God."

This is the most valuable witness.
There are those who think that the disciples
allowed their wishful thinking to lead them
to the belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Thomas is the remedy to that strain of thinking.
If the Skeptic finds it to be true,
who are the rest of us to linger in disbelief?
Thomas provides the strongest witness of all.

For a few years now,
this Sunday has also been called Divine Mercy Sunday.
I am not sure what it adds to the meaning of the Easter witness.
Nor am I certain why it should be celebrated on this day.
Perhaps it is to bring out the message of God's unconditional love,
the central meaning behind the Easter event.

But we know that it will always be connected with Doubting Thomas,
whose witness is most valuable.

Third Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2015

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19	Peter's Proclamation
Psalm 4:2, 4, 7-9	Hear my prayer
1 John 2:1-5	We have an Advocate
Luke 24:35-48	The Road to Emmaus

A notable event of this past week was the announcement
of a resolution of the Vatican's investigation into the LCWR.
The worst fears were not realized.
The details are in the document.
But the meaning of the event is in the photograph
of the LCWR leaders meeting face-to-face with Pope Francis.
Not with some Vatican official, but the pope himself.

Differences remain, but the message is
that we should be able to live with differences.
We might be able to hold convictions,
and yet respect those whose convictions are different from our own.

In other words, for Christians:
Where do we experience the truth to be revealed?

It seems to me that today's liturgy puts that matter in terms of a question:
Where do we find the risen Christ?

In all the resurrection stories there are certain disconcerting themes.
They fail to recognize him, until something happens that they do.
Clearly something is different.

Secondly, there is an unmistakable emphasis
on the physical bodiliness of the risen and returned Jesus.
It is definitely so today, with Jesus inviting them to touch him,
and even eating something in their presence.

They do not recognize him,
but he is not a ghost, he is flesh and bones.

There are a number of stories in which Jesus is not recognized.
Most are Easter stories,
like the account of Jesus on the shore in the morning,
while the disciples are out on the boat.

There are other boat stories that might have an Easter connection.

There is the time that the disciples are in the boat during a storm,
and Jesus comes to them walking on the water.
They do not recognize him; they think it is a ghost.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus
famously says that they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.
And this after he spent some time with them on the road,
explaining all that referred to him in the scriptures.
Yet they did not recognize him
during all that time on the road hearing the scriptures.

In one branch of Christian tradition,
most clearly represented by the Protestant churches,
but not exclusive to them,
the recognition of Christ comes precisely in hearing the scriptures.
In the word of God is revealed the truth of the risen Christ
that changes them, and will change the world.

This is our own belief in our liturgy of the Word,
which we believe is one form in which Christ is present to us.
It changes minds, and then also changes hearts.

And yet, we do not stop at the liturgy of the Word,
but move on to the liturgy of the Eucharist.
And we remember how they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

In some expressions of Christianity,
the Eucharistic liturgy is at the center of faith reality.
This is probably seen most clearly among the Orthodox churches,
but certainly not only there.

This view can be said to define a certain approach to Catholicism as well.
It projects an image of a faith-centered village
clustered around the church, center of their shared life.
And is seems to share the fragility of that cultural moment,
and desires to freeze it in time.
Nonetheless, it is powerful in its shared experience.

But like the liturgy of the Word, where we do not stop, but move on,
so it is with the liturgy of the Eucharist.
We move on to the next moment.
We leave the church, but we do not leave our faith.
We take it with us.

Among the gospel stories in which Jesus escapes recognition
is a parable, not an Easter story.
    Though maybe it should be read as one.
    I am thinking of Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats.
You will remember how those who performed the works of mercy
    and those who did not
    both questioned when they did or did not attend to the Lord's needs.
Both those who did and those who didn't
failed to recognize the risen Christ.

And then there is this:
    Here too the bodily nature of the deeds are emphasized.
    These actions have come to be known as the corporal works of mercy.
        And "corporal" means "bodily," of course.

We have supplemented these since with the spiritual works of mercy,
which have been assembled in imitation of this corporal set,
with scripture texts added on.
    It almost seems that these represent a spirituality
    that would downgrade the physical works, and supplant them.

But the biblical record remains of the parable of the sheep and goats
    —with the unrecognized Christ in the bodily needs
    of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked,
        the ill, and the imprisoned.

So yes, we do not stop at the liturgy of the Word,
or the liturgy of Eucharist,
but we go out the door to the world in need.
    And there we find another occasion to encounter the risen Christ.

This too is emphasized in some expressions of Christianity
more than in others.
    It is a large part of a certain version of Catholicism,
    perhaps most apparent in the post-Vatican II renewal
    of communities of American religious women.

It is sometimes called progressive,
in contrast to something else called conservative.
    But I think it more likely that it is a difference
    in response to the presence of the risen Christ.

But speaking of the works of mercy,
I am once again reminded of Pope Francis,
who has made this a centerpiece of his view of the church.

His gaze is squarely on those made vulnerable
by lack of the wherewithal that most take for granted.

His shorthand word for that is the Poor.
His word for attending to their needs is Mercy.
He speaks as one who seems to have met the risen Christ among them.

Which makes me think once again of that photograph seen this week,
of the sisters and the pope.

While differences remain,
I think there is a fundamental agreement
on where the unrecognized Christ can be found.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2015

Acts 4:8-12	Peter's Kerygma Speech, again
Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28-29	The stone rejected
1 John 3:1-2	Children of God
John 10:11-18	The Good Shepherd

In pulpits across the world today,
in an attempt to find something fresh to say,
there are discussions of sheep and shepherds,
    although in most of the developed world
    we have almost no direct experience with either.

But there is another image in today's readings, one that gets ignored.
    So it might be worth our while to look at the stone that was rejected.
        It appears not only in the reading from Acts,
        but also in the response psalm for today.

When Peter speaks of the stone that was rejected,
that has become the cornerstone,
he is speaking of Jesus, who was crucified and rose again to life.
    His rejection was brutal, but his new life is victorious.
    He is the stone that has become the cornerstone.

There are echoes of this language in the stories of the empty tomb,
and the stone rolled away.
    And we know Peter means Rock,
    which is not the same thing as stone, actually.
        Stones are scattered around on the ground;
        rock is the solid outcropping upon which citadels are built.

Peter is quoting scripture,
and that scripture is Psalm 118, today's responsorial.
    The psalm was written in a time of success for Israel.
    It is thanksgiving and praise.
The stone that was rejected is Israel, God's people,
unrecognized among the nations of the world.
    The recognition has finally come.

There is irony in Peter's use of this quotation,
since Jesus was rejected by Israel, in turn,
    and Peter is making the point that the election
    has passed on to new territory.

But the psalm itself is quoting something.
It is quoting an old proverb when it says
that the stone rejected has become the cornerstone.

And here we have to understand something.
Our word "cornerstone" is not the best translation.
What is intended is what we usually call
the "keystone" at the top of an arch.
Literally, the word is "head."

The stone that has been rejected has become the head.
But we don't want to call it a headstone,
because that would make us think of cemeteries.

Think about the stones needed to build a wall.
They need to be regular, conforming to a certain size and shape.
The oddly shaped stone that doesn't serve this purpose
might, on the other hand, be just right
for the oddly shaped space at the top of the gateway arch.

In other words, the misfit might become the head.
This is the ugly duckling theme;
the plain little girl who becomes the ballet dancer.
The nerdy little boy with the big eyeglasses
who becomes Silicon Valley genius.
This is Harry Potter.

This is St. Francis,
who put aside everything that would make him special,
only to become special.

This is Pope Francis, as well.
He came from the very edge of the known world, as viewed from Europe,
and became pope.

But also, it is Pope Francis who looks out for the lost and disregarded.
Who embraces the disfigured and washes the feet of Muslim women.
And who reaches out to the refugees in their boats.

And so this is also the Good Shepherd,
watching out for his sheep,
calling them out of the darkness and the danger,
and into the safety of the fold.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 10, 2015

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48	Pentecost at Cornelius' house
Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4	The Lord has revealed to the nations
1 John 4:7-10	For God is love
John 15:9-17	Love one another

Today John tells us,
"Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love."

And elsewhere, "God is love,
and whoever abides in love, abides in God."

But this seems to be a hard sell today.
Some would tell us that natural disasters suggest God is not so loving.
This past month we have seen an earthquake in Nepal,
which killed over 8,000 people and injured more than twice as many.

A boat carrying migrants from Libya capsized in the Mediterranean,
killing over 400 of those on board.
This is simply the largest of many such events.

Italian police report that this past week on one of these boats,
Muslims started throwing Christians overboard,
killing 12 before the rest organized a human chain for protection.

One only needs to mention Boko Haram, in Nigeria, or ISIS in Iraq,
to bring to mind current attempts to obliterate Christians from areas,
some of which are the oldest of Christian territories.

All kinds of questions can be raised about what it means
to say that God is love.

Today's Gospel reading is a continuation of last Sunday's passage
about the Vine and the Branches.
We learn that keeping the connection is important,
but also the pruning.

The branch cannot produce fruit apart from the vine.
And today we hear: "remain in me, as I remain in the Father."
But we also hear, "No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Thomas Merton has written
that the fundamental meaning of nonviolence
is to be able to enter into conflict with another
while remembering to love your opponent as a brother or sister.

Love is not to be confined to those we find agreeable.
Love is more than candy and flowers.

Today is Mother's Day.
We wish a Happy Mother's Day to all mothers.
We also reflect upon how this day began,
as compared to what it has become.

In 1858, Ann Jarvis of Appalachia founded Mother's Work Day,
to promote sanitation in response to high infant mortality.

Because two of her children died before the age of three,
Anna asked doctors in her community
to teach her how to prevent disease.
In Mothers Day Work Clubs throughout her county,
mothers taught others how to prepare food properly
and clean their homes.

Later, in 1970, Julia Ward Howe
wrote her Mother's Day Proclamation, against the carnage of war.

She wrote:

Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly:
"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,
for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

The first Mother's Day was an anti-war observance.

Another word for this might be "mercy."
In yesterday's TH, Karen Zechser
had some wise words to say about Mercy.

“Perhaps parenting introduces many of us
to mercy's deep well of kindness and forbearance
-- in the vernacular, the well of second chances.
We extend love's leniency to the missteps of spilled milk
and clemency to innocent deceptions.
We offer a blessing, a teaching,
an understanding in place of condemnation,
hoping they learn lessons of forgiveness, integrity and kindness.

“Pope Francis would suggest
that we extend this economy of grace to everyone,
that we dig deep within to find the mercy needed to face injustice.

“Even though we are fallen,
mercy finds us, heals us and leads us from brokenness to wholeness;
from lost to found, from sorrow to joy and from guilt to redemption.
Truly, mercy is not just a response to sin's devastation.
Rather mercy flows from love's abundance.

There is an old saying, oversimplifying things as old sayings do,
that proposes that a mother’s love is unconditional,
whereas a father’s love places conditions on itself.

Like the proverbial mother, God’s love is unconditional.
It is not earned.

We can love because we are loved,
despite our difficulty in accepting that reality.
We can love our enemies because God loved us,
even while we were enemies, according to Paul writing to the Romans.

We can manage to accept diminishment, harm,
and threats without returning them in kind,
because we are confident in the love of God.

Or, again in the words of John:
“Beloved, let us love one another,
because love is of God;
everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.”

Solemnity Of The Ascension Of The Lord

May 17, 2015

Acts 1:1-11	The Ascension
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9	God mounts his throne
Ephesians 1:17-23	Risen to God's right hand
Mark 16:15-20	The longer ending of the Gospel

The Ascension of the Lord is not a historical event.
It is a truth of faith.
From a theological point of view,
it marks the completion of the work of the Incarnation,
with the Son of God returning to the Father, task completed.

For the Gospel-writer Luke,
it marks the end of one era, the time of Jesus of Nazareth,
and the opening of another,
the time of the Spirit moving among the faithful.

And for Luke it is also an opportunity
to dramatize this moment of transition.
He is writing when the story of Jesus is in the past,
but the story of the Holy Spirit is active
and shaping the life of the Church.

In his story of the Ascension we see the three moments
—the time the disciples are leaving behind them,
the unknown into which they are entering,
and the present moment in between.

The past they are leaving behind is found in their question:
"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"
It is apparent to them that the time for this is growing short.
They need to know. What is happening to the promise?

The future into which they are being thrust is also a source of anxiety.
This is addressed in Jesus' assurance to them:
"It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Father has established by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth."

They are not to worry.

They may not know what lies ahead, but with the help of God,
and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit,
they will find themselves adequate to the occasion.
And that occasion will be mission to the wider world.

And the moment in between?
This also gets addressed in an explicit word,
this time from the two men dressed in white, presumably angels,
who ask them a question: "People of Galilee,
why are you standing there looking at the sky?
This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return…"

And with that they themselves returned to Jerusalem,
picking up where they left off.

It seems that we are always in the moment in-between.
We have our own versions of the disciples question
about restoring the kingdom to Israel.
We want to know when the promises will be fulfilled.

Even apart from the question of ordination,
when will women be fully recognized in the church?
When will they be recognized in society, for that matter?
We are well aware of places in the world
where education for girls is felt to be an abomination,
as against the will of God.
And we sometimes feel hopeless.

We ask questions about climate denial.
When will God see fit to allow the facts
to be accepted by a reluctant segment of the population,
before it is too late?
What if it is already too late?

Or you may have other questions.
When will God see fit to allow the stalled momentum
of ecumenism among churches to be removed
from the back rows and back into consideration?

Or when will the expanding universe,
expanding likewise in our awareness of its immensity,
be allowed to enter into our religious consciousness?

When will the world we all share in our daily awareness
find its way into our faith vision?
    How long will this door also be closed?

There are so many ways in which we share the disciples' urgency—
    Now will you accomplish the deed?
    — for the time seems to be getting short.

And what do we have for answer?
The promises.
    What has been called Radical Hope.
    Hope beyond specifics of realization,
    beyond clear instructions for assembly.

In our day it has become clear that in the Scriptures
we find the story of the faith community
that often fails to live up to its mandate.
    Equality is affirmed, and then not lived out.
    Repentance is preached, but often enough also forgotten.

But the point is that a vision is projected,
one that is only partially achieved, perhaps,
but one that is shared as a project, a possibility.
    The dream of full justice, full recognition of the disregarded,
    full restoration of the reduced community,
    is raised up and given names.

Mary Magdalen in the garden is given us as an apostle,
the first witness to the resurrection.

    The earth itself is presented as a garden,
    with the couple, Adam and Eve, assigned to cultivate
    and provide its stewardship.

The many sheepfolds are envisioned as one day being one.
There are many mansions.

Behind Radical Hope for the future, is the vision of God's Dream for us.
    Despite our historical inability to work it out,
    the dream is laid out for us,
    as possibility, as promise, as a guiding star.

And, I would like to suggest,
it has provided the dream for secular society as well,
in its hope for equality and full justice.

And, finally, we ourselves are between the unfulfilled past
and the vision of the future.
And what do we hear, in this place in between?
People of Jerusalem, why do you stand there looking at the sky?

We have to take the next step.
Having worried about the pressure of the past upon us,
and having looked into the sky, what is next?
The answer seems to be that of doing what we can do.
Return to our place and work there, confident, in radical hope,
that this will be adequate to the occasion.

For there is nothing else that can be so.
It is what we do,
what we can do.

The theological meaning of the Ascension
lies in its triumphant completion of the Incarnation.
Its personal meaning, for us,
is learning to live in the daily world of the Incarnation,
making real the promise that has been given us,
where we are, and in our time.

Pentecost Sunday

May 24, 2015

Acts 2:1-11	The Spirit at Pentecost
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34	Lord, Send out your Spirit
1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13	Gifts of the Spirit
John 20:19-23	Breathing the Spirit

Like traffic patterns and checkout lanes,
calendar events tend to cluster in bunches.
This year Pentecost falls on Memorial Day weekend.
And if that were not enough, it is also the weekend of Loras graduation.
So it is busy in my neighborhood.

Pentecost is usually celebrated as the birthday of the Church,
signaled by the arrival of the Holy Spirit
upon the community gathered in the Upper Room.
Luke, the author of his gospel and Acts of the Apostles,
has given us this picture, and it is an enduring one.

He is doing many things with the account of this event,
which opens the book of Acts.
One of these is to foreshadow the coming move out to the Gentile world,
recounted in this book.
Another that we often hear about is the reversal
of the moment captured in the 11th chapter of Genesis,
the story of the Tower of Babel.

In our study group we looked closely at the book of Acts last year,
and among the many interesting things we discovered
is that Luke has a special affinity for the Greek Old Testament,
the Septuagint, meaning "Seventy,"
named after the supposed number of scholars in Alexandria in Egypt,
who translated it from the Hebrew about two centuries before Christ.

With that in mind, we checked this Pentecost story
with the Greek version of the story of the Tower.
We were surprised at the close fit between the two.
Most of the key terms in one were also found in the other.

What was perhaps most surprising was the name of the Tower.
We know it as the Tower of Babel.
This is how it appears in the Hebrew Bible.
It intentionally has overtones of Babylon,
known for its stepped pyramids with temples at the top.

But it also chimes nicely with the English word "babble,"
as in talking a lot without making much sense.

But in the Greek this was translated as the "Tower of Confusion."
Nothing about babble, but a lot about misunderstanding.

In the story of Pentecost, Luke even makes a nod in this direction
when he says the large crowd of Jews from every nation gathered outside "were confused because each one heard them
speaking in his own language."

Luke is not being entirely realistic here.
We might wonder, for instance, how each group knew
that the others were also hearing things in their own language.
For that matter, how did they know
that the apostles were not speaking in the same language
as they, the hearers, used?

Luke is not concerned with these matters.
He wants to put the confusion on the record,
because it is about to be cleared up.
The disaster at the Tower of Babel, or rather, Confusion,
is about to be reversed.

But is it reversed?
After all, the story of the tower depicts
the splintering of the human family into many languages.
The Pentecost story of the upper room
may show them coming back together again,
but not by way of returning to one language.
Instead, what we find is that the division into languages
no longer reinforce divisions among the peoples.

It is reversed, but not by way of returning to one language.
Rather, it turns things around by way of realizing
that despite many languages we are one people.
Despite our differences
we have something even more important in common.
We are all God's human creatures.
And for Luke, we are God's children, descendants of Adam, son of God.

Having planted that firmly in our minds,
Luke begins his saga of the mission to the world,
recounted in Acts of the Apostles

—as we have been hearing for the past seven weeks.
It is a story of the movement reaching out from the center to the edge.
In the language of Acts, out to the "ends of the earth."

And part of the story is the report back from the edge to the center.
The message undergoes changes as it encounters
new languages, new cultures and communities.
And these make their own contributions,
building on and changing the message from the center.
It is not simply one-directional,
as the edge and the center enter into conversation.

Today we see that dramatic conversation in action.
If you look at a globe, like they have in libraries and some classrooms,
you will find that Argentina is not exactly
on the opposite side from Rome.
But you certainly will find it difficult to look at both at the same time.

Our Argentinian Pope Francis has come from the "ends of the earth,"
in a very real sense.
The edge returns to speak to the center.
And a lively conversation it turns out to be.

Today's Pentecostal image of a conversation
among many languages, many cultures,
anticipates the world in which we live.
And we are a part of that conversation,
in ways we never would have imagined.

Today we celebrate the birthday of this Church.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

May 31, 2015

Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40	Lord of Creation and History
Psalm 33: 4-5, 6, 9, 18-22	By his word the heavens were made
Romans 8:14-17	Spirit of adoption, Abba Father, Christ brother
Matthew 28:16-20	The Great Commission

Ten years ago Karl Haas
no longer broadcast his classical music show,
"Adventures in Good Music," on NPR.

What I remember is that he liked to focus his shows around topical themes.
As Jewish, he always themed a show on the Jewish feast days.
He also remembered Christian feast days, as well.
Invariably, to my annoyance, he would manage to mention
that Christians believed in three Gods.
I still think of him every year on Trinity Sunday.

We believe in Three Persons in One God.
We always pay attention to the Three Persons on Trinity Sunday.
But what about the One God that we believe in?
What does that mean?

The Trinity is not a part of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament.
That is a revelation of the New Testament.
So in the readings today,
the letter from the Romans and the Gospel of Matthew
each mention the persons of the Trinity.
But the reading from Deuteronomy does not.

But with the Deuteronomy reading we are reminded
that the signature revelation of the Old Testament
is the One God.
And the book of Deuteronomy had an important role in that revelation.

In the generation previous to the disaster of the Babylonian Exile,
with its destruction of the city and the temple of Solomon,
Israel had one last chance,
with the great reform under the good king Josiah.

What has come to be known as the Deuteronomic Reform
consisted of a great clarification of what it meant to be a believer.
Formerly, God Yahweh was seen as supreme among the Gods.
But with the reform, all other gods were banished from the land.

This was the first step.
When the Exile unfortunately arrived,
the exiled Israelites found themselves among a system of pagan gods,
who were apparently pretty successful,
since, after all, they had defeated Jerusalem
and destroyed its temple.

But they discovered they could still pray to God
outside the land that they associated with him.

Under the guidance of such as the prophet we call Second-Isaiah,
the people learned to recognize that there was only one God.
The others did not exist.
In exile, Israel learned the truth about the One God,
and it became their message and mission to the world.

We experience the divine in many ways.
This was recognized by the pagan religions,
which had a god for every occasion.
What they lacked, however,
was a sense of the transcendent uniqueness of the divine,
the truth of the One God.

This experience of the divine in many ways
also became the insight behind the revelation of the New Testament,
with the Father, Christ, and the Spirit, as Paul generally names them.

Only with the final verses of Matthew, heard in today's Gospel,
does the New Testament give us the familiar formula we use daily
—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul, and others among the New Testament writers,
recognized that we experience God in different ways.
On the one hand, there is the Creator,
the transcendent origin of all we know.
This creation is even more impressive today,
as we learn more and more about our physical world.

But in addition to God as Creator,
there is the presence of God in human history.
This began with the covenants with Israel,
but reached a special moment in the incarnation of Jesus, the Christ.

God is present not only as founder and sustainer of the created world,
but also as an active participant in human history.
This is not a welcome thought to most Americans,
who prefer to keep religion in the private realm.
But as a matter of fact, God of the Bible
is not interested only in private matters,
but has a stake in the larger issues
that we associate with public affairs and even politics.
Matters of injustice, inequality, violence, discrimination
are also concerns of the biblical God.

A third area of our divine experience is that of community,
and the writers of the New Testament tend to speak of this as Spirit.
The Spirit is a guide and source of energy for the faith community.
It provides courage as well as consolation,
endurance as well as the unexpected turns into newness.
It can be named in a word, as Life, the life of the community.

These insights have been differently expressed in different settings.

In his famous method of correlation,
the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich
aligned the Persons of the Trinity
with the deep questions that trouble human inquiry.

The problem of Being
—why is there something and not nothing, for instance—
finds its answer in God the Father.

The problem of existence, with its human dimensions
of anxiety, contradictions, unfulfilled hopes,
finds a response in the second person,
who entered into the human condition as Jesus, the Christ.

The problem of negotiating life's ambiguities,
experienced daily and in moments of crisis,
finds a response in the Spirit.

In the three volumes of his *Systematic Theology*
these are presented as Being and God,
Existence and the Christ,
Life and Spirit.

It is in efforts like these that the New Testament revelation
gives meaning to all aspects of our lives,
respecting the need that paganism attempted but failed to answer.
For it lacked the dimension of including all this in the One God.

But in thinking about the Three Persons,
we too might be forgetting the One God.
It is this fundamental faith truth that drives the Muslim faith
as well as the Jewish.
Islamists also do not perceive our devotion to the One God,
and tend to view us as idolators.

So for me the question remains:
How do we experience and express our belief in the One God,
as a part of our Trinitarian faith?

Perhaps one answer is our conviction
that we are one human family, under God.
What God wants for us, God desires for all.

Corpus Christi

June 7, 2015

Exodus 24:3-8	Sinai Covenant ratified by Israel
Psalm 116:12-13, 15-18	I will take the cup of salvation
Hebrews 9:11-15	The more perfect sacrifice
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26	The Last Supper

Today, on this feast of Corpus Christi,
the scripture readings speak of blood shed in ritual ceremonies,
and covenants sealed by blood.

The "Blood of the Covenant" makes us think of sacrifice.
And certainly, that is what the author of Hebrews is thinking about.
But many people are not comfortable with the idea of sacrifice.
I have never forgotten Rebecca West's words
in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*,
upon witnessing an animal sacrifice offered
to ensure safe and certain childbirth.

She writes:
"If there was a woman whose womb could be unsealed
by witnessing a pottery and pointless act of violence,
by seeing a jet of blood fall from a lamb's throat
on a rock wet with stale and stinking blood,
her fertility would be the reverse of motherhood,
she would have children for the purpose of hating them."

I myself have witnessed two animal sacrifices,
one at a tourist site in Samaria and another among Bedouin in Petra.
In the second case, I helped to obtain the kid goat,
and watched as they sacrificed it atop a large rock,
the size of a small house.
I may have elaborated it in memory,
but I have this image of the blood
flowing down the sides of the rock.

One of the problems with the idea of sacrifice
is that it imagines that God requires so much suffering,
a certain amount of shed blood, to be appeased.

It is the image of God, as much as the rite itself, that disturbs us.
How is this the God who is Love?
What is the God who must be appeased
by a certain allotment of pain?

Perhaps it is for reasons such as these
that the New Testament has emphasized a different idea of sacrifice.
Here is has the moral meaning of giving something up
on the way to a greater good.

In baseball we speak of a sacrifice fly,
that is, a hit that leads to an out,
so that a run can be scored by another.

More seriously, we speak of the sacrifices parents make
in order to raise a family.
We speak of our own sacrifices,
giving up a possible good in order to move toward a greater cause.
One face of love itself, along with others, is sacrifice.

And then we think of authentic heroes,
who have sacrificed their lives for the sake of others.
You might think of military heroes,
who have been honored for risking their lives saving fellow soldiers.

Or you might think of Maximilian Kolbe,
the Franciscan friar who died in 1941 in Auschwitz,
having volunteered to take the place of a prisoner condemned to death.

This is what we commonly refer to as the "ultimate sacrifice."
And it returns us to the idea of the blood of the covenant,
perhaps at a deeper level.

Recently, when I told the story of my witnessing a Bedouin sacrifice,
I received in response, the question: "Did they eat it?"
I had to answer that they did.
All ate except me.

It was a simple question, but it hinted
that maybe my reaction was that of a city boy
who doesn't experience where his food comes from.
Death is a part of living.

And unless I want to become a vegetarian,
I ought to come to terms with the role
that slaughtering animals has in my daily diet.

The further implication is that death
is a part of our continued existence here,
and perhaps I am unwilling to look at that.

Well, there is some truth in that.
It is not something I like to think about,
even though I know it is inevitable.

And that returns us to the blood of the covenant,
and how it might mean more than it seems at first glance.
Whether we welcome the thought or not,
death is part of our human experience,
and the death of Jesus is part of the Incarnation,
the divine taking on the human condition.

As the letter to the Philippians puts it:
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

In solidarity with the human condition, even unto death,
and that on a cross,
we have a God who does not demand the diminishment of death,
but shares in it.
This is the message of the new covenant.

But what about the feast of Corpus Christi,
and the ceremony of the Eucharistic meal?
It is here that this covenant is consecrated
and its victory over death celebrated.

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 14, 2015

Ezekiel 17:22-24	The great cedar of Lebanon
Psalm 92:2-3, 13-16	Like the cedar he shall grow
2 Corinthians 5:6-10	We walk by faith, not sight
Mark 4:26-34	Two Seed Parables

The late Victor Sprengelmeyer used to complain,
in our Monday Bible study, about the lack of humor in the Bible.
My usual response was that humor is culture specific,
and doesn't translate well from place to place and from time to time.

I think of a certain deadpan Midwest sense of humor,
in which my uncles, for instance, were experts.
They could say the most outrageous things
and until you knew them, you couldn't tell from their faces
that they were joking.

Then there is Garrison Kieler
and the early days of "Prairie Home Companion."
For a number of years, after it went national,
people on the east coast were asking where the humor was.
It didn't seem to fit the standards of comedy as they knew it.

The New Testament was written 20 centuries ago,
halfway around the world.
There are chances that if there is any humor in it,
we would not recognize it immediately.

Take the parables of Jesus.
Over the centuries we have treated them with solemn respect,
enshrined them in the halls of inspirational literature,
used them as lessons for living the proper life.
But we need to peel away layers of spiritual varnish
to see them as the gems they originally were.

And it is my contention that they involved humor.
Take the parable of the **mustard seed**.
Here is one place where we are reminded
that Jesus worked within a storytelling tradition.
We have an example of that tradition in the first reading for today.
The allegory of the great Cedar Tree
appears in a number of places in the Old Testament,
often enough to show that it was a traditional topic of story telling.

In other places in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel
it represents the great empires of the world—both Egypt and Assyria.
The signature image is that of the birds of the air
finding shelter in its branches.

Today's selection builds on that
to express the yearning in some quarters of the Israelite world,
for a similar imperial reign for God's chosen people.
Someday, when the Messiah finally arrived,
Israel would take its place among the empires of the world,
receiving at last its due recognition.
It offers a vivid indication of the messianic hope,
as many anticipated it.

But now we hear Jesus describing the Kingdom of God as a mustard plant.
The signature phrase is there:
the birds of the air will find rest in its shade.
However, it is not a mighty cedar tree.
Anything but.
As all farmers and gardeners know, mustard is invasive.
Though it has its uses, for most of the time it is a weed.

Jesus is making a point.
The Kingdom of God is not going to be an imperial presence in the world.
It will not be a mighty political power.
However, like the cedar of Lebanon,
it will still provide shelter to the birds of the air.
It will still be a lifeline, a place of refuge.
Or, in P. Francis's words, a field hospital in a time of war.
With the wars, of course, being waged among the empires of the world.

And it would seem that Jesus is indulging in a little humor
at the expense of those who yearn for mighty deeds and lofty titles.
As, again, the mustard plant is not a mighty cedar,
not really even a tree.
It is a weed.
And weeds invade without an invitation.

Once we peel away the spiritual varnish from the parables,
we find this kind of thing.
Almost every parable has a twist, a surprise, and a sense of irony.
For instance, the **other parable** we heard today
dwells on the time of growth of the seed,
between the planting and the harvest.

It turns around the way we usually think about this,
with the hardworking farmer and the plants
just placidly growing in the field.

In Jesus' telling of the tale, the farmer is doing nothing,
while the plant is working hard.
He elaborates the effort—first the blade, then the ear,
then the full grain in the ear.
And finally the grain is ripe.

Or take the parable of the **leaven**.
The leaven parable is paired with the mustard seed parable
in Matthew and Luke.
Leaven, or yeast, is a symbol for corruption in the Bible.
That is why the house is cleared of yeast for the Passover Seder.
It isn't evil; it is symbolic.
It works in secret to transform the dough.

With the parable of the leaven,
Jesus is suggesting that the Kingdom of God which he is announcing
will work like leaven,
secretly operating in a hidden way to transform the world.

It can be said to have a subversive quality, at least as it concerns those
who want to maintain a social order that they find beneficial,
even if not just, and equal to all.

It would seem that Jesus is making a sly joke
about the subversive quality of the Kingdom,
unlike what many are hoping for it to be, and hoping for themselves.
The status quo is in danger, he is suggesting.

And we ought not to forget that humor itself is subversive,
when it does not take seriously the pomp and circumstances of the world,
the power arrangements that prop up structures of uneven distribution
and politics of disregard for those without resources.

These like to be taken seriously.
Jesus didn't.

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 28, 2015

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24	God does not rejoice in death
Psalm 30:2, 4-6, 11-13	I will praise you, Lord, who rescued me.
2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15	By his poverty you might become rich.
Mark 5:21-43	Two "Daughters"

It has been a watershed couple of weeks for American Catholics.
It began with a groundbreaking encyclical on the environment
—one that will require further attention during homily time.
It was widely received with praise.

Some noted that the position on contraception was not changed,
and for them it was incomplete.
For most, it was a welcome boost in the direction
of responsible care of the earth and those who live on it.

And this was followed by the massacre
at the Emanuel AME church in Charleston,
with nine church members including the pastor
gunned down during bible study,
by a white supremacist whom they had welcomed into their midst,
unaware of his intent.

This past week President Obama gave the eulogy for the pastor's funeral,
leading the congregation in singing Amazing Grace in the process.
The church musicians found the key and accompanied the singing,
in the style of Sr. Arnold.

Reflections on these events raised the question
of whether there is any place black Americans can be safe.
Not even sanctuary is given them.

And some members of the gun lobby have reached
a sufficient degree of lunacy to claim that the church members are at fault
for not being armed with weapons to protect themselves.
Having more faith in guns than in God,
they want to turn the church into the OK Corral.

But one thing that came out of these events
was the decision to retire the Confederate flag from public places,
and subsequently in most commercial sites.
It may mean the tide is turning against
a certain kind of thinking about race, at least publicly.

And then there were the two decisions delivered by the US Supreme Court.
The Affordable Care Act survived another test.
It will likely not be the last.

Some were overjoyed, some were disappointed.
Some, like the economist Paul Krugman, were relieved.
"I was pacing the room, too nervous to sit,
worried that the court would use one sloppily worded sentence
to deprive millions of health insurance,
condemn tens of thousands to financial ruin,
and send thousands to premature death."

Catholics too were divided.
Along with those who celebrated
the nearly universal health coverage this would provide,
there were others who worried about infringements on religious freedom,
thinking that the law would require them
to participate in some way with providing abortions.
The moral theologians were hard at work,
as well as the politicians.

And then there was the ruling Friday
legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the country.
Here in Iowa we have had that for some time now,
and so we most likely to do not fully appreciate
the changes this will introduce.

Comparable to the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion,
this landmark decision also differs from it in significant ways.
Whereas the decision to get an abortion can be kept relatively quiet,
not so with marriage. It is essentially a public act.
It puts a personal relationship up for public and legal recognition.
Which is to say, it changes the appearance of the public landscape.

It is worth noting that nearly 60% of Americans are in favor of this change.
And it is closer to 70% among young people,
including those who identify as Republican.
Notable widespread jubilation greeted the court decision.
It is also worth noting that this opinion is driven by ethical concern.
Perhaps moving from the settled realization
that sexual orientation is not chosen, but given,
the outcry is for fairness.

Matters of inheritance, insurance, hospital rights,
all enter the picture.

At the same time, the change in our culture
has occurred with neck-snapping abruptness.
In a few short years the demographics strongly against
have turned to strongly in favor.
Cultures do not absorb sudden changes easily.
Nor will it do so in this case.

I would suggest we should be prepared for serious backlash.
The public nature of the change will seem to many to be "in your face,"
as the idiom has it.
And the response will likely be in kind.
It doesn't promise a smooth transition.

And if the culture changes slowly,
the church is known for changing even more slowly.
These will be strange and tense years.
Archbishop Jackels, who properly responded to the news media
in person, rather than through spokesperson,
struck a balanced position.
We have to affirm the truth of our position,
without disrespecting those who disagree.

It will not be enough to quote bible texts,
or to cite the dictates of natural law, in support of traditional marriage.
No, we will have to show why we believe what we do,
and try to make evident the wisdom of our position, as best we can.

And in that effort, how do we operate?
Some clues may be in the Scripture for today.
In the Gospel, Jesus encounters two women, one a mere girl,
who are in need.
How the encounter happens, and is told, is worth reflection.
Here are three thoughts.

First of all, both are called "daughter."
This is a tender term, a term of endearment.
We see this in action with Jairus, the synagogue official,
concerned about his daughter.
We often think about the patriarchal societies of old, and in the bible.
But here we see the father's fear for his daughter.

It is this feeling that is behind Jesus' word
for the woman who touched his cloak.
To call her a "daughter" is to say she is a member of the family,
one who deserves care.

She is not lost and outside, having exhausted her resources.
She is not a person of the street. She is "daughter."

Second thought: The year twelve appears for each of these.
The girl is a mere twelve years old. That seems a short time.
But the woman has been suffering for twelve years without relief.
That seems like a long time.

And now that situation to which she has become accustomed
is about to change, abruptly. It is for the better, but it is abrupt.
How will that change her?

And thirdly, Jesus brings compassion to the lives of these sufferers,
but not without opposition.
With the woman, his disciples are no help at all. But Jesus insists.
And with the young girl, he must overcome the deniers
who mock and want to prevent him.

For Jesus, compassion is an insistent and persistent thing.
It pushes. It makes its own way.
It fights to express itself in action.

Tender care, sudden change, and hardboiled compassion
are some of the lessons in today's gospel stories.
And they may provide insights on how to carry on
in the coming days and years.

There is one more watershed event happening, that needs mentioning.
Our liturgist is retiring.
Twelve years is a long time, but three times twelve is longer by far.
Sister Liz Hilvers has given much of her life
to creating and maintaining a space of worship for this community.
It is a space that was called for
by the liturgical documents from the Second Vatican Council.
It reflected those values of communal prayer, with a role for all.
It was the community praying,
not merely sitting in while the priest prayed.

My own description for what is experienced here
is that it is serious without being fussy.
    It includes the new and the old,
    the different aspects of human experience that we bring to prayer.
        It honors the divine and forgives the human.

Or, I might cite the daughter of a friend—another daughter—
who joined us one Sunday for the liturgy.
    The tradition of my friend and her daughter is evangelical, bible-based,
    and individualist in the evangelical manner.
After the Mass, as they left the chapel, the daughter said to her mother: "Wow!
That's worship!"

    That is not how I would say it,
    but I know what she means.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 5, 2015

Ezekiel 2:2-5	The prophet is called and sent
Psalm 123:1-4	To you I lift up my eyes
2 Corinthians 12:7-10	When I am weak, I am strong
Mark 6:1-6	Rejected at Nazareth

Ezekiel is sent to the hard of face and obstinate of heart.
He is not to expect too positive a response.
But either way, heed or resist, they will know
that a prophet has been sent among them.
But he is to expect rejection.

Jesus, now among his own, is also rejected,
and quotes the proverb, "A prophet is not without honor
except in his native place."
He reminds us of the repeated theme of the rejected prophet.

We remember his lament over Jerusalem,
"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets
and stone those sent to you,
how many times I yearned to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
but you were unwilling!

The rejection of the prophet. What do we do with that?

I can imagine a homily that will be delivered today.
It focuses on the plight of the church in society today.
It paints a picture of a beleaguered Christian church
in a pagan society that has rejected the revealed truth of the gospel.

It cites many cultural changes in today's world,
including especially Supreme Court decisions on Abortion,
and now, Same-Sex Marriage.
It amplifies this, however, with demographics on the departure
of so many Americans from church attendance,
or even religious identification.
It expresses concern about the implications of Obamacare,
for traditional teachings about contraception.

Taking its cue from Ezekiel, it makes its case clearly and unequivocally,
putting those who object on notice,
so that they know that a prophet has been among them.
I can also imagine another homily that might be given today.
It takes its cue from P. Francis, and his mission to the world,
as well as the church.

However, it focuses on the plight of society today,
and summons the church to respond.
When Jesus says that a prophet is without honor in his native place,
and in his own house,
this prophetic vision does not imagine "his own" as America,
but as those within the church
who cannot accept what Francis has to say.

Here there might be words about the encyclical, "Laudato Si'."
It would focus on the call to conversion that this letter is making,
and how it is being resisted.

What is the difference between these two sermons?
One difference is how they consider the phrase "his own"
in presenting the message of prophecy.
When it focuses on those in the culture who disagree,
but does not include those of us in the church itself,
it changes the message.

It changes the message from prophecy
to an airing of grievances about things with which I disagree.
It invites me to pull away
and close myself off from the unnerving world,
and find a place where I am not disturbed,
a place where we can agree on what is truth.

Which leads to another difference between the two,
and that is the sense of mission to the world.
Rather than reject that world, it seeks it out
and calls it to conversion.

The second vision knows that the following story
after Jesus' rejection in his hometown
is his sending the Twelve out on mission, two by two.
If this door is closed, go out to others with the message.
The call to conversion.

Whatever homily we hear, we are deaf to the call of the prophet
if we do not recognize that we ourselves are addressed
by his or her summons to conversion.

To return to the encyclical,
one point that Francis makes is that the problem
is that of the rich nations.

Here we need to look at America, and Americans,
as well as those in the church,
when it considers those who resist its teaching.

And here a quote from a recent op-ed piece by Paul Vellely,
in the NYT, that has been widely shared on social media,
might find a place.

He says:
"But there is something more profoundly subversive about Laudato Si' than what it says on climate change. On the day it was published, the pope privately told his closest advisers in Rome that the encyclical was not really an environmental document at all. Global warming is merely a symptom of a deeper malaise.

"The real problem, he insists, is the myopic mentality that has failed to address climate change to date. The rich world's indifference to the despoliation of the environment in pursuit of short-term economic gain is rooted in a wider problem. Market economics has taught us that the world is a resource to be manipulated for our gain."

It is here that I find myself joining those
who are busy finding objections to what the pope is saying.
    It is here that I sense that I am being asked
    to change some of my habits,
        and I find myself in response marshaling arguments
        that support my habits, and not the call of the prophet.

It is here that I find myself criticizing
those in the higher reaches of the church hierarchy
who are resisting the pope's efforts, even while I excuse myself.
    And I find myself criticizing the American politicians
    that are busily minimizing the scope of the pope's teaching,
    even while I am doing something similar.

It is then that I fully realize that the cry of the prophet
is toward repentance and conversion.
    And it is then that I understand, because I find it in myself,
    why the prophet is rejected.

And it is here that I learn, because I find it in myself,
that the rejection of the prophet is not inevitable,
    because I know that if I listen to the truth of the message,
    I realize that I should, and even could,
    answer in my own life the call to conversion.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 12, 2015

Amos 7:12-15	Amos' self-defense
Psalm 85:9-14	Justice and peace shall kiss
Ephesians 1:3-14	In him we were also chosen
Mark 6:7-13	The Twelve are sent on mission

Who will welcome the prophet?

Not Amaziah, priest of Bethel,
who tells Amos to go back home, where he came from.
Amaziah is situated in the way things were,
and does not see any need for changing them.

Not Jeroboam, the king, who is the face and head of the establishment,
and sees no benefit from changing the way things are.

Is Amos alone? He is not a member of the cohort of prophets,
who work for the institution, whether it be the temple or the court.
Where does he find support?
Does he have a community, or is he entirely alone,
depending only upon his call and his God?

Who welcomes the missionaries sent out by Jesus,
announcing a new Kingdom of God?
Some do. Others clearly do not.

Some welcome them,
and provide them with lodging and a listening ear.
Some turn them away, and are themselves turned away.

Welcoming the prophet requires a discernment and a call.
It is the calling of the prophetic community.

The prophetic community is not one
in which everyone is out at the edge,
standing on the brink, crossing the line.

Not everyone is called to be the prophet.
The prophetic community takes upon itself
the care and feeding of prophets.
It is the place where the prophet is nurtured,
from which the prophet goes forth, and to which the prophet returns
upon encountering resistance to the message.

My first and firmest impression of the prophetic community
is Jonah House in Baltimore,
    founded, as you know, by Phil Berrigan and Liz McAlister in 1973.

Baltimore is an old, honored city, the first Catholic diocese in the U.S.,
now fallen on hard times.
    Today we think of the killing of Freddie Gray
    and the subsequent troubles.
        We know that a couple of days ago the police chief
        was fired by the mayor.

Here is where Phil and Liz planted their community,
    conveniently near Washington, D.C.,
    for the mission of prophetic witness.

When Loras, along with Clarke
and the Minnesota colleges of St. John's and St. Ben's,
    began, in 1984, our annual Holy Week retreats in the streets of D.C.,
    pilgrimages of prayer and protest,
    we partnered with Jonah House.

What struck me was how the community
was organized around their ministry of witness,
    a witness that frequently involved arrests and jail time.

If an issue arose that needed addressing,
    if someone was required to confront
    an injustice that was going unhindered, a process of discernment began.

Who was available?
This person couldn't be involved because she was still on probation.
This other couldn't because he was needed in the kitchen. And so forth.
    The community settled together on those who would be allowed
    to fulfill the community mission in any particular case.

That was one model of the prophetic community.
Another is this Franciscan community.
    Not everyone is called to stand at the edge or cross the line,
    but many of you have, and that was possible
    because of those standing beside them, backing them up.

This community has been present
at so many of the hurting and angry places,
not only here in America, but in other places around the globe.
Stop and consider for a moment
the many troubled spots your witness has reached.

It is not simply a matter of certain individuals with a special charism
moving into places of need and, often enough, risk.
It is matter of a community making its witness known.
It is buffering the risk by its support,
managing the difficulties with its resources.

It is the prophetic community reaching out through its members,
who are taking that community along with them.

Another version of the prophetic community with which I am associated
is the Anawim community, to which I go every Sunday
after finishing at Francis House.
Not large, and not particularly young any more.
But a source of sustenance for some who continue to witness.

While it began as a meeting place for those left behind
when Aquinas Institute moved to St. Louis,
it was also associated with the Dubuque Catholic Worker,
and that helped to determine its mission.
It is a place of welcome, among those who value the need for witnessing.
It has been doing this since 1981.

The prophetic community knows that its role is at times not easy.
Because of the prophet's task of unsettling old habits
in which injustices have become ingrained,
in order to bring about conversion and change,
because of the resistance that greets such calls to conversion,
the prophet is so often discounted, if not rejected.

And the prophetic community can share in that disfavor.
So the prophetic community does not just happen.
It is a calling, a communal discernment.

The rewards for the prophetic community are not obvious.
But there is the hope that in welcoming the prophet,
the accusation of the dusty sandal will not be theirs.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 19, 2015

Jeremiah 23:1-6	I will raise up a righteous shoot
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
Ephesians 2:13-18	He is our peace
Mark 6:30-34	The apostles return

The Gospel reading for today is unusual
in that it pictures a moment between events,
rather than the events themselves.
The "apostles" have finished their mission and have returned.
The multiplication of the loaves and fishes is about to happen.
But now we are in-between.

But the passage from Jeremiah's prophecies points us
to a singular phrase in the gospel:
They were like sheep without a shepherd.

This sounds like a quote from the Old Testament. And so it is.
In our Monday Night Bible Study we discovered
that it is a very popular Old Testament sentiment,
and can be found in many places.

It seems to be a popular proverb,
expressing the feeling that the leaders have failed them.
They are adrift without guidance or direction.

We sometimes hear that the image of the shepherd is lost on us today.
It provided a vivid symbol for the ancients,
who had daily contact with the world of sheepherding.
But we do not have that today.
We get our fabrics from racks
and our meat in plastic wraps from the supermarket.

But recently some vividness has been restored to the image.
I am referring to Pope Francis's statement
last Holy Thursday, after blessing the oils,
when he said to the priests, bishops and cardinals gathered there
that the shepherd should have the smell of the sheep.

The image caught the attention of the world,
even if they did not have much to do with the world of the shepherd.
Even if they had no idea what sheep smelled like.

Of course, he was talking about being among the people,
in particular, the poor of the world, and in the neighborhood.
In a way, it sums up the new direction
in which he has directed the church for today.

It is a direction that many have already taken.
It is my conviction that in the encounter
between the American women religious and the Vatican,
happily now fading away, perhaps,
this engagement with the poor of the world, and of the neighborhood,
is what made the difference.

We had sisters in leadership positions
who were also ministering in Mississippi and El Salvador,
earning credentials and credibility
that wasn't gained by those spending their time in offices,
even the offices of power.
Even if those offices were in the Vatican.

The sisters were closer to the sheep than those who criticized them.
Their authority was moral authority, and everyone knew it.

Francis also reflects this same set of concerns
in his recent encyclical, "Laudato Si'."
Just as he called the assembled clergy to account last Holy Thursday,
so he now calls the developed world to account.

One feature of his teaching is an emphasis on causes as well as effects.
He looks at what we have done with our world,
and how it has a particular impact
on the peoples in the developing world.

He says, in paragraph 25:

> **Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face**

> **natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited.**

But he also looks at how things came to be that way.
He also says, in paragraph 49:

> **This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population. This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality.**

On the one hand,
"Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected
by phenomena related to warming,"
and on the other hand, major decision-makers
"being located in affluent urban areas,
are far removed from the poor."

They, and we, cannot smell the sheep.
For it is not the decision-makers alone, but all of us
who enjoy the amenities of the developed world, in which

> **"a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption."**

The pope's challenge is almost overwhelming.
It cuts to the very center of our lifestyles.
Where does a person start?
Where do we begin to change our own lives?

It reminds one of the old image of turning an ocean liner around.
It takes time and a considerable amount of determined effort.

Some practical steps in consciousness-raising can be mentioned here.
The Jesuit, Thomas Reese, has a study guide on the encyclical
available online at the National Catholic Reporter.
It could be useful in small group study.

Also, this coming Thursday evening, July 23,
from 6:30 - 9:00 in the Loras Campus Center,
there will be a public presentation and discussion of the encyclical,
with Father Bud Grant of the Davenport diocese presenting,
and David Cochran, of the Loras Kucera center,
leading a discussion of faith implications.

Today, on what seems to be every street corner,
multiple candidates for election to the Presidency of the United States
are courting Iowans and their votes.

We have a unique opportunity to ask informed questions,
and perhaps get candidates to make position statements,
that will then circulate around the social media.
But first we must get ourselves informed.

We have a way to go. But we are not without resources.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 26, 2015

2 Kings 4:42-44	The prophet Elisha multiplies loaves
Psalm 145:10-11, 15-18	The hand of the Lord feeds us
Ephesians 4:1-6	One Lord, one faith, one baptism
John 6:1-15	Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes

It may be something of a surprise to hear the story of Elisha
multiplying barley loaves in the stories from II Kings.
How are we to understand the similarity between the two stories,
one from the tradition and one from the Gospel?

Most of us, when we hear the words "multiplication of the loaves"
think of the story of Jesus.
It would appear that in Jesus' day
people would think of the story of Elisha.

One of the difficulties we face in hearing biblical stories is cultural.
We have to come to terms with the ancient custom
of couching events, even personal experiences,
in story forms that were derived from the tradition.

What would interest us would be the details of the actual event.
Not so with the ancients.
They were more interested in showing
how it fit into a pattern of similar events,
lending their experiences the authority of tradition.

It would appear that is happening here.
The details are hidden behind the conventional story form.
Note, for instance, that among the miracle stories of Jesus,
this is the one that doesn't show the action that accomplishes the deed.

In healing stories, for instance, we are told what he does.
He heals a leper by touching him.
He dismisses the unclean spirits by a firm command.
The action is always clear.
But here we find out about the miracle only after the event,
when they are picking up the fragments.

But when we look at what the story says that Jesus does,
the actual description of his activity, what do we find?
Only a few words.

While he asks questions, and issues a number of commands,
his own actions are limited.
He asks the disciples what they are to do with all these people.
He tells them to have the people recline.
Later he tells them to pick up the fragments.
This is what he tells others to do.

But what does he do himself?
John tells us, he "took the loaves, gave thanks,
and distributed them to those who were reclining,
also as much fish as they wanted."

He gave thanks, he distributed.
The Greek word for giving thanks is our word "Eucharist."
Clearly, this story has Eucharistic overtones,
although this is not the Last Supper.
However, you will remember that John
doesn't tell about the bread and cup at the Supper.
Instead we have the washing of feet.

But do not fear, John will share his thoughts on the Eucharist
in the passages that follow upon the multiplication of the loaves
—the gospel sermon we call "The Bread of Life."
This will be our Sunday meditation for the next month.

So what do we make of the Eucharistic dimension of the loaves miracle?
Is this a preview of the Supper?
But if John doesn't talk about the Eucharist at the Supper,
what is happening here?

For me, a clue comes from something I heard this past week.
In the Thursday night presentation at Loras,
on the pope's recent encyclical, "On the Care of Our Common Home,"
Fr. Bud Grant spent some time talking about the concluding chapter,
which opens up the spiritual foundation of Pope Francis's thinking.

The sacramental dimension of creation,
in which all created beings reveal something of the creator,
as St. Francis knew and taught
—this sacramental dimension, says Pope Francis,
centers in the Eucharist.

The dignity of creation implied in the incarnation,
the personal involvement in human experience
that is a part of the divine becoming human,
    is concentrated for us in the liturgy of the bread and wine,
    consecrated and transformed.

And the mystery that is evoked in this sacrament
reaches into the mystery that is creation itself.
    It is sacred, and it is a trust.
    It is, as the title of the letter says, "our common home."
    A home given and entrusted to our care.

But after Jesus blessed the bread, the gospel of John tells us,
he distributed it.
    That is the second thing that he did.

Somehow, in the distribution of the five barley loaves and two fish
the multitude was satisfied.
    This naturally makes us wonder how this happened.
    Again, the story doesn't tell us what happened, only that it did happen.

One popular way of imagining it is
that people began to share what they brought for themselves,
    but apparently did not tell the apostles
    who had surveyed the crowd for what was available for provisions.
This is a useful way to think about it,
though it doesn't say much for the apostles' discernment.

However, all the story tells us
is that there were five loaves and two fish,
    and that this was enough,
    and there was enough left over to fill twelve baskets.
        We are left to draw our own conclusions.

But since we are thinking about the encyclical on the environment,
    we might recall a few more points the pope is making,
    points concerning distribution.

He looks at the gap between the developed and the developing world,
and notes who pollutes and who suffers from it.
    He points out that the program for achieving development
    through carbon fuels cannot be continued
    for the rest of the world striving toward development,
        since Mother Earth cannot sustain

the exploitation and cumulative trash that involves.
And at root, the separation of two worlds offends against
the common community that shares a common home.

When Jesus distributed the loaves and fish,
he was telling us it is possible.
At the time it seemed impossible.
But, it turns out, it was indeed possible.
What is needed is vision, hope, and practical action.
The apostles assessed the situation,
determined what was at hand,
and began to work with that.

The baskets of fragments left over
was the assurance that it, and more, was possible.

Recognizing the mystery embedded in creation
and working with it offer a way forward.
In the midst of the desert of the impossible, there is hope.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 9, 2015

I Kings 19:4-8	Elijah beneath the broom tree
Psalm 34: 2-9	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord
Ephesians 4:30—5:2	Be kind to one another
John 6:41-51	"I am the bread come down from heaven"

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became Flesh
and made his dwelling among us.

So John begins his gospel.
And today we see this under the heading of the Bread from Heaven.
But the emphasis for now is on the Word.
The Flesh is for next week.

It is not by bread alone that we live,
but by every word from the mouth of God.
Jesus in the desert invokes the bread from heaven,
and the bread is the word.

During these weeks we have been in the desert
where Jesus has multiplied the loaves and fishes,
and now he distributes the word.

The word, as it comes to us in the Bible, is life-giving,
and we come to it with expectations.

In our own gathering of the bread from heaven,
our own reading of the word,
we might see at least three moves taking place.

The first move before the scripture
is to understand what the passage meant in its time.
It is like traveling abroad.

And before we go into a strange culture we would best
spend some time learning how they go about their business,
how they relate, what is important to them,
and how best to behave in their homeland.

In studying the past that is the home place of the Bible,
we try to understand what it means in its own terms,
how it spoke to the community that first read it,

and often enough how that faith community read
and reread it down through time.

This trip back to the original community of readers,
to understand what the scriptures first meant to them,
is what is technically called Exegesis.
It explores the text itself, in its time.

For instance, we might learn that Elijah, in today's story,
is on the run, for Queen Jezebel, a fervent pagan,
is killing the prophets.
We might learn that the mountain called Horeb
is the same as that called Mount Sinai, in other places.
We begin to understand that he is returning to the source,
to renew and begin again.
We might also appreciate the irony
that though he is going to the holy mountain to be renewed,
he is already receiving sustenance on the way.

But after visiting the foreign territory,
we have to come back home to our own place and time,
and that means understanding the word,
now fleshed out with a fuller meaning, as it affects us.
This is the work of interpretation,
and officially is given the name of Hermeneutics.

In coming back home, we might look
at issues that are shaping the present world,
and try to understand how the scriptures speak to those issues.

The current political situation, with candidates vying for attention,
especially as seen this past week,
might be the ground of our reflection,
turning on the skepticism of the opponents of Jesus,
in what appears to be their jaded sense of hope.

Or maybe the rise in theater shootings
and our political paralysis in the face of our rising gun culture,
as perhaps seen in the dejection of Elijah,
as he travels through the desert.

Or perhaps we reflect on the call to conversion in the recent encyclical,
"On Care for Our Common Home."

Maybe we are caught by the image of bread in the desert,
and see a parallel in our own situation.
Or maybe we see the struggle against hope in Elijah,
or the jadedness of the people of Jesus' day,
and we find an echo of our own struggle for hope.
With that we can build a message for our day,
turning on the message of bread from heaven.

And so there are two moves.
One goes back to the time the scripture is being written,
to understand what moved them then,
and how this passage spoke to them in their concerns.
The other returns home to our time and place,
in an act of interpretation, helping us understand
our own set of concerns in the light of the word.

But there is still a third movement of the word
if it is to be bread from heaven.
Up until now, we have been interpreting the scripture.
Now, however, we must let the scripture interpret us.
We have been questioning the text, now the text questions us.
We have been probing for meaning,
and now we let ourselves be probed.

Up until now the search has been general and thematic.
And now it turns personal and specific.
Something in the scriptures calls us by name.
It addresses me, in my particular moment,
my own set of possibilities and liabilities.

Following Exegesis and Hermeneutics,
we have what we can call the Existential moment,
which addresses us in our own personal unique existence.
Now it comes truly home.

To take our example of the encyclical on conversion and environment,
the point about conversion gets our attention.
And now it is no longer an example; it is talking to me.

Maybe I am in denial about climate change.
I find myself in uncomfortable company
with the skeptics addressing Jesus.
Maybe I see the reality of the situation,

but not as affecting me personally.
Suddenly, however, I find my name called
in the reading of the word, making its claim upon me.

Maybe I am committed to the issues and the changes called for,
and am growing tired and cynical,

and I observe Elijah, and Jesus in the desert,
and I begin to question my own lack of hope.

Maybe I discover I have done what I can,
and must now live with what comes.
Maybe all I have is hope, and maybe it is hope against hope.

But now it has moved beyond interesting topics and general issues
and entered my own life.
Now I am no longer a bystander looking upon the troubles of the world,
but now have a place in the drama,
the struggle that the Word has called forth in me.

Which is to have life, and be given life.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 16, 2015

Proverbs 9:1-6	Wisdom's House
Psalm PS 34:2-7	Taste and see
Ephesians 5:15-20	Singing and playing to the Lord
John 6:51-58	Flesh and blood

The Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us.
Last Sunday was the Word;
this Sunday it is the Flesh that we hear about.
In a sense, we move from the Liturgy of the Word
to the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
Having considered Christ's presence in the Word,
we turn to his presence in the shared meal.

And today we hear about it
in strong, strange, and surprising language.
Elsewhere in the New Testament writings the language is
"this cup you drink, this bread you eat."
And with it, "This is my body; this is the New Covenant in my blood."

Cup, bread, body.
These are the words to which we are accustomed.
But John shakes us out of our complacency with his language:
Not "this cup you drink," but "drink this blood."
Not "this bread you eat," but "eat my flesh."
And even this: "feed on my flesh."

The language is graphic and unsettling.
Graphic in its physical image of feeding;
unsettling in its implications of drinking human blood
and eating human flesh.
It seems to be pushing a point too far.

What is John trying to tell us with this intensely physical language?
One thing that many will be hearing in this morning's various liturgies
is how it insists on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.
You cannot get much more real than in this kind of language.

But this might take us to a question:
"Why is this doctrine of the Real Presence so important?
What does it do, and what does it do for us?
Is it for our security, our consolation?
Is it a sign of God's care for us?

Or does it invite us, not to safety, but to risk?
Does it make us feel safe here in our home?
Or does it call us into taking chances
in the places beyond our comfort zones?
I think it is the second.

And the reason takes us back to the words at the beginning:
The Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us.
Besides the cluster of instances in today's passage
from the Bread of Life discourse of John,
the other place that word, "Flesh," appears
is in that opening verse.
The Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us.

That line is so familiar,
and we have a sense we know what it means.
It is a description of the Incarnation.
God took on human nature.

Human nature sounds so generic, so bland.
But when we see today how John talks about flesh,
in all its graphic and unsettling detail,
we might have another thought.

We might think of Tennyson's line from "In Memoriam,"
nature is "red in tooth and claw."
It is not pretty, it can be ruthless.
And so is reality that we know, outside of books and greeting cards.

This is the reality of the Word made Flesh.
It means that the humanity that God embraces
is not just an abstract concept, a theory of being human,
but the actual experience, with all its sometimes disturbing reality.

The mystery of the Incarnation is not just a fact, but a mission.
It is a mission to the reality of human experience,
to rescue it and lift it.
To rescue it from the dangers and entanglements
the human story has involved it,
and lift it to possibilities it may no longer even imagine.

The Incarnation is not a comfortable homecoming,
but a mission of risk,

seen finally in the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus, the Incarnate son.
It is a move beyond safety into the calculated risks of rescue.

If that is what flesh means, in "the Word became Flesh,"
then what John is telling us about the Eucharistic Meal
takes on a new tone.
To feed on my Flesh is to share my mission, to do as I do.
It is a continuation of the Incarnation mission
into the places needing rescue,
places where people are desperate and in need.

It is not my own comfort, but the plight of the others,
that is implied in this language of John.

To continue the mission of the Incarnation
is to become aware of those who are in places of desperation,
of diminished options for life,
and to share their sense of diminishment
and feel their desperation.

Why is it necessary to insist that Black Lives Matter?
Can we risk moving beyond our cocoon of white privilege
to discover what life is like outside of it?

What does it mean to be an immigrant
who has left a familiar homeland, risking life and limb
to escape greater risk of life,
to live in the shadows among us,
without protections provided by citizenship,
but at least not in immediate danger?

For that matter, what does it mean
to leave behind the gang wars of a big city
to settle in the relative safety of a small river city?

Sharing in the Eucharist, John suggests,
is to share in the mission of the Incarnation.

One thinks of the other gospels, and how they make this point.
Mark, for instance, shows Jesus asking James and John,
"Can you drink of the cup from which I must drink?"

We know what he means when he is in the Garden of Gethsemane,
pleading with his Abba Father:

"If you will, you can remove this cup from me."
We know he is talking about the crucifixion which is hours away.
And we know what it means when at the Supper
he shares the cup with his disciples.
This cup is theirs to drink as well.

But John uses the language of flesh,
and all it means in his way of using the word.

For him, it would seem,
the broken bread and shared cup
is better seen as the blood for drinking
and the flesh for feeding.

And this realism is the reality of the Real Presence.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 23, 2015

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18	Covenant Renewal in the Land
Psalm 34:2-3, 16-21	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord
Ephesians 5:2, 25-32	The Church, Bride of Christ
John 6:60-69	To whom shall we go?

"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"
These are disciples of Jesus,
who are reacting to the sayings about the Bread of Life.
    But it could be anyone who is given evidence
    that the truth is inconvenient for them.

The Bread of Life Discourse is over,
and now we hear about the reactions.
    They are mixed.
    Peter represents others, when he says,
    "To whom shall we go?"

Today, this isn't the only follow-up story.
We also hear from the last chapter of the book of Joshua.
    The conquests and division of the land is over,
    and now they bring it all together
        with a renewal of the Covenant on Sinai,
        now in the land itself.

    It is a new generation;
and there were some in the land who joined them in the conquest
and now pledge to the covenant community of Israel.
    Again, some followed; some did not.

It is not uncommon for disciples to respond to difficult messages,
saying, in effect, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?"

A current example, playing itself out as we speak,
is the preparation for the American visit of Pope Francis
    a month from now, Sept 22-27,
    stopping at Washington, D.C., New York, and Philadelphia.

An assessment of a recent Gallup poll,
discussed in *USA Today*, went as follows:

"Growing conservative disaffection with Pope Francis
appears to be taking a toll on his once Teflon-grade popularity in the U.S.,

with a new Gallup poll showing the pontiff's favorability rating
among all Americans dropping to 59% from a 76% peak early last year.
"Among conservatives, the drop-off has been especially sharp:
Just 45% view Francis favorably today, as opposed to 72% a year ago.

Gallup analyst Art Swift wrote Wednesday,
when the survey was published.
"This decline may be attributable
to the pope's denouncing of 'the idolatry of money'
and attributing climate change partially to human activity,
along with his passionate focus on income inequality
— all issues that are at odds with many conservatives' beliefs,"

What will Francis talk about when he comes to the US?
Here is the report of some in a position to make educated guesses,
which they point out is better than uneducated guesses.

He had wished to enter the US from Mexico,
to demonstrate his solidarity with the immigrants taking that route.
It didn't work out, but you might expect him to mention it.

He will speak to Congress.
Recently, when he spoke to the European Parliament in Strasbourg,
he emphasized the dignity of the human person.
That might a theme with Congress.

In Washington, he will also speak to the bishops
in St. Matthew's Cathedral.
He knows that not all US bishops agree with him,
and given the sharp criticism of his remarks to the Vatican Curia,
this New York moment also ought to be of interest.

In New York, his speech to the U.N. will likely repeat
many of his themes in the recent encyclical on ecology and conversion,
On Care of Our Common Home.

His visit to Ground Zero is the only inter-religious event on the schedule.
We might expect him to address a major concern of his,
experienced in the refugee flights from Africa
—namely, rising religious fanaticism.

In Philadelphia, he will attend the World Meeting of Families,
helping to set the stage for the coming Synod on the Family.

Likely, the emphasis will be on mercy in applying church law,
as he has pointedly emphasized recently.

He will also visit a prison in Philadelphia.
One might expect some remarks
on the drastic prison situation in the US,
especially with our warehousing of the black male population.

Thus far, we might find all of this welcome.
However, we might expect that we, whoever we are,
will not escape scrutiny in this visit.

The USA Today article quoted earlier goes on to add:
"But liberal fervor for the Argentine pope,
who was elected to great acclaim in March 2013,
has also cooled, dropping an average of 14 points.

Some observers have predicted
that many who embraced the pope's candor
and his views on a range of social justice issues
would temper their ardor as they realized
he would not change church teachings on hot-button issues
such as abortion or contraception or gay marriage."

But there is much to be said beyond American categories
of conservative and liberal, right and left.
For instance, he will doubtless mention a central theme of his,
the plight and witness of the poor.

And he will be doing so
in one of the most conspicuously comfortable nations in the world.
It is impossible to imagine that this will not be mentioned.

And this addresses us all.
It is not hard to foresee a general American response
to the effect:

"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 30, 2015

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8	You shall not add or subtract from it.
Psalm 15:2-5	The one who does justice will live.
James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27	Be doers of the word and not hearers only,
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23	Thus he declared all foods clean

In the book of Deuteronomy we hear Moses warning,
"you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it."
The Law, or Torah, as it is known,
was the testament of their fidelity to God.

In a world in which there held threats and temptations on all sides,
situated as they were among pagan cultures,
the Torah was their guidebook, and map for survival.

But in the gospel of Mark, to which we return this week,
we hear Jesus distinguishing
between human traditions and God's commandment.
In many ways, Mark shows him selecting
among the law books of the Bible
in what amounts to a new interpretation.
He is insisting that some things can be changed, namely, human tradition,
and others cannot, namely divine law.

This is good to hear, since law can be inflexible in its application.
But are we to turn exceptions to the law into new laws?
Does the reading that releases the law from its rigidity
then become the new inflexible command?
How do we determine today what it means to follow the will of God?

In our culture there seems to be a need
to keep pushing back the line that separates acceptable behavior
from that which is unacceptable.
How are we to respond to that,
as disciples of Jesus and members of his church?

For example, this week an article—typical of its kind—
appeared in one of the online magazines—SLATE, I think—
by a blogger who took exception to restrictions on pornography.
According to the headline, it took the position
that it is intolerable that Christians impose their restrictions
on a normal human activity, as this person claimed pornography is.

How can we make known our sense that this is not true?
Religion as we know it is not simply a set of restrictive rules?

In yesterday's *New York Times*,
a rather humorous article by Timothy Egan
made the case rather nicely, I thought.

And so, though I do not do this often,
I'm going to quote from it rather extensively.
The article is titled, "The Anti-Trump Cometh,"
(perhaps playing upon Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming,"
which has been getting some play lately, regarding Trump.)

Egan presents two models for us today.
One we might call "the Donald."
The other we can call "Francis."

He writes:

"One man hasn't watched television in 25 years, gets around in a Ford Focus,
and is named for a nature-loving pauper
who didn't believe in owning money, property or shoes.
He is considered infallible, but often doubts his daily utterances.

The other man spent 14 years
in the mirrored embrace of a television show about him,
is transported by a fleet with his name on the side,
and looks down on anyone who hasn't amassed a mountain of property.
He *thinks* he's infallible."

Egan then adds:

"In a few weeks, Pope Francis will visit our fair land,
a fitting pivot from the Summer of Trump, closing out
a gluttonous episode of narcissism, rudeness, frivolity and xenophobia. …

"Francis is the anti-Trump.
He has more power, media magnetism and authenticity
in his lone functioning lung
than Donald Trump has in his entire empire of ego."

Then Egan elaborates on the comparison:
"Francis is the son of immigrants, invites the poor into his home,
and washes the feet of the sick and marginalized.

Trump wants to round
up and deport immigrants,
considers the poor to be losers, and is afraid of touching people.

"Francis lives in a two-bedroom guesthouse,
and says the measure of a person's value
has nothing to do with financial net worth.
"When money becomes an idol, it controls man's choices," he said.
"It makes him a slave."

Trump sleeps in monogrammed satin,
and divides his time among a string of mansions, towers and estates,
all crusted in gold.
He exults in materialistic excess with an empty sack of a soul.
"Part of the beauty of me is that I am very rich," he said.

Francis preaches forgiveness.
"Never, never let the sun go down without making peace," he said.
"Never, never, never!"
Trump loves nothing more than stoking feuds and hurling insults,
and will not apologize. His enemy list spans three time zones.

"Francis preaches urgent care of an overheated planet.
Trump says climate change is a fabrication.
"The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese
in order to make the United States' manufacturers noncompetitive," he said.

"Francis wants to build bridges.
He's reached out to Muslims, Jews and atheists.
Trump vows to erect a 2,000-mile wall.
"Nobody builds better walls than me, believe me."

"Francis has never been on the Internet,
and doesn't own a cellphone.
Trump is sustained by nonstop social media,
which he feeds with constant idiocies.
"I have so many websites," he said. "I have them all over the place."

Egan concludes his piece with a final assessment:
"In a six-day visit, the pope will bring substance and self-deprecation —
an appeal to our better angels.
It may be just enough to wash away the grime of
Trump's ego effluence.

"Trump is the demagogue we can't stop watching,
the freak show that cable television can't stop promoting.
His core message is spectacle.
It's crazy to take any of his "policy" assertions seriously,
because he himself does not.

"You will never hear that from the pope,
a man trying to live by the humbling aphorisms of his namesake,
Francis of Assisi.
"Show me someone without an ego," says Trump,
"and I'll show you a loser."
At least we know how he'll address him.

Well, that was kind of fun.
But it also raises the question of what it is we base our actions on.

As a representative of a certain theme in American culture,
the Donald embraces and trumpets the cause of the individual ego.
This is the final justification for acting.
It is a law of its own, different from the law of Moses or the Gospel.

But what is the law behind the model of Francis?
Egan in his article suggests but does not say.
He uses words like forgiveness, humbling, simplicity and poverty.
Egan knows we find this attractive, but he doesn't say why.

Elsewhere, as in his encycslicals,
we find the principle behind Francis's gospel-based behavior,
and the key word is relationship.

So, if the Gospel is a law that demands obedience,
it is this simple, self-effacing law
that promotes generosity and the health of relationships among us.

It is not the self, the Ego, that is the law of our actions,
but the consideration and promotion of others and their welfare.
That law has been summed up as the commandment:
Love one another.

The law of love.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 6, 2015

Isaiah 35: 4-7	A people restored from exile
Psalm 146:7-10	The Lord heals and protects
James 2:1-5	Do not favor the influential/rich
Mark 7:31-37	A deafmute is healed

This week this community was shocked
in the fullest sense of that much abused and overused word,
to hear that a woman was brutally beaten and raped
in front of the old Lourdes building on 17th street.

It is a horrible crime.
It has a terrifying quality, such as those you read about.
One thinks of Truman Capote, and his book, *In Cold Blood*.
It is a reminder of the reality of evil.

The aftershocks continued.
We learned that the attacker, Helmon Betwell,
to use his name, since it is now on the way toward being buried
under caricatures and rage,
was a deeply alienated young man who called himself a loser,
and wanted to be punished.
One thinks of Sr. Helen Prejean,
and her efforts to redeem a similar case, in Walking Dead.

And we learned he is a Marshallese,
and it was not difficult to think about the impact on that community,
and the many Marshallese who are working for the Franciscans
here and at Clare House.

But we still did not know the identity of the victim.
And when we were told, it was breathtaking.
Nancy Krapfl was a pious woman who worked for the church,
including Holy Trinity, here in Dubuque, a thoroughly Franciscan parish.

And she was the brother of Fr. Dan Krapfl,
who sometimes joined us for communal penances.

She had nursed him during the final days before he died.
How could we find any side of this story that made sense?
It was as if virtue and innocence were being made subject
to a bizarre divine joke.

And then the fact that it was completely arbitrary,
that she "happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time,"
took away any possibility of making sense of it.
    It made a mockery of what we believe,
    and seemed to confirm all the myths and stereotypes
    against which we have been working.

It is this kind of thing that bewilders religious people
and causes them to question their beliefs,
    not to mention opening them up to those who find religion ludicrous
    and who ridicule their commitments.

The entire event seemed like a parable,
a drama condensing all the fears and stereotypes we are prey to:
    One thinks of the West-enders that fear to go downtown;
    or those who say she brought it on herself
    for being out at this time and place.
Or even that cultural dark dream that possessed the American south,
that "they" were out to rape our daughters.
    In fact, that seemed almost a script for what was happening.

So where do we go from here? What do we make of it?
What do we do with our feelings of futility?
    Already there are memorials on the steps of the building on 17th Street,
    and vigils there, and persons taking up a collection for a memorial.

And today we come to church.
And we turn to the scriptures for guidance.
    Perhaps it is asking too much to find our answers there,
    but still, we look. And what do we find?

Today we hear a story about Jesus healing a deaf-mute.
    It is a strange story with some odd details.
    This is an act of compassion for an individual who is suffering.

But this deed also has a social dimension,
indicated by its reference to the passage from Isaiah
that we have for our first reading.

    It pictures a defeated people in exile being rescued
    and returned to their land by a spectacular act of God.

The people are renewed with their health returning;
the land is restored,

with desert lands bursting forth with new vegetation,
the brown landscape becoming green.

And, Mark is telling us, this is what Jesus is doing, as well.
Restoring not only individuals, but an entire people.

It is helpful to recall what is happening
in the Galilee of Jesus of Nazareth.
Roman occupation brought a sense of limited opportunity.
The land in which they lived was no longer their own.

This was brought home to them by in actual displacement.
Cities rose up in the Roman style, requiring care and feeding.
Food cannot be shipped in from a distance,
and so traditional family holdings were conscripted
to make large plantation estates to feed the urban populations.
Families found themselves working land they used to own,
now owned by large landholders.

"The promise that had been made to their ancestors
was now being enjoyed by outsiders — veterans of Herod the Great's armies
and other pro-Herodian favourites who had been given shares
in the best land of the country as a reward for their loyalty."
(Freyne, Galilean Jew, 47)

Or perhaps they had nowhere to work.
Banditry grew, trying to seize back what was lost.
Popular messiahs raised armies, to no avail.

It is the opinion of social psychologists
that a defeated and despairing population develops a variety of illnesses.

In addressing the illnesses, Jesus was not only returning them to society,
but he was healing the society itself.
He was moving them from despair to hope.
And his approach was 180 degrees from the violent,
and intimately futile, methods of the social bandits
and popular messiahs of the day.

And the teachings of Jesus work toward a similar goal.
One author, Richard Horsley, puts it this way:

"In such circumstances one would expect
a high degree of resentment of the wealthy. …

These sayings of Jesus rather call people in local village communities
to take economic responsibility for each other
in their desperate circumstances.

Those addressed may have little or nothing themselves.
But they are called upon to share what they have willingly
with others in the community,
even with their enemies or those who hate them.
They are not to seek damages from a formal insult.
They are even to render up the pledge for a loan
that the unmerciful creditor has no right to take. …
The message seems to be: take responsibility
for helping each other willingly, even your enemies,
in the local village community."

The promise of the scriptures is that there is hope.
The power of the event that took place this week
tempts us toward old caricatures,
or exhausted feelings of futility.

Ultimately, hope doesn't lie in programs, but it involves programs.
It involves working toward justice,
toward a recognition of the worth of all people,
but it knows that ultimately things are in God's hands.

In the face of trauma, this sounds bland.
What I am trying to say is that we should not give up our efforts
to bring about a world more like that dreamed of in the bible,
but that it doesn't ultimately depend on our own efforts.

But those efforts are still important.
It is the work that has been compared to that
of a field hospital in a battle zone.

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 13, 2015

Isaiah 50:5-9	The Third Servant Song
Psalm 116:1-6, 8-9	I walk in the land of the living
James 2:14-18	No faith without works
Mark 8:27-35	Peter declares Jesus to be Messiah

Frequently we find ourselves on one side of an issue
that divides the societies we are a part of.
    Currently, in the political world, the treaty with Iran, for instance,
    separates two groups of separate mindsets.
In the Catholic church in America, the visit of the pope
raises questions and brings to the front differences of style and outlook.

It is my own bias to call these war and peace,
or law and order versus mercy.
    But it can also be seen by others as realism versus idealism.

My own approach to these matters is related
to a long relationship with the Gospel of Mark,
    beginning with writing a musical based on this Gospel.

This is the Gospel we are following this year.
And today we come to a turning point in the story.
    One part, the part that takes place in Galilee, ends;
    another part, centered on Jerusalem, begins.

When I was writing the musical based on this Gospel,
I tried to distinguish the two parts
    by moving from a minor key in the first
    to a major key in the second.
        The first part ends with an exultant realization
        of the messianic role of Jesus, as Peter sees the light.

The words from the musical (I am not going to sing them)
tries to capture this. Jesus begins.
    You will recognize the others as they speak:

> How do other people suggest I came?
> Elijah, John the Baptist, or some such name.
> But what do my disciples believe I claim?
> Up jumped Peter, for he saw the meaning:

You are the Messiah! Peter replied.
The long hoped-for Messiah God would provide!
Yes, but now I die, and when I have died,
I will rise from death on that other side!

Peter said to Jesus: You can't mean that!
I'd kind of like to be an aristocrat.
Jesus said to Peter; That's where I'm at,
So if you'd follow me you'd better work it through!

But Peter, who now knows Jesus is the Messiah,
does not know what Messiah means for Jesus.
He understandably assumes the common hope
that the Messiah would be a conquering king,
finally wresting the promised land
from those who unjustly had taken it.

Jesus at his Baptism heard the Voice from heaven name him as Messiah,
but add that he also was the Suffering Servant, as in the book of Isaiah.
But Peter did not hear this radical revision of the role of the messiah,
since he had not yet become a part of the story.
His call, along with his brother Andrew, and James and John,
would come later.
And now, he learns that there is more to the story.

Again, without actually singing the words,
here the story moves into a minor key.

If you would be my followers,
then come and follow me.
Take your cross, your weary load,
and follow me that narrow road
to see
Jerusalem with me.

Jesus said he had to die.
Peter didn't understand.
He took Jesus to one side
and there he earnestly denied
what Jesus said his Father had planned,
and all that it implied.

Jesus looked upon his own
and then aloud to Peter said:
The only ways you know are man's
You know nothing about God's plans.
Who will you follow when I'm dead?
Will you follow someone else, instead?

If you would be my follower,
then come and follow me.
Take you cross, your weary load,
and follow me that narrow road
to see
Jerusalem with me.

We find Peter and Jesus in a heated argument.
Peter rebukes Jesus, because this defeatist attitude
is not proper to the Messiah, in his view.
Jesus rebukes Peter in turn,
for not knowing God's will in the matter.

But as we noted, Peter did not hear the voice from heaven.

And then we come to the words
that provided the refrain for the song:
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me."

It is difficult not to think of the part
that Peter finds himself playing later in the story.
He is in the courtyard of the high priest's house.
Jesus is inside, in effect beginning to take up his cross.
This is the moment for Peter to deny himself,
and join in Jesus taking up the cross.
But instead, he denies that he knows the one inside,
and flees from the cross.

But first we have this dispute.
And shortly afterward, Jesus and three of his disciples
climb the mountain where he is transfigured.

Six days later,
Jesus took Peter, James and John
and led them up a mountain,
with none other, altogether all alone.

They noticed how his outfit shone.

Then came Elijah, walking with Moses.
They were together, talking to Jesus.
Peter decided: Lord, it's good for us to be here.
Let us pitch some tents here for you,
one apiece for each of you,
for Jesus, for Moses, and Elijah!

Then a shadow,
then a voice came from the cloud.
It scared, it terrified them.
Hear his teaching,
He is my beloved son.
Then Jesus was the only one.

The Voice from heaven at the Baptism returns
to settle the dispute between Peter and Jesus,
for the Messiah will be the Servant.

And Jesus begins to teach about the place of the Suffering Servant
in the royal task of the Messiah.
And he also begins to explain what servant discipleship means.
And this will take them to Jerusalem.

The disciples will not understand.
The Twelve will compete for the best places in the Kingdom,
but this is not servant discipleship.
James and John will jockey for the right and left hand seats.
But this is not servant discipleship.

Servant discipleship was to be the guiding beacon of the Apostles
in their own exercise of authority.

But it is not an obvious way to run an organization.
Human beings are hardened, we hear,
and firm discipline is the only way to handle them.
Law and order go together, for without the first
you cannot have the second.

You cannot run a ship on mercy.
Or so we thought until P. Francis reminded us differently.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 20, 2015

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20	Tormenting the Just One
Psalm 54: 3-6, 8	God is my helper
James 3:16—4:3	Against war
Mark 9:30-37	Rivalries among the Twelve

Some of you know this story.

At our family reunion this past summer
I found out something about my family, as I do every summer.
This time it was about my paternal grandfather.

In investigating the possibilities
of Luxembourg descendants receiving dual citizenship,
the story of my grandfather Beck's family arriving in the States got told.

My grandfather wasn't born yet.
That would happen after they arrived.
But his older brother was three years old
when they entered the States through Canada.

It was in Toronto, I believe, that they lost track of the three-year-old.
They couldn't speak the language, and the train was leaving,
and they lost him.

My grandfather never knew him,
but this proud, stern old man couldn't speak of the incident
without weeping.

You will not be surprised to know that I thought of this incident
when I saw the picture of the 3-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi,
face down on the beach, having washed ashore from a refugee boat.

He looked asleep, but of course he had died.
He too was three years old, I said to myself.
I have a sense of the feeling that this boy aroused.

And it aroused the nations of Europe,
who had been denying the reality of the mounting refugee crisis.
No longer.
It took a little child to put a face on it.

I think of the other images of frightened parents
caught in the tangle of refugees
in the corridors of emigration through southern Europe,
parents who have lost track of their own children,
or whose children are failing.

One understands better why "Taking a child,
he placed it in the their midst."

The little child is the reason as well as the example.
If we cannot see the place the little child has
in the incessant disputes that drive our adult lives, policies, conflicts,
then we do not know why we are doing them.

Why did he choose a little child?
Why did he take a child, place it in the their midst,
and say to them,
"Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me;
and whoever receives me,
receives not me but the One who sent me."

I think our first thought is that children are innocent.
They are not aware of the many cares and concerns
that trouble the lives of adults.
They do not have to make the hard decisions,
because they are being made for them.

They are innocent, not meaning they are little angels,
but meaning that they are still unaware of the difficulties
that lie ahead in their adult lives.

But I think it is more than that, as well.
I think that when we see the little children,
we see ourselves before we learned to divide up against one another,
before we learned how to despise one another,
to hate and really mean it.

We are charmed when small children black and white, play together,
as yet unaware of the racial differences that will change their lives.
We look at the Syrian children, and they are simply children.
They are not Syrian, or Muslim, or Middle Eastern,
or anything else but small children.

And in that perception, I think we understand something,
or maybe remember something that we always knew.
We recognize here our common humanity.
In the children we see ourselves before we learned
to divide into groups in conflict,
and we remember we are all children of God.
We are all sisters and brothers of one race, the human race.

And when we remember this, something in us grieves, I think,
for what we call the loss of innocence,
but what I think is the memory of our common humanity,
our common family relationship.

The deep call of peace on earth, so common as to be a cliché,
is a sign of this.
It is a call from deep in our common nature,
and because it seems so remote, it is something we grieve over.

It is for this reason, I think, that we dream of a lost Eden,
a time when we were one,
before we were divided among the many tribes and cliques,
the civil wars and partisan divisions.

We seem to remember that we are one human family,
all children of God.

When Jesus speaks to the Twelve,
who had been arguing among themselves
as to who was the most important, or most favored,
and he tells them, "Anyone wishes to be first,
shall be the last of all and the servant of all,"
he is reminding them that no human being is without worth.

He is not merely chiding them for competing for higher places,
he is also reminding them that being in high places
is not what make them human beings.

It is something else. It is something they all share
apart from whatever station they enjoy in society.
It is that they are human beings created in the image of God,
each of infinite worth.

Yesterday, Pope Francis arrived in Cuba.
This Tuesday he will come to the United States, in Washington, D.C.
    On Thursday, he will travel to New York,
    and on Saturday, to Philadelphia.
He will spend an entire day in each city.
Sunday evening, a week from now, he will return to Rome.

He will have a full schedule,
visiting Catholic Charities as well as Congress,
    both the UN and Harlem,
    both the gathered American bishops and a prison,
        and on the same day.

His schedule is full,
    but no one expects him to limit his encounters only
    to those they have scheduled for him.

Who knows what street person,
    what stressed waitress or baggage carrier,
    he might take time to recognize, with the world watching.
        Who knows what ill or disfigured person he might embrace?

Who knows what child he will lift up,
    perhaps ask for a song,
    and change that one's life?

And teach us about ours?

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 27, 2015

Numbers 11:25-29	Eldad and Medad
Psalm 19:8, 10, 12-14	The precepts of the Lord
James 5:1-6	Woe to you rich
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48	Privilege and Scandal

Joshua, son of Nun, did not like that idea that Eldad and Medad
were sharing in the Spirit of Prophecy without being with the others.
"My lord, stop them!"

Moses, on the other hand, was not perturbed.
"Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets!
Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!"

Likewise, the apostle John is not happy
that someone who is not with their group of the Twelve
was shown to be an effective exorcist, using the name of Jesus.

Jesus, like Moses, is not disturbed by this.
Though we usually remember it the other way around,
his line is memorable: "whoever is not against us is for us."

A friend of mine writes in her weekly scripture column:
"For whoever is not against us is for us."
Haven't I always heard it is the other way around?
"Those who are not for us are against us."

The difference, of course, is real.
One is the tribal principle, which says that
unless you agree with me you are my enemy.

It builds walls and separates people to either side of those walls.
But now we hear that if you don't agree with me, then that is fine.
You are not necessarily my enemy.

This leaves an avenue open.
It invites rather than prohibits.
It builds bridges instead of walls."

It is impossible to hear words like this
without thinking about the current American visit of Pope Francis.
He is one who is not a friend of walls.

He spoke against building walls against immigrants.
And who can forget his visit to the walls in Israel
—the wailing wall, of the one hand,
and the wall constructed around the occupied Palestinian territory,
on the other.

At the 9/11 memorial in New York,
he was joined by representatives of other faiths.

"Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue
and Imam Khalid Latif, the Muslim chaplain at New York University,
offered reflections before the pope spoke. …
Representatives of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh,
Christian and Muslim communities read meditations on peace,
and a choir sang a Jewish prayer in honor of the deceased."

One New Yorker in attendance said it was the first time
she had experienced peace at that site.

Others were concerned about blurring the distinctions between religions.
They worried about keeping the lines of truth clear,
avoiding dangers of merging or muddying the truth.
This doesn't seem to be a concern for Francis.

There is a spirituality of separation.
There is also a spirituality of inclusion.
And thinking about that, sometimes I have a running argument
going in my head, along these lines:

There is a spirituality of separation.
And there is a spirituality of inclusion.

Those who object to the pope's style are upset
that he doesn't maintain the stark lines of orthodoxy.

For them, the function of the church is to maintain the dogma.
For them, the truth is more important than the people.
Their devotion is to what they consider the unchanging truth.
Their mission is to reject any change, even in its expression.

Caught in this kind of commitment, they are also devoted
to rejecting change of any kind.
This rejection of change is peculiar, of course,

since it would freeze the recent past, or perhaps the 4th century,
as somehow the eternal moment.

It is the syndrome that views the moment
that I arrived on the scene as the eternal moment,
how it always was, before the changes
that I have experienced in my life have occurred.

Like the dog in the manger, they fiercely guard their deposit of truth
against all violators, no matter how needy they might be.

The enemy is anyone who wishes
to adapt the deposit of faith to their own lives.
They are told that they must adapt their lives to the deposit of faith.

Their experience is meaningless until it fits into the mold.
Many who do not accept this, having valued their own experience
for what it is, simply leave.

Francis is not changing doctrine, let alone dogma.
He is asking how we can help those who are in need of it.

His examples tend to be those who are clearly in need.
These are the truly poor, those who are rejected
because of disfigurement or other kinds of illness
that puts them in disfavor.

But, some worry, can't everyone claim some kind of neediness?
Where will it all stop?
Even middle-class Catholics can claim that they are suffering.
Who isn't suffering?

Some worry that before long the deposit of truth will be compromised,
and we might not even notice it happening.
It is best to just deny everyone who comes begging for help.
It is safest that way.

Pope Francis doesn't seem to be interested in being safe.
He regularly goes where security minded people,
or those with the responsibility to maintain security, wish he wouldn't.

What will never be forgotten is his lifting up
of two Catholic Americans in this speech before the US Congress.

Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton are familiar figures to most of us here.
But it turns out nearly all Americans, and most Catholics,
were unaware of their existence.
This will no longer be the case.

And in bringing them into his talk, and building his message around them
(along with Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.),
he has brought these two
from the ragged edge of American Catholic experience into the center,
at least for the moment.

But the effect, to some degree, will be lasting.

As one analyst pointed out, it appears that Pope Francis
has been reading the writings of Day and Merton.

Thomas Merton, known as Fr. Louis at the monastery, wrote much,
said many things, and represents many things for us.
For me, one of these was the way he introduced nonviolence
into the Catholic dialogue.
This was against an almost unbroken tradition of Just War theorizing.

Another was his reaching out to other faith traditions.
As people now know, he died in Bangkok,
at an ecumenical gathering of Catholic and non-Christian monks.

It was 1968, the same year that Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy died.
Merton stepped out of his bath
and was electrocuted by a faulty electric fan.

If Merton anticipates the pope's reaching out to other faith expressions,
Dorothy Day is certainly an example of reaching out
to the disregarded and ignored people of no influence
—those we sometimes call the poor.

When she made the startling move of moving to live among the poor,
one of the criticisms she received from well-meaning Catholics,
including those in positions of authority,
was that her approach was misguided.

If she wanted to help the poor, she should organize benefits,
programs to raise money and alleviate their burdens.
But by moving in among them, and sharing their conditions,
she lost any ability to make meaningful contributions.

In fact, she just became another of them,
and what good is that?

But she remained convinced that being present to them as persons
was more important than anything she could do.

I think I hear the same thing from Francis.
The same song, slightly different words.

In his encyclical, "On the Care of our Common Home," he wrote:

"Many professionals, opinion makers,
communications media and centres of power,
being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor,
with little direct contact with their problems. …

This lack of physical contact and encounter,
encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities,
can lead to a numbing of conscience
and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality."

Dorothy and Fr. Louis.
So many stories.

And now Francis.
So many more stories.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 11, 2015

Wisdom 7:7-11	Solomon's wisdom, and riches
Psalm 90:12-17	Teach us wisdom of heart
Hebrews 4:12-13	God's word is a two-edge sword
Mark 10:17-30	A rich young man

Sometimes it is hard to see both sides of an issue.
But in the case of distributive justice, we have help.

On the other hand, we are aware of the disparity in our country
between the "One-Percent" and the rest of us.
We have it dramatized in our day by two presidential candidates
who are standing on opposite sides of this issue
and making it visible for us.

Bernie Sanders is protesting the division;
Donald Trump is rejoicing in it.

With that, we understand the injustice of the inequality of distribution,
and we lament the inability of the One-Percent
to understand why it is a problem.
The resistance to change seems to represent stubbornness,
a hardening of heart.

That is one side of the issue.
On the other side there is the inequity that Pope Francis
is frequently talking about
—the disparity between the developed world,
with its share of the world's fortune,
and the underdeveloped world,
with its comparatively minimal share.

At this point, if this were Facebook,
a graph could be produced now, to illustrate the difference.

What other reason than this are we so concerned
about refugees supposedly flooding the United States?
Why else do we fantasize about building a wall
across the length of our border with Mexico?

But now we are looking at the difference from the other side.
From this side of the divide, it seems little can be done.
Yes, we may have a disproportionate amount of the world's goods,

but what are we expected to do about it?

There doesn't seem to be many options open to me personally.
And besides, we just noticed how we are small players in this game.
Remember the One-Percent?
Isn't the real burden on their backs?

So there are the two sides to this question.
With this, perhaps we can better appreciate the story
of the Rich Man and his encounter with Jesus.

We recognize the format of this story.
It is a call story, like that of Peter and Andrew, James and John.
He said, "Come, follow me."
And they left everything and followed him.

But that doesn't happen here. Today we hear:
"You are lacking in one thing.
Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor
and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

And then: At that statement his face fell,
and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.
This is a failed call story.

And yet he was a good man.
In the interchange, after Jesus responded
to the question about what he should do to gain eternal life,
by reciting the commandments about love of neighbor,
he responded that he had done that since his youth.

He was a good man.
It was only when he realized the man's sincerity,
that Jesus gave him a further option.
Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor
and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The ancient world was one of severe disparity
in fortune and opportunity.
We can get a sense of this from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche,
who taught that originally, there were two kinds of people—
what he called "the noble, the powerful,
the superior, and the high-minded"
and the "low, low-minded, and plebeian."

The former had an unquestioning hold over the latter—
they had a feeling of ruling and superiority
that was justified by the fact that they were ruling
and they were in fact superior.

And this was reflected in
the near total possession of goods by the former
and the desperate poverty of the latter.
Except when they could somehow get in the good graces
of the upper classes. There were no middle classes.

We do not know where the Rich Man who came to Jesus lived,
what he possessed.
Only that he had many possessions.
But we can appreciate what Jesus was asking of him.

I might suggest he was asking more
than an adjustment in his investment portfolio.
He was asking for a change in his identity.
He was the Rich Man. But who would he be
if he gave it all to the poor and went to follow Jesus?
Who would he be then?

A vast empty space opened up in that picture of the future.
It would be like walking off from a high place
out into that empty space.

And who can do such a thing?
What would allow a person to risk it?
It would require a great deal of trust,
and where does one find a basis for such trust?

It is at this point that we can appreciate the saying
that says that it is harder for a camel
to pass through the eye of a needle
than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

And yet, all things are possible with God.
That seems to be a clue to the answer of the trust question.

Again, two contrasting examples might make the point.
If I can be bold enough to invoke again the figure of Donald Trump,
who was described in a news article today as the brash billionaire,
we can see here, I think, one model of trust.

The trust is not simply in his money,
which he frequently reminds people about,
    but rather in his ability to acquire it.

He is an apostle of the faith, the trust, in Self.
    In fact, he seems to talk about little else.
    This is an identity that would seem to be surrendered up
    only with great difficulty.

    So let us put him up on one side,
    as the kind of trust that Jesus is not demanding.

But who can represent the opposite? Is there anyone?
    Recently in answer to this question it was proposed
    that St. Francis is exactly that.

He was a rich man and a rich man's son.
But he surrendered all of that.
    His trust was total. But it was not in himself.
    It was in God—that kind of trust that is commonly known as faith.

And he did not lose his identity, but gained it.
He became the person the world knows.

In fact, he became a model for that kind of decision,
that kind of trust, that kind of discipleship.

    He is the anti-Trump,
    and the contrary to the Rich Man of the gospel.

Which is one of the reasons a Jesuit took the name of Francis
upon becoming pope.

It is not just for Franciscans. It is for the world.

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 18, 2015

Isaiah 53:10-11	The conclusion of the 4th Servant song
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22	A song of trust in God
Hebrews 4:14-16	A high priest who has suffered, and knows
Mark 10:35-45	James, John, and the Servant

James and John had apparently talked it over.
If they were to make their move, it had better be now,
before the others thought of it.
The group was nearing Jerusalem,
where the Messiah was destined to come into his own.
They would ask for the places of preference in the coming kingdom.

All along the way, Jesus had been telling them
about the true character of servant discipleship,
and the lesson had not been taking. And now this.

Jesus makes his point again.
One cannot think how it could be any clearer:

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles
lord it over them,
and their great ones make their authority over them felt.
But it shall not be so among you.
Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant"

Apparently those in the early church did not find this easy to accept.
Perhaps the continuing need to repeat it is why Luke, in his gospel,
moves these instructions right into the words of Jesus
at the Lord's Supper (Lk 22:24-26).
Could it be made any clearer?

And yet even today ambition seems to be the hallmark
of a certain clerical culture.
One struggles to understand how they read the gospels.

Today a drama is playing out at the Synod on the family
taking place at the Vatican.

It is not too dramatic to say that nothing less
than the fate of the Second Vatican Council is being determined.

Those of you who have been following those events
will have read about the letter some 13 cardinals—
including three top Vatican officials
(Cardinals Pell, Müller and Sarah,
as well as Cardinal Dolan of New York
—sent the pope expressing their concerns
about how the Synod is being run.

While credited for their honesty,
as the pope has requested of the delegates,
they also deserved poor grades for transparency,
another papal request, since they wanted it kept secret.
And were outraged when the letter was disclosed.

The line that they are drawing in the sand is the fear that communion
will be offered to divorced and remarried Catholics,
which will in their view violate a moral truth central to Catholicism.
Cardinal Mueller has warned about a pending schism—
a charge that has been picked up by others
who are writing about the schismatic pope Francis.

On the other side, there are voices like that
of the Vatican II-minded theologian, Enzo Bianchi,
founder and prior of the Ecumenical Monastery of Bose in Northern Italy,
who said, "What's at play here
is not Catholic doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage…
No, it's the pastoral dimension, [pope Francis's] attitude
towards those who make mistakes
and towards contemporary society." …
"Let's be clear – what scandalizes them is mercy!"

Mercy does seem to be a problem for many.
It seems to threaten the slippery slope,
for truth is said to be of a piece,
and there is no room for compromise
for then, it is thought, the entire structure will collapse.

Some of you will remember the days of the Council,
when Cardinal Ottaviani,
curia leader and fierce opponent of the Council,
introduced this line of thinking.

You may recall his famous line, "Error has no rights."
You might also recall the American theologian, John Courtney Murray,
clarifying that neither error nor truth has rights,
because they are abstractions.
Only persons are the bearer of rights.

But for some there has been a shift of concern
from persons to abstract truths,
from mercy to liturgical rules,
and from the Eucharist as a shared meal in a desert place
to ranked subjects in a royal court.

A good example is a biblical verse you will hear frequently cited
on the issue of communion and divorced Catholics.

It is from First Corinthians, chapter 11, verse 27, and it reads like this:
"whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily
will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord."
For some, this has anachronistically come to refer
to the Real Presence in the Eucharist,
something that historically was formulated at a later date.

In context, the verse is clear.
Paul is concerned about the assemblies at Corinth.
In those days, there was a meal
between the breaking of the bread at the beginning,
and the sharing of the cup at the end.

We still have a remnant of that in the consecration of the cup,
when the priest says, "When supper was ended, he took the cup."

But in Corinth, the wealthy ate while the poor,
who did not have food to bring, waited and watched until they were done.

Paul found this intolerable, and charged them
with violating the meaning of the Eucharist.

Ignoring this in favor of using the verse for excluding some
to save the dignity of the Eucharist is both ironic and sad.
Ironic, because Paul charges the Corinthian community
with ignoring the poor, excluding those in need, and failing in mercy.
Sad, because these are precisely what is needed, then, and now.

But this practice of reworking
the New Testament away from mercy is not new.

Who can forget the reaction of some when Pope Francis
washed the feet of some who were not Catholic men.
One would think that the symbolism of Jesus action
of service at the Lord's Supper was clear.

But for some it had come to represent the sacrament of Ordination.
So much so that one person was heard to exclaim,
"If it doesn't mean that, what could it mean?"
One would think that it was clear.

Or one might think of the parable of the Sheep and Goats,
and the seven works of mercy.
And how they have been re-labeled the "Corporal" Works of Mercy,
and placed alongside another set called the Spiritual Works of Mercy,
with the implication these are superior,
even though the first set is given in scripture
and repeated four times for emphasis,
while the latter is devised first
and then assigned various scriptural proof texts.

Or one might think about today's gospel passage,
and Jesus' question to the two brothers,
"Can you drink the cup that I drink
or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

Later, in Mark's account of the Supper, he will share the cup,
and they will all drink from it.

And after the Supper he will go to the Garden, where he will pray,
"Abba, Father, all things are possible to you.
Take this cup away from me,
but not what I will but what you will."

Clearly, this cup is more than a chalice,
unless the "chalice" also includes the cross.
The cross, and the life spent in service of others.

Including the poor.
Including those otherwise excluded.
And those suffering, those without direction,
without a sense that they are of any value.

For, "For the Son of Man did not come to be served
but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 25, 2015

Jeremiah 31:7-9	The blind and the lame in their midst
Psalm 126:1-6	He brought back the captives of Zion
Hebrews 5:1-6	Because he is broken, he is patient
Mark 10:46-52	Blind Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus

When I was submitting my column to the Witness this week
I had two pictures in the file to accompany it.
One showed Jesus and his followers in a courtyard
viewing a man sitting by the wall,
wearing dark glasses, playing a clarinet,
with a hat at his feet open for receiving tips.

The other was more dramatic, depicting Jesus moving through the area.
He is surrounded by men in something like togas,
also wearing dark glasses,
but wearing them in the way Secret Service men do,
impassively and with an air of observing whatever threat is in the area.
We have a close focus, with just their heads
as they are moving toward us, slightly to our right.

But to the side, in profile, is another man calling out to Jesus.
He is in profile. He is also wearing dark glasses,
and he looks a lot like Ray Charles.
Which would make him also a musician.

I chose the second.
What I like about it is that everyone but Jesus is wearing the dark glasses,
which suggest limited, or maybe selective, vision.
There is a nice interplay between the authentically blind beggar
and the apparently blind men accompanying Jesus.

These drawings are some thirty years old,
made before I was losing my own degrading vision,
when I didn't have trifocals and could see what I was doing.
I do not always remember what point I was making.
And sometimes, when I do, it comes as a surprise.

It was the second of these experiences,
when I realized that I was making a point about blindness,
being both physical and spiritual.
And that was prompted by the comparison of Bartimaeus,

the blind man of Jericho,
and the apostles James and John.

We heard their story last week,
with their outrageous request to have the best seats in the kingdom,
followed by Jesus repeated insistence
on the manner of authority exercised in the kingdom of God.
It is service, not lording over one another.

James and John were not getting the point,
after all the lessons Jesus had delivered
on the meaning of servant discipleship
along the road to Jerusalem.

Today's story of Bartimaeus is in direct contrast
to that of James and John.
His blindness is physical, but it is cured.
And as it is lifted, so also is his lack of comprehension.

He became an authentic disciples, who "followed him on the way."
That way led to Jerusalem, and the events that would occur there.

In the liturgy, we are now only the last stop before Jerusalem.
After this, we will stop following the progress of Mark's narrative
and skip ahead to the events of the final week.
The entry into the city is reserved for another time,
namely Palm Sunday of Passion Week.

But realize that we are nearing the events
of Jesus' final week at this point.
And the blind man is the one following on the way.
The disciples, we know, find this week hard,
and desert him at the Garden of Gethsemane.

This past week, Pope Francis gave an important speech
on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops.
It is important, I think, to realize that the Synod
is not something that happens when the pope calls it into session.

We tend to think of it as the meeting of bishops.
This is not the case.
It is a standing institution, and is always there.
It was established by P. Paul VI,
though it only meets when it is called together.

On the 50th anniversary of its establishment,
while the bishops of the synod were in attendance,
Francis gave a speech.

And I wonder if he did not have the gospel of last Sunday in mind,
when James and John were told that they are not to be like the Gentiles,
whose leaders lord it over one another.
No, they are to be servants.

I am surmising this, because the pope said
that the church and the hierarchy should be imagined
as an inverted pyramid.
Not top down, in the manner of an organizational pyramid,
where orders flow from the leader down to the rest.
Rather, he called for "a healthy decentralization."

He said the papacy itself should be rethought,
in "a conversion of the papacy," with the pope guiding the church
but really one bishop among many, one Catholic among many."

We recognize here his emphasis in practice on his role as a bishop,
rather than as a monarch and head of state.

He called for a church "founded on justice and fraternity,
generating a more beautiful and worthy world for humankind
and for the generations that will come after us."

The synod meeting is now over,
and those who were looking for doctrinal changes will not find them.
But of course, to hope for that is to remain with the old top down model,
hoping for the pope to deliver an edict.
But that is not what this meeting was about.

As the Associated Press article noted, nothing has changed,
and yet it seems as everything has changed.

The results are the same, but the rules have changed,
and there is a new openness,
a new possibility to speak of what possibilities for the future.
Bishops have remarked how they have a new freedom
to speak about previously taboo topics.

A Canadian archbishop has proposed ordaining women as deacons.
This is remarkable, first of all, that it was proposed,
indicating a new freedom of expression.
But secondly, it was not quashed, but tabled for further study.

Of course, alarmed opposition continues, as one would expect.

The editor of the Italian Jesuit Journal, Fr. Antonio Sparado,
told Vatican Radio, "We have to understand
that we are living an ecclesial process of huge dimensions.
So we shouldn't be surprised that there are moments
of fatigue, of blockage, difficulty and tensions.
There's also the joy that we are creating history together."

Our own Loras theologian, Dr. Amanda Osheim, said to me,
"Don't these people realize that pope Francis
is simply implementing the Second Vatican Council?"
And so he is. And so it is happening. Finally.

It is a matter of restructuring, with the idea
that with an inverted pyramid there will possibilities of change.

So today's gospel reading tells us that Jesus and his entourage
were traveling through Jericho, on their way to Jerusalem,
and there was a blind man there who had a request of Jesus.

He wanted him to interrupt his journey
in order to make his needs known.
Those around Jesus wanted him to be quiet.
They were not interested in his input.
They had important things to attend to,
and Jesus should not be bothered.

However, he insisted, repeating his call.
There is a lesson there as well.

And Jesus stopped, and we know the rest.
He followed on the way.
And so do we.
And the way continues yet today.

Solemnity of All Saints

November 1, 2015

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14	The heavenly multitude
Psalm 24:1-6	The people that longs to see your face
1 John 3:1-3	Beloved, we are God's children
Matthew 5:1-12	The Beatitudes

Today is All Saints.
It is the feast that recognizes
that the roster of saints in the church year
does not exhaust the meaning of sainthood.

The gospel reading from Matthew, the famous Beatitudes,
looks to what makes a saint—
those poor in spirit, the meek and the mourning,
the merciful and the clean of heart,
those who seek justice and those who make peace.

The reading from the first letter from John acknowledges
that not all the children of God are known.
There are so many that are not.

The passage from Revelation pictures the heavenly gathering.
Those who are numbered are a vast throng—144,000.
A symbolic number: 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10.
Representing for John of Patmos the Jewish saints.

But dwarfing that massive assembly is another,
the vast unnumbered throng, the gathering beyond counting.
The number is not known, for so many of them are unknown.

In the Catholic tradition, some saints have their feast days.
There is a test they must pass to be recognized officially.
To be canonized, at least two miracles must be proven.
But most saints do not have feast days.
Most are not recognized for lives of quiet faithfulness.

In the Catholic tradition, martyrs are those
who have died in defense of the faith,
usually interpreted as fidelity to the Catholic church.

And yet there are so many who are children of God,
and so many whose fate must be added to the list of the unnumbered.

Robert Ellsberg has a well-known book called *All Saints*.
It is his idea to include all manner of saints,
Catholic or not, Christian or not.
In fact, some, like Job, were not even historical persons.

But all the great heroes (and heroines)
of justice, fidelity, compassion, in our common cultural history,
those who have lived and died for the possible world
that God has revealed to us in the Scriptures,
all are included, within the limits of 365 days.

Dom Helder Camara along with Moses,
Vincent van Gogh along with Ignatius of Loyola,
St Rose of Lima along with the White Rose,
the teenagers who resisted the Nazis.

In the spirit of that collection,
I have been thinking of the forgotten, the disappeared,
those who can be counted among the uncounted,
that have come to my attention this past year.

Here are some others I am thinking of:
When I hear the words, "the disappeared," I think of
the dark years of Argentina, when people were brutally eliminated
by the military that took over the government.
Identifications are still being sought for many of them.

Before this year I did not know about
the massive number of martyrs that died in Viet Nam
in the introduction of Christianity into that country.
It was the presence of the Vietnamese sisters
here that alerted me to that.

The 219 schoolgirls that Boco Haram
captured and enslaved in Nigeria.
Some have escaped. Most have not.

The refugees from Syria,
washing up on the shores of southern Europe.
Yesterday, 29 migrants died when their boats
sank off the Greek island of Lesbos.

The migrants who are flooding Europe,
traveling through unwelcoming territory,
trying to keep their families together, not always successfully.

The immigrants in our own country, who live in the shadows,
fearing what might happen to them or their families
if they claim too much of what they deserve.

The list could go on for a long time.
You have others to add that I have not mentioned.
You may even wonder why I omitted them,
since they are also so forgotten and so much in need of recognition.
So I ask you to add them to the list.

At one time, when the incomparable activist Mano Berreno
was part of the Dubuque justice community,
we had a ceremony that amounted to an impromptu litany of saints.
After each name was lifted up, we would declare, "Presente,"
"he/she is here."

It is part of the Latin American tradition for honoring the memory
of those who have lost their lives in the struggle.

So today we honor those
who have lived the life as faithfully as possible,
who have remained in the places that needs are known
and solace is otherwise lacking.

Here and now, in this space, we name them and think about them,
in a word, we ensure that they are listed among the remembered.
And in so doing, we honor those who are not remembered,
who miss the honor that we are showing is due every child of God.

We honor those who have done their best
to answer the call to follow the example of the gospel,
to devote their lives to making a difference,
to be disciples.

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 8, 2015

1 Kings 17:10-16	Elijah and the widow of Zarephath
Psalm 146:7-10	The fatherless and the widow he sustains
Hebrews 9:24-28	He will appear a second time, with salvation
Mark 12:38-44	The widow's mite

We do not know her name, but she is famous.
She has made her way into our language
in the phrase, "the widow's mite."
She only appears once in the Bible,
and that is in today's passage from Mark's Gospel.
But she has made her presence known.

And standing behind her is a long line of widows in the Bible.
Her story brings them to mind, and is intended to do so.
One of them is the widow of Zeraphath,
who showed hospitality to the prophet Elijah.

But it is back in the Law Code of the Sinai Covenant,
brought to Israel by Moses himself,
that we find the meaning behind these stories of widows.

In Exodus 22 we find the passage that some call "the Cry of the Poor."
It warns Israelites not to molest a certain class of people,
marked by their vulnerability, and susceptibility to abuse.
It names three—the stranger in the land,
the widow and orphan,
and the poor person.

Each is vulnerable in his or her own way.
The stranger is separated from the safety of the home network.
The widow and orphan are bereft of their protector
in the patriarchal system.
The poor person lacks the material resources to secure the necessities
that take life beyond the constant cares about survival.

Because it is found in the law of the land,
it becomes the gauge of the success of Israelite society.
And by extension, it becomes the gauge of any society's success:
How are the vulnerable doing?
How are the refugees or immigrants faring?
How are the poor being regarded?

The bible frequently uses the shorthand:
the widow and orphan represent the group.

Elijah's widow was poor, and a foreigner.
    But every widow we meet in the Scriptures evokes the concern
    about the vulnerable in a society that can be ruthless.

And we come back to the widow in the Gospel,
putting a few cents in the temple treasury.
    She is contrasted, first of all, to the scribes
    who manage to extort the estates of widows,
    even while keeping a show of piety.
They represent those who ignore the Law Code of the Sinai Covenant.
They are part of the reason it was spelled out.

The second contrast to the widow
is with the wealthy donors who contribute large amounts.
    They are not corrupt like the scribes just mentioned. Not at all.
    They provide a public service,
    they keep society running smoothly, no doubt.

They are not being criticized.
    They are simply brought in to say something about the widow.
    They provide a point of comparison.

Her gift is not as helpful as theirs.
Hers is not as noticeable,
and in fact it would have gone completely unnoticed
    if Jesus hadn't been there, paying attention
    and pointing it out to the disciples.

But hers does something that the gifts of the other donors do not.
That something is the price she pays for her gift.
    Jesus says, "she, from her poverty,
    has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

Which brings two thoughts to mind.

The first has to do with her generosity.
If she is poor, why should she give away what little she has?
    Why not take a lesson from those
    who carefully guard their possessions?
    What is wrong with her?

But it seems that her sense of well-being, and her sense of security,
do not lie in what she possesses.
Rather, it rests in the network of relationships that sustain her.

She belongs to a community who care for one another.
That is not mentioned, but we do see Jesus noticing.
He is taking care.

And her gift is a sign of her taking care, in turn.
Her trust in others is signaled in her willingness to give of herself.
She knows others will reciprocate.

She is not locked in an isolation of strict self-reliance.
Between the isolation of individualism and dependency,
she lives in a world of interdependence,
each relying on the other, each giving to the extent they can,
even if it is a widow's mite.

That is the real world we live in.
It is one of the reasons we are celebrating this liturgy,
with yourselves as guests of the Franciscan Sisters
who are grateful for your own contributions.

The second thought has to do with her gift of her entire livelihood.
This story of the widow is the last story of Jesus' public life,
as Mark tells it.
We are at the end of chapter 12.

In the next chapter,
he will say farewell to his disciples, at considerable length,
and then we enter the Passion Account,
where he will give his life as a gift for others, for us.

In including this story of the widow,
Mark seems to be giving us a hint of what is to come,
with Jesus himself, giving his life, as well as his livelihood.
His life is given as gift, and the widow shows how that is done.

Today we gather to celebrate those in our families
and those among our friends,
who have lived and died in this same sense of gift of self,
to family and friends, and to the life of faith in a God
who has shown his own self-offering.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 15, 2015

Daniel 12:1-3	All those written in the book
Psalm 16:5, 8-11	My allotted portion and my cup
Hebrews 10:11-14, 18	One offering has forgiven sin
Mark 13:24-32	The Son of Man coming in the clouds

As we come toward the end of the Ordinary church year,
and the days grow shorter and the wind colder,
the liturgical readings turn toward apocalyptic language
and images of the end times.

But the promise is not only that the sun will be darkened,
the moon fail to give light, and the stars fall from heaven,
but also the Son of Man will be coming on the clouds.
These are words of consolation to a beleaguered people
who feel they may have been forgotten.

Those who study these things assure us that in the times it was written
the apocalyptic vision was not mainly about the future.
Rather it was an alternative vision of the present time,
with all its troubles, and its domination by foreign, pagan powers.

It saw the world of the imperial, earthly powers
as subject to a higher order, a higher authority.
And some day that would be made evident.
That was the meaning of the look to the future.

But for the present, the faithful are assured
that they have the author of the universe on their side, behind them,
and they should not be afraid.

This belief made the early church of martyrs
very difficult for the civil authorities to handle,
since they were not afraid of dying. They could not be controlled.
They could not be threatened, and so they became a threat.
They were willing to die for the cause
because they were supported and rewarded by the one God.

But once we see this, we cannot help but think
of the events of the past few days in Paris,
where suicide bombers, unafraid of death,
targeted a major soccer game, a shopping mall, and a rock concert,
crying out, "Allahu Akbar," — "God is greater."

We all have seen the reports, the stories and images on TV.

Here too we have a bold confrontation with a world power
in the name of a higher order.
Here too we have visions of the coming end.
So is this the same as what we are celebrating today?
We are appalled even at the suggestion.
But what is the difference between the Paris atrocities
and Christian witness?

In America, a prevailing story is that religion and state are separate,
and that they should never be associated.
Often this is expressed in terms of the prior responsibilities of the state.
Religion is seen as a private exercise, allowed by the state
so long as it doesn't make public assertions.
That would infringe on the public domain
that is under the proper authority of the state.
In effect, religion is a private and personal matter,
and to be kept in the private realm.

But the problem comes when we think of social justice.
Is this outside the interests of God?
Is God only concerned about private behavior?
Is God uninterested in the public realm?
Is there no concern for justice or social ethics?
Is our God a God of the household, or of the universe?

A concern for social justice has marked American Catholicism.
Recently I have been thinking of the witness during the 1980s.
On December 2nd we will honor the four American churchwomen
who were martyred in El Salvador in 1980.
Those years have marked most of us.

Here too we have a witness supported by the conviction
that there is a higher authority that delivers judgment
on political powers as well as individual sinners.

But there is a difference here, in this assertion of higher authority.
That difference is found in the American tradition of nonviolence,
retrieving the biblical witness.

In the bible, apocalyptic themes reflect movements of the day.
Resistance to real injustices, mass executions, brutal policies,
produced a response in certain Jewish quarters

not unlike those we are reading about in Paris—
with the obvious exception of explosives and gunpowder.
But methods and motives were pretty much the same.

But the resistance model of Jesus, shown in the gospels,
differed dramatically in its adherence to nonviolence—
a scandal then as it is now.

When Pope Francis spoke to the American Congress,
three of the four Americans he mentioned
are important to this tradition.

Martin Luther King, Jr. explored
the nonviolent meaning of gospel resistance.
He is thought to have married Gandhi's Satyagraha
to the New Testament teachings,
but Gandhi himself pointed to Jesus as a model.

Thomas Merton was among the first Catholic writers
to explore nonviolence at a popular level among Catholic journals
and in conversation with policy-makers.

And Dorothy Day made it a Catholic practice,
moving from hospitality houses
to nonviolent witness and civil disobedience.
It is in civil disobedience that King and Day sharpened the question:
Which is the higher authority?

In our own actions of nonviolent resistance,
we continue that heritage,
whether it be the witness at the School of the Americas,
or Holy Week at the Pentagon, or elsewhere.

Today, as we live in the world of November 2015,
with Paris as its latest billboard message,
and as we read about the end times
from texts that were written 20 centuries ago
in circumstances that were spooky in their similarity to today,
we are invited to refresh our commitments.

An American cultural tradition of privatized religion
would insist that we keep our religious concerns
out of the public world of politics.

We cannot agree to that, with its implications
that God has no concern about public injustices.

A worldwide underclass,
personified currently by uprisings in the Middle East,
would insist that God's Will
be imposed upon the unbelieving world by force.
We cannot accept its message of brutal hatred,
and not simply because we happen to be on the side of the targets.

There are problems with violent assertions of God's purpose,
since it tends too easily to assume that my own purposes
are necessarily those of God.
And that murder is one of them.
Its implication is that God's hate is stronger than love.

In our commitment to nonviolence,
we do not abandon resistance to social injustice.
Rather, we find in nonviolence a method for pressing our case,
expressing our concern about social evils.

In refusing to take our active resistance to the violence in the streets
does not mean that we concede the case.
The resistance continues,
and in a manner even more difficult to discount,
since violence begets violence,
but nonviolence interrupts the cycle of mutual destruction.

The New Testament images of apocalyptic end times
are not an invitation to engage in the battle,
but rather an assurance that Christian nonviolent witness is not in vain.

In the end, it will be disclosed to all
that this is the only witness that succeeds.
In the meantime, it is disclosed to us.

Today we welcome two new associates
to the community of Franciscan witness.

In presenting themselves, they make the affirmations
that place them among the community of witnesses
of both the Franciscan
and the biblical, New Testament tradition.

The Solemnity Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

November 22, 2015

Daniel 7:13-14	Son of Man coming on the clouds
Psalm 93:1-2, 5	The Lord is King, robed in majesty
Revelation 1:5-8	Ruler of kings of the earth
John 18:33-37	Pilate engages Jesus in conversation

"My kingdom is not of this world."
We all know Jesus' answer to Pilate's question.
We all know the question, but what about the answer?

"My kingdom is not of this world."
Where is it then?
Is it in some otherworldly place?
Is Jesus telling us that we should withdraw from the world
and live in seclusion, in a world of our own making?

Is this kingdom not of this world somewhere else?
And where would that be?

What is Jesus telling us here?
Is it that we should not be concerned about
the affairs of the world that we find ourselves in at the moment?
That what we know and experience is not important,
but that we should wait until we die,
and then we will be in the kingdom?

Jesus goes on to say that if his kingdom were in this world
then his followers would be busy at that very moment getting him free.
They would be fighting
to keep him from being handed over to the authorities
that are setting him up for Roman execution.

The word for followers here can mean soldiers, or guards.
These are the special forces that would be carrying out a plot
to spring him free.
That is what Jesus means, it would seem, by being of "this world."
It is not another place, but another system, another world view.
It is not "here," that is, in the Praetorium,
where Pilate is dispensing his judgment upon Jesus.

"Are you a king?" asks Pilate.
"You say I am a king," responds Jesus.

In this way, he elicits from Pilate
something like a profession of allegiance,
as if Pilate himself, the representative of Roman government,
accepts the authority of Jesus' kingdom.
Whatever that may mean.

In a sense, Jesus is saying
that his authority comes not from Rome,
but from the throne of God.
While Pilate thinks that he is judging Jesus,
in actuality Pilate is being judged,
and with him, the system that he represents.

What does Jesus depend upon, if it is not force?
He says it is "truth."
He stands upon the truth, and that will be his defense.

That seems a fragile protection against power.
And Pilate agrees.
In the line that follows, not included in the reading for today,
Pilate asks his famous question,
the question for which he will ever after be known:
"What is truth?"

Pilate believes in force more than truth.
His soldiers will shortly be directed
to take Jesus to the place of crucifixion.
Jesus believes in truth more than force.
His soldiers are not storming the place to release him.

Which brings our reflections to the events of the past week.
In response to the bombings in Paris, as well as Lebanon,
and the downing of a Russian plane over the Sinai,
there has been a strong reaction here in the States.

As we know, 31 governors, including that of our state,
have made known their opposition
to letting Syrian refugees into their states,
for fear that there will be terrorists hiding among them.

With the fear of refugees comes anti-Muslim rhetoric
that caricatures that religion,
and shortly following that come the caricatures of all religion.

In contrast, there has also been
a strong reaction against those positions,
and, often enough, caricatures of them as well.

Does the scripture have anything to tell about this?
Some have cited a passage from Luke's Gospel
to say that Jesus would support the use of guns.
My sense of Jesus' remarks to Pilate in today's gospel reading
is that he explicitly rejects the use of force.

Others would say that Jesus supports secluding oneself behind walls.
“My kingdom is not of this world."
And so you should keep your world away from mine.
But this neglects to notice how Jesus' action
took him to this place before Pilate,
how his challenge brought about this consequence.

My own suspicion is that the gospel doesn't reject
opposition to the unethical and unjust,
but that it does so on the stark ground
of claiming and standing upon the truth.

It is in prophetic witness that the Christian message,
publicly as well as privately, gets spoken.
It is not by way of force.

That said, about what Jesus’ kingdom is not,
what shall we say that it is?
This kingdom that draws on the authority of the throne of God?
That is the crucial question.

Here is my example.
I will never forget the last war between Israel and Lebanon,
between the Israeli Jews and the Muslims to their north.
Both areas were home to notable Christian settlements.
During the war, Christians on both sides provided
shelter, hospitalization and resources for the wounded and the displaced.
This, in my mind, stands for the openness to those in need
that Pope Francis has called a field hospital in a battlefield.

The risk is real; but it calls forth trust.
We stand upon the truth,
and that will be our defense.

Cycle B 2015

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