First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017

Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7	You have hidden your face from us
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16,18-19	Let us see your face and be saved
1 Corinthians 1:3-9	In him you were enriched in every way
Mark 13:33-37	You do not know when the time will come.

Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new Church Year.
I am always looking to the biblical text
that opens the scripture readings for the new year.
Last year it was the vision of peace in Isaiah 2
—the swords will be beaten into plowshares.

This year, however, we begin with a deep lament,
from another passage in the book of Isaiah,
this one the anonymous prophet we call Second-Isaiah.
With that, we join the grieving community of Judah,
returned from exile to a devastated land.
The temple is no more.
As we hear today, for them that means that the face of God is hidden.

This is a recurring lament in the Bible, but it is also part of our own experience.
We too are familiar with the hidden face of God.

In the hallways of Loras College,
one repeatedly encounters a posted warning that tells us,
"In case of an emergency, do not panic."
This is sound advice, if we are to negotiate the emergency successfully,
and come out safely on the other side.
And yet I find myself thinking every time I see that sign
—If we do not panic during an emergency, when DO we panic?
Emergencies would seem to be the appropriate time.

In today's world, I think we live
in a state of persistent, silently smoldering panic.
In times of great change and social upheaval,
the familiar is gone and the future cannot be discerned.
Nothing can be predicted.
Life is tenuous, and one grows weary of constantly having to improvise.
Nothing seems to be constant.

Yesterday, I learned of a Dubuquer who is putting his life in order,
materially and spiritually, under the firm conviction
that he (and the rest of us) will not survive the coming months
because of the looming nuclear war initiated with North Korea.

Another kind of panic can be seen in the rise of white supremicist movement.
The crisis of discovering a new model for masculinity shows itself in other ways.

We keep rehearsing the old patterns, but in an especially aggressive form,
from concealed carry gun laws to unnecessarily loud and large pickup trucks,
(often with what they call "rolling coal,"
emitting dark clouds of pollution on command).

The suicide rate among military veterans is another sign.
And then the #Metoo movement,
in making public widespread patterns of sexual intimidation and assault,
has raised the level of anxiety among bewildered males.

Panic of another kind can be seen among cultural conservatives.
There was nothing in their social formation
to prepare them, for instance, for gay marriage.
But it is larger than that.
For instance, tattoos—especially those that cover entire arms or necks.
They remember vividly when any kind of a tattoo was considered immoral,
for being a form of self-mutilation.
And this is not to mention tongue studs and nose rings,
encountered at the supermarket, adorning the clerk in the check out lane.

Then there is the clamoring panic of the climate-aware,
who are marking in turn each irreversible threshold we cross
on the way to an unsustainable planet.
They feel like the only person on a sinking ocean liner
who knows what is happening.
And they cannot manage to get anyone's attention
long enough to make a plan.

Some are politically panicked,
as they observe the constitutional protections against authoritarian rule
being systematically dismantled,
one by one, safeguard by safeguard.

Another kind of low-grade but corrosive panic assails those
who are concerned about social programs being discontinued,
including health care,
in pursuit of an ideology of personal freedom and self-reliance.
They fear for the loss of a sense of community and common good.

Others fear for the loss of civil discourse,
buried under a growing erosion of public courtesy.
Angry partisanship and personal attacks seem to keep growing,
along with a crudity of expression and language.
This was captured for me in something I heard recently,
when a person complained,
"These idiots that keep calling people names are just morons."
It can creep up on you unawares, if you are not watching,
and before long you are doing what you dislike in others.

And I cannot omit the simmering sense of panic

that is felt by those of us who are still churchgoers,
who do not ascribe to the caricature of Christians
that the various media favor,
whose friends and relatives are among the so-called "nones,"
meaning that the religion they identify with is "none."
Sometimes it seems that the world is moving in the other direction.
Or, in the language of the Scriptures,
that the face of God is hidden.

This list is long enough, but you know that it is only partial.
In fact, I may not even have touched on the thing
that you are most concerned about
in the world we navigate today, as best we can.
You can add it to the list.

The Old Testament prophet tells us that the face of God is hidden.
But what is the remedy?
When we turn to the Gospel, Mark has little direct consolation for us.
He pictures Jesus in his final words before the Passion of his final week,
and Jesus just keeps telling us to Watch! Be alert!
No answers here, but just the insistence
that we should keep alert for an answer.

Hearing these words, one cannot help but think of
the drama in the next chapter of Mark,
when the apostles fall asleep during the Gethsemane hour,
and Peter, later that evening, hears the cock crow.
Once more we are reminded, keep awake.

Mark's Gospel doesn't have a Christmas story, as do the others.
So we will be leaving Mark after next Sunday.
His parting words are for us to be on the watch.

And today, in this posture of watching and waiting,
we can turn from Mark to the Christmas story of Luke.
In his opening chapters he pictures the poor of Yahweh, the *Anawim*,
the villagers named Zachary and Elizabeth,
Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna.
They are characterized as devout and righteous.
They are singing canticles—Christmas carols, as it were, ahead of time.
And they are all marked by a common feature.
They are waiting.

What they are waiting for is given different names
—salvation from our enemies, the consolation of Israel,
the redemption of Jerusalem, the kingdom of God,
and in the angels' song, peace on earth.

But these faithful persons are all waiting upon events,
for they do not occupy the halls of power.

They cannot coerce events to their own advantage.
They can only wait, and hope, and trust that God
will move events toward justice, peace, and compassion.

And at the beginning of this Advent season we are with them.
Today we stand in our major helplessness
and look to God in trust.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40:1-5,9-11	A voice cries: "In the desert prepare a way"
Psalm 85:9-14	Justice and peace shall kiss
2 Peter 3:8-14	We await new heavens and a new earth
Mark 1:1-8	A voice cries in the desert: "Prepare a way"

The vision of Advent is coming clearer.
Last week we wallowed in the slough of lament.
This week we hear the first sounds of promise.

We are called to trust in God. However, we are doubtful.
We have heard so much about prayers and thoughts,
without any actions to accompany them, that we have become cynical.
Why should we trust in God? What good has come of that?

But this Sunday makes a case for that trust.
And here I might present evidence to support that case.

Exhibit A is given in the biblical history of God's people,
seen in today's scripture readings.
Today, Mark introduces John the Baptist with a quotation
from the prophets of the Old Testament.
He speaks of "A voice of one crying out in the desert:
'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

We recognize the scripture quote because it serves as the first reading for today.
The prophet Second-Isaiah announces the end of the Babylonian Exile,
and the beginning of the road home:
"In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!"

But you will have noticed that Mark is not quoting the prophet exactly.
Where Second-Isaiah spoke of a road in the desert,
providing a smooth avenue for those returning home,
Mark speaks of a Voice in the desert, calling for a new day.
One has the road in the desert; the other has the voice in the desert.

So did Mark misread the prophet?
Did he get it wrong?
No, we can be pretty sure Mark knows what he is doing.
However, he is not being literal; he making a larger point.

And that point has to do with the God they believe in,
and in whom they place their trust.

Second-Isaiah is saying,
Behold, something new is happening, something that has never happened before.
The people of Israel are given a second chance at building a homeland.
They are allowed to return and rebuild in the land they were taken from.
While the Persian king, Cyrus, has made the arrangements,
he is simply the instrument of our God.

Mark is picking up on the newness, the unexpectedness of it.

Something unprecedented is happening, says Mark.
It is announced by John the Baptist,
but it will mean the redirection of history.

Not to put too fine a point on it, it might be mentioned
that this kind of unexpected newness is a theme in the Bible.
The prophet's message of a return from exile
is described by him as a New Exodus, repeating the first settlement.
Where the first Exodus found a dry path through the waters of the Red Sea,
the New Exodus finds a well-watered route through the arid desert.

And the original Exodus itself is seen in the same light.
Although early accounts spoke of the land being dried by a constant hot wind,
the more dramatic picture is of the waters standing like a wall on either side.

The writer remind us of the separation of the waters
in the original creation story of Genesis.
But now a new people was being created out of a ragtag group of slaves.
It is a liberation story that was musically and correctly interpreted
by America slaves, in their spirituals: Go Down, Moses, set my people free.

The bible is making a paradoxical point:
Our God is capable of doing the unprecedented,
and we know this because he has done it before.
There is a precedent for the unprecedented.
And because he can pull possibility out of the apparently impossible,
we have learned to trust in God.

That is Exhibit A.
Exhibit B is found in our own personal history.

You have yours, I have mine.
But one memory that many of us have in common
is the unexpected event of the Second Vatican Council.
Most Catholics today do not remember it, being born too late.

But books remembering what happen then
can also stir awake memories for us of those exhilarating days.

Included among those memories is the hesitant beginning of the council.
It appeared to be set up as a rubber stamp,
and those in the Curia were prepared to lead the bishops to an early conclusion,
arranged so that nothing would change.
But the bishops, supported by John XXIII, did not allow that to happen.
Instead, a holy fire was unleashed, and it continues today.

There is a second event I think we can point to
as an example of the unexpected entering history
and changing it in ways that could not have been anticipated.

I am speaking of the election of Pope Francis.
There is no need to elaborate on the meaning of this move in church history.
But I will mention one:
After a sustained reaction against the accomplishments of the Council,
attempting to move authority back to the center

and stop it from moving out to the wider church,
Pope Francis has reasserted the vision of conciliarism.

Once again the flow is moving from the center to the provinces.
Other voices are being heard.
The unexpected moment of the council has now been supported
by an unexpected pope, so unlike any we have seen before.

If Exhibit B is drawn from our common faith history,
Exhibit C might be seen in the testimony of current events.

First of all, there is no shortage of causes for lament.
But that was last week's theme.
In the midst of all this, and not unrelated to it, we have unexpected promise.
And here I am only going to mention one example
—what TIME Magazine calls the "Silence Breakers."

In the past few weeks, especially noted under the hashtag MeToo,
but equally due to the courageous risk-taking of those
named as representing TIME's Person of the Year,

a deluge of voices have spoken up about the culture
of abuse and intimidation of women in our society.

It is probably too early in the game to declare this a watershed moment,
a decisive break in the culture.
This is especially true for those who have been victimized
and have become very wary.
And today it only includes only half of society, at least politically.

However, it very well be just that:
a watershed, a break in the assumptions that define our culture.
And as such it is breathtakingly unexpected.
After all, we are talking about a shift not only in our own American culture,
but something much vaster.

The patriarchal pattern, with its crude and cruel reinforcements
has been in place throughout most of the world for millenia.
If this is about to break, if a wedge is driven into the culture,
so that no longer will certain behaviors be accepted or excused,
that would be an amazing thing.

Once again, the entirely unexpected can happen, and suddenly.
People talk of tipping-points, and usually assign them to dire happenings.
But the same can be said of movements toward a better world.

True, there is no Scripture, no Church document,
to announce this to be the work of God.
However, what we are noticing today is that God works in this way,
and what has been lost sight of, what has been beyond hope,
suddenly comes into being.

Hope is like that. Hope is different from anticipation,
where you can see what is coming.

Hope delivers in unexpected ways.
Advent is the season of hope.

In the drama of Advent, we have moved beyond the time of lament
to the promise that is given by hope.
True, we have not heard that God has delivered us.
For now, we are simply told that we have a God who can deliver total surprises.
And we are invited, on that basis, to trust in God.
And to hope.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2017

Isaiah 61:1-2,10-11	The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Luke 1:46-50, 53-54	Selections from the Magnificat
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	Rejoice always
John 1:6-8, 19-28	"I am the voice crying out in the desert"

The Advent drama continues to unfold.
We are past the lament, and the hint of hope of last week.
And we come to the seekers, and the search.

It begins with John the Baptist.
Delegates from Jerusalem appear with questions.
Tell us who you are, that we may answer to those who sent us.
John's answer is precise and complete.
But it might be summed up in one sentence:
You are looking in the wrong place.

Yes, the time is ripe, but they are looking in the wrong place.
Out of our own malaise, we also know about looking in the wrong places.
In the unsettling nature of the times in which we live,
we see no shortage of seekers and searches,
looking in all the wrong places.

Much of our effort is devoted to supporting our sense of self.
We think that if we focus on the self, we may heal it.
There is some truth to that.

But it can become the full focus, and we begin to witness
another version of the American devotion to the absolute **Self**.
In a sophisticated form, it can have a healthful practice like Yoga
take the place that religion used to have in one's life.

In more crude forms is comes out in assertions like,
"Ain't nobody gonna tell me what to do."
And yet this can only take us so far, before it no longer fills the emptiness.
Not the right place to look.

There are others.
Upon reading of a convenience store or a branch office of a bank being robbed,
who doesn't think about **gambling**, and debts getting out of hand?
The elusive promise is that one more try will get you the big prize
that will finally make you rich and solve all your problems.
But as a desperate remedy for life's ills, it fails.
Not the right place to look, either.

Nor are **drugs** the answer some hope for.
The gap-toothed meth user has become a cliché, but this is truly a tragedy.
Opiates are destroying communities.

And more recently, the artificial opioid, Fentanyl, is creating havoc in many lives.
Beyond the addiction itself, is the desperate hope to find the key
that will make our lives full and glorious.
But the early promise leads into later destruction.
This is not the right place to look, either, it appears.

Some people turn to owning **guns**.
Perhaps it is out of a sense of lost status or privilege, viewed as a loss of respect.
Perhaps it is the realization that one's abilities or skills are no longer valued.
But amassing guns as a bulwark against social change,
and the confusion that it brings to some, doesn't seem to work.

The clue that a deep need is being expressed, but not finding a solution here,
is found in the need for ever more guns.
Oblivious to what is obvious to everyone else, they are blind to the simple fact
that adding guns to a volatile situation will not make it safer.
This also is not looking in the right place.

Our faith is that these are substitutes for the only real answer to life's problems,
the only answer that reaches the level we can call ultimate reality.

But is this also just more hype?
It was Karl Marx who told us that religion itself was an opiate.
It should be pointed out that he did not think that was entirely negative.
He felt that in a situation in which change was not possible,
a drug that eases the pain might be the best we can do.

But, he felt, we should always realize that there is something we can do.
Action was his motto, his mantra.

But is his characterization of faith a caricature? Believers think so.
Can a case be made? Faith experience would argue the matter.
In the call to belief we are not being lured into a false Never-never-land
(although we might concede that some dwell there).

Rather, we are called to a lifetime of honest self-examination.
In a relationship with God, we are invited to consider deeply our real selves.
Rather that escaping into a fantasy realm,
we are invited to pay attention to who we are, where we are,
and what that means.

Three thoughts come to mind concerning this:

First, in a relationship with God, I find out the difference
between myself and the ultimate reality.
God is the Creator. I am a creature. This is an important distinction.
It is also helpful realism, to learn that I am not the center of the universe,
that I have limits.

No more a child, I realize that the sun does not revolve around me.

My self-help striving to be the perfect being is bound to be frustrated,
and knowing that goes a good way toward not getting lost
in a maze of blocked pathways.

Second, I nevertheless am not worthless, even though I am a mere creature.
I am loved by God. I am not valueless.
God who made me, loves me, warts and all.
I, the real me, have value, the very one who is not the center of the universe.
It is the unlovely me that is loved.
However, I am still encouraged to clean up my act.
It is the decent thing to do,
once I realize that I have a place in the scheme of things.

Third, it doesn't end here. I do not simply bask in my new sense of self-worth.
All of this is also a call to action.
I am asked to assist others in their own needs.

And so, when John the Baptist was interrogated by those looking for the Messiah,
he did not only announce that they were looking in the wrong places.
He did insist that he was not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet.
But he added a positive note onto the negatives:
He was the Voice, he said.
The Word has became flesh, but the Word needs a Voice,
and he was the voice.
And in that sense, we too are the voices for the Word.

And here we come to appreciate more completely
the word of the Isaiah prophet, who announced in the first reading,

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to heal the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to announce a year of favor from the LORD
and a day of vindication by our God.

Because of Luke's story,
we associate this with Jesus in the Nazareth Synagogue, reading from the scroll.
This can be seen as the fullness of the meaning.

But in the first place,
the prophet was probably originally referring to his own call.
This would be the origin of the meaning.

But it is the call of his people, the children of Israel, returned to their land,
faced with the prospects of rebuilding and recommitting themselves
to the historic task given them by their God.

It is the call of his people,
and it is our own call, as well.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2017

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16	The promise to David
Psalm 89:2-5, 27, 29	A covenant with David
Romans 16:25-27	Paul's last word
Luke 1:26-38	The Annunciation

We have voiced our laments;
we have received the assurances that our God is capable of undreamt-of surprises.
And we have observed the seekers, searching in all the wrong places.
And now the drama of Advent comes to a tipping point, securing the future.

The liturgy takes as its theme the promise of David, first given and now fulfilled.
It concerns major turning points in the history of God's encounter with his people.
Not only the founding of the royal family of David,
but also the beginning of the temple in Jerusalem.

And, of course, the Annunciation,
the beginning of the mystery we celebrate in this season
—the Incarnation of the Word made Flesh.

And we might notice today how those major moments of transition are negotiated.
They are quite unlike the statement of Paul, in today's second reading.
His final statement in the letter to the Romans is a long sentence,
winding through byways and subordinate clauses, to arrive at the final blessing.

In contrast, the other readings are conversations, not declarations.
The first involves David and the prophet Nathan.
The second shows the angel Gabriel in dialogue with Mary of Nazareth.

How do the two conversations compare?
First of all, they have much in common.
A human interacts with an agent of God
—a prophet in the case of David; an angel for Mary.
In both cases, at stake is a momentous change in the course of events.
These are significant conversations.
And in each case, God's role is to certify a new beginning in the story of his people.

In each case, God's word is final and authoritative.
It is only the human that hesitates or misspeaks.
Nathan is a human agent; Gabriel is not.
On the other hand, Mary is the human party with the questions.
In both cases, something in the exchange serves to reinforce
the momentous decision being taken.

In the case of Nathan, it is the drama of a reversal in the decision.
By going one way and then backing up to reverse direction,
the point is unforgettably made.

In the case of Mary,
it is the deliberate pondering that led to her definitive "Yes."
In both cases, the two conversations make a point
of reinforcing the point that is made, because such reassurance is needed,

given the momentous change that is at issue.

And so we see that there are also differences between the two conversations.
They are initiated differently.
With David it begins on the human side,
but with Mary it is God who opens the discussion.

Furthermore, the agent of God in David's case
—the prophet Nathan—is an unreliable spokesman.
After he gives his assurance to the king, God has to correct him,
and send him back with the amended message.

In the case of Gabriel, there is no doubt
about the angel's authentic representation of God.
So that is not part of the conversation pattern.
Instead, we dwell on the hesitancy and pondering of Mary.
But in each case, God's word is final and authoritative.
It is the human that hesitates or misspeaks.

And there is another large difference.
In the Samuel reading, the human party
is the premier Alpha Male in the Bible—King David.
He is in complete control of events.

Even Moses was hesitant in taking the role assigned him.
And Abraham was a sojourner hoping at best for a fulfillment in the future.
Not so David, he shaped the world to his interests.

Meanwhile, in Luke's story, the absence of men is part of the point.
"I know not man," is Mary's line as it is traditionally rendered.
The conversation takes place in the privacy of her room,
rather than in the public square.

And God, as noted, initiatives the exchange;
it is not done as David does, the man in control.

In Luke's story of Mary, God is the maker of history,
the one who directs the course of events.
It is the creator God, who makes new things
and makes things new.

And Mary concurs.
Gabriel says "Hail Mary."
And at last Mary says "Yes," and this "Yes" is momentous.

Does Mary know that her "Yes" marks a tipping moment in history?
Does she realize that from this time forward
the planet will mark all time, mark the calendar,
as occurring either before or after this event? This assent of hers?

There is a reason for Ave Maria among the Christmas songs on the radio.
The Hail Mary is an Advent prayer, whether we realize it or not.
And with that prayer, we enter into the drama.

In the first part, we stand in the shoes of Gabriel, greeting Mary:
"Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you."

Mary's response was silence, pondering what the greeting meant.
Perhaps she also ponders what we mean when we use those words.

In the next moment, we adopt the role of Elizabeth greeting Mary:
"Blessed are you among women, Blessed is the fruit of your womb."
Mary's response this time is the Magnificat, with its unnerving reversals.
"He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty."

The last part of this Advent prayer, the Hail Mary, finds us asking a favor—
"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners
now and at the hour of our death."

We call upon Mary
to help us make our own affirmation, in her manner,
responding to the moment that presents itself.
Do we know whether our own assent will change the course of subsequent history?
Of course it will.

Perhaps the calendar will not be dated from that time on,
but that Yes will make a difference that will last
and change what comes after.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 31, 2017

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14	Advice on respecting parents
Psalm 128:1-5	The Family of the Pious Man
Colossians 3:12-21	Wives, Husbands, Children, Fathers
Luke 2:22-40	Presentation and Purification

The Feast today has a history.
Here's what I have been able to determine, quoting online sources:

> Because of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt,
> a feast for the Holy Family has been observed by the Copts from early times.
> In Western Christianity, however, a cult of veneration for the Holy Family
> as a group, rather than as individuals,
> did not arise until the 17th century.
>
> Veneration of the Holy Family was formally begun in the 17th century
> by Saint François de Laval, the first bishop of New France,
> who founded a Confraternity.
>
> It was not officially recognized until the feast day was formally instituted
> in 1921 under Pope Benedict XV.
> Originally celebrated on the Sunday after Epiphany (then January 6),
> the Feast of the Holy Family was moved
> to the Sunday after Christmas in 1969,
> bringing it within the Christmas season.
>
> The primary purpose of this feast
> is to present the Holy Family as a model for Christian families.

With that, we can say that it represents the ideal family,
which happens in this case to be a nuclear family.
This is despite the situation in which a family is the entire village.

And this is also the testimony of Mark 6,
which mentions brothers of Jesus named James, Joses, Judas, and Simon,
along with unnamed sisters.
In this first Gospel, Mary is mentioned, but not Joseph.

The feast is a suitable reflection during the Christmas season,
as the light begins to return to the earth
in the way of longer days and shorter nights.
Yet there is a darkness in the season as well.

There is a darkness in the picture of the happy family.
It is not all sweetness and light.

We have just heard reference to the flight of the family to Egypt,
refugees in response to an attempt on their child.

And we also have Luke's account of the census and the journey to Bethlehem
under adverse conditions, with no place to alight and settle in the town.
And just days ago we honored the slaughter of the Holy Innocents,
the genocide of Bethlehem, also part of the Christmas season.

Do we only think about the risk to Jesus when we hear this story?
Or do we also give a passing notice—a moment of dismay—
for the innocent boys themselves, destroyed through no cause of their own.
As well as their distraught parents.

And I sometimes wonder about Luke, and what has happened in his life.
There are lost children in his gospel.

We all know the story about the Prodigal Son, and the father who seeks him.
Often we are so caught up in discerning the moral of the story
that we do not pause to recognize the dismay of the father,
who concedes to his son's wishes
even while believing he has lost him for good, for the rest of his life.

And in Luke's Christmas stories, there is that one story out of sync with the rest,
the one that always puzzles one
—the story of the 12 year old Jesus,
staying behind in the temple after the feast.

And who has not experienced the raw fear of the couple
who discover that their son is not with them in the caravan returning to Nazareth.
And so they retrace their steps back to the city to look for him.
This is Luke's story, found only in his Gospel, just as is the Prodigal son.

And Simeon, who warns Mary
that her new status as a parent is to be a mixed blessing.
Beyond the pride is the fear and the danger.

Ideal on the surface, this Holy Family is skating across an abyss of sorts,
lurking just below the surface.
While the ideal picture is important, it is not the full reality.

I suspect that the real value of this feast is not
what the moralists generally represent as its purpose,
whether that be to foster vocations,
or simply to encourage a pious family life.
These reasons can be found online, in earnest-sounding websites.

I suspect that the more basic, and therefore authentic, value of this feast
is to recognize the risk and potential terror
that is part of willingly-adopted responsibility of raising a family.

Nothing is automatic. Everything is calculated risk,
skating across thin ice in a spirit of trust.

For my money, minimal as it is,
the stories of the Holy Family find us where we are,
not where we imagine ourselves someday to be.
They help us understand how life is to be lived
in faith, hope, and unconditional love.

The Octave Day of Christmas

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God
January 1, 2018

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 We are adopted children
Luke 2:16-21 The Shepherds at the stable

The Feast consecrates the New Year.
Consecration to Mary is a promise to succeed in the New Year.
Blessing is the theme of the day.
The blessing of Aaron begins the year.
And the psalm echoes it: *May God bless us; may he let his face shine upon us*.

Meanwhile the shepherds glorify and praise God.
A returned blessing of sorts.
But also a thanksgiving for the blessing given.

Meanwhile, we are one week into the 12 days of Christmas.
Halfway to the traditional date of the Epiphany.

However, by another method of reckoning,
the "Twelve Days of Christmas" are now BEFORE Christmas, not after.
They are shopping days.
Perhaps this is inspired by the exaggerated gift-giving in the song
—how many swans-a-swimming and lords-a-leaping does it all add up to?

Even Loras College had a donation promotion *before* Christmas,
called "The 12 Days of Christmas."
I found myself thinking that it clearly is no longer a college run by priests,
who would have insisted on the traditional 12 days of the liturgical calendar.

This year's Epiphany is on the 7th, rather than the traditional 6th.
In the past it has come earlier; this year it is later.
We are moving major feasts to the nearest weekend.
That is, we are avoiding the workweek.
We are adjusting feasts to the rhythm of the business calendar.

A theme, then, that is worth reflecting upon
is the so-called "commercialization of Christmas"
—which actually is the commercialization of everything.
It pervades out lives.
However, it is best seen—most clearly seen—in the Christmas season.

A recent headline in the *New York Times* reads:
"Christmas May Be Over, but Holiday Shopping Is Not."

There is some irony here.
On television, and in the rest of the media,
Christmas is equivalent to Christmas shopping.
Once the gifts are delivered (and the ballgames finished), the holiday is over.
Now we learn from the *Times* that even so, the shopping continues,
and so the Christmas season, though over, still continues.
Maybe we will have 12 days of Christmas AFTER the feast once again.

A recent article claimed neoliberalism—that elusive but omnipresent term—
has redefined us and our self-understanding in terms of capitalism.
We know who we are because we shop.

Marketing is the commercial face of business.
We generally take the claims of marketing with a grain of salt.
We do not expect them to be literally true.
That is, we do not expect them to be true. Period.
Marketing is expected to lie to us, and the phrase is "buyer beware."
We excuse this unfortunate trait in marketing because it is so basic to our lives,
and thus we make adjustments.

Today, critics no longer write movie reviews.
Instead we get sales reports.
A good movie is the one that sells a lot of tickets.
That is how we know it is good; it is the operative criterion of value.

In the corporate world *competition* is king.
It involves winners and losers.
And the winners are the ones who have a lot of money.
That is the only proof necessary to be called a success in the game of life.

We are successful when we adopt this model of the world
as the program of our lives, as the thing that makes us real.
We are real when we understand we are consumers
and that describes the core of our very being.

And I haven't even mentioned the complete conquest
this model of humanity has achieved in our national politics.

So am I simply being grumpy? Did I have a bad week?
Why not simply say "Happy New Year," and let it be?

No, I have not had an unhappy week.
I am simply reminding us that this feast day of Mary, Mother of God,
calls us to a different set of criteria for being full and successful human beings.
We already know that, of course.
But we live immersed in an alternative world of values,
and might be inclined to forget it.

It strikes me that life lived according to religious vows,

privileging a sense of community,
devoted to caring for those unequipped to care for themselves,
    is a life that contradicts this world we live in.

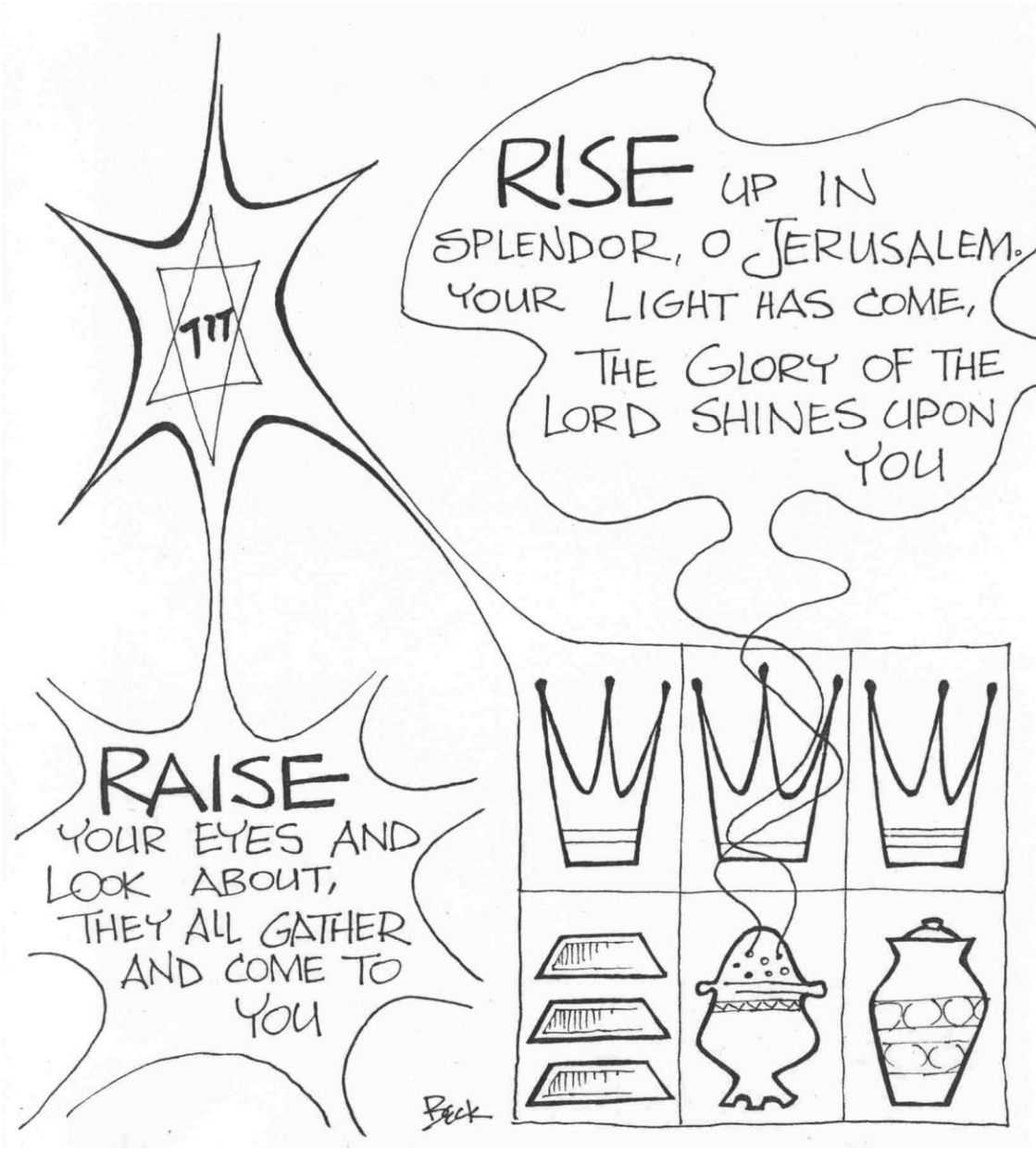
I imagine the movers and shakers of the world
think of this way of life as quaint. Charming.
    And yet it somehow nags at them
    that it seems to work for those who believe it.

I think that this is part of the witness-value of faith life.
    In simply being true to the vision that is given us,
    we raise questions, plant doubts, without making a program of it.

There is a fullness to be experienced in life
that doesn't involve filling it with stuff—
    things that look more like clutter than wealth,
    when the light changes a bit, and we view them in that new light.

The most powerful witness, I think, is given simply by being joyful.
Joy is not a common thing in our corporate world.
Or at least it isn't prominently featured.
And so when it is observed among those who place their trust in God,
in the context of God's people,
    it triggers a certain lost memory, a kind of yearning.
    Or so I think.

Today we begin the year as believers, members of a community of believers.
We welcome the blessing of Aaron, and the joyful promise of the shepherds.
    And like Mary, we ponder these things in our hearts.


RISE UP IN SPLENDOR, O JERUSALEM. YOUR LIGHT HAS COME, THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHINES UPON YOU
RAISE YOUR EYES AND LOOK ABOUT, THEY ALL GATHER AND COME TO YOU
BECK

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 7, 2018

Isaiah 60:1-6	Rise up, Jerusalem, your light has come!
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 11-13	The kings shall offer gifts.
Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6	The mystery made known to the Gentiles
Matthew 2:1-12	The Magi come to Bethlehem

Today the Magi arrive at the stable in all of the Nativity scenes.
It has taken them some time to get here.

As the poet T.S. Eliot imagines them complaining:

> 'A cold coming we had of it,
> Just the worst time of the year
> For a journey, and such a long journey:
> The ways deep and the weather sharp,
> The very dead of winter.'

The Magi come, and give homage. And then they go.

And here something strange happens.
> "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
> they departed for their country by another way."

My friend Ben Viviano, OP, Matthew scholar,
has noted that there is something amiss here.
> God, in a dream, is instructing the Magi to disregard
> the conditions under which they are allowed to visit
> the land, and the town of Bethlehem.

> "When you have found him, bring me word," they were told.
> Now God was telling them otherwise.

While we have been focussing on the scene in the foreground,
as the Magi come with their gifts
and honor the child Jesus as the new Messiah,
> we are conscious that in the background there is the threatening presence
> of Herod the Great, King of Judea.

We will shortly see those warning signs come to reality,
when the children of Bethlehem are put under the sword,
> partly due to the silent departure of the Magi,
> leaving the king without providing more precise information.

In medieval pantomime and French opera,
Herod has entered the tradition as a caricature,
representing the gross abuse of authority.
> He was jealous of rivals, self-preoccupied, loved flattery

and demanded elaborate praise from this subordinates.

Extremely thin-skinned, he easily took offense
at any who questioned his importance.
He punished disloyalty severely,
and many he fired from their positions by having them killed.
He had at least three wives.
One of whom he had executed.

While much of the portrait of Herod is exaggerated,
there remains a firm foundation of fact that underlies the legends.

King Herod is in the background of the Epiphany readings in general.
The Gospel story of the Magi is intentionally evocative of King Solomon,
the model of a wise king.
And Herod is set up as the opposite.

The Queen of Sheba brought gifts of gold and spices to Solomon,
and gained from his wisdom.
The Magi similarly bring gifts, offer homage,
and learn from the experience of visiting the Messiah.
The wise men gain wisdom.

While we usually do not give too much attention to the response psalms,
the one chosen for today, Psalm 72,
is very much a part of the set of readings.
The psalm is a hymn of praise to the ideal king,
as represented especially by the model of Solomon.

The psalm lies in the background of the Magi story, as intended by Matthew.

The word "homage," borrowed from the psalm,
appears three times in the Magi story.
Those from Arabia and Sheba shall bring tribute, and offer homage.

And the qualities of the wise king are attributed
to the one they come to visit, the young Messiah.
He is endowed with judgment and justice.
He shall govern the people and the afflicted ones with that justice.
He shall rescue the poor, have pity on the lowly.
And the lives of the poor he shall save.
He shall save the children of the poor and crush the oppressor.

But of course, when we hear that he shall save the children
and crush the oppressor, we know that this is not Herod.
Matthew, who will shortly tell of the fate of the innocents of Bethlehem,
is saying that Herod is not the wise king the psalm envisions.
And so the Magi honor the true king at Bethlehem,
and not the false king in Jerusalem.

And so that brings us back to the departure of the Magi.
"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they departed for their country by another way."

What is happening here?
The best I can do to describe it is to borrow words I've used elsewhere:

"We are accustomed to this story,
so nothing particularly remarkable seems at play here.

But who is this God, advising them to sneak out by the back route?
Who is this God who does not take charge?
This is not the God of the establishment, the God of the empire.

That God, who takes control of events and adjusts them to fit his program,
is glimpsed in the slaughter of the Bethlehem innocents.
There we see the take-charge approach that characterizes
the God who is in control.
This shows us the God of the empire
—or, in this case, the emperor's surrogate, Herod.

No, the God who advises the Magi in a dream is another God entirely,
whom we recognize as the God of the gypsies, if you will,
who enables them to skirt authority,
avoid direct confrontation with power figures,
and live life in the corners, if not the shadows.

The … entire infancy account adopts this social outlook
and colors the subsequent narrative.
The dreams of Joseph, the flight and the delayed return,
all contribute to the picture of a peasant people
required by circumstances to keep watch for those in power
and work around them, staying out of their way."
—Beck, *Banished Messiah*, 105-6

The feast of the Epiphany shows the presence of God
in the child Jesus at Bethlehem.
His authority is not that of the God of Herod,
who crushes others to achieve his goals.

The revelation, the "epiphany," if you will,
is that our God is not like the harsh deity of the empire.
Our God is God of the oppressed, the afflicted, the poor and lowly.
This God stands with them.
All other gods are false.

The Magi have come and gone.
What they have learned they will take to the wider world when they return to it.

But the lesson of the Wise Men will not be readily welcomed there.
That lesson is ours to carry forward in their name.

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

January 14, 2018

I Samuel 3:3-10, 19	Call of young Samuel
Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-10	Here I am, Lord
1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20	The body is not for immorality
John 1:35-42 1	John sends two to Jesus

At the beginning of the Church Year we are invited to reflect
on why we have followed this far the star that guides us.
The scripture readings are about calls and recalls, if you will.
These weeks we have something like a mini-seminar
on responding to the call from God.

This morning we hear the story of Samuel, called as a young man.
It keeps repeating.
In stories in the oral tradition, repetition is common, usually three times.
Like most of the jokes we hear, which are also in the oral tradition.

This triple repetition makes sense.
The first time we hear something happening, and that's all.
But the second time it happens, we understand this is a series.
The third time uses the expectation set up by the series to do a change on it.
Something new happens.

Samuel goes to Eli one time, two times, and on the third Eli has an idea.
Answer: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."
And so there is even a fourth time! and Samuel gets it right.

What is the story, with its repetitions, teaching?
Not Samuel's fidelity to God, since he doesn't know it is God calling him.
Perhaps a better idea is that God is persistent in seeking Samuel,
and therefore, us. He doesn't give up easily.

In the Gospel, John the Baptist is sending Andrew and his friend to Jesus.
Here too we have a series, though not all of it today.

There are four days recounted in the first chapter of John's Gospel.
On the first day, John is asked questions by the authorities,
and he takes the opportunity to point out that he is only the voice,
not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet.

The second day, he points out Jesus
and announces in general to anyone within earshot
that this Jesus is the Lamb of God.

Today we hear what happened on the third day.
John makes the same call, but for the benefit and Andrew and his friend.

So what is the lesson here? Following the sequence of days,

we might say that the gospel is reinforcing the Baptist's message
that he is only the Voice. The Messiah is over there.

So we have two stories of people being called.
Why are they paired together in the liturgy?
What do they have in common?

Well, in both cases there is a second moment,
one in which the followers are set straight, given a new direction.
Eli sends Samuel to his destiny.

The Baptist sends Andrew, and consequently Peter, to Jesus.
Both need a second try.
Sometimes we do not get it right the first time around.

I have priest friends who were headed in another direction first
—Doug Wathier first went into medicine, then decided to enter the seminary.
Tom Zinkula went into law, then changed direction and became a priest,
then pastor at the Holy Spirit parishes, and now bishop of Davenport.

But sometimes it goes in the other direction, from religion to elsewhere.
We know religious who have left to go in another direction.
We have them in our families.
A wonderful thing is that they generally stay friends
with the communities of which they were a part. Not always, but often.

With priests it isn't always so simple. The are different reasons.
Many I know were religion and biblical scholars,
who say they left in order to continue their work without hindrance
—John Dominic Crossan and James Carroll come to mind.
They have continued to do excellent work, but not exactly the conventional.

Another for me is Sean Freyne, a priest and New Testament scholar
from the seminary faculty in Maynooth, Ireland,
whom I met in summer school in Notre Dame.
He encouraged me to get into Scripture work,
and wrote a letter to the Archbishop in support of that.

Later, he left the priesthood, but continued important biblical work,
and was eventually hired to revive the theology program at Trinity College in Dublin.
Which he did.

At one time, it was easier for priests to quit.
After the Council Pope Paul VI set up structures to accomplish that.
However, Pope John Paul II revoked them, as he did so many things.

As a result of the move back and forth, one comes to understand
that the permanency of the priesthood is not a doctrinal position,
but a matter of discipline or practice.

For John Paul, it would seem, the thought that it might be a cause of suffering
did not seem to be a persuasive argument.
After all, he was of the school of thought that understood suffering
to be a part of discipleship, and should be embraced.
An important argument in the appeal for his saintly canonization,
was his practice of physical disciplines, such as flagellation.

And then there is that other area fraught with conflict—Catholics getting a divorce.
We all know different situations, even in our families.
In my own, a couple, each previously married, with kids, and divorced
have found each other after a disastrous experience with marriage.
Strong Catholics, they are in a quandary, a bind.

They of course ask me, but I have no certain answers.
Of course, I understand the argument is that if you relax the law here,
where do you stop? Isn't this a slippery slope?
At the same time, where does compassion enter the picture?

And unlike with the priesthood, divorce is mentioned in scripture.
Although it is interesting that other Christian churches,
who put much more emphasis on scripture, like the Lutherans,
also find room for divorce under certain circumstances.

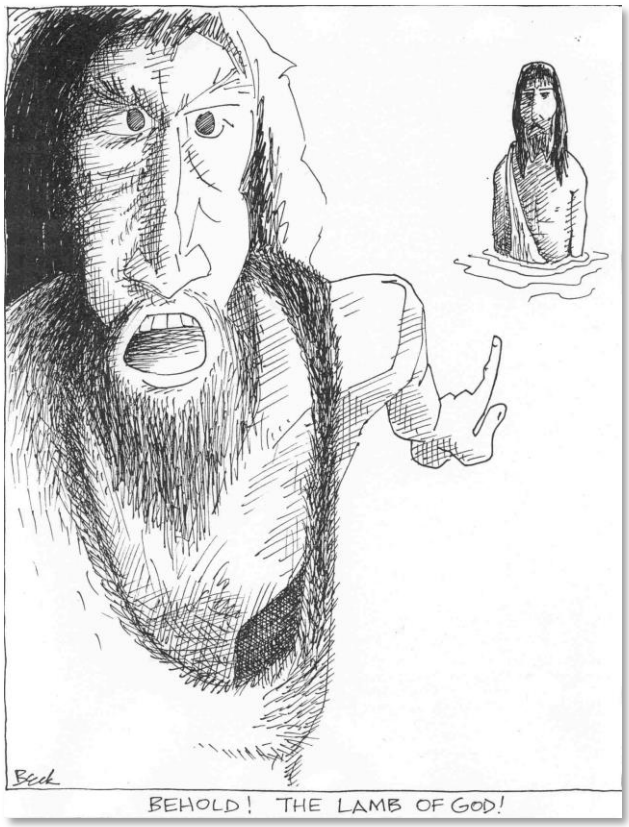
We also know that at the top levels of the church today this is a polarizing question.
P. Francis has disturbed many traditionalists with his document, *Amoris Laetitia.*
There he proposes to relax, in some cases, the strict ruling
on banning divorced and remarried couples from receiving communion.

Prominent conservative Vatican voices have publicly accused the pope of heresy.
Ross Douthat, *NYT* columnist, and convert to Catholicism,
has been unapologetic in making that accusation.
They feel that the papal emphasis on mercy
abandons a consistent position on the truth.
But again, where does compassion enter the picture?

Do I have the ultimate answer to all this? No.

But I ask myself,
Does God know that we sometimes make the wrong choice first?
I do know that God knows us better than we do ourselves.

And I would venture to say that the readings today tell us
that God well knows we do not always choose best the first time around.
And sometimes the right choice at one time
is not the right choice later on.


Beck
BEHOLD! THE LAMB OF GOD!

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 21, 2018

Jonah 3:1-5,10	Jonah goes to Nineveh
Psalm 25:4-9	Teach my your ways, Lord
1 Corinthians 7:28-31	Time is running out
Mark 1:14-20	The Call of Four Disciples

Why do we renew vows?
Some renew marriage vows. Others renew community vows.
And we are known to renew baptismal vows at the beginning of the year.
What is wrong? Are we fickle? Do we wander?
Or is it something more than that?

Today's readings continue the reflections of last week on the experience of being called.
But they look deeper, and see how the call intensifies, changes.
In both the case of Jonah and Peter, the call is repeated.
We do not hear that today, but that is what underlies the stories we do hear.

For Jonah, this is the second time he has been called.
We are in chapter three.
Two chapters earlier, at the very beginning of the book,
he first heard the call, in the same words as today's reading:
"Set out for the great city of Nineveh."
But Jonah was no fan of Nineveh,
whom he considered the great enemy of his people.
Nineveh was in the east, but Jonah went down to the shore of the Mediterranean,
boarded a ship and went west.

We know the story: they encountered a storm,
Jonah identified himself as the problem,
and he was thrown overboard to save the ship.

But God was not done.
He arranged for transportation—the only kind available was a large fish—
and he returned Jonah to the place he began,
and he issued the call again, as we just heard.

Even then, Jonah was reluctant.
He did his job, but perfunctorily.
And Nineveh repented enthusiastically, to Jonah's considerable disgust.

The book of Jonah is comic fiction.
It is satire, making fun of the isolationist Judeans
in the somewhat paranoid time after the exile,
when they feared for the loss of their place and identity.
But it shows God taking the prophet places where he does not want to go,
but God does.

In the Gospel reading from Mark, we hear about the call of the four disciples.
But the story of Jonah reminds us that there is more than this.
In Mark's account, the call of Peter is only beginning.

There is more. Halfway through the story, at the end of the Galilean mission,

as they are about to turn toward Jerusalem and the confrontation there,
Jesus asks his disciples what people say about him, and who do they think he is.
Peter responds with: You are the Messiah.

But then Jesus speaks of going to Jerusalem,
and suffering and dying—all things not included
in the traditional expectation of the conquering Messiah.
Peter objects, and argues with Jesus.

At that time, the call of Peter is renegotiated.
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me."

This is quite different from the call by the lake.
Then it was, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men."
And they abandoned their nets and followed him.
Then there was no mention of a cross.
Nothing about denying yourself.

All of this takes on even more weight when we remember
that Peter will be the one standing in the high priest's courtyard
when Jesus is taking up the cross.
Peter denies, but gets it wrong.

Peter's discovery is that the call keeps going.
What happened by the lake was just the beginning.
The first commitment leads to the next.

I am reminded of the writing of Michael Crosby,
in his book, *The Spirituality of the Beatitudes*,
where he tells of he the hermeneutic circle of Jon Sobrino.
Crosby calls it "the circle of meaning."

It begins with an experience that jars me out of my accustomed worldview.
Maybe it is doing a service trip, that takes me
to a place in which poverty overwhelms people.
Maybe it takes me to another culture that operates on different assumptions
than those to which I am accustomed.
In any case, it jars me.

There is a story going viral this week.
Someone who spent some time in the Peace Corps in Africa
says Trump is right about other cultures.

Her complaint was that the culture she encountered
was not up to American biblical standards.
She was deeply repelled.
It becomes apparent that she experienced the shock,
but never was able to leave the cocoon of her childhood certainties.

At Loras, we are just concluding the J-Term, or January term.
It is a time when we do different projects,
and if possible, take people abroad to other cultures.

They tend to have their own version of this experience.

Some embrace the experience,
and some have even married people they met at that time.
Others, however, never leave home in their minds,
and never experience the culture they are visiting.

We also have service trips that take us to impoverished parts of our country,
where our students do good work.
And are often radicalized, in their own way.
When I discover a world of pain right here among my neighbors, I am appalled.
Why did I not know this?

That leads to my questioning everything that I thought was the case.
In extreme cases, I begin to think that everything I was taught was lies.

The next step, in the circle of faith experience, is to return to the origins.
As Crosby describes it:
"Rejecting this former concept of God, I return to the scriptures
to search for similar experiences others have had.
This reveals to me a new understanding of God…"

Having visited the pockets of poverty and neglect, in this country or elsewhere,
I am shocked, and rebel against the lies fed me during my upbringing,
and, at this moment, can go in different directions.

Some leave and return after a period of time.
Some leave and never return.
Some look more deeply into the new experience,
and the faith that prompted them to risk mission in the first place,
and discover something unexpected.

The next step, in the circle of faith experience, is to return to the origins.
As Crosby describes it:
"Rejecting this former concept of God,
I return to the scriptures to search for similar experiences others have had.
This reveals to me a new understanding of God…"

In terms of the Bible, we grow up on bible stories.
And later, shocked into new awareness, we return to the Gospels
and discover a basic perspective that was there all along,
and in fact was at the heart of the message,
but we had missed it in our formative years.
And now we think, "So *this* is what it is all about."

And then the circle begins again.

There are many reasons people leave the church,
and so many of these cannot be glossed over. They are real.
The lack of full recognition of women in the church;
the seeming failure to address the problems of contemporary life.
And, of course, the crisis of clerical sex abuse.

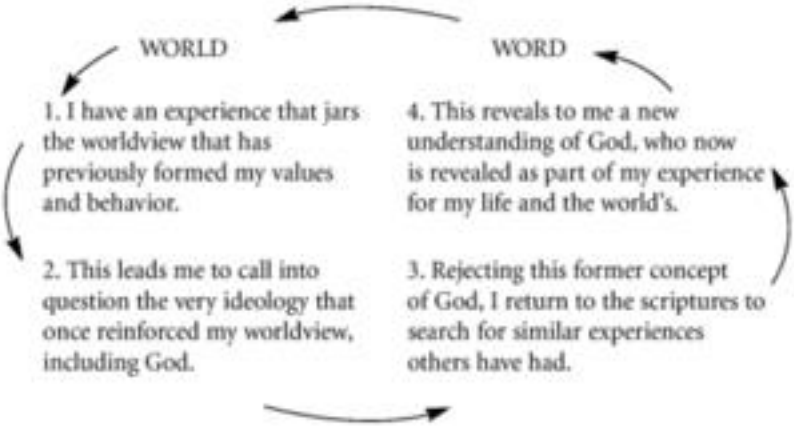
The Pope's mixed experience in Chile this past week is a current example.
He both wept with the victims of sex abuse,
and defended the bishop accused of defending a pedophile,

offending the victims.

People turn away.
But there are also people who stay, but on new terms.
The distress they encounter is not reason to depart,
but a discovery of the real reason for the faith community.
and their own reason for continuing in it.

—From Michael Crosby, *The Spirituality of the Beatitudes*, 17.

The hermeneutic or method that has best enabled me to bring the scriptures to bear on the existential questions of my life and world—and which also faithfully reflects the approach Matthew seems to have used with his questioning community—is based on that model proffered by Juan Luis Segundo in his book *The Liberation of Theology*.[45] I find in his "hermeneutic circle" (or the "circle of meaning" or "faith cycle") an approach that makes sense to me about my world and God's word. At the same time I have discovered that each of us, in our own ways, must go through this hermeneutic circle if the scriptures are to be translated in our lives by our profession and practice:



Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20	God will raise up a prophet
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9	If today you hear his voice…
1 Corinthians 7:32-35	Paul on Marriage in the Meantime
Mark 1:21-28	A Synagogue in Capernaum

Each of the Gospels chooses a different starting point
for the story of Jesus' public life and ministry.
For Matthew, it is the Sermon on the Mount.
For Luke it is the reading of the Isaiah scroll in the Nazareth Synagogue.
For Mark, it is this story we just heard,
about the exorcism of an unclean spirit in the Capernaum Synagogue.

Many strands of the story are launched here,
including the fundamental struggle
between the Holy Spirit in Jesus, and the unclean spirits.
It is also the first mention of the human opponents,
here in the persons of the scribes.
All of this will develop more fully in the coming account.

But the reading from Deuteronomy suggests that
what the liturgical lectionary wants us to notice is the theme of the Prophet.
Deuteronomy promises a prophet to come,
to provide instruction once Moses is gone.
The New Testament sees Jesus as the special fulfillment of this promise.
For the writers of Deuteronomy, it meant that each age would have its prophet,
to rise up and speak the truth of God.

In his story of Jesus, Mark invokes the theme of the prophet
to place the story of Jesus within the trials and tribulations of his own time.
During the time of the Roman occupation of Galilee and Judea,
social changes were erasing the traditions important to the Jews.

Many forms of resistance rose up.
Some were militant—social bandits in Galilee,
and violent revolts behind a charismatic leader from the countryside
—what the bible calls "false messiahs."

But there were also nonviolent prophetic types.
Commentators today call them "signs prophets,"
because they typically would take their followers to a significant location
reminiscent of the origins of Israel, such as the desert,
or the Jordan river where Joshua crossed into the land.

They would gather and wait for God to inaugurate a new beginning to history,
to fulfill the promises of the past.
But then the Roman Army, which countenanced no hint of opposition,
would follow them out and slaughter them all.

The self-proclaimed prophet, Theudas,
mentioned by Gamaliel in Acts of the Apostles,
took people to the Jordan, where they expected a miracle.
He was beheaded by the Romans.

The one they called "the Egyptian," also mentioned in Acts,
took his followers out to the wilderness, and then they proceeded in procession
to the Mount of Olives, and from there to Jerusalem,
where they expected the walls to fall,
as those of Jericho did in the time of Joshua.
Many in his group were killed or imprisoned, but he himself escaped.

Jonathan the Sicarius led his followers into the desert,
where they awaited a sign from God.
And there were many others such,
mostly unnamed in the historical sources, unsympathetic to them.

John the Baptist is usually included in the list.
And Jesus found his own vocation in the presence of John.
Jesus himself performed signs in the wilderness,
seen in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

But what is remarkable in the story of Jesus, is that after his baptism,
he left the desert and returned to the villages of his upbringing.
The villages were in disarray. Illnesses and social malaise were devastating them.
Instead of symbolic actions in the desert,
Jesus began constructive actions in the villages,
restoring the ill, reviving the village communities,
teaching lessons of forgiveness and mutual assistance.

Today Mark tells of the beginning of all that.
The synagogue of Capernaum is the social center of the town
which is Jesus' home base in Galilee.
Mark writes the people say that Jesus "teaches with authority, unlike the scribes."
And yet what the townsfolk praise as teaching
is described as an exorcism of demonic influence.
Mark seems to be saying that the teaching of Jesus operated like an exorcism,
dispelling the diseases and evil spirits that were overcoming the people,
leading them into despair and illness.
His teaching was life-giving and dispelled the noxious spirits.

And he teaches with authority. This too is important.
Mark is telling the story of a religious leader who has no established credentials.
He is a carpenter from a village in the north, called Nazareth.
Arrayed against him are the full range of religious authorities
—scribes, Pharisees, High Priest and elders.

And yet he teaches with authority.
Mark tells us that it was because of the Holy Spirit that came upon Jesus at his baptism.

The Holy Spirit undoes the unclean spirits.

But this is also the authority of the prophet,
who stands outside the established lines of authority.
Jesus' authority is that of the prophet in the manner of Moses.
The spirit of prophecy in our faith comes from outside the establishment,
bringing the otherwise unspoken truth.

Among the prophetic voices in my time are those of religious women in the U.S.
It was through their unhesitating response to the call of the Second Vatican Council
that it was kept alive, despite the reaction against it in many official circles.

The torch was kept lit until a new generation of church people and theologians
could pick it up again.
This was prophetic witness.

The role of American religious, women and men, in missions to Latin America
was another aspect of the prophetic in our church.

During the 1980s, while one version of American activity in Chile and El Salvador
was being promulgated in official state circles,
we had the testimony of our sisters and brothers on site,
reporting back to us another version, based on their own experiences.
This too was prophetic witness.

The witness of Latin America, building of the Council,
gave us a painful but exhilarating vision of the future.

One result was so-called Liberation Theology,
taking as its point of departure the condition of the poor.
It was called the Preferential Option.
It turned theology on its head.
It too was prophetic witness.

Our present pope is one place where these influences converge,
and is an indicator of how the prophetic voice
can come back to the corridors of official order and transform them.
However, it remains a struggle, as we well know.

When Pope Francis visited the US Congress,
he mentioned three Americans that we would do well to emulate:
Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day.

This was an important moment in the American Church.
Searches for the Catholic names, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day,
overwhelmed the Google site immediately following.
Some heroes we knew for a long time were now widely discovered.
And we understand that they were prophetic witnesses,
and brought the otherwise unspoken truth to our sense of faith.

In that faith, we praise and follow the Christ, the Lord of Life, the Lamb of God, the Firstborn of Creation, and the Son of God.

But first, he was the carpenter from Nazareth, a little town in Galilee.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 4, 2018

Job 7:1-4,6-7	Life on earth is a drudgery
Psalm 147:1-6	The Lord heals the brokenhearted
I Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23	All things to all people
Mark 1:29-39	Peter's mother-in-law, and more

For years I was puzzled why this passage from Mark's gospel
was chosen for special attention in a Sunday liturgy.
After all, very little of it is story.

Yes, there is the brief mention of curing the mother-in-law of Peter.
But the rest of the story consists of summary statements,
with no narrative shape—no rising tension and resolution of that tension.
Just accounts of people gathered outside the door at evening,
with reports of many who were sick and possessed cleared of their ailments.

And then in the morning going elsewhere, to other villages with similar needs.
What is there to talk about here?
What is the message that we are to take away from this reading?

It was only when I began to look at the gospels as a whole,
and especially when I began to consider them
in the context of the times when they were written
that I began to understand better.

Sean Freyne, of happy memory, an Irish biblical scholar,
and former priest and faculty member of Maynooth Seminary outside Dublin,
was someone whose opinions I favored.
After all, he was the one who insisted that I get into Scripture studies,
and wrote a letter to my bishop in support of the idea.

Sean was the origin of and force behind the attention to Galilee in recent decades.
What he sometimes called "the search for the historical Galilee."
A scripture scholar's joke.

At one point in a recent book,
he made much of the seemingly insignificant statement at the beginning of Mark
—that after Jesus was baptized, he returned to the villages of Galilee.

It seems insignificant. But when it compares to others at the time,
such as John the Baptist, it provided a striking contrast.
The others, the prophets of the time,
made their mission a matter of symbolic actions.

John, for instance, baptized people
as a symbol of renewal and beginning again.
But Jesus left the Jordan, and the desert, to work in the villages.

It is in that realization that today's passage
about the people coming to Jesus, at Peter's house, and in the surrounding villages,
began to make sense to me.
It is about the needs of the people that called out to him.

He had to return to the villages, and do something about them.

I began to learn about those needs,
reading in the books about Galilee by Sean Freyne, and others.
I learned about the loss
of the traditional patterns of life and property in the villages.

I read about the evidence of archaeology in Galilee,
how large estates replaced the ancestral family holdings,
dispossessing the villagers, who now, at best,
could hire out to work in the farms they once owned.
After all, the new cities, built in the Greco-Roman style, needed supplies.

I learned of the hopelessness of the people
whose faith was challenged by the occupation of the Roman forces.
After all, God was supposed to be the God of history, in control of events.
So how could a foreign empire be so successful,
while being so arrogant and disrespectful?

I read how village communities were beginning to disintegrate,
with increased tensions, malnutrition, and illness.
Loss ancestral lands led to loss of life direction
—dispossession to demon possession—
as despair and hopelessness generated illness and chronic disfunction.

Renewal movements began to emerge.
Some were symbolic, like the signs prophets;
others were violent, like the messiahs and social bandits.

But Jesus was none of these.
He went into the villages and began to work with them.
What in many cases we might see as psychological trauma,
was interpreted in those days as demonic activity.
Many illnesses were a result of loss of hope, lack of a future.

Mark makes much of the language of Holy and Unclean,
borrowed from the ritual language of Judaism.
That language implies an entire theology of holiness.
If the opposite of holy is unclean, then holiness itself is equivalent to clean.

In other words, the meaning of holiness is purity, spiritual cleanliness.
The community that wishes to maintain its purity
must banish all contaminating elements.
This was the practice of the Pharisees, whom Jesus opposed.

But contamination is not the same as contagion.
Contagion has to do with disease.
That is the place for quarantine.

We know that especially today,
with the serious flu epidemic that is infecting the nation.
Each week we hear the casualty count,
with the young and elderly especially at risk.
We are strongly advised to keep children
home from school when symptoms appear.

But contagion, which has to do with microbes,
is not the same as contamination, which is a social term.

Social illness is not the same as the sickness of an individual.
Quarantine does not solve social illnesses.
Purity is not a helpful remedy for communal disorientation.
Jesus recommends compassion, instead.
Compassion does not keep its hands clean,
but dirties them, if necessary in reaching out to others.

In the first half of Mark's Gospel,
the part that takes place in Galilee, before Jesus moves toward Jerusalem,
his time is spent providing hope, by attending to illnesses,
restoring community to the banned,
mending paralyzing guilt by assuring forgiveness.

He is busy attending to individual needs, but also restoring communities,
by bringing their members and former members
back into relationship with one another. So we heard today:
He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages
that I may preach there also.
For this purpose have I come."

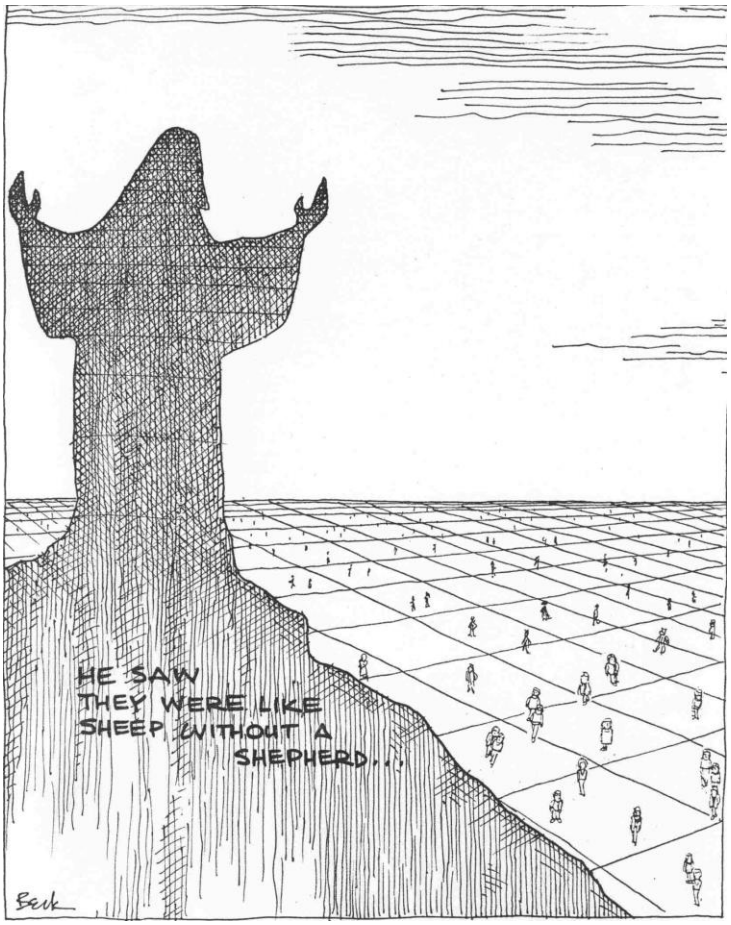
Today we hear a lot about building walls and barriers,
as a way of solving social problems.
Jesus would have nothing of this.

After spending his time relieving anguished villagers in Galilee,
he would turn toward Jerusalem, enter the temple,
and charge them with malfeasance, breach of office.

The temple, the center of the holiness system of purity,
Jesus would confront in an action we call the Cleansing of the Temple.
Cleansing the heart of the Holy, which in his view needed it.
His words were borrowed from Isaiah:
"My house shall be a house for *all* people."

Today's Gospel takes its meaning from its place in the larger story.
It is the beginning. It is the reason for his mission.
It is why he came.
It is, in his view, why he has been sent.

Discipleship means many things.
But one of them is to learn from Jesus' ministry in Galilee.
As with him, it would lead to other things.
But this is where it begins.


HE SAW
THEY WERE LIKE
SHEEP WITHOUT A
SHEPHERD...
Beck

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 11, 2018

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 The law about leprosy
Psalm 32:1-2,2 5, 11 My guilt I covered not
1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1 Be imitators of me
Mark 1:49-45 Jesus heals a leper

Before we leave Mark's Gospel and enter the season of Lent,
we meet up with a leper.
We think of Jesus traveling among the villages of Galilee,
and we picture him healing people who are ill.
But the leper shows a different side of the work of Jesus.

Consider the plight of the leper.
Not allowed to enter the village, required to stay outside
and warn people of the danger of contacting him.
The plight of the leper is not the disease. It is the isolation.

Quarantine is not invoked for the health of the individual,
it is invoked for the health of the community.
For the leper, isolation is not the cure, it is the problem.
It is the ailment he must suffer.
When Jesus heals the leper he brings him back into society.
But here is the thing: he also heals the society itself.

Michel Foucault in his book on mental illness (*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 existed wastelands which sickness had ceased to haunt
but left sterile and long uninhabitable."

Foucault goes on to report how all the leprosariums, now emptied,
began to fill again, this time with the mentally ill.
There seems to be a penchant from time immemorial for social groups
to solve their problems by building walls and isolating problem people.

Today we have president who desperately wishes to build a wall.
For security, he says. But is that true?
History tells us of famous walls.
The Great Wall of China is prototypical, constructed to keep out the barbarians.

And recently there is the Berlin Wall.
This past week, we heard a news report:
"On Monday, Berliners celebrated a once unthinkable occasion:
The Berlin Wall has now been gone for longer than it stood."

Also, Israel has built a notorious wall around the West Bank.
It is a peculiar wall, as any map can show you.
It is not built on Israel's side of the border, but on the Palestinian side,
often cutting deeply into it.
And at times it makes a grand swoop in to include a valuable location,
so as to put it on the Israeli side of the wall.

In short, there are problems with walls.
Three such might be mentioned.

First of all, they are more symbolic than they are practical.
It has been repeatedly shown that a wall between the US and Mexico
is not only difficult to construct across a difficult and varied terrain,
along with populated areas it must divide.
But also, it would be the least effective of means available today for border security.
Its function is more effective as a symbol.

A wall is massive and eminently visible.
It makes a strong visual case for the effort being expended toward the cause.
And as a symbol, it emphasizes a distinction
between the people on each side of the wall.
It says that they are two different kinds. They are not to be mixed.

Secondly, the message a wall sends is that it is permanent.
The separation it creates is here to stay, it says.
It is rooted right in the ground, not to be moved.
The Great Wall of China is a favorite witness to that message.

On the other hand, the Berlin Wall shows that this image of permanence
is mainly a propaganda story.
(And yet, this week they not only celebrated the fall of the wall,
but someone discovered hidden and forgotten section of the wall, still there.
They will find remnants of that wall for centuries, no doubt.)

The lie about permanence is that the two sets of people separated by the wall
are different in a way that is real and for all time.
It pretends that the difference is part of nature,
and not a political and prejudicial difference.

A third and more basic matter is that walls that arbitrarily separate peoples
are a violation of basic humanity.
This is the reason that powerful graffiti keep appearing
on the wall along the West Bank in Israel.

It is the reason for a continuous series of documentaries
that show, among other things, the plight of Palestinians
who live on one side, and work on the other, and never know for sure
when the authorities will decide to have the gates open.

It is because the wall is a violation of basic humanity
that rejoicing overwhelmed the German people when the Berlin Wall went down.
Rejoicing overflowed into the streets and public arenas.
It was revived again to mark the moment this week.
The wall was down longer than it was up.

But the walls are not simply brick and mortar, or steel and barbed wire.
For instance, healthcare can construct another wall,
when it prices medication beyond the capacity of many to pay for it.
The message is that those deserving healthcare are only those
who have proven their worth by being wealthy.

Walls separate people in different ways, skin color as well as economic power,

gender roles, political views. And more.

The story of the leper is the story of building walls
to protect society from others who are felt to be threats.

But Jesus heals the leper:
"Moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand, touched him,
and said to him, "Be made clean."
In healing the leper, Jesus restores him to society,
and in so doing, restores the society itself.

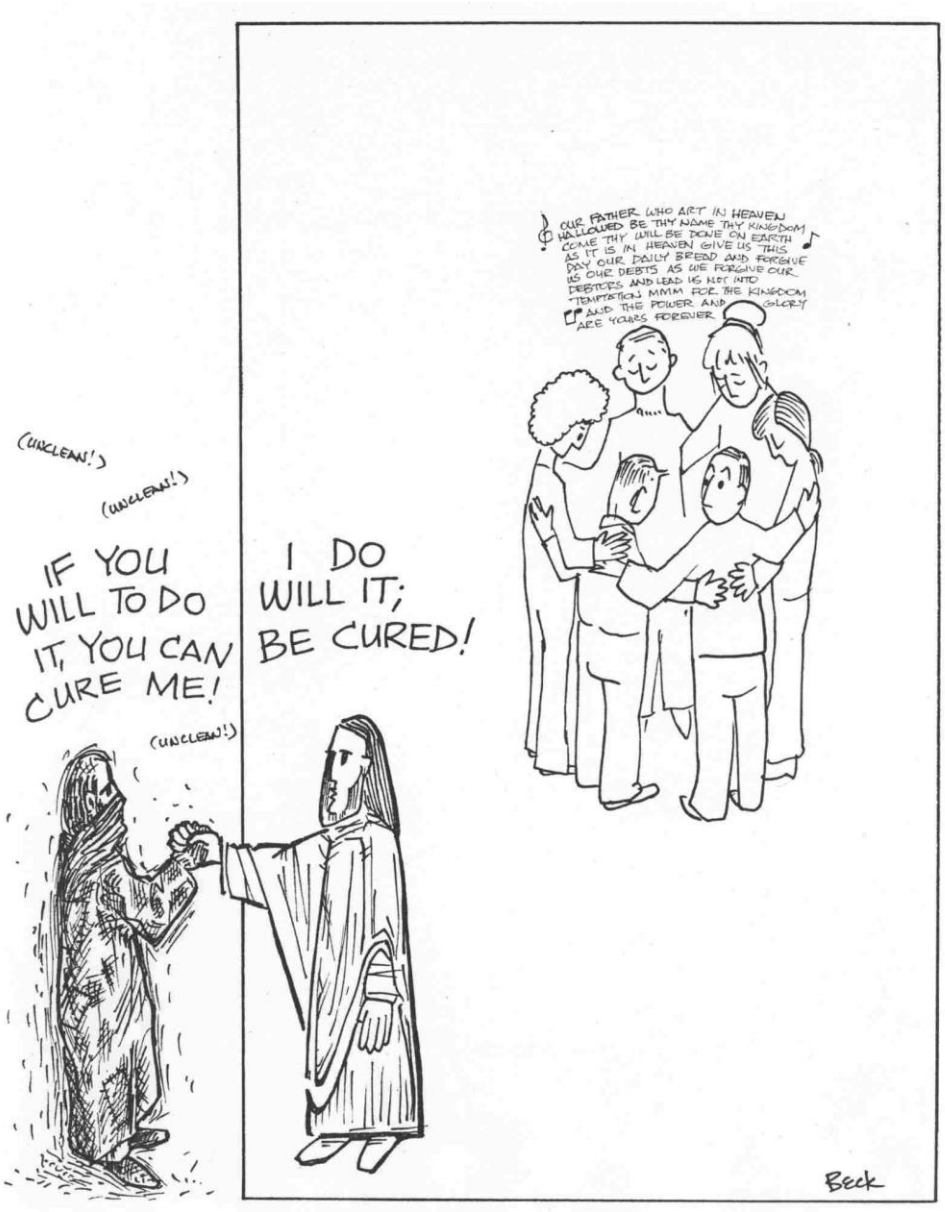
However, such work is not without its price.
Ironically, after healing the ostracized leper, Jesus finds himself outside—

"The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter.
He spread the report abroad
so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly."

It was as if Jesus, while freeing the leper from his leprosy, contracted it himself.
Not that he did, and yet he paid the price.
The reason given is different, but the result is the same.

This is the common price one pays for advocating for the dispossessed.
One can become dispossessed in turn.
It is not always popular to embrace the cause
of those who are so unpopular as to be banned.

But it is better to be moved by compassion,
and reach out and touch the untouchable,
and join Jesus in the consequences.


(UNCLEAN!)
(UNCLEAN!)
IF YOU WILL TO DO IT, YOU CAN CURE ME!
(UNCLEAN!)
I DO WILL IT; BE CURED!
OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN HALLOWED BE THY NAME THY KINGDOM COME THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION MMM FOR THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND GLORY ARE YOURS FOREVER
Beck

First Sunday of Lent

February 18, 2018

Genesis 9:8-15 The Covenant of Noah
Psalm 25:4-9 Your ways are of old
1 Peter 3:18-22 Noah, sign of Baptism
Mark 1:12-15 Jesus in the desert

This Lent, I am remembering a series of presentations some time ago
that I gave at Shalom. It was called Arks and Covenants.
As I look back, I see that it needs updating.

This Lent, the Sunday readings from the Old Testament tell a story of their own.
It is a story of the covenants of Noah, Abraham, and Moses.
One covenant for the cosmos—that's Noah.
One covenant for the human race—that's Abraham.
And one for the family of faith—that's Moses.
Or maybe I should be more precise
and say that this is a story of covenants under threat, worlds at risk.

Today we hear the story of the covenant with Noah.
But it begins with his ark. And what is an ark?
We all envision it as a large stubby boat.
But "ark" means something more.
Strictly speaking, it refers to a special container for sacred objects.

That time long ago, at Shalom,
I began with a poem that attempted to define an ark.
"Ark. *Arca*. [first meaning] 1. Sacred / casket of the pact; … "

The Ark of the Covenant, that traveled among the tribes of Israel,
contained the tablets, sacred relics, and the holy furniture
of the traveling sanctuary, the Holy Tent or Tabernacle.

"Ark. *Arca*. [second meaning] 2. Cupboard of the secret tracts; … "
In the Synagogue, there is an Ark, a cupboard at the high end,
which contains the Torah, and other biblical scrolls.

So the Ark of Noah is more than a boat—
it is a container for something sacred, namely, life itself.
For life is sacred.
And when it was under threat, it was preserved by God, through Noah,
and that is the lesson of the story.

And so there is a third meaning for Ark—
"3. Floating arch/ival (bio-survival) genetic ideolect."

We have our own life-preserving arks.
I think of articles I've read about biodiversity programs on certain farms
where threatened varieties of grains or vegetables, or animals,
are kept alive and nurtured, as a sort of genetic information bank.
This is done in the spirit of Noah.

In today's world, modern genetic manipulation of hybrids
have created standardized crops and food stuffs

that have mightily served to feed the rapidly growing population 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, disappearing.

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

But there is one more possible meaning of "Ark."
I also imagine the planet Earth itself as another version of Noah's Ark.
The poem continues on, to tell of this:

"…4. Planet
traveling through waste

of the galactic arm
in a vast plain of
space, guarding its gift
of conscious reflection.

Like a mirror or echo
the treasure of the gift-
bearing planet moves
through faulted time,

a basket of eggs on
an Easter project,
a cargo of pure life,
an airborne seedpod."

None of us have any trouble calling to mind images of the planet earth,
a bright blue globe, photographed from outer space.
We are the first generation to have seen this image as a photograph.
This planet, vivid in our imagination, 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.

One is all the more convinced that we need to hold on to this blue planet
and keep it close, because it is all we have.
I imagine it floating through universe, carrying its cargo of life,

like a milkweed pod floating through the autumn air,
on a colonizing mission.

Some call it Spaceship Earth.
For me it is the Ark. And what the Ark is carrying, in the poem,
is "the gift of conscious reflection."
Not just life, but <u>conscious</u> 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.

We are convinced other examples exist, but we are no closer to finding them.
Yet we do know that here, on earth, life,
and mind, and thought, thrive and flourish.

Stewardship is more serious than we first thought,
is more of a responsibility, more of a divinely delegated task.
We need to adjust our thinking to make it truly global,
because we intimately affect one another,
no matter how distant we are on this globe.

We are truly community, because we are helplessly mutual.
No longer can we live in isolated bliss, unaware of what happens elsewhere,
for now we have a world in which each of us
is affected by what happens elsewhere.

WE are NOAH.

One of the summons for this Lent
is for us to re-commit to that responsibility.

<u>Poem</u>:

Ark: *Def*.

Ark. *Arca*. 1. Sacred
casket of the pact; 2.
Cupboard of the secret
tracts; 3. Floating arch-

ival (bio-survival)
genetic ideolect.
And now: 4. Planet
traveling through waste

of the galactic arm
in a vast plain of
space, guarding its gift
of conscious reflection.

Like a mirror or echo
the treasure of the gift-
bearing planet moves
through faulted time,

a basket of eggs on
an Easter project,
a cargo of pure life,
an airborne seedpod.

<u>Another poem</u>:

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.

Second Sunday of Lent

February 25, 2018

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18	Abraham and Isaac
Psalm 116:10, 15-19	Lord, I am your servant
Romans 8:31-34	If God is for us, who is against?
Mark 9:2-10	The Transfiguration of Jesus

A little over a week ago,
Elizabeth Bruenig began a column in the *Washington Post* with this line:
"Nothing symbolizes the foreclosure of the future
like the slaughter of a nation's young."
As you know, Bruenig was speaking of the rash of school shootings,
with special reference to what had happened in Parkland, Florida.

And this week we come to the story of Abraham, asked to sacrifice his son.
And with it, the future he was promised in the covenant with the Most High God,
that he shall have descendants, numberless as the sands on the seashore,
the stars in the sky.

Bruenig was writing about the strong sense of being defeated, once again.
Since then, the usual patterns have occurred:
the outrage; the call to ban assault weapons, if not all guns;
the backlash reaction accusing of those who favor regulation
of exploiting an emotional crisis for political ends.

But then something unexpected, outside the script, occurred.
The students spoke up, and suddenly things look different.
The survivors called out the adults.
And while the accusing voices continued mocking,
they sounded less and less convincing, more and more cruel.
And morally bankrupt.

In the Abraham story, Isaac is not killed.
Although we call it the Sacrifice of Isaac, it is actually a ram that is sacrificed.
It is not the son.
If sacrifice has been a timeless way of granting the divine honor for the gift of life,
returning a life for a life, let it be a ram, not the child.
The lesson seems to be that we are not to sacrifice our children,
but to find another way to honor, and defend, the gift of life.

In the Jewish tradition, this story is called the Akedah, the "Binding" of Isaac.
It is the tenth trial of Abraham, testing his faith in the covenant with God.
That is one way of accounting for what seems so appalling in this story
—that God would call for the death of his child.

It is outrageous,
and the picture of God that it presents is outrageous.

The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, was gripped by this story.
In his book, *Either/Or*, he explored it
in terms of a contrast between ethical truth and religious truth.

While ethics tells us what is right and just,

religion can take us beyond human categories into a transcendent reality.
And the tension between these two can cause anxiety.
Or, "angst," to use the word that he has contributed to our culture.

Ethical intensity leads us to work toward a more just society,
to confront injustices where we find them.
It calls us to take care of the vulnerable,
feed the hungry, and shelter the homeless.

But in Kierkegaard's view, religious intensity can call us into mysterious realms,
where the ethical demands seem to be left behind.
It is a supreme ethical act to defend those unjustly accused.
But it is beyond that to trade places with those about to be executed,
as Maximillian Kolbe did in the death camp of Auschwitz.
This is beyond ethics.

Or we might say that the security guard at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School,
who failed to intercept the shooter but instead stayed outside,
was an ethical failure, even if an understandable one.
For it was his job to halt the mayhem.

But the teachers and coaches, like Aaron Feis,
and students, like Peter Wang, Martin Duque and Alaina Petty,
ROTC members who spontaneously gave their lives to save the others,
even though it was not their job
—they can be said to have transcended the ethical demands.
They went beyond what was demanded.

The Abraham story offends our ethical sensibilities,
even while it moves into the transcendent realms of religious awe.
Abraham trusted that God would not harm his son,
that God would stay true to the promises he had made.

But trust is hard to come by.
Today we are a sharply polarized society.

With the help of social media,
not to mention contributions such as Russian bots and hackers,
we have come to trust one another less and less.

And the shortage of trust in our world leads me
to something I have been thinking about all week.

I am sure that for many this story of Abraham and Isaac leads in another direction.
For them it describes the plight of the unborn.
But we are a society divided into left and right.
One side appalled at shooting massacres; the other at legal abortion.

We cannot accept that those with whom we disagree
can have honorable motives, such as we do.
We cannot grant them the same dignity.

But what strikes me are the emotional similarities
that have been exposed this past week or two.
Consider these feelings, common to both sides—

We are morally appalled at the unrestricted slaughter of young lives,
whether is be school children who are defenseless, or unborn human lives.
We are frustrated that nothing seems to change, or can be allowed to change,
whether because of NRA lobbying or that of the NARAL.

We are accused of inviting the slippery slope,
whether it is allowing any hint of gun regulation
or limiting abortion laws in any way.

We are concerned about preserving basic rights,
whether it is women's right to self-determination, now coming to full light,
or the traditional culture of rural America, guns and all.

We are so committed that we want an absolute difference, an entire ban.
No one needs guns; life begins at conception.
We sometimes focus on one issue, since it seems so important.

We feel caricatured by those who disagree with us,
whether it be talkshow hosts on the right
calling the protesting students political tools of the left,
or those on the left accusing those protesting abortion
as callously using a sensitive issue to mobilize a rightwing political agenda.

We have difficulty allowing
that those who disagree with us on life and death issues
can be sincere about their views. We cannot trust.

One difference has emerged in the past week,
as the victims of the Parkland school shooting have made their voices heard.
It has changed the landscape of the struggle.
This is not an option in the struggle for the unborn.

We have yet to discover how to maintain our ethical passion,
which is necessary and required of us in promoting the truth we see,
and at the same time recognize the honest commitment to truth
in those with whom we disagree.
But in achieving that difficult balance we find the path toward change.

David Cochran a political science professor at Loras
who has widely published in the area of peace and justice,
points out that Catholic social teaching is neither liberal nor conservative,
as these are construed in America today.

Abraham is our witness this week.
And his story is one of discovering an unexpected and new resolution
of the agonizing dilemma.
This is not the ethical resolution; but it is what Abraham knew.
It may be what we see now
in the voices of the Parkland students speaking to power.

Abraham is telling us not to despair when we cannot see our way out.
Trust against trust; keep the faith.
And keep the pressure on.

Third Sunday of Lent

March 4, 2018 - Year B

Exodus 20:1-17	The Ten Commandments
Psalm 19:8-11	The Law of the Lord is perfect
1 Corinthians 1:22-25	But we proclaim Christ crucified
John 2:13-25	Jesus cleanses the Temple

In our procession through the Arks and Covenants of the Hebrew Scriptures
we come to the Ark of the Covenant itself,
and the tablets of the Ten Commandments that were placed in it.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the commandment that stands out
at this time is the fifth: "Thou shalt not kill."

And yet, what does this mean?

In Deuteronomy, elaborating the Ten Commandments,
we also have instructions to execute certain malefactors.

This throws us back to the old antagonism
of the God of the Old Testament vs. the God of the New Testament.

But there are not different Gods.

However, there may be different discernments.
Isn't Jesus showing that the vision he shares with us
is already a part of the Covenant of old, but hidden previously?

Different needs and circumstances, and different visionaries,
may bring out latent meanings.

And yet, what about Jesus? What about his cleansing of the Temple?
Doesn't that show him being violent?

In fact, the story stands high among the New Testament texts
that are recruited to justify use of violence by Christians.

The cleansing of the Temple is positioned first among Jesus' actions in John.
It contrasts with the other Gospels, in which the cleansing
is the climax of the work of Jesus.

In other Gospels, a line of tension between Jesus and his opponents
moves from the initial announcements to the temple at the center of Judea,
where Jesus challenges them in prophetic zeal.

I have argued it shows the nonviolent confrontation of Jesus.

But many think it violent.
Many people think that *any* confrontation is violent.

But if that were true it would eliminate any such thing as nonviolent action,
and restrict nonviolence to non-retaliation and pacifism,
and practices that avoid conflict altogether.

Still, the story we just heard sounds violent.

However, the whips and cords appear only in John's account.

And in this account only that we have the animals being driven out.
The two would seem to be connected.

He also knocks over some tables.
That would be seen by some as violent.

But maybe destruction of things is different from violence against persons.
A long time ago I wrote a reflection on destruction and violence.
I was wondering why some people trust violence,
when it seemed to me that it had no value at all.
I reflected on what advantages violence offered.

My thoughts found their way into the preface of *Nonviolent Story*, about Mark's Gospel.
Here is some of that reflection.
It begins by wondering if violence has any purpose at all.

"This is not to deny that violence is effective. It clearly is so, within a narrow field of accomplishment. But what does it effect? What are its achievements? We are safe, I think, in assuming that it is in the work of *destruction* not construction, that violence excels. … Certainly destruction does have its practical virtues. It clears the slate by removing a construction or any unwelcome constructing persons or groups. The effect of destruction is to require new construction, preferably along the line favored by the destroyers. In this way it can boast a certain kind of usefulness for solving problems.

"Furthermore, destruction is quick and easy, yet comprehensive. Perhaps one of its most awe-inducing aspects is its ability to disrupt in moments what has taken years, even centuries, to put in place. In its noncreative impotence it can alter circumstances completely. This is one of the main reasons it is useful. It saves time by avoiding processes. In addition, it can control outcomes; it is expedient. The virtuoso of violence wins not only the war but the peace afterwards as well. The convenience of destruction is that it doesn't get bogged down in honoring claims or relationships. It can move ahead with the task at hand without apologies, without endless consultations, without the necessary bookkeeping of human obligations. While destruction carries out its effect in some ways independently of its intent, it would seem to be at heart an intended activity. Which is to say it is a human act. This why it is an inverted form of construction. Something similar may occur in the natural realm, apart from human intention, but it is not destruction.

"But if destruction is a human act, it is not such in the same way that violence is. Violence would seem to include something more. We might say that violence is destruction directed toward persons. It is this sense of things that is evoked in Mark's Gospel when the Pharisees and the Herodians meet "in order to destroy him."

This reflection on the value of violence is my answer to those
who would trust in violence as the deliverance from violence.
It is a description of the works of violence as a response to those
who would seek security in violence.

Whose notion is that guns act as a deterrent to those who would be violent.

For them safety is construed simply as the avoidance of horrific slaughter.
It doesn't bring into consideration that positive work of peacemaking and peace.
It doesn't look at the more civilized works of security.

A classroom also operates on trust, but it is trust based on mutual assistance
in reaching something recognized as common truth.
It urges into being what it values.
It requires a sense of trusting relationship.
It values reason and a shared search.

The idea that gun-free zones are an invitation to violence
is to make certain assumptions.
Among these are the idea that there is nothing already on site that makes for peace.

It assumes that the world is full of people trying to destroy peaceful settings
simply because they abhor them.
It presumes that violence sows the ground with peace.
And these are beyond all those practical considerations
that make having concealed carry in the classroom absurd.

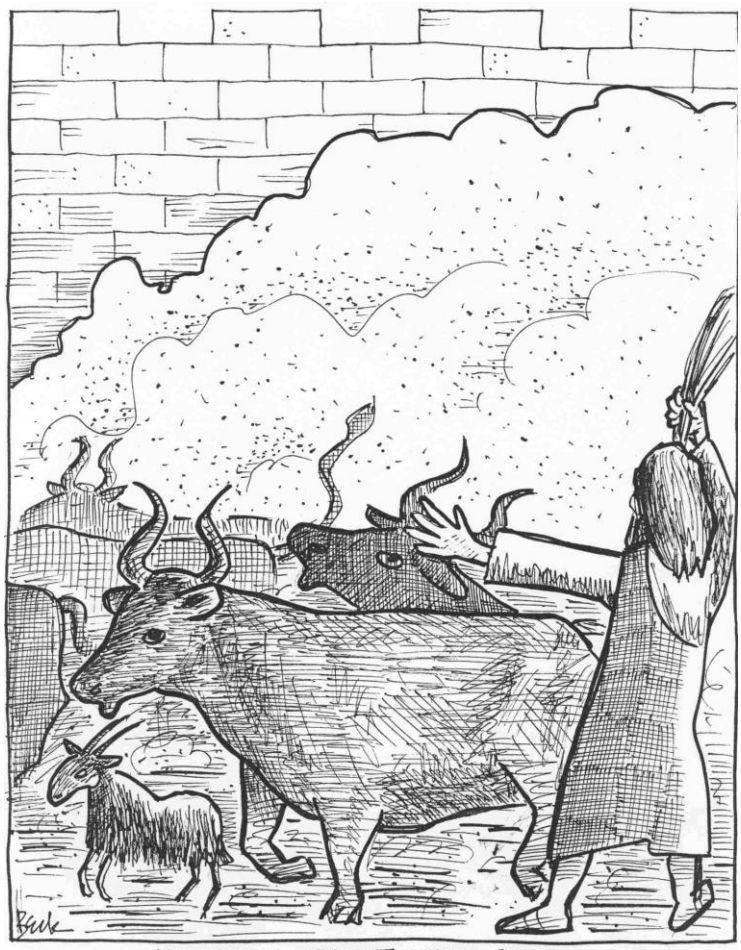
The gospel issue is fundamental trust,
and worship of guns for security is not the gospel.
Trust in God recognizes not only our ultimate fragility
but also our recognition of a larger order.

In recognizing our human fragility,
we no longer refuse to consider ourselves all-powerful,
able to overcome any obstacle, given enough firepower,
but accept that in the final frame, we are simple mortal beings.

In acknowledging our place within a larger order,
we understand that we exist in the vaster frame of things that we call creation,
and that we have a God who favored us with existence
and is inclined to support us in that.

In the Temple Cleansing, Jesus teaches us that resistance need not be violent,
and that nonviolence need not be passive.
That which is anti-personal requires resistance,
but resistance that is violent is anti-personal.

In trusting in God, we place our trust in peaceful processes,
human dialogue, shared search for truth, a common humanity, mutual care.
And we trust that these will prevail.



CLEARING THE TEMPLE AREA

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 11, 2018

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23	Till the land has retrieved its lost Sabbaths
Psalm 137:1-6	By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept
Ephesians 2:4-10	Even when we dead he brought us back
John 3:14-21	God so loved the world he gave his Son

It has been said that Home is not "home" until you leave it.
It is the name of the place of departure
and earns its name by way of the departure.

The act of leaving "here where I am,"
or "here where I have always been,"
or even "here where I feel stifled,"
establishes it in the mind as "home."

In the Sunday homilies of this Lent
we have been following the Arks and Covenant narrative
traced in the Old Testament readings.

Today we come to a hiatus in that story, with the end of the kingdom of Judah
and the forced deportation into Babylonian exile.
The covenant was not honored by Israel,
and now the consequences are felt.

A strange feature of the Bible is the fact
that although the exile was the traumatic center of the Old Testament,
around which the rest of the story clusters,
there is no account of what happened there.
We only have reports from the edges—the beginning and the end.

Today's account from Second Chronicles anticipates the end,
and interprets the time lost as filling in for its lost Sabbaths.
Seventy years, said Jeremiah, and the Chronicler takes that to mean
that the land will rest fallow for the many Sabbaths in which it was not.

This is akin to the Jubilee theme.
They will not regain their home, come home again,
until the time lost is retrieved.

The exiles would return, and would rejoice in that return.

> *"When the Lord restored the captives of Zion,*
> *we thought we were dreaming.*
> *Then our mouths were filled with laughter;*
> *our tongues sang for joy." (Ps 126:1-2)*

But they would be disappointed.
For they brought the exile back home with them.
They were back, but were no in control of their own land,
their own lives, their own destinies.
They remained in some deeply felt sense, homeless.

Homelessness is one important rubric for Lent,
inviting us to recognize our own distance from home.
We are familiar with homelessness, displacement,
drifting populations today.

We have stopped looking at the hopeless plight of the Syrians.
We avert our eyes.
For years now they have been trying to escape the slaughter.
And Turkey and Greece are no longer accepting them.

Refugees from Africa, crossing from Libya to Italy have been drowning *en masse*
in capsized boats on the Mediterranean for years now.
Although departing from Libya,
most are from Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, and Eritrea.
Populations so desperate to escape that they are willing to risk death.

But now they wander homeless.
Italy and the rest of Europe is beginning to resist.
The Europeans too are beginning to feel homeless,
insofar as they are nostalgic for the life they had before the influx of refugees.
But there is no going back.

In America something similar is happening.
Refugees from Latin America, escaping violence
generated by drug war and gang culture, often exported from this country,
have entered the country looking for refuge.
But here too they have encountered resistance,
as we cherry-pick the people we are willing to admit.
The talented, but not necessarily the endangered.

Like Europe, we are experiencing a backlash,
driven by the feeling that we have lost our own way,
and our own home.

In this city, we have welcomed back young people who earlier had left,
as we work to revive the civic scene.
And we welcome refugees from the violence in Chicago.
And as it often happens, they bring some of that with them.
But they are not home, at least not yet.

And meanwhile this city with its public history of racism
finds the old guard fleeing west
to the treeless, flat housing developments of Asbury and Peosta,
themselves feeling displaced and disrupted.

Homelessness, displacement, escape from political threat,
is also a feature of the gospel stories.
We have seen this in the Christmas stories, as the family of Jesus
finds itself on the road to Egypt to escape the slaughter happening in Bethlehem.

And in its final chapters, the gospel story shows Jesus
being executed by the Roman authorities,
condemned as an outsider, a rebel.

Today in John's account, anticipating that ending,
just a few weeks away in our liturgical calendar,
we have the image of the bronze serpent on the pole,
an image of Christ on the cross, in the indirect language of symbolism.
But the line that makes the news is 3:16—
"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,"

This, as I have come to understand it,
taps into the fundamental narrative of the New Testament,
at least as articulated by Paul
—when we were enemies, sinners, homeless and away from home—
God loved us and reached out to close the gap.
He called us home.

The Christian Sabbath is Sunday, not Saturday,
because Easter came on a Sunday,
and with Easter came the promise of new life.
In our time, we retrieve the lost Sabbaths with the coming of Easter.
And with its new life, a coming home.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2018 - Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34	A covenant written on the heart
Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15	Create a clean heart in me
Hebrews 5:7-9	Jesus in the garden
John 12:20-33	A grain of wheat must die

Jeremiah was not all doom and gloom.
We have been hearing of covenants.
Today he speaks of a new covenant,
one written on the heart rather than slabs of stone.

However. he is still Jeremiah,
prophesying in the shadow of the Babylonian invasion.
But now he turns from warning to the possibility of hope.

But it depends on turning from the old ways.
No longer will there be a covenant that is distant and external,
written on a memorial stone.
Now the covenant, the Torah of Moses,
will be inscribed right in the spirits of the Israelite people.

Now they will obey, because they have taken it to heart.

So when the psalmist says today,
"Create a clean heart in me, O God," he is speaking not of purity,
but of receptivity, willingness to answer the word of God.

The clean heart is a heart that is receptive, open to the impulses of the will of God.
It hears the call and responds.
It says, Here I am. Teach me what to do.

And so it is that we come to the message from Hebrews this morning,
and the word from John's Gospel.

When Hebrews speaks of Christ Jesus in the flesh,
offering "prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears
to the one who was able to save him from death,"
we are not wrong to think of the Gospel story
of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And John's story, with its memorable image of the grain of wheat—
unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies,
it remains just a grain of wheat;
but if it dies, it produces much fruit—is similar.

John's Gospel does not relate the story of the Agony in the Garden.
In his account, Jesus comes to the Garden
just as Judas arrives with a band of soldiers and guards.

Instead of the Garden agony, John gives us the passage we heard today.

"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?
'Father, save me from this hour'?
But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.
Father, glorify your name."
Then a voice came from heaven,
"I have glorified it and will glorify it again."

This is John's version of the Garden moment.
Facing the trials ahead, Jesus is tempted to refuse.
But not for long.
Almost immediately he accepts the cost of the direction he has taken
and he continues on the difficult road.

The call of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel
was not a demand that he suffer
to satisfy an obscure ledger of pain and suffering that God required.
He is not depicted as called to be a human sacrifice,
just as Isaac was not called to be.

Rather, Jesus' call was an invitation to prophetically address
an unjust condition gone viral, as they say.
He was to call out the perpetrators, but it was to be at some considerable risk.
His initial consent, at the baptism where he began,
has led him down that road that indeed proved to be toxic, deadly.
And now he was to pay the price.

And now he was tempted to back out at the last moment.
But the temptation did not last for long.
"Not my will, but yours be done," it says in Mark's Gospel.
Today, from John's, we hear "it was for this purpose that I came to this hour."
From Hebrews: "Son though he was, he learned obedience."

Jesus says Yes. This word of Jesus, this "Yes, I will," keeps the story going.
It is the decision that keeps the gospel from aborting.
It keeps the story going. Jesus could have said, No,
and then there would be no gospel.

In this regard, I often compare it in my mind,
with that other crucial moment, a call which also received a Yes.
By that I am referring to the story of the Annunciation,
when the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary.
And she, after reviewing the matter, said Yes.

There too, without that consent,
the story would have stopped, untold, unfinished.
There would have been no gospel.

It has been my fancy that these two moments,
moments of saying Yes that make the gospel possible,
are the explosive content of the two most common prayers of the Catholic Christian.

The Hail Mary memorializes Mary's moment of saying Yes, and makes it our own.
"Hail Mary, full of grace," said the angel, beginning the story that ends in Yes.

Similarly, it seems to me, the Our Father, the Lord's Prayer,
memorializes the Garden prayer of Jesus.
Mark is the first to report it.
And we know he wasn't there, and the three who were there were sleeping.
And when they woke, he was taken away and they did not see him again.

And yet Mark reports of the prayer in the Garden.
My sense is that he constructed a suitable prayer
from the prayer that he knew was that of Jesus—the Lord's Prayer.

Abba, Father. Thy will be done.
Not "give us our daily bread," but rather, "take away this cup."
The bread and cup are the offering, then as now.

And then: Lead us not into temptation,
and "pray that you may not undergo the test."

And with Jesus' affirmation in the Garden,
the Gospel story comes to its completion.

Not my will, but thine be done.
That is the Yes of Jesus in the Garden,
and the affirmation we make in reciting the Lord's Prayer.

And in the two prayers, this and the Hail Mary,
woven together in the Rosary prayer,
we affirm our own willingness to make our Yes, and continue the story.

The call comes in many ways.
How many teachers have not had someone come up unexpectedly,
in a social gathering, typically,
and be told by them how their lives were changed
by something that happened in class.
And that person was eternally grateful.

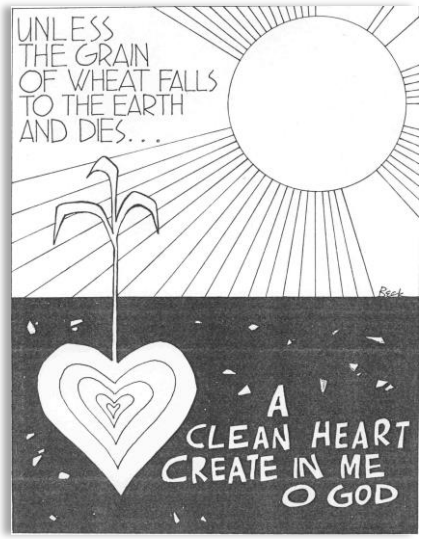
And you the teacher nodded and spoke encouragingly, and considerately.
And meanwhile wondered,
Who is this person, and what class was it? I haven't the faintest idea.

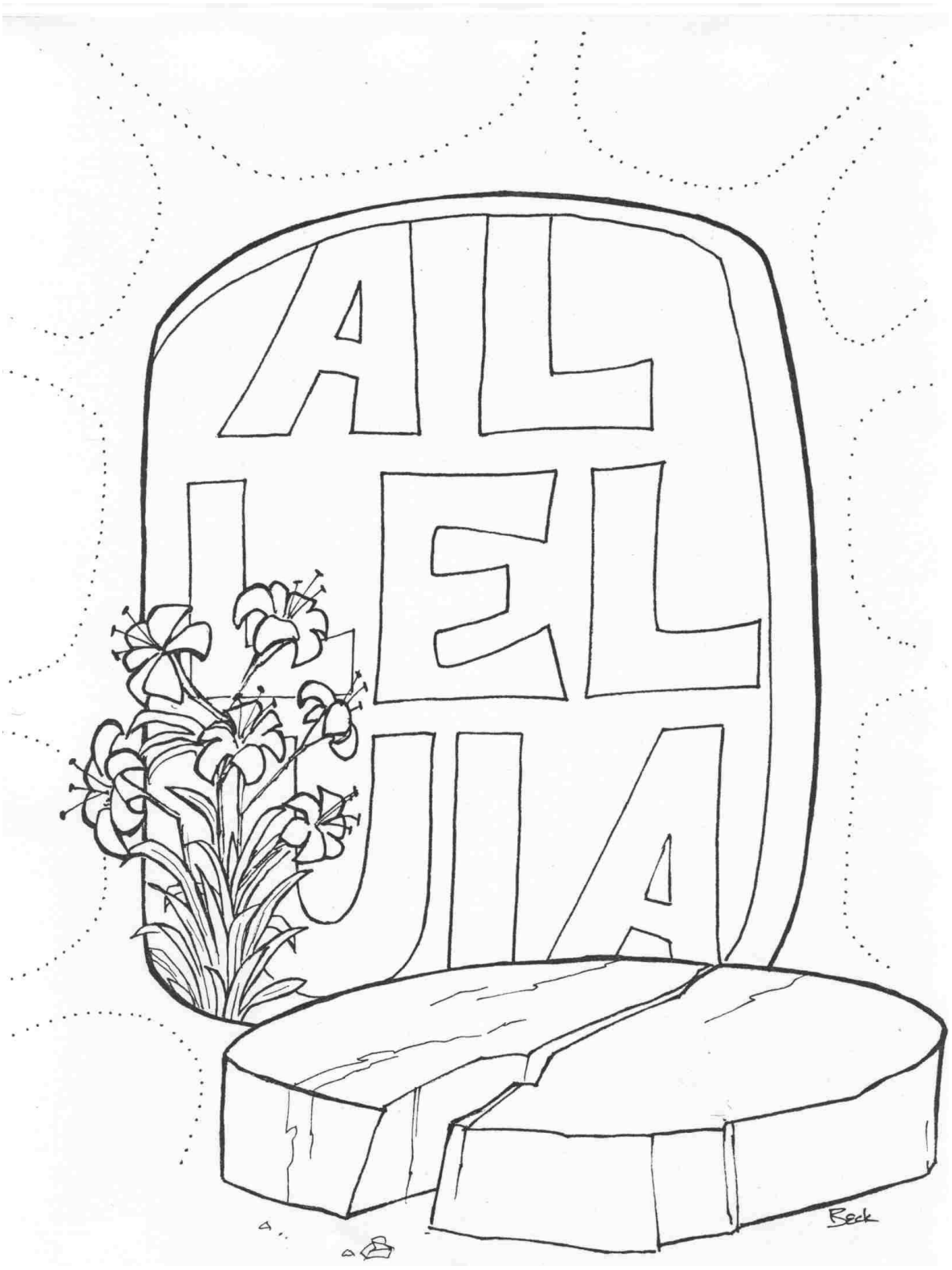
Who hasn't been in some kind of service work, or ministry,
and not had the same kind of experience?
Who hasn't been an advocate for others who hasn't known this?

Having responded at some time in the past to the call we label "vocation,"
we do the work as well as we can, day in and day out,
without looking for any particular kind of reward.
But unexpectedly, we discover that it has effects.
The story is kept going.

As the readings today remind us, hinting of the Passion story,
we are coming close to Holy Week.
We are reminded that our own discernment of God's call into risk and commitment
led to our own Yes. At least much of the time.
And that affirmation, that willing assumption of the task,
that too has kept the story going.
That too is a moment of possible derailment now avoided.

In the coming Holy Week,
we are invited to find ourselves in the story that unfolds there.
And in that, come through to the far end, in the Alleluias of Easter.


UNLESS
THE GRAIN
OF WHEAT FALLS
TO THE EARTH
AND DIES...
A
CLEAN HEART
CREATE IN ME
O GOD


ALLELUIA
Beck

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 22, 2018

Acts 4:8-12	Peter preaches to the Jewish Council
Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-29	The stone rejected by the builders
1 John 3:1-2	We are God's children now
John 10:11-18	I am the Good Shepherd

"I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus.
"A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
A hired man, who is not a shepherd … has no concern for the sheep."

In the ancient world, an important symbol of leadership,
both civic and religious, was the shepherd.

We notice that both Moses and David put in time herding sheep.
Moses was tending sheep
when he experienced his call from the Burning Bush.

David was called from the flock to become the king of Israel.
When all the tribes of Israel came to David to seek his kingship,
they said, "The Lord said to you:
You shall shepherd my people Israel; you shall be ruler over Israel."
And it worked out well in both cases.
Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt,
liberating them to be a people with a land of their own.

David overcame the Philistines,
who threatened to bring Israel's social experiment to an end.
David too was a liberator.

The prophets looked back to these foundational experiences
in criticizing the kings of their own day.
Ezekiel is typical—"because my sheep became plunder,
because my sheep became food for wild beasts, for lack of a shepherd,
because my shepherds did not look after my sheep,
but pastured themselves and did not pasture my sheep, …

"I will take my sheep out of their hand
and put a stop to their shepherding my flock,
so that these shepherds will no longer pasture them.
I will deliver my flock from their mouths
so it will not become their food." (Ezek 34:7, 10)

The prophet Micah gets more graphic with this last image:

Hear, you leaders of Jacob,
rulers of the house of Israel!
Is it not your duty to know what is right,

you who hate what is good, and love evil?
You who tear their skin from them,
and their flesh from their bones;
Who eat the flesh of my people,
flay their skin from them,
and break their bones;
Who chop them in pieces like flesh in a kettle,
like meat in a pot.
When they cry to the Lord,
he will not answer them. (Mic 3:1-4)

Harsh, even grotesque, words.
But we have to understand he is thinking of the leaders as bad shepherds.
What he is saying is that the shepherds of Israel are butchering their flock,
and eating the sheep instead of guarding them.

When Jesus is speaking of the shepherd,
he too is delivering a blistering criticism,
and not just presenting a comforting image to the insecure.
He charges the leaders with being thieves and robbers,
with being hired help who are only interested in a job, and not the sheep.

The wolf is the clue—wolves are not part of the job they signed up for,
and they get themselves out of there when the wolf shows up.

But the Good Shepherd, says Jesus, defends the sheep,
even at the cost of his own life.
Because the true shepherd has a relationship with the sheep.
The true shepherd sees his life as part of theirs.
Shortly he will say to his disciples,
real love is to lay down one's life for one's friends.

And today he is saying that about himself,
in the presence of those who are about to make and attempt on his life.
And before long, they will invoke the help of the Roman authorities
to do just that.

The vulnerability of the shepherd is highlighted here,
and it is not what we would have expected.
And it is that vulnerability that allows a transfer
to images of authority that we have in our own world.

Here I am thinking first of all of the apology that Pope Francis made
of his misguided defense of the Chilean bishop
who covered up abuses by a pedophile priest.
Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, appointed to that post
to heal a similar situation, called him on it.

E. J. Dionne wrote in *Commonweal* that "he read Francis
whatever the Roman equivalent of the riot act is."
And Francis admitted his mistake.

I find myself thinking a couple of things.
One has to do with the notion of papal infallibility,
which in its inflated version takes on the form of assuming
that the pope can make no mistakes.

Well, that idea is trimmed a bit now.
As Francis said when he first was elected, "I am a sinner."

My second thought has to do
with what is commonly called his pastoral approach.
"Pastor," of course, is from the Latin word for shepherd.

In discussion of the papacy, the language often contrasts
the juridical authority, making proper decisions
and preserving the absolute truths of the tradition,
with the pastoral approach, which tends to look more
to the needs of people than those of absolute truths.

This also defines the struggle between Francis
and the traditionalists in the Vatican.

A couple of examples come to mind.
Recently I read these words written by a parish priest in New York.
He wrote: "I usually make the eight-minute walk
from parish office to the hospital at a leisurely pace
so I can prepare mentally for what I might encounter.
This time, while walking, a strong directing question came to me:
"What would Pope Francis do in this situation?"
I was not asking what would the Holy See do,
but rather: What would Francis the priest, the pastoral minister, do?

I do not think I ever had such a thought in the past.
For the first time, I was mentally reaching out to a pope,
not as voice of theological authority or center of ecclesial unity,
but as a source for help in a basic pastoral need."

The other example comes from another article by E. J. Dionne.
This also concerns an apology.
But this one concerns Larry Kudlow, former TV host,
but now top economic advisor to President Trump.
He apologized to Nikki Haley, the ambassador to the UN,
concerning an exchange about her supposed confusion about defense policies.

Dionne said: "Kudlow, by the way, violated another Trump norm.
In a never-apologize world, he issued a gracious apology.

"She was certainly not confused," Kudlow said
in a statement to the *New York Times*,
"I was wrong to say that — totally wrong."
You wonder what Trump made of his act of contrition." So says Dionne.

And this threatens to open an entirely new line for consideration.
But it is one we will not be taking here.
Suffice it to say that we have two models of authority
—the Shepherd and the anti-shepherd.
Or, if you will, Francis and the anti-Francis.

And I leave it to you to unfold the many ways in which this is true,
item after item, point after point.

For now, after these unsettling and harshly prophetic words,
I will leave you with the image, so often reproduced,
of the boy shepherd with the lamb draped across his shoulders,
bringing comfort to the afflicted and shelter to the lost.

As Psalm 23 says,
"the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2018

Acts 9:26-31	Saul, after his conversion
Psalm 22:26-28, 30-32	I will praise you, Lord
1 John 3:18-24	We should love one another
John 15:1-8	I am the vine, you are the branches

We all know these words:

"No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee."

John Donne was an Anglican clergyman.
And his most famous poem was actually a sermon, reframed as a poem.
It was a very different vision from what we see so often today.

The American mythology holds that each of us is unique.
Each of us is special.
There is a way in which this is true.
And there is a way in which this is American exceptionalism,
applied to each one of us.
Each one is an island, entire of itself.

In American public life,
I often hear talk of individualism as our defining characteristic.
Each individual is distinct, even supreme.

When we speak of communal life, the individual is often contrasted with the collective.
I imagined such an image of a group of supreme individuals in the same place,
the collective of supreme individuals, to be like a box full of ping pong balls.
No connection, except that they were in the same place.
I began to wonder where community comes into the picture.
And without community, where is the common good?

When I was a young priest,
thinking about the possibility of entering a life of scholarship,
a defining moment occurred for me during a retreat.
Pursuing this idea that I was unique,
I began to wonder in what way it was true.

I looked at my beliefs, my personal convictions.
I looked at the what I thought about things.
Which of these, I wondered, was uniquely mine.

And going over them, one by one, I had the unsettling discovery
that everything I knew, I had borrowed from someone else
—whether something I had read,
or someone I knew who had influenced me.
In short, I discovered that nothing was uniquely mine.

But what for me made this a defining moment
was the realization that what made me, and anyone else, unique, if anything,
was something else entirely.
It was a matter of location.

I stood in a place in which certain influences converged.
It was this place of intersection that was different from that of others,
who experienced a different convergence of influences.

It seemed to me that any person was like an intersection.
Previously, I thought of individuals persons as self-contained units.
Each person, myself included, was an enclosed world.

But now I realized that each person, myself included,
was actually a knot, an intersection, a connecting point, in a network.
Just as a net consists of strings tied together,
each knot in the net was each person in a community.
I began to see that we were more like a membrane, a network.

A mesh of blood vessels comes to mind.
Or a road system with intersections as the place where the roads connect.
Or a neighborhood, with each home a whole within the whole.

This notion of connection, of connectivity,
is that of the Vine and the Branches.
Life continues when we are connected to the vine, and thus to each other.
In this famous passage, everything is said to depend on being connected.

The classic word that keeps repeating is "abide"
—Abide in me, as I abide in you.

Today it is translated "remain," which seems to me thinner and weaker.
"Remain" is a word we use for what is left over,
what happens when we miss our ride.
But the meaning of "abide" is to be connected.

The Vine is a network, and mesh of relationships,
that depend on a primary connection to the source.
"Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own
unless it remains on the vine,
so neither can you unless you remain in me."

Which is to say that this image of the Vine and the Branches
speaks to a vision of community that is more than a collective,
more than a incidental group of supreme individuals
in the same place at the same time
because that was when the event was planned.
That is when the meeting was set.
That was when Mass was scheduled.

To return to the image of John Donne, the Anglican priest:
No one of us is an island, entire of itself.
We are all a part of the main, a piece of the continent.

We are members of a life community,
and for us that means drawing life from a common faith,
and in this Eucharist, not only one Bread, but the common Cup.

We are all part of the one Body of Christ,
branches of the One Vine.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 6, 2018

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48	Peter baptizes Cornelius and family
Psalm 98:1-4	The Lord has revealed to the nations
1 John 4:7-10	God is love; let us love one another
John 15:9-17	My commandment: love one another

A major topic of consternation and debate in the public world of today
is the role of religion, especially in relation to political life.
There are insistent voices in the social media, print media, and all the other media,
that propose we should exclude religion from any influence in public life.

This week, for instance, Rev. Pat Conroy, SJ,
was fired from his position as house chaplain in the US Congress.
He had been warned by House Speaker, Paul Ryan,
to keep religion away from politics.

He was rehired, as you know, after many accused Ryan of objecting
to the chaplain's gospel-based concern for the poor and outcast in his prayers.
The implication was that gospel-based values were good, and to be promoted.
Some felt that criticisms of his role were anti-Catholic,
insofar as they felt that a chaplain who had children
could be a better counselor.

Later in the week, at the state level, the governor of Iowa signed a bill
that would restrict abortions in this state more than any other.
Once a heart beat was detected in the unborn fetus,
abortion is prohibited, except in extreme cases.

The argument is that if the cessation of a heart beat signals the death of a person,
the beginning of a heartbeat signals the beginning of personal life.
The new law is frankly proposed to invite a lawsuit, which is already in the works,
so as to bring the case to the Supreme Court,
and perhaps overrule or modify Roe vs. Wade,
the court decision that legalized abortion.

Again there was, and is, a reaction against the decision,
on the grounds that religion is unfairly and unjustly impacting politics and public life.

Again, we hear that we should keep religion out of politics.
But now the roles are reversed.

The outcries come from the other side of the congressional aisle.
Those who defended Father Conroy, and his religious beliefs,
now find religious beliefs oppressive, and not to be tolerated.

Certainly religion has been a cause of division and rancor in our public life.
Some see it as the root of all evil,
a role that was previously given to the love of money.

Others insist the old way of looking at it is more accurate.

And religion has historically been a source of domination and oppression.
Who cannot think of religious wars?
Some would point out that this is natural,
since religion involves the most deeply held convictions in a social group,
and therefore such convictions are likely to generate deep oppositions.

And more recently we are becoming more conscious
of the way in which Christian missionaries,
who spread across the world in centuries previous, were inadvertently
supporting the program of world conquest of Western imperialism.
In saving the world, they were also helping the culture of the West dominate.

No doubt they were unable to distinguish between domination and salvation,
seeing them as two sides of bringing them to enlightenment.
But today we see the dark side as well.

Religion is getting a bad reputation.
Some reject it in favor of spirituality.
My take on that contrast may be wrong, but it seems to me
that this is to replace a common faith with a private one.
Which in my mind is a triumph of individualism, and the American way.

With all of that, we come to the Scriptures for today.
And what do we find? God is love.
That surely is good news.
And it is news worth spreading.

If this is at the heart of mission, and not constraint,
or guilt obsession, or cultural domination, it is good news.
But it would seem that sometimes the good news gets lost.

Recently I have been reading Sr. Pat Farrell's book, *A Vine Transplanted*,
which is the story of the Dubuque Franciscan presence in Latin America
in the last 50 years.
This is an impressive story.
And it is one congregation, one community outreach, among many such.

Many American congregations, priests as well as nuns,
answered a call to evangelize in Latin America.
And there were others as well as American missionaries.
Irish, for example.

And something happened.
While the programs were innocent enough in the beginning,
part of the party line, not conscious of the way their efforts
were unwittingly coinciding with government programs
that were ultimately oppressive, this changed.
Consciousness-raising occurred.

They remembered that God is love.

And working that out, they discovered that there were forces and influences
that did not appreciate their efforts in promoting this.

Especially insofar as it meant waking up sleeping populations,
who had come to be inured to the difficulties of living life without respect,
or often without basic means of survival,
but now raising their expectations in ways in which
certain kinds of authority found inconvenient.

God is love, and whoever is without love does not know God.
And so "mission" was found to have other meaning than what it seemed at first.

And there is more:
"If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love,"
and "This I command you: love one another."
And "No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends."

And this happened also.
Not only committing one's life to spreading this truth,
but even at times paying for it with the ultimate price.
As Jesus does in the Gospel.

One obvious example is one of Dubuque's own priests, Fr. Ray Herman,
killed in Bolivia for his subversive, quiet activity
of service and support of the poor.

During the Easter season, the book of Acts of the Apostles
has been tracing the original movement out from Jerusalem,
the original mission to the world.
It too has been at some cost.

The story of Acts is the beginning of the mission
and the scriptural warrant for Christian mission.
But what are they taking to the world? What drives them outward?
Surely it is the news that God is love,
and not the need to provide religious cover for the imperial conquest of the world.

Today we have come to the story of Cornelius.
It is at the heart of the mission.
Peter had a vision, which happened just earlier.
No food was to be considered unclean, he was told.

And now he comes to the non-Jewish, Gentile, Cornelius, a Centurion,
an officer in the Roman army occupying the land of Judah.
And he has a major realization.

"In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.
Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts justly is acceptable to him."

The barriers are removed—in this case the kosher food laws,
retained for the Jewish community,
but not imposed on the Gentiles to whom they are reaching out.

The barriers are removed, but the recognition is given them
—in every nation whoever fears God and acts justly is acceptable to him.

Or as John put it more simply,
God is love,
and this is my commandment: love one another.

The Ascension of the Lord

May 13, 2018

Acts 1:1-11	Jesus ascends to heaven
Psalm 47:2-9	God has gone up with a shout
Ephesians 1:17-23	Seated at the right hand
Mark 16:15-20	Taken up into heaven

The Ascension marks the end of the story of Jesus of Nazareth
and the beginning of the time of the Risen Lord.
It is indicated in Scripture passages about mounting his throne to shouts of joy.
Lines from Ephesians say that God has raised him from the dead,
seating him at his right hand in the heavens,
far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion.

The image is one of completing one's task,
returning with the evidence,
and receiving the deserved honors as a result.
The work is done, and the worker is rewarded.

The message is similar to, but different,
from another biblical kind of speech, that of apocalyptic.
In apocalyptic language, we find assurances of consolation.
We are told that there is a great struggle in progress,
and although things look bad, as if we have no hope, the truth is quite different.

The greater forces are those of truth and faith, and they will win in the end.
We are in the midst of a struggle.
But we are not to be deceived by the apparent success of the forces of evil,
for that is an illusion.
God will win out. Be reassured.

That is the language of apocalyptic.
We are in the midst of a battle.

But today we hear the language of Ascension.
The battle is already over, no longer in progress.
The work is done. The future is assured.
There are matters that need to be cleaned up, but the victory is won,
the new day has arrived.

And yet, we wonder. It doesn't seem like the new day has arrived.
It doesn't appear that the battle has been won, is over and done.

So perhaps we can put it another way.
For even in the worrisome struggle we find signs of the victory.

Exhibit A. Today is Mother's Day.

We are accustomed to thinking about this in terms of greeting cards
and gestures like breakfast in bed.
Yesterday I saw a father with his two young kids
reading the offerings in the card aisle at the grocery store.

Anna Jarvis founded the American celebration of Mother's Day in 1905,
the year her mother Ann Reeves Jarvis died.
Her mother was a peace activist,
who cared for the wounded on each side during the Civil War.
She founded Mother's Day Work Clubs which attended to public health issues.
Anna wanted to honor her mother, and started the holiday.
It has good roots, in other words.

It has become commercialized. But we have noticed that.
On this day we not only honor our mothers,
we not only honor the peace activists connected to its history,
but we also honor what mothers bring to our human experience.

Of course there are exceptions,
but mothers not only symbolize unconditional love,
they also bring it alive in our experience.
They keep it alive as part of our experience of being human.

We have feuds, we have wars. But we also have mothers.
They keep us aware of compassion, of the need to see those we oppose
as also children of perhaps another clan.
Mother's Day reminds us that among other elements,
compassion, care, solicitude—these are also in our genes,
and possible ways of behaving in our world.

That we celebrate Ascension on the same day tells us
that this part of our experience is locked in as the true reality,
the victory that has been won, the crown that has been fitted.

Exhibit B.
Yesterday many of you, with others, traveled to Postville,
to put on record and to honor
the 10th anniversary of the raid against immigrants
—to date the largest in the States.

On the one hand, this seems a futile effort,
especially since this week we had another at Mount Pleasant,
in which 32 were arrested. So the pattern continues.

But not without notice.
Postville did not disappear into the past. It is still alive.
And that is because we are keeping it alive.
The ceremony was a protest on behalf of humanity

and against the forces that diminish and degrade our common humanity.

Fighting fire with fire, as our president likes to put it, is to keep the fire alive.
Peaceful opposition exhibits an alternative to the fire.
It is a flame that lights rather than consumes.
And keeping the flame alive is to refuse to forget,
and to refuse to accept the inhumanity of that event. And events like it.

The Ascension in this memorial is that the offense is not forgotten,
it does not fade into history,
lost and no longer a recognized part of our present condition.
The act of keeping it alive is an act of maintaining hope.

Today, in the passage about the Ascension from Acts of the Apostles,
we hear those gathered with Jesus ask a question:
"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

We can imagine that they were thinking
that there is little time left for that to happen.
They are looking for the restoration of justice,
the return to the time when Israel was the kingdom of God's people,
and not a subject of the Roman Empire.

They were looking for any kind of evidence that tells them
that God is on their side, that God has not forgotten them.
They have ideas about what God can do for them,
and they want to know when they will have the world
the way they desire it to be.

Jesus' answer seems evasive, but it is on the mark.
"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."

The struggle continues, but it is in its mopping-up phase.
The forces of evil have already lost, though they are not aware of that.
We are to be confident of that,
and witness to the power of the Spirit in the world, wherever we may be.

Witnesses of peaceful resolution of conflict,
Witnesses of the power of compassion,
Witnesses to a world that needs that news, and otherwise unknowing,
recognizes its need only when it experiences the good it brings.

The power to which we witness is the power of compassion,
the power of peaceful interaction in times of conflict,
the power of living in grace

and honoring our common humanity.

Pentecost Sunday - Mass during the Day

May 20, 2018

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

Sometimes the planets align.
And this year the holy seasons come together.

As the Muslim world begins its celebration of Ramadan,
Jews and Christians celebrate the feast of Shavuot, or Pentecost.
Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, is a week of weeks,
seven times seven, or 49 days, from the time of Passover.

This was the occasion for the gathering at Pentecost
—50 days (close enough)—of the Jews in the story of Acts.
They had come to Jerusalem for the feast, and then something happened.
The Spirit arrived upon the community gathered in the upper room.

With that the movement began.
They left the room and ventured out into the streets and avenues of the city,
speaking in tongues, the language of the Spirit.

Luke tells the story in language that evokes the story of the Tower of Babel,
which in the Greek Bible is called the Tower of Confusion.
But the confusion of the many languages is reversed,
and an image of oneness projected upon the gathering,
and upon the world of human beings.

The Acts of the Apostles begins here, and then reaches out into the world.
While the Christian missionary movement has often
been used to justify Western imperialism,
that is not what is happening here.

Significantly, the first thing that happens is Peter's healing of a paralyzed man.
It signals a mission to the marginal, the disregarded,
those at the edge of the picture begging for alms.
It is a mission of witness to a compassionate God.

It stands in dramatic contrast to what we are witnessing in the world today,
with its entrenchment in tribal enclaves.

In Gaza, as Ramadan begins,
Muslim Palestinians in unarmed protest are being shot by Israeli gunfire.
In America, white supremacists are building a propaganda campaign against Jews.
We see the fears of white supremacist men

are being acted out on vulnerable populations,
most vividly by mass shootings at schools.

And most prominently, a campaign against immigrants
is being mandated at official levels in this country, and brutally put into practice
by ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement
of the Department of Homeland Security.

"Homeland security" seems to be the byword in so much of this.
Not only in America, but in Europe.
Brexit expresses the fears of an older generation in England.
In continental Europe, fierce reactions are building
against the wave of immigrants from the war-ravaged areas
in the Middle East and Africa.

Violence increases, as partisans fear for their lives.
But perhaps another fear, just as deep, is what drives them
—the fear of lost identity.
What does it mean to be British?
What does it mean to be Italian, or Austrian?
Or American?

The fear in many quarters is that we are losing
our heritages, our history, what makes us who we are.
An older generation fears that a younger generation
is not committed to carrying on the tradition.
And it will then disappear.

It is not enough to appeal to a world community, a world family,
since that seems so abstract, theoretical.
The tribe, on the other hand, is concrete, tangible,
with its common symbols, its touchstones,
its slang, its dialect, its kitchen recipes, its pubs and bars.

And so it appears in the church as well.
Reactions against change are so often driven by the fear
that something essential is being lost
—something essential to who we are, what we stand for.

The loss of identity is a real fear, because is it a real experience.
And it is a common one.
And yet our experience as well is that loss of identity
is the way to discovering another, perhaps truer,
understanding of who we are.

It is an aspect of growing older.
Old self-images die away, or are discarded as not true.
And we come into a sense of a better understanding of ourselves.

When people marry, they visibly discard an old identity
in favor of another, one which they generally prefer,
and which strikes them as closer to the reality.
They leave one life behind, and enter into another,
often with different friends and different ways of celebrating life.

Often a sense of vocation, a calling, is avoided
because it threatens to replace one's familiar self
with another that appears from this vantage point as artificial and false.
But when it is accepted and explored it becomes validated
as an authentic sense of self—God calling us to ourselves.

And as with individuals, so with communities.
The old justifications fade, and newer ones present themselves.
And in answering to those possibilities,
so often a sense of authentic commitment follows.

The promise of the new is hidden until it arrives.
So the fear is real.
And the only way forward is often a leap of faith.

In the Pentecost story, the community of Jesus followers
is at a loss, at a dead end.
They are gathered, at the behest of Peter.
And the Risen Christ has made a number of appearances.
But where do they go from here?
The answer to this question is that they go out to the world.
But they cannot as yet.

With the coming of the Spirit, something is released.
They are emboldened, driven, and move out of the upper room,
out of the city, out of Judea,
out to the larger world.

Their message is one of forgiveness, for God is love.
It is one of healing, as Jesus healed, restoring lives and communities.

With the coming of the Spirit,
they realize that the loss experienced on Good Friday
has made possible the new life of Easter Sunday.
The community that they were, disciples of Jesus,
has been reborn as the community that they are now
—apostles witnessing to the new life.

Loss of identity is one way of dying.
And it is fearful and is understandably resisted with all one's might.
But it is only by letting go, that the new possibility is realized.
Which is another meaning for Jesus' words:

If you love your life you will lose it;

but if you lose your life for my sake and that of the gospel,
you will find it. (Mark 8:35)

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

May 27, 2018

Deuteronomy 4:32-42, 29-40 The One God
Psalm 33:3-6, 9. 18-22 Creator and Deliverer
Romans 8:14-17 God, Christ, Spirit
Matthew 28:16-20 Father, Son, Holy Spirit

The special seasons of the church year end today in a great doxology,
like the Glory Be that ends a decade of the rosary.
We brings things to a close with a prayer to the Trinity.

The revelation of the Holy Trinity came in stages.
In the Old Testament we find the one God.
In the New Testament, the three Persons
—shown in the way they affect the faith community.

It is only with the Trinitarian Councils in the fourth century
that we have consideration of the relation of the three Persons among themselves
in the divine community of the Trinity.

In the Liturgy of the Word today we are concerned
only with the first two of these three moments.
The one God, and the three Persons.
When we think of the Trinity, we think of the Three Persons.

But the full formulation is three Persons in one God.
The one God is part of the mystery.

The Old Testament shows us a people that gradually
came to the realization of the oneness of God.

In the course of its history as a covenant of tribes and then a kingdom,
Yahweh was seen as the high God.
The existence of other gods was not questioned
so much as they were considered to be powerlessness.
God was champion over all their neighbors, with their army of gods.

It was only toward the end of the kingship that things came clearer.
When the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians,
what traditions they could rescue were preserved
by taking them to the temple in the southern kingdom of Judah.

There they were put in the Temple archives.
Among these items was the scroll of Deuteronomy,
hidden in this “attic” of the nation.

The book of II Kings tells us that a century later,
the scroll was discovered by the priests, and shown to King Josiah.
This began what people today call the Deuteronomic Reform.
It was comprehensive, and widely supported.

The reform consisted of removing all foreign idols,
and all rural shrines even those of Yahweh himself, in favor of the one Temple.
The notion was "one Temple for the one God."

It was not long after the death of Josiah, however,
that Jerusalem itself was conquered by Babylon, and the kingdom came to an end.
However, the Deuteronomic reform influenced the people in exile,
as they reflected on the uniqueness of God,
and assembled the texts that would later become the Old Testament.

The faith struggle that culminated in belief in one God
was as difficult as it was important. And it was hugely important.
It became in Jewish consciousness their gift to the world,
something the world sorely needed.

A recent article in the New Yorker by the poet and critic Adam Kirsch,
called "Tales of the Tribe," identifies that gift to the world
as "ethical monotheism and messianic hope."

The great Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz put it this way:

> "The [need] is to regard the highest Being as one and unique,
> and as the essence of all ethical perfections,
> and to worship it as the Godhead
> —in a single word, Monotheism in the widest acceptation of the word. … .
> If Zeus is a god, licentiousness is no sin.
> If Aphrodite is a goddess, chastity cannot be a virtue."

Josiah's reform was a powerful statement insisting on monotheism.
But a difficulty emerged.
When worship is restricted to the Temple,
it leaves a vacuum for worship at the local level.
For God comes into our lives at different levels, in different ways.
This vacuum, ironically, is one way in which the Old Testament
prepares for the New Testament revelation of the Trinity.

In the Gospels and Letters of Paul, we see how the different Persons
speak to different aspects of our faith experience.
In the Father, we relate to the high God, the creator of all.
This resonates with our sense of the vast universe, the immense created world.

In the Son, we turn to our experience of the God of History.
In Jesus of Nazareth God has entered the human world of interaction
and politics, which is the name that history has when it is happening.
In the Holy Spirit, we have the presence of God in the believing community,
the life-giving presence that imparts hope to our feeble enterprises
that otherwise seem doomed to fail.

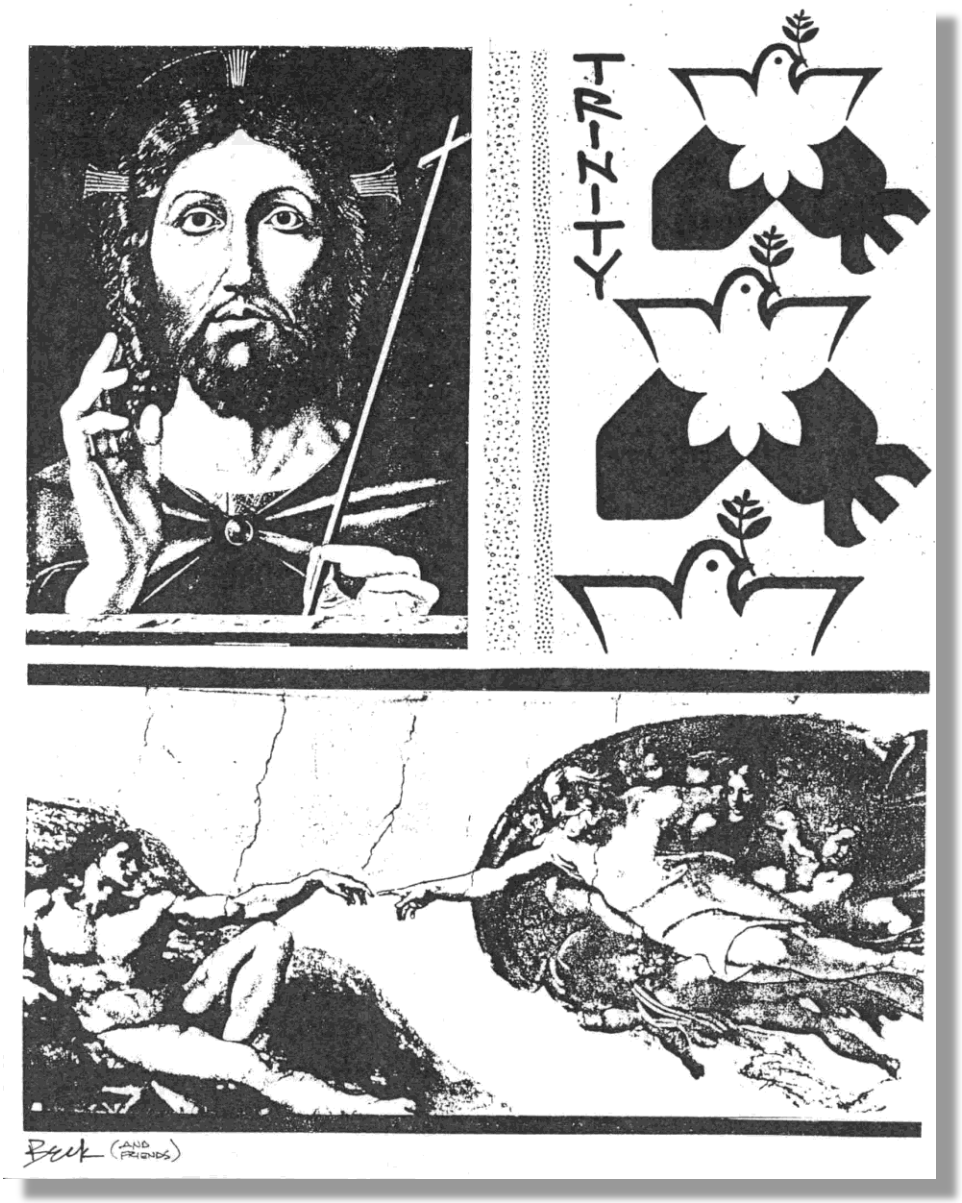
In the God of Creation, **the first Person**,

we find a faith grasp on the care of the planet.
We are the fullest expression of God-directed evolution.
If there is other articulate, self-conscious life in the universe,
we have not yet discovered it.
Thus far, we are the flower of consciousness
which the movement of evolving awareness in the mute, inarticulate world.
We are the mind of creation, and are appointed to mind creation.
As stewards of creation, we are God's active emissaries,
custodians, wardens of the realm.

In the God of History, **the second Person**,
we are tasked with making justice social and society just.
We are to take the gospel into the courts and the courtyards,
the highways and byways, the senates and the slums.
In the Son of God, the prophetic fire of the Hebrew Scriptures comes to a fullness,
and passes it on to us, bringing God into our own history.

In the Spirit, **the third Person**, the life of the Community,
we are constrained to live the life we declare to others.
We witness here in living what we witness elsewhere in words.
In the life of the Spirit, the utopian becomes possible as hope.
What seems impossible is given possibility,
and turned into something worth living toward.

And in **the Oneness of God**, we discover ourselves to be one people,
one common movement in the life of God's creation.
We are called to strive for a shared future in which we can all prosper.
We are all children of God.
In the one God, we are one human family.


TRINITY
Beck (AND FRIENDS)

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

June 3, 2018

Exodus 24:3-8	Ratifying the Sinai Covenant
Psalm 116:12-13, 15-18	The cup of salvation
Hebrews 9:11-15	Mediator of a new covenant
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26	The Last Supper

We used to call today's feast Corpus Christi.
That is, the Body of Christ.

But now we call it the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.
We are now paying attention to the Blood as well as the Body.
And this year, the imagery of the feast focuses on the Blood,
perhaps as part of the renewal that restored the shared Cup to the liturgy.

Now our attention is divided. Body and Blood.
Bread and Wine. Loaf and Cup.

Dichotomies and Contrasts.
They tend to dominate the feast.
And this division is found in the very understanding of it.
For we bring two theologies to the liturgy.

For some it is the final and most complete expression of Christian life.
For others it is the beginning that reaches out into the world, transforming it.

The first leave behind the secular in order to enter the realm of the holy.
For them, the liturgical setting represents the life of heaven to come,
and our eternal reward will be a version of the liturgy,
as in the book of Revelation.

The second think of it as consecrating the commonplace.
For them the goal of Christian life is not in the liturgy, but in the world,
which itself needs transformation.
Our theological language tends to finesse the two
when it says that the liturgy is the source and culmination of Christian life.

And then there is the Cup and the Chalice,
the debate that raised hackles in the past few years.

The Bible says Cup, but the Latin liturgy says Chalice,
and some feel that the Latin is the criterion for worship,
since we are, they say, a Latin rite.

Others point out that chalice may be the container,
but the cup is the contents as well.
We drink the cup, but drink *from* the chalice.

But behind this it a difference of opinion about the theology of the liturgy.
For those who emphasize the holiness of the moment,
the moment needs to be honored with gold and jeweled ornaments.
Not to honor what is happening here is to desecrate the moment.

For others, who believe that the purpose is to consecrate the commonplace,
it is important that the commonplace be the place we begin.
Ordinary cups and ordinary bread are to be consecrated
and become the Body and Blood of Christ.
And this is the sacramental meaning of the action.

To begin with special bread and ornamented chalice is to avoid the commonplace,
and already begin with exalted and uncommon materials.

And meanwhile this unfolds in a Liturgy that is both Word and Eucharist.
The feast concentrates on the Eucharist,
for is this not where the sacrament is?
Do we not think that the sacrament concerns the Bread and Wine,
the Body and Blood, and not the Word?
And yet Christ is present in the Word.

Part of this is historical, I suspect,
with the post-Reformation division between Protestants and Catholics,
the first specializing in the Word
and the second centering their devotion in the Eucharist.

We can ask our Protestant friends,
What is the Word without the Eucharist?
But we can also ask ourselves, What is the Eucharist without the Word?
Is it not mute? Unspoken and unthought?

Can we have the heart without the head,
or the head without the heart?

Of course, as you are well aware, I have devoted my own life to the Word.
In that I may differ from other Catholic priests
whose devotion is primarily Eucharistic,
and who find in this feast a celebration and a warrant for that spirituality.
So I make my disclaimers
and repeat that we need both a head and a heart.

But behind all this I find something else.
When I was younger, my life was impacted by someone
who was very pious and very strict. The strictness was not kind.
What I learned was that piety is not pity,
and what seems to be devotion need not come to mean compassion.

So it comes down to what it means to have faith.
Faith is not first of all an intellectual exercise, listing items to accept as true.

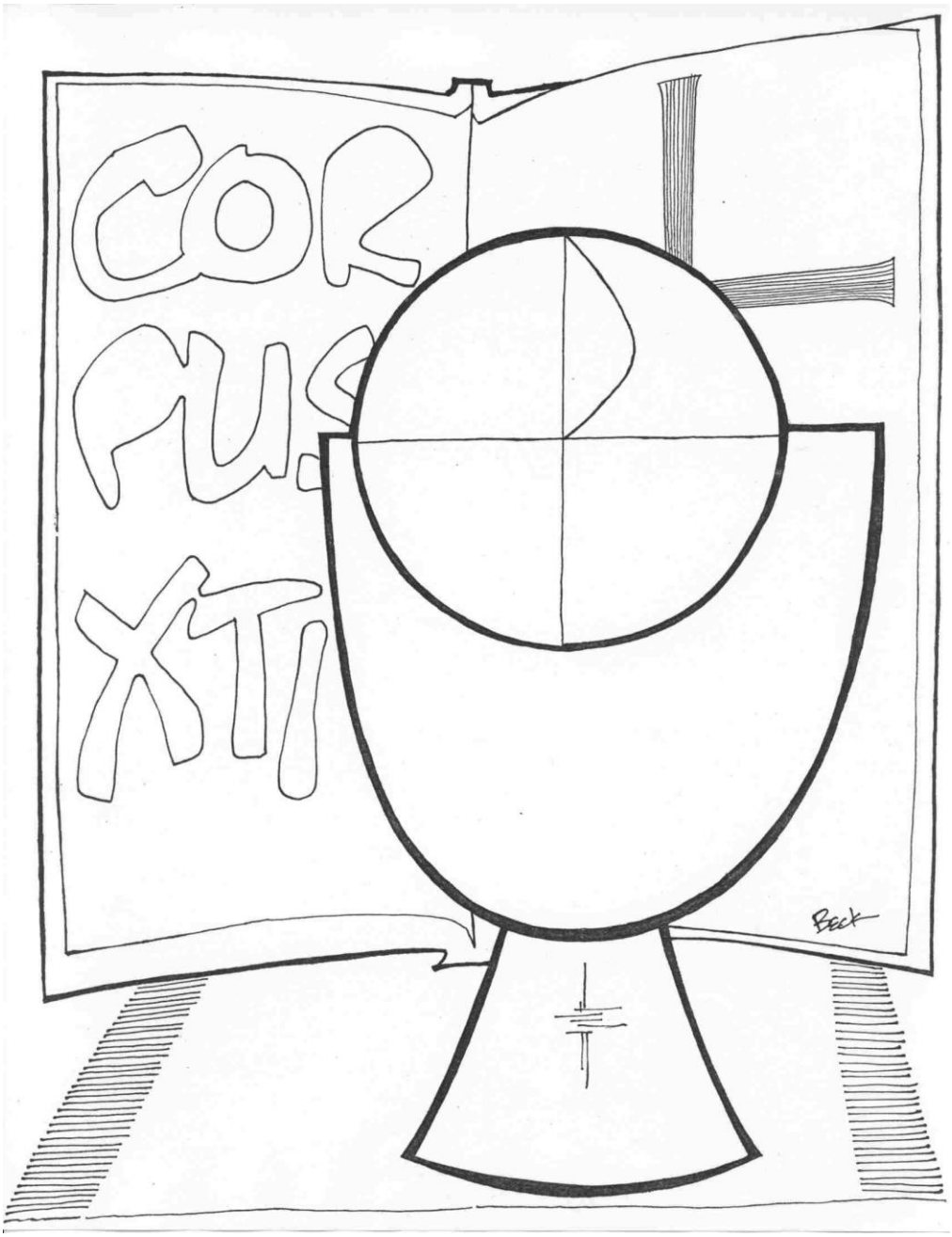
At least not in the biblical sense.

Rather it is a matter of trust.
It means to trust God with your life.
It is a matter of allowing God to direct your life,
and trust that God has your good in mind.

Trusting God with your life.
And there perhaps the divisions come together.
Whether a life of service or contemplation,
of action or of quiet devotion,
either shows a life directed by trust in God, and meaningless otherwise.

Behind the motion and devotion of the liturgy,
whether the feast be Corpus Christi for the Holy Body and Blood of Christ,
lies the common belief that in the sacrament the life-giving God has given us life,

and its most compelling sign
is in the prayer and shared life we celebrate today.


COR
PUS
XTI
Beck

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 10, 2018

Genesis 3:9-15	The tree in the garden
Psalm 130:1-8	From the depths I cry
2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1	The unseen glory
Mark 3:20-35	Can Satan drive out Satan?

"Here are my mother and my brothers.
For whoever does the will of God
is my brother and sister and mother."

Whoever does the will of God.
What does it mean to do the will of God?
The story of Adam and Eve is something of a parable about doing the will of God.
The part about eating the fruit of the tree is deliberately allegorical,
leaving open the question of the meaning of doing God's will.

We can leave aside, for now, interesting parts of the story.
The way they keep passing the blame onto others,
so characteristic of the human character, that is interesting,
but today we are looking at what it means to do the will of God.

The story locates the harm we experience in the realm of free choice.
It began with the first couple, so it seems.
But where did the serpent, with his bad ideas, come from?

Also, we can see that there are certain threads running through the readings for today.
Not only the serpent, reappearing as Beelzebul in the Gospel, but also the family
—the first family and the family of Jesus.
And the true family is "whoever does the will of God."

And so we return to the main theme.
What does it mean to do the will of God?

This week, some events on the national scene help to focus this question.
First of all, there were a couple of high-profile suicides that made the news.
The fashion designer, Kate Spade, and the TV chef, Anthony Bourdain,
startled the world with their untimely deaths,
and sparked the fear of copycat suicides.

An outpouring of sympathy was matched with a call
for dealing more effectively with depression and any other causes
that might lead to self-imposed death. These responses were encouraging.
And at the same time, our society finds itself conflicted on this point.
In many parts of America and the larger world,
physician-assisted suicide is a gaining acceptance.

The pressing question rises as to what the "right to die" means.
Do I have ownership of my own life?
Can I delegate others to arrange for me to die?
What does our religious tradition have to say about this?
And does it matter?

On another front this week,
the Supreme Court upheld the right of Jake Williams, a Colorado baker,
to refuse to make a cake for a gay wedding.
The responses were predictably partisan.
On one side, comparisons were drawn to denying African Americans
the front of the bus, or the lunch counters of Greensboro, North Carolina.

Others pointed to the traditional refusal of Catholic hospitals to perform abortions,
which would clearly be a violation of long established religious belief.
In some cases it seems justified, but apparently not all.

As an article in *Commonweal Magazine*
("The Case for Conscience:
The Supreme Court's Ruling in 'Masterpiece Cakeshop'" by Paul Moses),
pointed out this week that three of the judges who backed same-sex marriage in 2015
——Anthony Kennedy, Elena Kagan, and Stephen Breyer—
"recognized baker Jack Phillips's right of conscience
to refuse to create a cake for the wedding of two men,"
making the decision a solid 7-2.
Their argument was based on the sincerity of the baker in his beliefs.

They also noted the prosecutor's statement
that described Phillip's religious belief as "a despicable piece of rhetoric"
used to justify discrimination.
Justice Kennedy responded to this statement as follows:
"To describe a man's faith
as 'one of the most despicable pieces of rhetoric that people can use'
is to disparage his religion in at least two distinct ways:
by describing it as despicable, and also by characterizing it as merely rhetorical
—something insubstantial and even insincere …

"This sentiment is inappropriate
for a Commission charged with the solemn responsibility
of fair and neutral enforcement of Colorado's anti-discrimination law
—a law that protects discrimination on the basis of religion
as well as sexual orientation."

We recognize that today religion has no automatic social endorsement
as something sincere and enlightened.
Some of this is due to bad behavior
on the part of members of, and authorities in, the church.
In this part we experience a chastening humility.

In other parts, we see a growing pushback against religion,
often using evangelical versions of Christianity as the model.
Sometimes this means championing scientific truth against religious belief,
ignoring the limits of science
and the human values of non-scientific parts of culture,
including faith communities.

For what it may say to this, it is worth remembering
that Pope Francis was at one time a science teacher,
and has a certificate in chemistry.
He has repeatedly insisted on the need for science education.
There is not a contradiction between science and religion, in our understanding.

Which brings us back to the original question,
what does it mean to belong to the family
that is identified by doing the will of God?

My take on this is that it is a gift and a liberation.
If I experience my life as a gift given, and I do,
then I recognize that while I am in charge of my life,
I am not the author of it.

In the creation story, there first couple were made in the image of God,
to do the work of God, and co-creators.
But they were not God. This is a liberating discovery.
I am free to do what must be done,
without constantly agonizing about the consequences.
In the story we just heard, the first couple discovered they were naked.
What I see here is the discovery on their true nature,
in its vulnerabilities as well as strengths.

The self-discovery of our true selves,
something that continues throughout our lives if we are paying attention,
is also a discovery that there is much about us we hadn't known about,
and wouldn't be there if we had been the designer.
We aren't the designers, however.

In short, one of the reasons we join with many who are dismayed at suicide,
is this discovery of our place in the larger scheme of things.
We are not authors of our existence, but instead are custodians of it.
We are the gift, and God is the gift-giver.

And one of the reasons we have a tradition of freedom of religion
is because we respect the religious beliefs of others,
even when we disagree with them.

We honor the place of faith in our lives
as contributing something not found elsewhere,
namely, the truth of where we stand in the world, as creatures and co-creators,
freely doing the will of God,

with the rest of that family.

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 17, 2018

Ezekiel 17:22-24	Parable of the mighty cedar tree
Psalm 92:2-3, 13-16	Like a cedar of Lebanon …
2 Corinthians 5:6-10	We are always courageous
Mark 4:26-34	Parables, seeds scattered and small

The irony is that it is Father's Day.
The cruel treatment of immigrant children separated from their parents
that we heard about this week would be dreadful news at any time,
but in the week of Father's Day adds a special painful irony.

The news is indeed dreadful.
In six weeks, about 2000 children have been separated form their parents
on the southern border of the U.S.
Many kept in caged quarters in an abandoned Walmart store.
There is a report of a nursing mother being separated from her child.
Among the children are Brazilians who speak Portuguese rather than Spanish,
and cannot understand what is being told them.

The U.S. bishops began their spring assembly
with harsh words against separating children from their families.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, speaking in his capacity
as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops,
said “The Attorney General's recent decision elicits deep concern
because it potentially strips asylum from many women who lack adequate protection.
These vulnerable women will now face return to the extreme dangers
of domestic violence in their home country.”

Meanwhile, the Attorney General defended the practice
by citing Romans 13:1-7,
a passage consistently cited by authorities who wish to coerce people of faith.
The passage maintains that true authority comes from God.
One suspects that if it does not come from God, it is not true authority.

We can only hope that finally this means
that the creeping authoritarianism of the present Administration
has crossed a line that will sufficiently alert people to what is happening,
and that long due measures will be taken.
Meanwhile, it is Father’s Day.
It is the event that causes advertisers to reinforce the stereotypes of adult males.
Gift ideas range beyond neckties to gadgets and handy tools.
The stereotypes serve as a reminder
that parenting roles are shifting in today’s world.
And that the meaning of masculinity is changing with that.

But this particular social transition is not always going so well.
The record of relatively young men lost to the world,
through drugs or suicide, or simple despair, is sobering.
The defiant movement of white male supremacy is asserting its ugly claims.
Meanwhile, our prisons are being filled with men who are not white.

Woman are making the difficult transition to positions of authority,
as indicated by the large number
of female political candidates for the coming elections.
And men are frequently wondering what they are to do now.

The rules for being male and adult are confusing right now.
And the tradition of autocratic rule is being challenged.
There are hints and signals where we go from here, but it is still unclear.

And so, when we survey the world of this past week,
we come to the readings for today with questions.
What do they say to us?

I think these scripture passages are parables for what is happening in our midst.
They literally are parables!
Parables are mysterious and enigmatic by design.
They suggest meanings, imply answers. But it helps to put them in context.

The parables from the prophet Ezekiel and the Gospel of Mark have a history,
a tradition of story telling behind them.

In other places in the Old Testament
—the 31st chapter of Ezekiel and the 4th chapter of Daniel—
we glimpse this tradition.

There we find the image of the great cedars of Lebanon,
the most magnificent trees these people knew,
provided symbols of the great empires of the world.

They were magnificent,
and in their might and power they provided safety and shelter.
The birds of the air made nests in their branches.

This is the tradition behind the passage we heard from Ezekiel today.
It promises that one day a branch will be taken from the Lebanon cedar
and planted in Jerusalem, and there become a mighty tree.

Ezekiel is promising a devastated people in exile that one day
it will be their turn to be powerful and dominant.
Jerusalem will be the tree where the birds of the air
will find rest among its branches.

It is this dream of power and influence
that lies behind Jesus' parable of the mustard seed.

The dead give-away is in the lines,
"and puts forth large branches,
so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade."
What the U.S. bishops call "asylum" and "adequate protection."

Often, caught in the shifting of roles of women and men,
we are sensitive to sexist language.
In the gospels, that sometimes means translating Jesus' word "kingdom"
—as in Kingdom of God—
with another word—Reign, the reign of God.
However, as well intentioned as this may be,
it prevents us from seeing how Jesus is subverting the notion of kingdom.

If the kingdom is like a mustard plant, rather than a mighty tree,
we are leaving behind the pomp and circumstance, the power and the glory,
the dominance and coercion of the mighty power.
We are saying we do not need an empire to provide care and shelter.
Even with the mustard plant there is shade for the birds of the air.
The kingdom of God is not what the world, or the culture, conceives as a kingdom.

There is a transition in Jesus' vision of the good news
that is not to be found in the courts of great authority.
And it coordinates with changes in our society today,
as men and women try to find a balance in recognition of each other's full humanity.

Perhaps this enables us to understand events of this week.

We seem to be in a backlash, looking back
to times that seemed simpler and somehow more right.
And so we are replaying that memory script.

And in national politics, we are playing a version of the masculine authority
purged from anything that might seem feminine,
that is, "feminine" in the traditional sense.

So it is that David Brooks, the conservative voice of the *NY Times* opinion columns,
was heard on the PBS Newshour saying,
"If you take qualities like **affection, mercy, charity, compassion, empathy**
out of an administration, you wind up with policies like this."

Affection, mercy, charity, compassion, empathy.
Traditionally associated with the gifts of women.

But on this basis
removing these from the hyper-masculine conceptions of authority
produces nothing but a caricature.
And it underlines the need for the ongoing chances in our society.

It also is suggested in the parables of Jesus, with their vision of a new order,
under the title of "the Kingdom of God."

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 1, 2018

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24 God made us imperishable
Psalm 30:2, 4-6, 11-13 You changed my mourning into dancing
2 Corinthians 8:9, 13-15 By his poverty you became rich
Mark 5:21-43 Two "daughters," after 12 years

Jesus began his work in the villages of Galilee, his home country.
The first half of the Gospel story shows him working
to restore the depressed spirits and lost hope of the communities there.
He looked to those who were damaged and distraught,
and brought new possibility.
He restored individuals, and bringing them back into the community,
restoring communities, then, as well.

Today we hear about a couple of instances.
One is the father of a 12-year-old girl who is dying.
He is an official at the synagogue.
He has the full support of the synagogue assembly,
but he finds himself turning to Jesus for help.

I do not know what it is like to feel his alarm and fear for his child.
I have never had a child.
I do have friends and family who have lost children.
It has marked them permanently.

My parents lost a daughter at the age of seven—my sister Patricia.
My brother lost a son, Todd, at the age of two.
I have friends who have lost adult sons.
They are changed in a way that will never undo itself.

For a long time, a story circulated in our family
about my grandfather's older brother. I have told it here before.
When my grandfather's family was emigrating to the States,
they entered through Montreal, Canada.
This was before my grandfather was born.
There was some confusion as they boarded the train to enter the United States.
There was a language problem,
and a miscalculation of departure times, or boarding stations.
In any case, my grandfather's brother, who was very young, was lost.
He disappeared and was never seen again.

This event made a deep impression on me.
A few years ago, when a photo was circulating on the social media
of a two-year-old Syrian boy washing up dead on the shore of Greece,
I was reminded of my grandfather's brother,
and a silent grief awoke again.

More recently, as we heard about 2,000 or so children

being separated from their parents by immigration authorities at the U.S. border,
that same feeling welled up again.
I could not imagine how much graver it was for those
who had actually lost their children.

And here I have to make a correction to the record.
My youngest sister, a professor of geology,
and respecter of facts like only scientists can be,
has been doing some serious research into our family history.

This is part of her attempt to gain dual citizenship with the country of Luxembourg,
which requires such research.
She just received word this week, by the way, that she has been accepted.

Among her findings, she informs me,
is that the story about my grandfather's brother is not true.
At least not in the way I just told it.
It turns out that he was sixteen, took off on his own,
and rejoined the family when they got to Chicago.
Well, that certainly takes much of the drama out of the story.

But do you know what?
Even though I now know that the story isn't the way I thought it was,
I still have not been able to shake the feeling I had when I first heard it.
It sticks with me, and the sadness that evokes also stays with me.
I can only imagine what it must be for people who actually have lost their children.
And I think of Jairus, the synagogue official, in that way as well.
A desperate father, a dying child.
A future that looks entirely black.

But the story of Jairus is not the only one today.
We know how, while the entourage was on its way to the house of Jairus,
a woman entered the story. She is desperate.

It appears that the healthcare system of the day has failed her.
"She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors."
I think of difficulties was have today
in managing some of the more obscure details in obtaining healthcare.
I think of the high cost of care and medication we know today.
I think of the woman experiencing the same thing, in her own way.

It says she was afflicted with hemorrhages, that she had a flow of blood.
The account avoids being more specific,
such as identifying the problem as a menstruation disorder,
for that is not quite proper for public, or biblical, talk.
But it helps us appreciate some of the woman's problem.

In all the stories of Jesus bringing people back to health,
there is a moment at the beginning when they specify what it is they need.
The blind man of Jericho says, "Lord, that I may see."

The leper says, “If you will, you can cleanse me.”
But this is missing in the woman’s story.
Instead, she quietly seeks help without elaborating.

One can appreciate her problem.
What if Jesus asks her what she needs.
How can she answer that question, when the problem is so intimate?
Her solution is to avoid the explicit, and quietly touch his cloak,
thinking that will do.
After all, it can’t be worse that her twelve years of dealing with the doctors.

But of course, Jesus insists on talking with her.
With him, there is no healing without personal contact, personal interaction.
That is, the person is engaged, not just the disease.

And here we see something.
First, in this story we see the woman engaged in a problem that is hers, as a woman.
She is not just a typical example of someone who is not well.
It is precisely as a woman she is ill, and as a woman she is addressed.

I may be reading too much into this, but it seems to me
that the story makes the point that Jesus is aware
of the difficulties women have in society.
One of the difficulties is in being recognized in their own right.

And that allows me to notice that we have two women who are suffering here.
One has been ill for twelve years; the other is twelve years old.
But both are called “daughter.”
The word speaks to their relationship to a community, a family.
Jairus comes to Jesus for his daughter, though the mourners dismiss him,
saying, "Your daughter has died.”
And Jesus says to the woman, “Daughter, your faith has saved you.”

Which brings me to the second thing. Faith.
In this part of the gospel, Jesus is encouraging people with the words,
“Do not be afraid; but have faith.”
That is what he says to the child's father and mother.

The opposite of faith, for Jesus, is fear.
It is not as we think of it, where the opposite of faith is doubt.
No, here faith is offered as the substitute for being afraid.

Which means that for Jesus faith is not an intellectual affirmation,
that certain truths are true.
Rather, it is an act of trust, placing one’s cares and hopes,
no matter how dire things seem, in the hands of God.

This is a timely reminder, in my view.
In these days, it is not unlikely that a person can feel hopeless,
that things are getting out of hand.
The examples I mentioned earlier come to mind.

Children endangered, like the daughter of Jairus.
Healthcare issues overwhelming people, like the afflicted woman.
Women in general granted less human worth and respect than their due,
as in the women in the gospel story.

The gospel story backs up its promise of trust in God
by showing Jesus restoring health and life to the afflicted.
God will provide, as the old and somewhat tired saying goes.

And one of the casualties of today's world is the virtue of trust.
But of its nature, trust is not a given, not a calculated risk.
It is an act of faith.

For in continuing the work of Jesus, as his disciples,
restoring communities, rebuilding trust,
we also will experience the truth of the promise.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 8, 2018

Ezekiel 2:2-5	The mission of the prophet
Psalm 123:1-4	To you I lift up my eyes
2 Corinthians 12:7-10	A thorn in the flesh
Mark 6:1-6	Rejected at Nazareth

Not long ago during one of the weekday Masses,
I found myself concluding the homily with the words, "We are Ezekiel."
It was my way of saying that we do the work of the prophets of old,
but for today.

In the readings for today, Ezekiel speaks up.
He is recounting his encounter with God,
which ended with him being called to prophecy.
In the passage we have this morning, God is making it clear
that his people will probably not listen to him.
But that makes no difference.
The words have to be said, whether or not they listen.

Which is to say, there is a value in getting the truth out,
whether or not it gets a welcome reception.
There is no need to make a list of places
that the truth needs to be articulated today.

There is a premium on fudging the truth, or making a private matter.
Only losers tell the truth, say some.
Or act as if that were the case.
Ezekiel might be picking up a similar message in the words today.
God insists, but his word is not encouraging.

So maybe our theme for today
is the importance of the prophetic voice for the safety of the world.
Or maybe it is just about rejection.

The gospel story from Mark is sometimes called "The Rejection at Nazareth."
That is what it is called in my Bible. It is a story we know well.
One gets the impression, in reading it,
that the hometown people could not accept what Jesus was saying
because they knew him growing up.

I am reminded of a friend who once remarked,
"Growing up in Iowa is growing up with 'Who do you think you are?'"
I suspect this is true in a lot of places.
And maybe Nazareth was one of them.

The story is also a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus
in Jerusalem, the central city of his Jewish people.
In this sense, the rejection at Nazareth is paradigmatic of his entire mission.

The other gospels certainly seem to take it that way.
Luke, for instance, who used Mark as the basis for his own Gospel,
moved this episode to the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry.
It is Luke who shows Jesus reading the scroll in the synagogue.

As I was working with John's Gospel,
which does not depend on Mark in the way that Luke and Matthew do,
I found very little verbal connection with the other gospels.
What I did find all seemed to refer to this story.

The references were scattered around,
but the bulk of them were found in chapters seven and eight of John,
where the dispute between Jesus and his opponents get rather hot,
and in fact they try to stone him to death.

There is a way, then, that this story of Jesus in Nazareth
can stand for the entire gospel, at least as a certain aspect of it.
It looks ahead to the Passion and Death of Jesus,
and in that we also find a connection with Ezekiel,
and the struggle of all the prophets.

The New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson,
has explored the prophetic character of Jesus in the Gospel:

"When … the prophetic word issues a challenge
to the values and systems of society,
then the suffering of the prophet who speaks, embodies, and enacts this word
is going to be commensurate to the degree of resistance
generated by the stakeholders in the society's dominant values."

In the Gospel, those stakeholders are the authorities
who oppose what Jesus is doing.

Johnson continues—
"[This] characteristic of the prophet in the biblical tradition derives from the fact
that God's vision for humanity is not always—or even frequently—
popular with everyone. Indeed, the word of God must often be spoken
in the face of oppression and persecution.

The authentic prophet, then, is not one who seeks popularity of acceptance,
but one who speaks boldly before powers perfectly capable of destroying the prophet,
who bears witness to the truth of God's vision for humans
even in the face of those who represent vision hostile to God's."

He is speaking of Jesus, but he could be speaking of Ezekiel as well.
And he is thinking about the prophetic voice in today's world.

In the Gospel, Jesus dies without apparently achieving

the purpose that brought him to Jerusalem.
He had been working among the broken and distraught villages of Galilee,
and that took him to the central city
to charge them with complicity in the suffering of the people.
Their response was to include him among the victims of that society.
It appears that he failed.

For some, his approach fails
because he allows himself to be killed without forcing the change he demands.
What good, in that view, is suffering and dying, if the world is not changed?
We need to fight back, in kind, if necessary.

Recently I have been thinking about this,
and the apparent futility of speaking the truth, if it makes no visible difference,
and those opposed seem not only to refuse to change,
but in fact seem to win the day.
At times it doesn't seem enough simply to name the truth, as God asks of Ezekiel,
if we don't follow through with forcible change.

In response, I began thinking about Thomas Merton.
He spent a considerable amount of energy making connections
between Jesus' story, and the social experiments of Mahatma Gandhi,
and offered some insight to the matter.

In the ideal nonviolent campaign of Gandhi, one is open to the opponent, recognized as another human being like oneself, but in other circumstances.
Openness to the other was to bring about a conversion of the opponent
to a new understanding of the stakes at issue.
In this regard, Gandhi speaks of something he calls "self-suffering."
It refers to a willingness to receive harm rather than inflict it.

As one commentator notes, in Gandhi's view,
"Willingness to endure sacrifices
—such as poverty, injury, imprisonment and even death—
in furtherance of one's beliefs or cause
is likely to demonstrate the sincerity of the nonviolent activists.
Sacrifices incurred in violent conflict also demonstrate sincerity,
but … sympathy for the activists is more likely
when they are not also imposing suffering on the opponent."

In the Gospel, Jesus dies without apparently achieving
the purpose that brought him to Jerusalem.
But the Gospel story says that is not the case.
The resurrection shows God's support,
though not necessarily the success of his campaign.
For that we must look to the centurion at the foot of the cross.
He is the official charged with terminating the work of Jesus.
Presumably that work is finished, and the centurion's role is to confirm it.

But instead, we learn that the centurion,

observing the willing sacrifice in service of the truth,
announces, “Surely this is the Son of God.”
Instead of being the witness to the victory of his opponents,
the centurion embodies the success of Jesus’ mission and the truth he speaks.

So I’ll end as I began: We are Ezekiel.
We are prophets tasked with bringing truth to a damaged world.
We do not always win, apparently.
But we do not always know the effect of our actions.
In that, we are also the disciples of Jesus.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 15, 2018

Amos 7:12-15	Amos is invited to leave
Psalm 85:9-14	The Lord proclaims peace
Ephesians 1:3-14	Blessing on the Ephesians
Mark 6:7-13	Sent out in pairs

Today we hear about the prophet Amos,
making trouble in northern Israel,
even though he is from Judah in the south.
He is told to go home and stop bothering them.

In Mark's gospel the Twelve disciples are sent on a mission,
and instructed what to do when they are rejected—
"shake the dust off your feet."

What is this about people going where they are not wanted,
and getting other people disturbed?
My question is, Why don't they stay home?
Why don't they attend to their own affairs?

It's not like they are so perfect either.
Why don't they attend to their own spirituality,
and keep their religion out of politics?
Why don't they mind their own business?

The prophet Amos did all his preaching in the northern kingdom, Israel.
We hear how the priest at the temple of Bethel objected to his presence there.

He was told that he was trespassing, and that this was the king's property.
He was accused of being a paid provocateur, a hired agitator.
He defends himself by insisting that he is just a shepherd who is forced by God
to say something about what is going on in that society.

What is it that Amos is saying that so disturbs the high priest of Bethel?
We find that in the other parts of his book.
He is known as the prophet of social justice for a very good reason.
That is what he accuses them of.

And he gets specific.
He charges the leaders with financing their private parties
with funds that should go to the people and the nation.
He charges their wives with pushing their husbands
to a competition of wealth and display.
He charges the judges for selling justice to the highest bidder.
He charges the merchants with squeezing profits out of the poor.

He charges the priests with carrying on with the regular liturgies
as if God is not concerned about any of that,
but only about keeping the sacrifices coming on schedule.

There are few departments that are not targets of his fierce diatribes.
It is no wonder that they want him to go home and stop annoying them.

The Twelve disciples are sent out by Jesus to towns and villages on the way.
He has just been shut out of Nazareth, his hometown, in the story just previous.
But now he taking the movement on the road.
"He began to send them out two by two."

What are they to do?
It says that he "gave them authority over unclean spirits."
And later on, it says that what they did was preach repentance, drive out demons,
and anoint with oil many who were sick, and healed them.

Mark begins Jesus' mission with him driving out "unclean spirits"
in the synagogue of Capernaum.
It sets the tone for his mission and work.

It also implies that a company of unclean spirits have come over the land
like a dark cloud, that needs to be cleared away.
There is a need for the cleansing from the unclean spirits.
And with that, healing occurs.

It is not surprising that part of clearing away the unclean spirits
is anointing with oil and healing.
(We remember that this is the gospel for the sacrament of anointing of the sick.)

And yet there are some who find this intrusive, disturbing.
Jesus tells them that there are places that will not welcome them.
Will not listen to them.
They are not to waste time there, but to move on.

One begins to get a sense of why
the persons we hear about in this liturgy didn't just stay home.
They were compelled by a need that they saw.
It took them away from their own home,
to other places and to other homes.

And there is a way in which these stories point to the story of Jesus himself.
The disciples are being sent ahead, preparing a way.
The work that they are doing
is the work that Jesus is accomplishing in Galilee—
clearing away the demons, healing the sick, supporting the destitute,
returning the excluded to their communities,
reviving those communities in the process.

The disciples are expanding the work he does.

But they are also leading the way before him,
and the way leads to Jerusalem.

For at a certain juncture in the way, Jesus leaves Galilee,
and the work he is doing there, and heads toward Jerusalem.

In other words, he leaves his home country, Galilee in the north,
and goes to Judea in the south, and Jerusalem the center of Judaism,
where he challenges the leaders.

He moves from the edge to the center,
from the symptoms to the source of the malaise,
from the effects to the cause.
And he is rejected there, as well.

He is the "Galilean" who is dismissed
and accused of causing a disturbance, of arousing the populace.

The story of Amos in Bethel anticipates Jesus' story.
He is accused of coming from elsewhere with a message that only upsets people.
He is told to remove himself, that he is not welcome here.

We begin to see that Jesus is acting like a prophet,
that the prophetic tradition is alive in him.
And today we see him extending it to his disciples.

For myself, I am beginning finally to understand
that the prophet is at the heart of the gospel story.
And that the gift of the Old Testament to the New is the prophetic tradition,
shown to be alive in the story and ministry of Jesus.

It seems that we have made the gospel more convenient by making it personal.
If we make it private, it won't disturb others.
And yet, it seems to me, that to surgically remove
the political and prophetic from the gospel is to betray it.

Whether it is to reduce it to snippets of sayings,
or to translate it into generalized theological themes,
we remove from it the primary story, as given in the gospels.

For ourselves and our concern about religion and politics,
it seems we need to consider the consequences of what we want.
It is easy to sympathize with the indignation
about certain fundamentalist churches monopolizing the name "Christian"
in ways we we fervently disagree with.

And yet, it seems that the best way forward
is not to condemn the desire to make one's faith public,
for that seems to be at the heart of it.
Rather, we might let the public mission,

as inspired by the words of Amos and the deeds of Jesus,
speak for itself, as one of justice and compassion,
hard truth with mercy.

The actions carry the message.
St Francis is said to have said, “Preach the Gospel at all times,
and if necessary use words.”
It is not confirmed that he said this in words,
but he certainly did in action.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 22, 2018

Jeremiah 23:1-6	Diatribe against the leadership
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
Ephesians 2:13-18	Through Christ we are drawn back
Mark 6:30-34	The Twelve return from mission

"For they were like sheep without a shepherd."
How stark and desolate are these words.
We are accustomed to hearing them, perhaps,
for they appear time and again in the scriptures.
But when we stop to consider them, they can be chilling.

It says they are adrift. They are vulnerable to predators.
They are a people without direction or support,
without a backup to rely upon.
It evokes for me many images of refugees in our world
escaping dangers only to find themselves in new dangers.

Much in recent years has been written to recover a sense
of what was happening in Galilee and Judea in those days.
Large estates were taking over the traditional holdings of the peasant villagers,
because the larger cities needed a sure and secure source of food supply.

But the villagers were finding themselves out of their place, and out of luck.
A series of illnesses and depressions afflicted the population.
The crowd in the desert vividly depicts the plight
of a people wandering without direction.

The prophets called out the false shepherds.
By that they meant the leaders of the people, and specifically the kings.
So does Jeremiah in today's passage.

There is a backstory to this reading.
Jeremiah lived in the final days of the kingship of the David family in Judah.
He would live to see the city of Jerusalem taken and destroyed,
the temple of Solomon leveled to the ground.
He foresaw all this, and warned the leaders and the people, as well as the kings.

The scroll of his prophecies comprise the first 25 chapters
of the book of Jeremiah as we have it today.
The rest is largely biographical material
supplied by third-party observers of Jeremiah
struggling to warn Judah of the days ahead.

Jeremiah ends his scroll with a flourish.
In chapters 21-23 he summarizes the history of the kings that he knew in his time
— Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jeconiah, all get their brief description,
and none come out looking very good.

They are "shepherds who destroy and scatter the flock of my pasture."

In his review of known kings,
the prophet comes up to the one sitting on the throne in his day,
the king Zedekiah. His name—Zadok-Yah—means "The Lord is Justice."
But he is not named by Jeremiah.
It is as if Zedekiah is "he who shall not be named."

Instead, Jeremiah makes a deft and ironic move.
He imagines a future, when there will be a king of Judah
that will deserve the name, "The LORD our justice."
He doesn't mention the fact there is already a king with that name on the throne.
He lets his reader figure that out.

For Jesus, when he sees the crowds, like sheep without a shepherd,
it says that "he began to teach them many things."
He provided the word which they were missing.
And then he did more, he began to feed them.
He multiplied the loaves and fishes.

But the stories of the loaves and the account of his teaching
will concern us for the next few Sundays.
For now, we only know that they are adrift and in need.

It seems to me that we can connect with the experience
of the sheep without a shepherd.
That has been the feeling of many in the past week,
as our country becomes more and more adrift without clear direction.
Many are anxious and uncertain, and no resolution seems at hand.

This week I was struck by two commentaries, two testimonies,
one by the pundit for *New York Magazine*, Andrew Sullivan,
the other by the *National Catholic Reporter* columnist Michael Sean Winters.
The first concerned the President, the second the Pope.
It seemed to me a vivid contrast in what the role of the shepherd demands.

Sullivan's piece was a lament.
He sees a consistency in the President's actions.
He frames it as a vision of the meaning of leadership.

> "[The President's] deeper convictions really are …, at root, the same as those of the strongmen he associates with and most admires. The post-1945 attempt to organize the world around collective security, free trade, open societies, non-zero-sum diplomacy, and multicultural democracies is therefore close to unintelligible to him. Why on earth, in his mind, would a victorious power after a world war be … generous to its defeated foes? When you win, you don't hold out a hand in enlightened self-interest. You gloat and stomp. … And so today's international order strikes Trump, and always has, as a massive, historic error on the part of the United States."

> "There's nothing in it for him to like. It has empowered global elites over national leaders; it has eroded national sovereignty in favor of commerce and peace; it has empowered our rivals; it has spread liberal values contrary to the gut instincts of many ordinary people (including himself); it has led the U.S. to spend trillions on collective security, when we could have used that wealth for our own population or to impose our will by force on others; it has created a legion of free riders; it has enriched the global poor at the expense, as he sees it, of the American middle class; and it has unleashed unprecedented migration of peoples and the creation of the first truly multicultural, heterogeneous national cultures."

This is a dystopian, desperate vision of what needs to be done,
and what a leader should do.

In contrast, Michael Sean Winters writes of Pope Francis,
who memorably stated that the shepherd should have the smell of the sheep.
The Pope's homily last Sunday took as its text
the sending forth of the Twelve disciples two-by-two.
It is the journey from which today's Gospel passage speaks of their return.

His reflection begins with a phrase from the Pope's speech
that got a lot of attention—"divas on tour."
He said that the messengers of the kingdom of God,
are "not omnipotent managers, not immovable officials, not divas on tour."

Apparently, the phrase got a lot of attention,
and I suspect it was viewed in context of church officials
who like to dress the part to the finest degree.
In any case, the homily became for Winters prototypical Francis.
He noted that the phrase was notable,
but the entire paragraph deserved our attention. And he quoted it:

"The [second] characteristic of the style of the missionary is, so to speak, a face, the heart of which is a poverty of the means. His tools are known for their sobriety. The Twelve, in fact, are ordered "to take nothing but a stick for the journey: neither bread nor bag, nor money in the belt" (v. 8). The Master wants them to remain free and light, without support and without favors, secure only in the love of the one who sends them, remaining strong only on the power of his word which they go to announce. The staff and the sandals are the attributes of pilgrims, because they are the messengers of the kingdom of God, not omnipotent managers, not immovable officials, not divas on tour."

Winters adds:
"The way the pope uses the word 'face' is biblical in its roots. The face is not the moral stance of the person, but something deeper than that, a person's stance before the other and before the Other [who is God].

"And to this 'face' also belongs the way in which the message is received and welcomed by others: in fact it may happen that it is not welcomed or listened to (see verse 11)," Pope Francis said. "This too is poverty: the experience of failure. The entire story of Jesus, the one who was rejected and crucified,

prefigures the destiny of his messenger." In our aggressively optimistic country, Christianity too easily forgets the cross.

He concludes:
"There is so much to love and admire about our pope, but one of the things about him that we can most admire is the way he challenges us moderns and our modern ways."

Two images of the shepherd.
One admires power; the other is powerless in the ways of the world.
The one that is supposedly powerless has the weight of moral authority,
while the supposedly powerful scorns morality,
and perhaps, as a result, proves to be not so powerful at all.

And despite all the evidence to the contrary,
it appears there is a shepherd.
Much depends on where we are looking.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 29, 2018

2 Kings 4:42-44	Elisha multiplies the loaves
Psalm 145:10-11, 15-18	The Lord feeds us
Ephesians 4:1-6	Live in a manner worthy of the call
John 6:1-15	Jesus multiplies loaves and fishes

In an early version of the story of multiplying loaves,
the prophet Elisha explains: "thus says the LORD,
'They shall eat and there shall be some left over.'"

It would seem that this is a story
that appears from time to time in the story of Israel,
and Elisha explains its meaning.
No one will starve.

In the day of the Lord, everyone will have something to eat.
And it will be in abundance—they will be filled,
and there will still be some left over.
It is a picture of prosperity, among similar sketches of prosperous times
that the Bible dreams of under the heading of "Shalom."

But can we live on dreams?
If we say, "the Lord will provide," many will scoff.
And maybe we ourselves will find it unrealistic, and wonder.
It this anything more than a bromide,
a comforting saying to ease the pain of disappointment?

Are we fools or are we realists?
This doesn't seem very realistic.
How will the Lord provide?

Current thinking in our society, commonly encountered,
is that the world is a competitive place.
It is a matter of each for himself or herself.
This is called being "realistic."

This week, a friend who is a political moral theologian,
posted an article in which a woman who was staunchly in favor
of the competitive theory of society, wrote of her experience at a rally.
My theologian friend suggested she was nearly seduced by Christian principles.

She wrote:

"But then *[Alexandria]* Ocasio-Cortez
(the social democrat candidate from New York's 14th district) spoke,
… and I saw something truly terrifying.
I saw just how easy it would be, were I less involved
and less certain of our nation's founding and its history,
to fall for the populist lines they were shouting from that stage.

- I saw how easy it would be, as a parent, to accept the idea that my children deserve healthcare and education.
- I saw how easy it would be, as someone who has struggled to make ends meet, to accept the idea that a "living wage" was a human right.
- Above all, I saw how easy it would be to accept the notion that it was the government's job to make sure that those things were provided."

A recent *Commonweal* article spoke of "holes in the social safety net."
There is a push to get people off welfare and into jobs,
noting that there is a correlation between higher earnings and longer lifespans.
But the article notes that this "has the correlation backwards:
the available evidence suggests not that people need a job in order to be healthy, but that they need to be healthy in order to find and keep a job."

We sometimes encounter among people
who do not accept Darwin's scientific theories
a firm belief in "social Darwinism," the *unscientific* belief
that the best come out on top, and that a competitive society is the best.
This is called being "realistic."

But those who say this is the way it is
are actually saying this is the way it is SUPPOSED to be.
And that belief provides self-justification for their special place in society,
and it repackages greed as virtue.

And so we come to the story of Jesus and the loaves and fishes.
Among the stories of Jesus' miracles this one is different from the others.
It doesn't tell us what Jesus did to make it happen.

In all the other stories we have this.
He reaches out his hand and touches the untouchable leper.
He commands the unclear spirits to leave.
The woman touches his cloak, and healing power flows out to her.
He lifts Simon's mother-in-law by the hand.

But in this story we have nothing like that.
He simply blesses the loaves, and had his disciples distribute them.
At least that is how it is in the original story with Mark.
John shows Jesus distributing the meals himself.

But there is no definite and decisive action that makes the difference.
There is no moment when Jesus says, "Multiply!"
and suddenly additional baskets of bread and fish appear in front of them.
Instead, they just keep distributing,
and—guess what?—the food keeps coming.

There is enough.
In fact, there is plenty, with loaves left over.
Also fish.

This might be the basis for the popular interpretation of this story as sharing.
In that version, once the distributing began,
people who brought food opened their own lunch bags
and began to share it with others around them.

And in the process they discovered that among themselves
they had more than enough to feed everyone.
All it takes is generosity and sharing,
and the discovery that we can take care of each other.

The story in the bible doesn't say this.
However, it doesn't seem to know what happened,
since Jesus didn't do anything specific to make it happen.

Perhaps that is why the evangelists borrow the Elisha story
as a literary form for the event.
That would explain part of it.
But also, there is the lesson, made explicit in Elisha—God will provide.
It doesn't say how.
But we might be able to figure it out.

So we find an answer to the social Darwinists that accuse us of being unrealistic.
Our answer is simply to act otherwise than what they recommend.
And in so doing, not only show we survive well,
but also disprove their theme,
answering cut-throat competition with mutual solidarity.

So—we are not fools.
We are just not false "realists."

But there is one thing more.
The way the Gospels tell the story,
there is something that Jesus does that is very characteristic,
and speaks volumes.

It says he took the loaves, gave thanks, distributed them,
and gathered the fragments left over.
The language is very evocative of the Lord's supper, and intentionally so.

We remember the story of the disciples
who encountered the risen Christ on the way to Emmaus.
It says they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.
The story of the loaves and fishes wants us to recognize him here as well.

And we are to recognize him distributing it, each to each, all to all,
in a moral pattern that has come to be called "distributive justice."
That is, we recognize him in the *distributing* of the bread.

And in so doing, we recognize ourselves as well,

as disciples of the Christ, prophet and king.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 12, 2018

1 Kings 19:4-8	Elijah receives solace and lunch
Psalm 34:2-9	The angel of the Lord delivers them
Ephesians 4:30–5:2	Be imitators of God, and live in love
John 6:41-51	How can he have come down from heaven?

In the Catholic world, the most important thing that has happened recently
is that Pope Francis introduced a change into the Catechism.
He has ordered the revision to assert "the death penalty is inadmissible
because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

I find it somehow characteristic of this pope
that he doesn't introduce the change with a major document, like an encyclical,
but simply makes an adjustment to the catechism.

Those who reflexively oppose him tend to favor the catechism,
which was promulgated by P. John Paul II.
And in any case, John Paul was also against the death penalty
and earlier had edited the catechism in that direction.

That piece of news made me reflect differently on the Scripture readings for today.
The Gospel is about the Bread of Life.

Always I have focused on the Bread as the key to the meaning.
But now I found myself thinking about the rest of the phrase.
Why is it the Bread of *Life*?
Why not Bread of Salvation? Or Bread of Holiness?
Why Bread of Life? What does this say about Jesus' message?

It is worth repeating that Pope Francis' change to the text concludes:
"Consequently, the church teaches, in the light of the Gospel,
that 'the death penalty is inadmissible
because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,'
and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide."

Reactions have been varied.
I have a FaceBook friend whom I've never met,
but who has no shortage of firm opinions.

Michael lives in Washington, D.C.
In the past he has been a speechwriter in Democratic administrations.
He went through Loras College, and though he never took my classes,
that is why he seems to think we have something in common.
Michael made two points online about the change.

The first has to do with the form of punishment:
"What Francis does not seem to realize is that most convicts

consider prison for life without parole to be a death sentence by slow torture,
especially if spent in SuperMax."
While that doesn't change the teaching of the catechism,
it is worth bringing into consideration.

The second is more problematic:
"The question is not punishment or innocence for the death penalty,
it is the danger posed by the an individual to others. …
While some murderers, perhaps most, deserve reconsideration after a time, …
others can never be rehabilitated because they are sociopaths or psychopaths.
These are not mental illnesses, [rather] these individuals are pathologically evil."

For Michael, the State has the right and duty
of executing these individuals for the safety of its citizens.
It is not hard to imagine that the State might abuse this right and duty
in deciding who is a threat to its citizens.
And we have the example of many nations
who have executed those who dissent.

Another voice, for me more persuasive, is one
that many news media immediately turned to for a response.
That is Sr. Helen Prejean, a sister of St Joseph of Medaille in New Orleans,
who wrote of her experiences as a minister to those on death row
in her book, *Dead Man Walking*.

You know all about Sr. Helen.
Her name is pronounced Pray-Zhahn, as I found out from a Youtube video
in which she herself explains how to pronounce her name.
Perhaps you read her book. I did, but a long time ago.
What I remember is the deep impression it made on me,
of her courage and her faith.
Actually, I think it was her faith that supplied her with the courage.

Much of the book concerns a hardened criminal on death row
who had killed in cold blood.
He and his brother ambushed an unsuspecting couple
one Saturday night in lover's lane, and killed them.

He would seem to be a perfect candidate for the category
of "sociopaths and psychopaths who are pathologically evil."
And yet she did not perceive the man that way.

Sr. Helen has a number of Youtube videos,
and one of them is about the misconceptions we have of death row inmates.
She says, "We turn a switch, we disconnect
and say they are not human the way we are. This is another kind of being.

And they're dangerous, and we're made to be afraid of them.
And the fear is great, that what we actually say about people on death row
is that they are so beyond the pale of humanness

that as a society we have to kill them in order for us to be safe."

Which is to say, she precisely answers Michael's objection.

She said the great shock that she had
was in her first encounter with the man who had committed such a great crime,
she looked through the metal screen and looked into his eyes,
and saw another human being.
She couldn't believe that a person
who had committed such a horrifying act could be human.
But there he was.

One wonders if work like hers has any results. It seems hopeless.
And yet a movie was made from the book, starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn.
It was nominated for four academy awards.

And perhaps you don't know that the book has been made into an opera as well.
Jake Heggie and Terence McNally adapted it in the year 2000,
with considerable success.
I heard it on the Saturday Opera show of Iowa Public Radio,
last year, I think.

I only mention these matters as testimony to the power of Sr. Helen's witness.
It is a reminder that compassion is in its own way very compelling.
Brute force does not have the final say.

With all this, I have two thoughts.

First, Michael's first point is worth returning to.
Life without parole is a death penalty of slow torture.
If we accept what Helen Prejean and Pope Francis are saying,
and what is now part of the catechism of our faith
—that the dignity of the human person is at stake—
then that carries implications for ministry to those in such a state.

The seventh work of mercy—I was in prison and you visited me—
takes on sobering dimensions.

I know you are continually aware of the plight of those on death row.
I see the vigil lit in the gathering space for each state execution.
I know some of you or friends of yours have been involved in prison ministry.
You know what the works of mercy ask of us.
And some of you or friends of yours have spent, or risked, jail time
for civil disobedience in justice causes.
You understand the gravity of what the catechism now tells us we believe.
There are consequences to what we believe.

My second thought takes me back to the image of the Bread of Life.
In this part of the discourse, it refers to the teaching of Jesus—
"They shall all be taught by God."

And that is what we have been focusing on here.

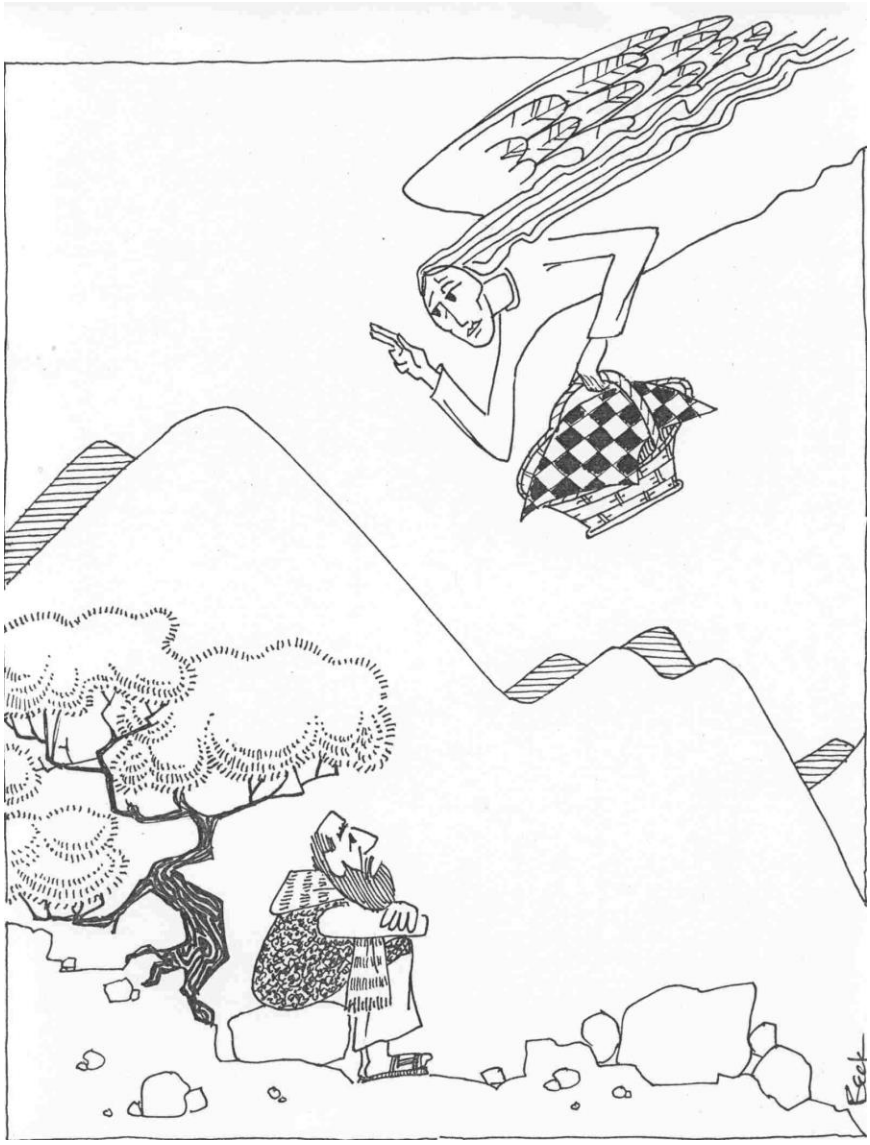
But the image of Bread takes us further, and especially in next week's reading
it will focus on the Eucharistic meaning.
In the Bread and the Cup, Jesus prefigured his death,
and very deliberately so at the Last Supper.

The Bread of Life takes on meaning in the death.
We typically think of Jesus' death as a sacrifice.
But usually the New Testament doesn't mean that in a ritual way.
There are other ways we think of sacrifice,
as when a person wages his or her own life to save others.

I think of the Navy Seal in Thailand that died saving the schoolboys in the cave.
In order to ensure that they had enough oxygen,
he gave up some of his own, and died. He sacrificed himself.

So it is that in this gospel of John, we find Jesus saying at the supper
that "No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)
And that is what Jesus sees himself as doing.

It is that we celebrate in the Eucharistic meal,
and in the corporal works of mercy.
Implied in our prayer as we gather today and every other day
is the conviction of the "inviolability and dignity" of every human person.



Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 19, 2018

Proverbs 9:1-6	Wisdom's House
Psalm 34:2-7	I will bless the Lord at all times
Ephesians 5:15-20	Do not continue in ignorance
John 6:51-58	The bread I will give is my flesh

The language is graphic, and even scandalous.
"Amen, amen, I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,

you do not have life within you.
    It is not difficult to see why detractors of Christianity, ancient and recent,
    sometimes accuse Christians of cannabalistic tendencies.

Regarding Catholic readings of these words, a common interpretation
would see this as testimony to the Real Presence in the Eucharist.
    I have done so myself.
And yet, maybe this is not what it is about.
This is the only place in John that this language appears.
    Nowhere else in the gospels, for that matter,
    is the Eucharistic meal described in this way.

Elsewhere, it is the bread and the cup,
identified and the body and blood of Jesus in the new covenant.
    And yet there too it is the Real Presence.
    One begins to suspect that John has another point to make.

I begin to think that sheer physicality is the issue.
    And I remember that in John's day there was a movement among believers
    that would downplay the physical side of reality as evil,
    and promote the spiritual as true and authentic.

In the ancient world it was called Gnosticism, but it is still with us today.
    In this mindset, the body is evil, and the spirit is holy,
    and the true salvation is becoming pure spirit and denying the body.

Following that lead, I find other clues.
One is in the opening statement of this Gospel:
    "The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us."
    Here "flesh" points to the human condition.

And then there is the declaration of Thomas at the end of the Gospel,
after the risen Christ displays his wounded body: "My Lord and my God."
    In both of these cases the very physical presence of Christ is given witness.

But the physical world is often tangled and confused.
    The spiritual world is clear and well-defined.
    It is reassuring and gets rid of all the mess.

And with this I am reminded of something else.
In our book group we are reading Dostoyevsky's classic, *The Brothers Karamazov*.
    Just recently we read about Father Zosima, the mystic monk,
    who said to his troubled visitors,
    "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing, compared to love in dreams.
    Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action,
    quickly performed and with everyone watching."

And I remember that this book was a favorite of Dorothy Day,
founder with Peter Maurin, of the Catholic Worker.

She often quoted this line.
In fact, William Miller, the biographer of Dorothy,
chose for his title, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*.
Anyone who has experienced the Catholic Worker
knows that it is often messy and chaotic.

The Catholic Worker is always involved in clarification of thought,
often in the midst of disputes among themselves.
And the life of the Worker is one of sharing in the chaos
of the homeless and lost people that come to the door.

We speak of the reality as opposed to the dream.
The dream is neat and tidy,
but the reality is often grimy, tangled, convoluted and confusing.
And Christian life is carried out in the tangled reality,
even while we look to the ideal.

And then I remembered something else,
a comment by the scholar of John's Gospel, James McPolin, S.J.,
who reminds us that this Gospel, though very sacramental in its language,
doesn't actually tell about the sacraments
—either the baptism of Jesus or the bread and wine at the last supper.

It mentions the baptism of John, but not John's baptism of Jesus.
And it tells of the washing of feet, but not the Eucharistic meal.

McPolin tells us that, instead:
"John's center of attention is never the sacraments themselves
or the cultic life of the community.
Rather his interest centers on the mission and self-revelation of Jesus on earth."

In other words, John is not so much interested
in the liturgical aspects of sacramental life
as he is in the entire life of Christ, and of the Christian,
as sacramental.
It is easier to be aloof from the messiness of life,
especially a life given in service,
and revert to a life of theory, or idealized service.

A recent satire is the use of the phrase, "thoughts and prayers."
The point of the critics who mock that phrase is that it avoids
actual immersion in the tensions and difficulties
of actually bringing about change in conditions.
Change is often agonizingly slow, and almost impossibly difficult.
But it does happen, with perseverance and dedication.

When we were young we learned that sacraments were outward signs of God's grace.
While we concentrated on the grace, we ignored the *outwardness* of the signs.
But the true sacramentality takes the present reality in its full force.

It is a sign precisely in being concretely "now."
It is sacramental to the extent it is immersed in the messy present moment,
in the needs and demands of the moment,
and finds grace there.

The sacramentality of the Catholic is that of finding God's grace
IN the mess, *not* BEYOND it. This is the disconcerting part.
And that disconcerting part is found in the emphasis in the gospel reading
with its the unrelenting emphasis on the thorough physicality
of the flesh and the blood.
It is the flesh and blood of ministry and Christian life,
lived with attentiveness.

I had originally planned to stop talking here.
But as I was composing this homily, the current crisis in Catholic life
again riveted everyone's attention, as the grand jury report
of cover-up of child abuse by priests in Pennsylvania, was made public,
to general dismay.

There is no possibility of commenting on this satisfactorily at the present moment. That will take a long discussion, and many important decisions.
But on the other hand, it can't be ignored as if nothing had happened this week.
Especially if we are considering Catholic sacramental awareness.

Perhaps for now we can appreciate the perspective
of a columnist from the *Washington Pos*t, David Von Drehle,
not a Catholic, I suspect. Friday, he wrote:

"The crisis of the Catholic Church is not a matter for Catholics only.
"Love it or hate it — or anywhere in between —
this is one of the most important, influential institutions in world history,
with boots on the ground in every corner of the world.

Its good works are monumental. No agency, I suspect,
has built more schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, orphanages and clinics.
No patron has inspired and endowed more masterpieces
of music, art, architecture and literature.

"Its scandals and sins are monumental as well;
no adequate accounting of the past millennium could be written
without the Reformation, the Inquisition or the trial of Galileo.
That's why the voluminous report by the Pennsylvania grand jury
on coverups of alleged sexual assaults by priests is so important."

There are many dimensions in this painful scandal
that need to be examined searchingly.
They need to be opened to the air and light, where healing can take place.

But I am thinking that today's gospel
points to both the problem and the cure—

the denial of the physical reality to the detriment of all,
and the sacramental vision
that in the very concreteness of the present moment, in all its chaotic disorder
is where we will find the grace at work to bring us past it.

Again those strange words—
"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

The vulnerable flesh of risking determined commitment;
the shed blood in the cost of discipleship.
The Real Presence of Christ in the streets and byways of our lives,
wherever we bring him.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 26, 2018

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18	Joshua renews the covenant
Psalm 34:2-3, 16-20	When the just cry out
Ephesians 5:21-32	Husbands, wives, and church
John 6:6-69	Reactions to Jesus' Bread of Life discourse

Pope Francis is in Ireland this weekend.
All eyes are on him, to see where we go from here.
The world and the church need to know.

Since the abuse scandal broke in Boston, in 2002,
it has surfaced in Germany, Chile, and elsewhere.
And with particular virulence in Ireland.
It is no longer characterized as an American problem.

And then in the past few weeks, with the report on Cardinal McCarrick,
and then the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report,
it is again an American problem.

So when I saw that the Gospel passage for today said,
"many of his disciples returned to their former way of life
and no longer accompanied him,"
I could not help but think of what is happening in our church today.

And when Jesus asked the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?"
and Peter answered with his own question, "To whom shall we go?"
—then I could not help but think of how many are asking the same questions today.

I am told, and I believe, that now is a time for listening.
At least for us in the clergy.
And not so much a time of making recommendations. At least not yet.

With that in mind, I have been listening to the voices.
I posted a couple of articles on Facebook from various sources,

asking the question, Why Should We Stay?
The answers came quickly.

Such as: Maybe it's time to leave.
And: I left a long time ago for this and other reasons.
And: I left long ago, and don't regret it.

Or: I left but am still compelled to keep up with the turmoil and the damage.
And: I am out now too. Lost the stomach for it.

And then there are statements like this:
None of my close Catholic School friends attend the Catholic Church any longer.
Some of those names would surprise you, Bob.

And this:
My son still attends the Catholic Church
and his kids attend religious education classes.
He told me last night that he told his kids
to never allow themselves to be alone with a priest.
That's what this has come to.
I told him that there are other Christian churches he can attend,
if he thinks that this is important.

That's what I am hearing, and it is devastating. Excruciating.

And there are no shortage of recommendations.
In the past few days I have collected 23 links
to articles and statements about what ought to be done.

Some tend toward leaning harder on the priests.
One important bishop suggested that priests must not serve as "lone operatives"
but should be supported by "ongoing assessment or ministerial supervision."

While this, I think, is intended to provide bishops
with ways of handling things different from the past,
it also has overtones of monitoring the priests.
(One thinks, no doubt irrationally, of ankle bracelets.)

There is already a priest shortage, and that too needs to be addressed.
This approach doesn't seem to be of help.

Others more persuasively point to a culture of clericalism.
Pope Francis is among these.
He has been speaking to this for years.
But what do we mean by clericalism?
I often hear it being denied where I think I see it.

Francis speaks of a culture in which fullness of spiritual attainment

is seen as largely reserved to ordained religious leaders.
In this conception of church, clerics are viewed
as the only real, full examples of religious life,
while lay people mostly occupy a second-best, helper status.
Clericalism treats 'priests as beatified ministers
merely by dint of the formal role that they occupy in the church,
holier than the rest of the church.

Francis also notes that in an clericalized church,
priests are not in open, equal, vulnerable human relationships with their flock,
but are isolated by their own moral and spiritual status.
For Francis, this tendency subverts traditional Christianity,
which holds that priests are servants of the laity and not the other way around.
Clericalism is thus tied to a top-down, overly authoritarian configuration of church.
For this reason, Francis sees a link
between a culture of clericalism and the lack of transparency.

All well and good.
But still, the question provoked by the Gospel today:
Why should we stay?

First of all, the pious answers we are hearing do not work.
For people are allergic to pious language without changes.
Even pious language seems offensive,
since that has so frequently been used as a coverup.

Another reason I read in the paper yesterday,
is that it is only from within the church that we can effect changes in it.
That I think is true.
Some speak of the faith community as a family,
one that has created great good,
but one that also displays great weaknesses and profound failures.
And yet the family makes it through,
by both calling to account and by holding one another up.
And yet, the decision is most personal.
Michael Crosby, Capuchin Franciscan, and Jon Sobrino, Salvadoran Jesuit,
spoke of the crisis of faith as the moment when a choice opens up.
Some leave. Others stay.

But they do not stay as the same person they were before.
They are driven back to the reasons they belong,
to understand them afresh.

They are driven back to the sources in the gospel,
to discover that its real meaning was something they had never noticed before,
something that was profoundly urgent in its demands
for helping one another, and especially the vulnerable among us.

In the decision to stay, but under new conditions,
I am reminded of marriages that encounter a crisis.

Some fold. I cannot judge that.
I haven't lived the conditions they've endured.

Some recommit, and that is amazing to see,
for it is not the same marriage afterward.
It is something new, perhaps more consciously precarious,
but also more nurtured and carefully tended.
It is a commitment with eyes wide open.

The biblical witness is similar.
This past week we have been hearing from the prophet Ezekiel.
He is giving advice to the Israelites in exile.

They are returning to Judah a different people.
The exile has clarified their faith, opened up dimensions unsuspected.
They discover God in the time of captivity
as well as in the time of conquest over others.
They learn from that other exilic prophet, Second Isaiah,
that there is a role for the Servant of Yahweh, the suffering Servant,
and that service too has power in its very vulnerability.
Out of the crucible of the time of captivity a new faith is born.

And so it is with the testimony of Peter in today's gospel.
"Master, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life."

Our own experience of that is not unambiguous
(to use an academic double negative).
But sometimes there comes a time when one has to decide,
and the options are laid out in all their naked clarity.

And sometimes, for me, the decision is as simple as this:
It is in the context of the Catholic faith community
that I have experienced my life as gifted,
and where there is a gift, there is a gift giver.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 2, 2018

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8	Hear these statutes and decrees
Psalm 15:2-5	Who does justice will live
James 1:17-18.21-22, 27	Be doers of the word
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23	From their hearts comes the evil

This morning I would like to share two images with you.
One is from the 1940s, when I was eight years old.
The other is from the 1990s, in my early years at Loras.

First, the early memory.
When I was young, the city of Waterloo

had a summer program of children's activities located at the public grade schools.
While I attended Sacred Heart Catholic School in Waterloo,
this allowed me to visit the playground of Lowell grade school, near my home.

One of these times I was carving something, and I cut my leg. I fainted.
When you are out cold, often you are entirely lost to the world.
While I was out, concerned adults carried me into the school,
a place where I had never been.

As it remember it, I was in this alternative world of blackout,
when I began to awake.
The world in which I was lost began to fragment,
and be replaced with a world—the interior of Lowell school,
where I had never been before.
It was a terrifying moment, in which the world dissolved
into something completely unknown.

For me, this experience has become a metaphor for many kinds of change.
I think of people who have grown up in a familiar world that was taken for granted,
that was assumed to grounded in reality.
That was the way it always was, and always would be.
And then things began to change, and the familiar world began to fragment,
literally fall apart before their eyes.
I understand that can be terrifying.

I see that around me, in the nationalist movements here and in Europe,
where traditions and cultures seem to be under threat.

I see it in the church,
where many feel that what have always been called eternal truths
are shifting, and even disappearing.
It began, for them, with the Second Vatican Council.
And though it was stalled for awhile, under Pope Francis it is happening again.

So that is the first image I'm presenting today
—the image of a dissolving world that was always assumed to be eternal,
but now is disintegrating before their eyes.
It is not just fear that is involved. It is slow, quiet terror.

The second image comes from my first years at Loras College.
I was invited to write a column on the Sunday readings,
and did so for five years in the mid-eighties.
At the same time I made a line drawing for each Sunday.
I have 250 of those drawings.

Now that I am writing the column again,
I do not make new drawings, but pull appropriate ones from the digital file.
Sometimes I cannot remember what I had in mind.
And sometimes it comes back to me.

For this Sunday, the drawing is a picture of two statues in niches of a church wall.
One is of Moses; one is of Jesus.
Moses illustrates the reading from Deuteronomy this morning.
At the base of the statue of Moses it is written,
"You shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it."
This is from today's first reading.

At the base of the statue of Jesus it is written,
"And thus he rendered all foods clean."
This is from a line that should be in the Gospel reading for today,
but was skipped over.

The difference between the two statues
is that Moses has a pencil in his hand, ready to write.
But Jesus also has a pencil, but with the eraser side out,
ready to remove what was written.
This is supposed to represent the two sides of the readings for today.

There is one more thing that puzzled me.
Why are they presented as statues in a church?

It was only later when I noticed the tendency
to rework the phrase "statutes and decrees,"
and replace the words "statutes" with "statues,"
that I began to understand.
Now I call the drawing "Statues and Decrees."

But what this drawing said to me was that there were two attitudes toward change.
Deuteronomy prohibited change.
This book was written in a time
when Israel experienced competition from pagan neighbors.
It was concerned about maintaining belief in the one God,
and was very firm about it.
It presented Moses in an uncompromising stance.

But the gospel reading from Mark took another position.
Jesus speaks to religious persons who are using their practices
for their own advantage, and at the expense of people who are sincere,
but not equipped to follow all the prescriptions that they have set out.

Those prescriptions originally were intended to provide a way to be extra pious,
going beyond the ordinary devotion
to achieve something more in the way of worshiping God.
However, in many cases it went awry, as the Gospel points out.

However, the line at the base of the statue,
but omitted from the reading today, says, "Thus he declared all foods clean."
This is getting at the laws of the holy and unclean,
which is at the heart of Deuteronomy and Leviticus,
where the basic laws for kosher food are found.

This goes beyond human tradition in elaboration of the law.
It goes to the law itself.
And because they found this intolerable,
it prevented many Jews from following Jesus. It was too much.

So there is my second image for today—another outlook on change.
Against those who deny the possibility of change, Jesus introduces change.
But it is not without struggle.

We are accustomed to speak of changeless reality.
This is a heritage of the Greek philosophical tradition in elaborating revealed truth.
But we know today that there is nothing that is unchanging.

There is slow change and fast change.
Slow change is so gradual that it doesn't attract our attention as actual change.
But now that we live longer, we can notice it.
Some of you may remember when farm houses had oil lamps.
My grandfather's did.
Since then, electricity made its way into our lives.
And it made television possible, which changed our lives.
And now it is the digital world, and the world wide web. Much has changed.

Recently, I was explaining this to a young person
who was inquiring about certain things Catholic.
Not wanting to talk about hot button issues like gay marriage or divorce,
I chose to talk about tattoos, and how when I was young,
tattoos were forbidden as a form of self-mutilation.
She discreetly covered her tattoos at that point,
which was when I first noticed them.

We know that language changes,
and a verbal formulation that meant one thing for our grandparents
can mean an entirely different thing today.
We know that at the heart of the physical world is the frantic action of atoms,
and that light consists of photons that are constantly moving.
It is more than this, I know, but this makes the point
—change is our only constant.
It is hard for us to accept naively that everything turns on unchanging reality.

But in addition to slow change, imitating changelessness, there is also fast change.
We especially know fast change.
In today's world, something that happens locally
can be known around the world in moments.
An example is the tragedy of Mollie Tibbets,
killed while jogging in a small town in Iowa.
Things happen so quickly, and are known so widely, in our world,
that there is no wonder we have a nostalgia for a simpler and unchanging world.

But here is my consolation:

Some would seek comfort in the past, seeing there a lost Eden,
a world colored by selective memory that would answer all our desires,
if we could only return there.

However, the Gospel dreams of a possible future.
It dreams of a possible reality that was not even fully realized in biblical times.

It looked to a time without slavery,
where everyone was a member of the human family,
but it didn't live in that time.

It looked to a time when women were treated equally with men
—Jesus was an example of doing so—
but it didn't really live that reality.
It dreamt forward to it. It dreamt toward change.

But living in change,
working through change toward a better way of living God's kingdom,
this can be daunting, unnerving.
If looking to the past for security
is like sitting on a porch chair sharing memories,
then living gracefully in the midst of change is entirely different.

The image that comes to my mind is surfing the waves.
It requires mental and spiritual adroitness, balance, flexibility,
and good humor through the shaky times.
It requires getting up and going again.

But like the bible itself,
it lives and hopes and dreams toward a future fulfillment
when—

The Lord God will wipe away
the tears from all faces;
and will destroy
the veil that veils all peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares,
and study war no more.


I
II
IV
V
VI
VII
YOU SHALL NOT ADD TO WHAT I COMMAND YOU NOR SUBTRACT FROM IT. - DT IV. 2
AND THUS HE RENDERED ALL FOODS CLEAN.
- MARK VII. 19
Beck

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 9, 2018

Isaiah 35:4-7 The tongue of the dumb will sing
Psalm 146:6-10 The Lord gives sight to the blind
James 2:1-5 Show no partiality
Mark 7:31-37 Jesus heals a deaf-mute

Jesus is traveling around Galilee.
He left the territory briefly for Tyre and Sidon.
Today we call the area Lebanon.

Now we find him returning to his home area, coming to the Sea of Galilee.
After leaving Nazareth, he made his unofficial base
on the shore town of Capernaum.
He is in that area as some people brought to him a man
who could neither hear nor speak clearly.

The usual term for this is a deaf-mute.
But today we have a strange word to describe the man's difficulty.
It is a strange word, that only appears twice in the Bible.
And we happen to have both instances in today's readings.

The word is a Greek word—*mogilalos*.
Literally, it means "speaking with difficulty."
Today's translation in the Gospel is "speech impediment."
They brought to him a deaf man with a speech impediment,
a deaf person with *mogilalos*.

Jesus heals the man,
and with that we have another strange word—"*Ephphathah*."
Mark translates that word for us—it means "Be opened."
For his ears and his voice were closed.
But immediately they were opened.

Says one friend: Does Ephphathah mean "find your voice?"
"He spoke plainly."
And the others proclaimed it, amplifying his voice.

In the reading from Isaiah today, the word *mogilalos* also appears,
but it is translated simply "mute"—as in "the tongue of the mute will sing."
I have heard of people who are tongue-tied when speaking,
but can sing beautifully,
as if the song brings a voice to the voiceless.

There are many voiceless among us. Many literally so.
This week we laid Sarah Jochum to rest.
As you know, Sarah is the daughter of Pam Jochum,
state senator and former chair of the senate.

Her father, Tom Jochum served in the Iowa House for many years.
Both parents are from the neighborhood.

Sarah, now in her early 40s, was born with a genetic disorder
that imposed intellectual disabilities.
Sarah could not speak, but only make a couple of sounds.
She died suddenly, falling down a flight of stairs in the night
in the home she shared with Pam.
As a recent *Telegraph Herald* article noted,
many of her organs were donated to people in need of them.
And so she lives on in them.

Sarah could not form words, but she could speak in other ways.
She was well known in the Iowa legislature, and even beyond that,
because her parents did not hide her away, but made her part of their lives.
Because they were public figures, so was she.

Sarah was famous in ways she never realized.
Without a voice herself, she became a living witness to those with special needs.
She was in effect a perfect lobbyist for others without a voice.

But there are many voiceless among us, many *mogilalos*.
For the voiceless include those who do not have a hearing,
who do not have the means to make their voices heard.
Sarah makes me think of other advocates for the voiceless among us.

I think of programs like those that teach *English as a second language*.
I think of the *Lantern* program that enables immigrants,
along with all other plans for helping those in need of advocates
because they are strangers in a strange land.

I think of programs like the *Circles* program
which "helps families break the cycle of poverty"
by instructing those who are outside the common language of American middle class
in the cultural language, the signals and responses, they need to enter the circle.

I think of Robert Kimble and the *Dubuque Dream Center*,
which also gives voice to the voiceless by modeling successful lives
to those otherwise without teachers.

I think of the efforts of many of you here,
who have spent your lives helping people find their voices,
both literally and more inclusively.

In our Church we have the *mogilalos* as well.
For only selected voices have been speaking.
We well know that serious changes are needed,
that the structures will change,
or else will stand isolated like those buildings we see on the news programs,
after a fire or a windstorm has reduced them

to only the structural pillars and crossbeams.

And we know that the voices that are muted now must be heard.
This is the Voice of the Faithful,
the revealed truth that comes through the People of God as church,
that the Second Vatican Council called us back to.

It includes the voices of women where the crucial decisions are being made.
It means the voices of laity who have experiences
that must be included in the vision of the Church's ministry.
These too must hear the word *Ephphatha*.
For the community as a whole depends upon it.

In the Gospel, we think of Jesus traveling around Galilee
helping individuals in need.

That is our own perspective, we who are members of an individualistic society.
But Jesus is doing more than that.
As he travels among the villages of Galilee,
he is healing communities as well.

We can see this even more clearly in the poetry of Isaiah.
The prophet speaks of other wonders as well:

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

And he adds images of a revived natural world:

Streams will burst forth in the desert,
and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

The prophet is speaking of the end of exile and return to the land.
He is picturing a restored community of Israel.
His dream carries him into a vision of a natural world renewed.
And part of that renewal is a restoration of the ill and damaged to new health.

When Jesus traveled the world of Galilee,
he was bringing into existence the vision of the prophet,
he was working to bring the persons and the villages, and the people of God,
back to health, to full life and living.

There was in Galilee a man who lived near the shore who was *mogilalos*.
He had friends and neighbors who were concerned about him,
and they brought him to Jesus.

Jesus was known for bringing people back to life and health.
Bringing back people to health is a work in the pattern of Jesus.

There are many among us who are *mogilalos*.
Bringing them a voice, or *to* a voice, is a work of faith.

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 16, 2018

Isaiah 50:5-9	The Third Servant Song
Psalm 116:1-6, 8-9	He has freed my soul from death
James 2:14-18	Faith without works is dead
Mark 8:27-35	You are the Christ!

Friday night I picked up a new phrase—"come to conclusion."
Sister Susan Francois used it repeatedly to describe our present situation,
in religious life and in the church in general.

It did not refer to the end of these realities,
but rather the end of their present form,
making room for something new and as yet undefined.
I think it is a good phrase to describe what is happening today.

Sister Sarah Kowles described in somewhat stark terms
the future that she and her co-editors face in the years to come,
but she sees this future not only as a farewell, but as a new beginning.
Memorial and hope blend in that vision.

At the same time that Shalom was hosting this gathering about the book,
"In Our Own Words," on Friday night,
there was a ceremony of repentance at St. Raphael Cathedral,
where the current crisis of clergy abuse was openly discussed and lamented.

The archbishop laid out clear lines of quick and effective action to be followed.
He emphasized the need for action as well as repentance.

In its article about that prayer service,
the *Telegraph Herald* supplied background about the Pennsylvania grand jury report,
as well as the more recent call by Archbishop,
and former Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Carlo Maria Vigano
asking for Pope Francis to resign.

This is unprecedented in modern times,
partly because until Pope Benedict resigned, we didn't know he could.

Further examination revealed the claims
the archbishop made in the letter were not fully supported,
and that the Archbishop was himself acting as a spokesperson
for a part of the church who reject the direction Pope Francis is taking it.
For many of them, the problem is the Second Vatican Council,
which in their view should never have happened.

Meanwhile, the Catholic periodicals to which I subscribe
—*NCR, America, Commonweal*—are mounting a defense.
Michael Sean Winters, of the *NCR*, has floated the specter of a church in "schism,"

as some refuse to accept the changes we are going through.
The young church historian Massimo Faggioli
seconded that idea in an article in *Commonweal*.

Winters, has leveled a charge of "worldliness" in the church,
making that a part of his diagnosis.
He notes, for instance, that Cardinal McCarrick was given unnecessary leeway,
being valued for his ability to raise money, and so
skated "through life on his charm, popularity, glibness,
fundraising skill and political savvy."

In all of this, I see things "coming to conclusion,"
with the unsettling inability to see what will follow.
It is unquestionably a time of crisis in our church.

And with that, we come to the scripture readings for today,
the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time, to hear the Word of God.
And what do we find there?

For me, the incident told by Mark today only makes sense
in terms of his full story of Jesus.
Of course, that is how I read the Gospels in general, in terms of their fuller stories,
but it was Mark's that taught me this,
and particularly incidents like that told today.

We are at the center of the Gospel.
The time in Galilee is now coming to an end,
and Jesus will start his move toward Jerusalem,
where his story will come to an end.
But this is not a smooth transition.
Instead, Mark relates it as a major crisis in the narrative of Jesus' movement.

The Galilean mission concludes with Peter's recognition that Jesus is the Messiah,
the coming king of Israel.
This is correct as far as it goes.
But Peter's idea of what the Messiah will do contrasts sharply with that of Jesus.
Peter pictures a rule of power, dominating one's enemies.
This is the traditional role of ancient rulers.

But Jesus has something else in mind,
and begins to speak of service, and even suffering.
This is anathema to Peter,
and he rebukes Jesus for even thinking along these lines.
And then Jesus rebukes Peter,
and there they are arguing in front of the rest.

In the time of his baptism,
Jesus heard a voice from heaven that combined two key scripture passages.
One, Psalm 2, spoke of the coming Messiah, as a king in the grand manner.
The other was from the Servant Songs of Isaiah,

and reinterpreted the role of Messiah along the lines of the suffering Servant.
This is probably why we have the third of the Servant Songs
in today's Old Testament reading.

But all of this happened before the disciples entered the story.
So Peter is operating by the traditional ways of thinking.
As a result, Jesus will spend his time along the road to Jerusalem,
speaking of the Servant Messiah, and the place of servant discipleship.
Mark arranges for this message to be delivered three times,
in what the Bible editors call the "passion predictions."

Today we heard the first. Peter misunderstands.
Next week we will hear the second, when all Twelve fail to get the message,
arguing among themselves who is number one.
Later we will hear the third, when James and John fail the lesson,
as they sneak in before the others
and ask Jesus for the best seats in the coming kingdom,
to the left and right of him.

In each of these instances,
Jesus needs to explain things in terms of Servant Discipleship.
To James and John he says:
"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."

And today we hear his words to Peter:
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me.
For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for my sake
and that of the gospel will save it."

This is a sobering revision of the initial call by the lake.
Then it was simply, "Come, follow me."
And they left everything, and did so.
But now he speaks of denying self and taking up the cross.

We might assume that even this does not sink in for Peter,
for we recall that when the time came for him
to deny himself and take up the cross,
was when he found himself in the high priest's courtyard.
Jesus was taking up the cross. Peter was denying.
But he was getting it backward, denying the cross.

At least Peter stuck with Jesus that far.
The rest left earlier, in the garden where Jesus was being arrested.
They were last seen jumping over the garden wall and sneaking out the back gate.

And all of that began with today's gospel story,
when the wonderful successes of Galilee seemed to turn sour
as they turned toward Jerusalem.

Reading Mark's gospel, you wonder how it ever got written,
since the disciples never again show up.

The women do.
At the tomb they are told to tell Peter and the disciples
that Jesus is risen and is going before them to Galilee, where they will find him.

That is all.
We do not see that meeting, not find out how they were rehabilitated.
There is a longer ending in the Gospel,
added by someone who felt this way of ending things was intolerable.
But that is not from Mark, not part of the original gospel.

So we do not have a gospel account of the rehabilitation of the apostles.
We only have the gospel itself,
which would not exist if that rehabilitation had not occurred.
We have that witness.
And we have the witness of the women.

And we have this account today of the crisis and the loss,
and that of the failure of the apostles,
which account must have come from the apostles themselves,
speaking of those times and their part in it.

And we have the resilience of the movement of Jesus discipleship,
and the promise of the empty tomb,
and resurrection.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 30, 2018

Numbers 11:25-29	Eldad and Medad receive the Spirit
Psalm 19:8, 10, 12-14	The law of the Lord refreshes the soul
James 5:1-6	Gold and silver corrode, wealth rots
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48	Whoever is not against us is for us.

What was Joshua's problem, that he couldn't bear the thought
of Eldad and Medad receiving a portion of the Spirit,
even though they were not with the rest of the group?
Moses offers the opinion that he would prefer
that all were prophets and had the Spirit.

And what was bothering the apostle John,
that he couldn't stand having someone outside the group of Twelve
casting out evil spirits?
Jesus' answer is telling—"For whoever is not against us is for us."

I think we usually think of it the other way around:
"Whoever is not for us is against us."
But they are quite different statements.

When I say, "Whoever is not for us is against us,"
I am siding with Joshua and John,
taking the position that whoever is not within our group is an enemy.
This is the way of constant commotion.
This is the way of virulent partisanship.

But when I turn it around, and say, "Whoever is not against us is for us,"
I am opening up the possibility that those people over there
are just as much a human being as I am.

Today's world seems to belong more to Joshua and John.
In church circles things are heating up.
Archbishop Viganò has just issued a second letter concerning Pope Francis.

Gerard O'Connell, in *America Magazine*, writes,
"Viganò confirms what was already evident to everyone:
His real target is Pope Francis."

And our civic discourse is not exactly civil either.
Deep divisions in the public arena were exposed in the rawest manner
in the testimonies of Professor Christine Blasey Ford and Judge Brett Kavanaugh,
in the latter's nomination to the Supreme Court.

And coming elections make everything seem more desperate.
My email box has been filled lately with messages
inviting me to crush, destroy, humiliate, or ruin someone on the other side.

It is apparently not enough to simply defeat them,
we need to wipe them from the fact of the earth.

Michael Gerson titled a recent column in the Washington Post,
"We no longer want to just win. We want to destroy."

It is certainly legitimate, even necessary,
to disagree with the positions that some people take.
And there can be very deep divisions of principle and philosophy involved.
But that does not mean that those who disagree with me are acting in bad faith.

I have been thinking lately of three words
that are coming from all directions in the social media,
words that imply that those who disagree are acting in bad faith.

The first has been recently called the "S" word,
implying that it is both indecent and common.
The word is "Stupid,"
applied to those who have a different opinion than the speaker.
It is very popular these days.
Maybe the speaker means "Ignorant,"
which simply implies lack of complete information,
that if the other person had in his or her possession would cause a change of mind.

But to settle on "Stupid" moves it to a character trait,
and amounts to an attack on the person.
Which is probably more satisfying for the speaker.

However, it fails to recognize that all of us have only a partial knowledge of the truth,
and just because mine is different from yours
does not mean I must be in bad faith,
purposely distorting the truth.
The second word is "Evil."
This is the absolute division, that between Good and Evil.
There is no bridge between them.
This is the absolute world of genre fiction. Good guys and bad guys.
Though not just bad, but evil.
It implies that the other person is acting in a deliberately immoral manner.

But it fails to recognize that different people approach morality is different ways,
and though we may disagree with their system,
they can still be sincere and acting
according to what they consider to be morally proper.

A simple example in a complex area
is the difference between acting for the Good and doing what is Right.
Some people believe the moral thing is to commit to the good result,
and this justifies whatever it takes to get there.

They say that to make an omelet you must crack some eggs.

You may not agree with this, but it is an ancient moral philosophy
and some people follow it fervently and sincerely,
and are working for a better world.

Other people insist that we should do what is Right,
whether or not it achieves the end we desire.

They say that the End does not justify the Means.
You may be dismayed at these people because they do not seem to care
whether a good end results or not,
so long as their actions are proper or pure.
But they are acting sincerely and fervently, and are trying to live a moral life.

Most people like a mix of these two.
And they also can be acting fervently and sincerely.

My third word is "Hypocrite."
This seems to be a favorite on all sides.
The procedure is to identify a place where someone is acting
in a manner opposed to that person's public posture,
and then point it out with a certain amount of glee,
and cry out "Hypocrite."
There is a certain "Gotcha" quality to this.

My problem here is that it depends on someone being consistent,
and never acting against the principles that person claims to live by.
And I know that I myself cannot claim to always be consistent
and live by the principles that define my life.
And so I cannot call out "Hypocrite," without feeling like I am one,
simply by applying it to someone else.

And so I think I have to have a default position
in assuming that the person with whom I disagree is acting in good faith.
At least until I can determine otherwise.
Or, putting it another way, "Whoever is not against us is for us,"
and not "Whoever is not for us is against us."

Which brings me back to the question,
what is eating at Joshua that Eldad and Medad upset him?
And why is John so disturbed by someone outside the circle of the Twelve
casting out demons in the name of Jesus?

Judging from the answers of both Moses and Jesus,
it would seem that their problem is that they feel their own position is diminished
if anyone can do what they are called to do.
It is as if they are no longer special.
It is as if there is no glory in doing something
unless somebody else is not permitted to do it.

But Jesus insists:

“Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink
because you belong to Christ,
amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 7, 2018

Genesis 2:18-24	Flesh of my flesh
Psalm 128:1-6	Your wife like a fruitful vine
Hebrews 2:9-11	That he might taste death
Mark 10:2-16	Shall a man divorce his wife?

The story of the creation of Eve never fails to irritate many.

The notion of being "Adam's Rib" does not please many women, I think.
Of course, the story is not a scientific one.
There is no mention of x and y chromosomes, for instance.
Rather, it is a parable of the social roles of men and women.
But, of course, that is the problem.
It suggests a role of domination for men, and subordination for women.
Or so that is the common perception.

Call me a dreamer, but I think that the story
is as much a protest of this theory as it is a promotion of it.
In thinking this, I am helped by the Old Testament scholar, Phyllis Trible,
and an essay in her book, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality*.
Her first move is to clear away
the long history of patriarchal interpretation of this story.
And then she looks at it for itself.
Among the points she makes are these.

First of all, the word '*adam*,
which becomes the proper name "Adam" in the story,
simply means human, and it doesn't mean male.
In fact, the creation of the male doesn't occur until the creation of the female,
in this very story.
What was an asexual being is now divided into two sexes.
What is created here is woman, and man,
and sexuality itself.

In this creation story, God is shown creating the human from clay, like a potter,
and then observing a certain loneliness.
Hoping to ease the human's loneliness, God begins to create other beings
in the same way the human was created—from clay.
Thus appear the animals.
Which are nice, but not an answer to the problem.

Then God gets the brilliant idea to divide the human and create two out of one.
In this way, the two are the same substance.
Also, in a Hebrew pun, they have the same name.
Without getting too elaborate, I might mention
that the Hebrew word for "man" is *ish* (not '*adam*),
and the word for woman is *ishah*.
But to say "her man" sounds very similar—*ishshah*.

Which is a way of saying that the man and the woman
are not only the same flesh and bones, but have a common name.

And for the ancients, the essence of a being resided in its name.
And the Bible loves puns.

But the point can be made in another way.
Because they began as one, when a man and a woman join one another in marriage,
they again become one. There is a completion.

My sense is that the story is protesting views of male dominance
by insisting on the mutuality of the partnership.
This is not a hierarchy, it is a partnership.

Which may help to explain why Jesus cites this passage
when answering a question about divorce.
It has long been my sense that Jesus' real concern here
is not so much divorce as it is marriage.
His vision is one of mutuality and partnership,
and that was not the way it was seen in Judea in his time.

According to the law of Moses, only men, only husbands, could file for a divorce.
The wives did not have that option.
One can see where this policy would lead.
Often a man would replace one wife with another,
as his attention took a new direction.
The common name for this is serial polygamy.

My sense is that Jesus is protesting
this distortion of the relationship of men and women,
and part of that protest is an appreciation of the full humanity of women.
He had women friends, for instance.
So he was criticizing their use of divorce,
and how it reflected on their view of marriage, and women.

But how should he address it?
Should he say that wives should also be able to file for divorce,
just as much as women?
But that would not help people to see
the fuller view of marriage as a completion, a partnership.
And that is why in his argument,
he caps it off with a quote from the Genesis story.
They shall become one flesh.
The sacredness of marriage is not separate from its appreciation
of the full humanity of the partners, the mutual gift and grace.

A side note: Perhaps you noted
there was a two-line addendum at the end of the reading in Mark:
"and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Here's the situation. Mark, writing in Rome, or one of its many provinces,
was in a different situation.
Roman law allowed women to seek divorces.
And so, Mark was faced with the problem
of how to transmit Jesus' teaching in a new social context.
His solution was to add a couple lines at the end of the story,
saying in effect that it applies to women, too.
But this changes things.
Now the emphasis is not on the marriage, but on the divorce.
And so the story gets handed on.

I considered it worthwhile to launch into this elaborate explanation of today's readings
for the simple reason that we are in the midst of a social revolution
regarding the roles of men and women.
That, in fact, is why there could be someone named Phillis Trible
to provide an alternative reading of the Genesis story,
because a new way of seeing has emerged,
allowing the text to reveal itself in its original power.

But this revolution has been a long time coming, and that is another reason
to notice its agenda emerging in the readings.
It is a long time coming, because it is overturning millennia of patriarchy,
and that is not the kind of thing that can happen quickly,
although typically there are moments
in which built up pressures causes things to shift suddenly,
clarifying the meaning of what is happening.
We seem to be in one of those clarifying moments now.

But because the change is major, the way forward is often perilous.
One example may suffice.
In the ancient world, up to almost yesterday, society was constructed
by communities in which each person had a place and a role,
and that provided identity.
I think of my grandparents, and their world of the house and the barn.
She was in charge in the house, and all that was associated with it.
He was in charge of the barn, and all that was connected with that.
Inside and outside.
The biblical picture is not too different.
The mother had the house,
and that was the reason she led the Sabbath prayer, for it was in the house.
The father interacted between the family and the larger world,
and the public and political was his domain.

But that is changing.
Our modern sense of the dignity of each person
tends to shift the center of value from the community to the individual.
In our world, each person is like a community unto his or her self.
This is liberating, on the one hand, since it allows each person
the opportunity to develop the life and story available to that person.
One aspect is the blossoming of the full recognition of female personhood.

There are other areas in which full personhood
is being allowed to groups of people traditionally marginalized.

But there is also an unknown journey ahead,
for what will replace the role of community in the new world?
Granted, we can no longer assign persons fixed roles
from which they are never allowed to depart,
but what will replace those traditional assignments,
that often seemed so comforting?

And further, how do we avoid the tyranny of the self,
the self that is the measure and excuse for anything I feel entitled to do?
We have ample examples of that in today's world,
and we haven't yet figured out how to manage it. Or so I think.
We are on the way, but there are advances, and retreats.
The first can overexcite us; the second can tempt us to despair.
But that pattern is unavoidable in a change as major as this one.
Martin Luther King Jr. said that the arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice. That I think is true.

And I am comforted by seeing the summons to justice
speaking out from the scriptures, as in the readings for today.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 14, 2018

Wisdom 7:7-11	Solomon's Prayer
Psalm 90:12-17	Teach us to number our days aright.
Hebrews 4:12-13	Sharper than any two-edged sword
Mark 10:17-30	A rich man seeks to follow

A rich man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.
We all know this story.
And it turns out he is a virtuous man,
having kept all the commandments from his youth.

When Jesus learns this, he approves of him,
and points out that he is lacking one thing.
Only one thing is missing. Sell all he has and give to the poor.

We Americans never fail to feel accused by this story.
Defensively, we make a point of distinguishing
between physically giving up our good things, which we say is not the point,
and the proper attitude of detachment about them, which we say is the main point.

If we are properly detached from our good things,
we do not have to sell them,
and we can continue to enjoy them.

We all know this story,

and there are famous moments in it that have entered our culture.
Here are some things about this story that I think are worth mentioning.

First, it is a call story,
like the stories of Peter and Andrew, James and John, by the lake.
You will remember that Jesus said, Come follow me,
and they left everything and followed him.

You will notice that underneath all the twists and turns
of today's story of the Rich Man, there is a call story.
But it is a *failed* call story.
Instead of leaving everything and following him, he cannot do it.
For he had many possessions.

Here is another thing about this story.
When the apostles protest, wondering how anyone then can be saved,
Jesus answers that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle
than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.
There is a common interpretation of this passage
that proposes there was a gate in the old city of Jerusalem that was so narrow
that for a camel loaded with goods to pass through it,
they had to strip the load from the animal and reload it after it had entered.

There is no evidence for this interpretation.
It has the ring of a homiletic construction, imagined to make a point.
In any case, what good would such a gate be,
for anyone except bandits who could make off with the unloaded goods?
Any halfway intelligent city authority would fix it right away.

More likely this is typical mideastern rhetorical exaggeration.
A kind of poetry.
Remember the line about casting the wooden beam out of your own eye
before you worry about the splinter in the other person's eye? It's like that.

What is the largest animal they know? The camel.
What is the smallest opening? The eye of a needle.
It's good imagery—the largest animal can get through the smallest opening
before a rich person gets into heaven.

But of course that makes it worse.
And we are relieved when Jesus, as reassurance, says,
"For human beings it is impossible, but not for God.
All things are possible for God."

Of course, we take this to mean that God, for whom all things are possible,
will give us a free pass, even though we didn't quite make the grade.
We do not adopt the other meaning, which is more probable,
that Jesus is saying that all things being possible with God,
there is a chance that the rich person will have a change of mind
and dispose of all those belongings, and come follow.

After all this piling up charges and accusations,
perhaps we should look at it in another way.
    We take this story personally.

Perhaps that is not the point.
Perhaps it is more about competing values, different value systems.
God and mammon.
    In that sense, the story is about a culture that pulls people
    in directions that are not compatible with discipleship.
It does seem to be insisting on the incompatibility of the two forces
pulling us in different directions
    —come follow,
    but a culture that values possessions.

In today's world it is not difficult to illustrate what I have in mind.
As Americans, members of the leading capitalist nation,
we live in a marketing culture.
    Everything has ads, for how else, we are told,
    will anyone be able to deliver the news you need?

Sometimes there are tensions between marketing and human needs.
As when health care is limited to the best markets.
    For instance, an entrepreneur decides to get in the hospice ministry to the dying,
    and offers a premium service at a high price,
        leaving the rest to survive by an underfunded service.
        Here you can add your own examples, probably from health care.

But in today's world we have a plenitude of examples
due to the fact that we have a President and an administration
who personify these values.
    Here I am not speaking of this person's personal qualities,
    but rather how he is a perfect representation of an aspect of our culture,
    driven by greed and profit-making.
These are not new.
Usually, however, they are disguised,
or explained away as a side effect of purer motives.
    Usually, apologies and deflecting remarks are offered. But not any more.
    This aspect of our culture is now out for public display.

One example. Ten days ago, Jamal Khashoggi,
a Saudi journalist who writes for the *Washington Post*,
entered the Saudi embassy in Turkey,
    where he was ambushed, tortured, killed, and dismembered
    because of his criticism of the Saudi regime.
Our president, however, mindful of the economic benefits
of our relationship with Saudi Arabia,
along with his own history of lucrative connections with that country's leaders,
    was reluctant to make a statement about it, let alone a protest.
    However, more recently he has become more vocal,

apparently under pressure to do so.

Meanwhile, from the Washington Post: "Even amid reports
that agents for Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman brazenly killed
a Saudi journalist working for *The Washington Post*, some of the world's
richest and most influential business, media and political figures
still plan to attend a Saudi-sponsored schmoozefest in Riyadh this month."

"On the agenda at what has been dubbed Davos in the Desert,
after a similar gathering of elites every winter in Switzerland,
are the sorts of topics beloved by the globe-trotting superrich.
"Investing in transformation," "technology as opportunity"
and "advancing human potential" are listed as the conference's broad themes.
The real attraction, to be sure,
is the promise of lucrative deals with the Saudi government."

Here we have an example how God and mammon exert competing pressures.
It is not that we do not want to do the right thing,
it is that we worry about the cost.
Maybe the problem will go away, or blow over.

A more critical example of the tension between human welfare and the profit motive,
between God and mammon, struggling for our souls,
can be seen in the the current climate crisis.

I remember back in the 1970s, I had some books I can no longer find,
by an author I cannot remember,
who had detailed alternative energy plans
for dealing with a climate crisis he said was coming.
The problem, he was told, it that there was no way to monetize his dreams,
so they had no chance of being implemented.

In the last few days, the media has been responding
to a devastating report by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
Change is accelerating,
and the situation has been compared to a nuclear explosion of climate destruction.
The U.N. calls upon world leaders to act now,
for we are rapidly running out of time.

However, it is not clear how responding to this crisis will make anyone money.
Where is the profit in this? For that is where the bottom line is.
Our president belittles the report,
saying that the world's climate might actually be "fabulous,"
and that he has seen reports saying that.

Meanwhile, the official actions taken by the administration
to remove safeguards that would help the climate are too numerous to list.
And the reason for these actions is that they impede economic welfare.
Again, the tension between economic and human welfare.

While this is a dismal list, my intent here is simpler.
I am simply trying to say that the teaching of Jesus in the gospels
is not to make rich people feel bad.
Rather, it is to show that there is a fundamental contradiction
between discipleship and accumulating possessions.
It is a conflict of life principles.

Jesus is not trying to make either the Rich Man or Peter and the disciples feel bad.
He is simply trying to show
how opposed these two life principles are in fact, and in action.
They lead in different directions, and they are not both lifegiving.
As we are so clearly finding out today.

It is after all this dismal news that Jesus concedes,
"For human beings it is impossible, but not for God.
All things are possible for God."
I think that is to assure us that there is hope.

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 21, 2018

Isaiah 53:10-11	Conclusion of the Servant Songs
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22	He loves justice and right
Hebrews 4:14-16	Our high priest has been tested
Mark 10:35-34	James' and John's ambition

On October 14, a week ago, Archbishop Oscar Romero was canonized a saint.
As Thomas Gehring, of the NCR reminded us,

> "Romero was gunned down while celebrating Mass in 1980,
> the first bishop to be assassinated at the altar
> since Thomas Becket in the 12th century.

The archbishop lived as a marked man, staring down death squads
and a right-wing government supported by the United States,

> preaching a gospel of liberation to the poor and exploited
> in a place where wealthy oligarchs ruled for generations."

For those of us who remember his murder, this has been a long time coming.
For me, the feelings of that day were revived

> when I read about the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi,
> also silenced for speaking out.

In the past couple of weeks, a lively discussion topic
has been the role of the Christian leader.
Many Evangelists support Donald Trump, some believing that he was sent by God.

> And yet, this is a person who dismisses critics with the words,
> "I am the President and you are not," as he did this week.

And in church circles we have another letter from Archbishop Vigano, the third such,
responding to the rebuke of Cardinal Marc Ouellet.
His concern is gays in the church.

> But those who have studied his letters have concluded
> that he is being supported by those in the church
>
> > who are motivated more by their opposition to Pope Francis,
> > and his vision for the church.

With all of this
—and more, for I haven't mentioned the upcoming elections—
we come to the readings today, and their words about Christian leadership.
And Jesus' admonition:

"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."

It is always my inclination to look at the events in the gospels
in the light of the larger story. And so it is with today's reading.

> Jesus receives a request from James and John

seeking special places in the kingdom, when that day comes.

One recalls how just recently the Twelve were arguing among themselves
who among them was more important.
The two brothers apparently want to finesse an answer to that question
by moving in ahead of the others. Jesus is not pleased.

When he asks them if they can share his baptism and his cup,
Mark wants us to think of the greater story of the gospel.
Both baptism and cup have prominent roles in his story.

The baptism begins the gospel of Mark.
The voice from heaven names him Messiah, but adds to that
the first verse from the suffering Servant songs of Isaiah,
as a way of saying that his kingship is one of service, with a price.

It is a kingship,
but it is not according to the cultural expectations of force and domination.
Jesus responds by taking 40 days in the desert to ponder this,
for it is a tremendous demand.

That is the baptism. The cup comes later.
In the Passion account Jesus shares the cup at the Passover meal with his disciples.
He calls it the his blood of the covenant that will be shed for many.

And this too is followed by a testing, a temptation.
But this time in the garden, not the desert.
And he says, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you.
Take this cup away from me,
but not what I will but what you will."

I think of these two moments as similar,
for they both challenge Jesus with the cost of his call to messiahship.

But they are also different.
In his affirmation of the call at this baptism, after the sojourn in the desert,
when he returns to begin working among the villages of Galilee,
the price he has to pay is as yet far off.
This is just the beginning.

But now, at the prayer in the Garden, the moment is upon him.
The crisis is here, tonight and tomorrow. This is it.
And yet, he again says Yes.

This is the baptism and the cup that Jesus asks of his disciples.

I cannot but think that Mark is reminding us that our own baptism is sharing in his.
It involves a commitment to a cost, the cost of discipleship,
still general and out of focus yet, but still a commitment.
And our participation in the Eucharist is given in the Lord's Supper,

as a share in the witness that he is called upon to make.

James and John seem to be confident that they can handle it.
They are dreaming dreams, however,
that are far away from what Jesus is talking about.
After agreeing that they will indeed share in his baptism and cup,
and also informing them that he cannot give the seats of honor that they seek,
he begins to speak about what authority looks like
for the disciples of the suffering Servant.

The rulers over the Gentiles, we can be sure,
represent the exercise of authority as it is evident at large, in the cultural sphere.
It involves use of force and deception.
We need not elaborate on this, since in recent days, and weeks, and years,
we have had ample illustration in our world, in our daily news cycle.
Do I need to review any of this for you? Of course not.
It is in your mind right now.

But in response to this, Jesus says, "It shall not be so among you."
That could not be more clear.

Then, just to be sure, he concludes the conversation with these words:
"Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant;
whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.
For the Son of Man did not come to be served
but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

But these words have a history.
They again allude to the suffering Servant of Yahweh.
But now, in contrast to the first words of the first song,
which began the story of Jesus at his baptism,
we have the final words of the fourth and last song,
explaining that the Servant will spend his life unto his death
in service of God and God's people.

There is a note of atonement as well,
for there is a way in which the suffering of the Servant is a result
and even a response to the cruelty that he will confront
in the world to which he goes.
And this, he suggests, is also part of the story of the disciple
and the cost of discipleship.

In the gospel narrative, Jesus has almost arrived at his destination in Jerusalem.
There the words he utters now will take on full meaning,
largely to the dismay of his disciples.

But that is yet to come.
Today we simply hear the teaching he has for them.

Today's scripture could not be more timely.
We hear so much of what "Christians" believe.
And even—perhaps especially—among non-Christians,
it has become a cause for indignant accusations of hypocrisy and false teaching,
ironically by many who do not believe in that teaching anyway.

But in case anyone was wondering
what the gospel has to say about leadership and authority,
it lays it out today.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 28, 2018

Jeremiah 31:7-9	I will gather them from the ends of the earth
Psalm 126:1-6	When the Lord brought back the captives
Hebrews 5:1-6	For he himself is beset with weakness
Mark 10: 46-52	Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho

A blind man hears the passage of what sounds like a parade.
He inquires, and told it is Jesus of Nazareth, heading toward Jerusalem.
He hesitates, then makes his decision.
He calls out to Jesus, "Son of David, have pity on me."
They try to quiet him, but he calls out all the louder.
Son of David, have pity on me.

In my file of drawings for the Sundays of the Year, I have one that I particularly like.
It shows Jesus passing through Jericho.
Off to the left side is a blind man calling out.
To me, in his dark glasses, he looks a lot like Ray Charles,
the blind blues singer and musician.

The right side of the drawing shows Jesus coming toward us with his entourage.
He is surrounded by stern, unwavering men.
They are in toga-like robes, and also wearing dark glasses,
reminiscent of Secret Service guards.
In fact, the only person in the drawing without dark glasses is Jesus himself,
who is looking to the blind man.

For me, the drawing is a parable about blindness.
One man is identified as blind by the parable.
Those around Jesus are also blind, though not identified as such.
They are blind to the needs of the man calling out to Jesus.

What motivates them?
They are not concerned about the plight of the blind man,
who is said to be begging by the roadside.
He is just a beggar. He is a nuisance.
What they *are* concerned about
is the importance of their movement toward Jerusalem,
the grand parade of which they are a part.
There is a question, however, whether they understand
what this movement of Jesus stands for.
It is up to Jesus to set them straight,
by calling the Bartimaeus, the blind man, to him.

Their response is telling. Take courage, they tell him, he is calling you.
They do not recognize the courage he has already exhibited.
They speak out of their own sense of the movement,
as one of grandeur and great importance.
And they are part of it.

But Jesus has another idea of what he and his movement are about,
and it is not grandeur.
His attention to the abandoned and ignored by the side of the road,
those who are discarded from the list of interesting persons of the times,
those who are without advocates otherwise,
this attention of his is not theirs.

We see that kind of sense of what the Christian faith
is about repeated today, in many forms.
The Prosperity Gospel is an obvious case. But it is broader than that.

Wherever we are in the Christian community,
we often have a more widespread penchant
to favor the marks and display of the Christian
over the program of advocacy for those without anything to offer,
without any possibility for allowing us to demonstrate our generosity.

Today I am thinking about another parade, one moving through Mexico,
heading toward the southern border of the States,
seeking asylum from violence and poverty.
They are traveling in a caravan for mutual safety.

"Bartolo Fuentes, an activist and former Honduran lawmaker, initially organized it.
In an Oct. 4 Facebook post, he shared a graphic promoting a "Migrant March."
The graphic told migrants and protesters to gather on Oct. 12
at a bus station in San Pedro Sula, one of the most violent cities in the world.
"We don't leave because we want to, violence and poverty chases us out," it said."
(Politico: https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/23/migrant-caravan-facts-trump-border-881006)

"The people in the caravan that are traveling toward the US
will present themselves at a point of entry and request asylum.
The law allows this.

A person does not have to have any prior paperwork or documentation to do this.
There is no prior approval required to enter at a point of entry
and claim asylum." (*source*: Mark Schmidt)

This Franciscan community has firm ties to Honduras,
and knows on immediate terms what is happening there.
Despite that situation, given that we are in an election cycle of some importance,
the caravan has been touted as
either prompted by some Democrats trying to embarrass Trump,
or by some Republicans trying to put Democrats in a difficult position.

Some on social media have drawn biblical comparisons.
One is picture of the Holy Family on the road, with the caption,
"That moment when you are so desperate to protect your child

that you risk fleeing to another country."

But another that caught my attention
showed the crowd of Israelites following Moses, escaping out of Egypt.
They were traveling into the unknown, without a clear destination in mind,
except that it somehow was the Promised Land.

This image of risk and liberation
seems to represent many refugee communities in today's world.

And like them, the Israelites encountered blockades and risks.
The Amalekites tried to stop them from entering their territory.
When they came to Edom, the king refused permission
for them to pass through on the major route in the Near East
known as the King's Highway,
and so they skirted that country.

Refused permission by the Amorites, they were attacked.
Another king, fearing that their presence
as a liberated people would inflame his own,
met them at the border
and gave them a military escort across his land into the next.

In other words, this story is an ancient one.
Both the desperate need and the resistance to it.
And the response of the gospel is that
our neighbor is whoever comes into our awareness,
into our circle of concern,
and makes a claim upon us.

When Blind Bartimaeus, whoever he may be in our lives,
calls out, we have options.
One set of options is represented by those who rebuke, telling him to be silent.
Another is represented by Jesus, who stopped and said, "Call him."

He received his sight, and followed him on the way.


"SON OF DAVID, HAVE PITY ON ME!"

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 4, 2018

Deuteronomy 6:2-6	The Shema, the daily prayer
Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51	The Lord is my rock, my deliverer
Hebrews 7:23-28	A high priest higher than the heavens
Mark 12:28-34	The first of all the commandments

Today we welcome those of you who join us in our Sunday worship.
Today, in this season, we honor those who are close to us, who matter to us,
who have died, and entered into eternal life.

We believe they are with God, in the risen community.

And we pray with and for them today.

In Luke's gospel there is a moment in which a scholar of the law asks Jesus,
"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus answers, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

And the answer to that is the story we have in today's gospel reading.

In Mark's presentation of the story,
a scribe asks about the first of the commandments.

For his answer, he receives not one, but two commandments.

The first is from the daily prayer life of the devout Jew.
That passage from Deuteronomy, given in our first reading,
is the morning and evening prayer.

It is the proclamation of faith in the one God above all others.

It is the revelation with which the Jewish community was entrusted,
to bring to the world in need of it.

The second law is also from the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus.
The full reading of verse 18 of Leviticus 19 is,
"Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

Notice that it concerns taking revenge,
and how one ought not to do it.

The two passages are sitting there in the Old Testament.
What Jesus did, that was unique and surprising, was to bring them together.

So here is the first question:

What difference does it make when he does this?
Another way to ask this question is to wonder
if it is possible to love God without loving one's neighbor?

Can there be piety without pity?

It would seem so, because there are many pious people
who are not notably friendly toward their neighbors.

At least not in any apparent way.

But Jesus is suggesting that it cannot be that way.

Love of God implies love of neighbor.

But then there is the second question,
and the scholar of the law in Luke's gospel asks it:
And who is my neighbor?

This was a big question in Jesus' day, as it is today.
Some took a narrow view,
like the Essene community, famous for the Dead Sea scrolls.
According to those scrolls,
only members of that community were neighbors,
and no one else, not even other Jews.

The Pharisees at the time were split on the question.
Did it include foreigners?
Some said yes, if they converted to Judaism.

Others said, no, it is about strangers among us,
and if they converted they would then be Jews, and no longer strangers.
The law talks about strangers, aliens in the land.

For what it is worth, the chapter in Leviticus that gives us the rule,
adds a little further on,

"When a stranger resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one.
You shall treat the stranger who resides with you
no differently than the natives born among you;
you shall love the stranger as yourself;
for you too were once strangers in the land of Egypt.
I, the Lord, am your God." (Lev 19:33-34)

In Luke's account, Jesus answers the question about the neighbor
by blowing it wide open.
He answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Not only does he recommend the Samaritan, a foreigner,
but he changes the question from "Who is my neighbor?"
to "How can I be the neighbor?"

There is a pivotal passage in the Exodus law code,
that tells Israel to give special protection to the vulnerable and easily molested
— the strangers in the land, the widow and the orphan,
and the poor among them.
This is sometime called the Cry of the Poor.

It says that God is especially concerned about them,
and the community of his faithful should be so concerned as well.

Many of you know that this religious community, in the spirit of St. Francis,
have looked to the vulnerable and those easily exploited.

Among them are many from other lands, as well as in our own,
anywhere life can be precarious
and justice can be leveraged against competing interests.

And many of you support this community for these very reasons.
And you too refuse to separate
the two commandments that Jesus brings together here—
love of God and love of neighbor.
For you too believe that in this is eternal life.

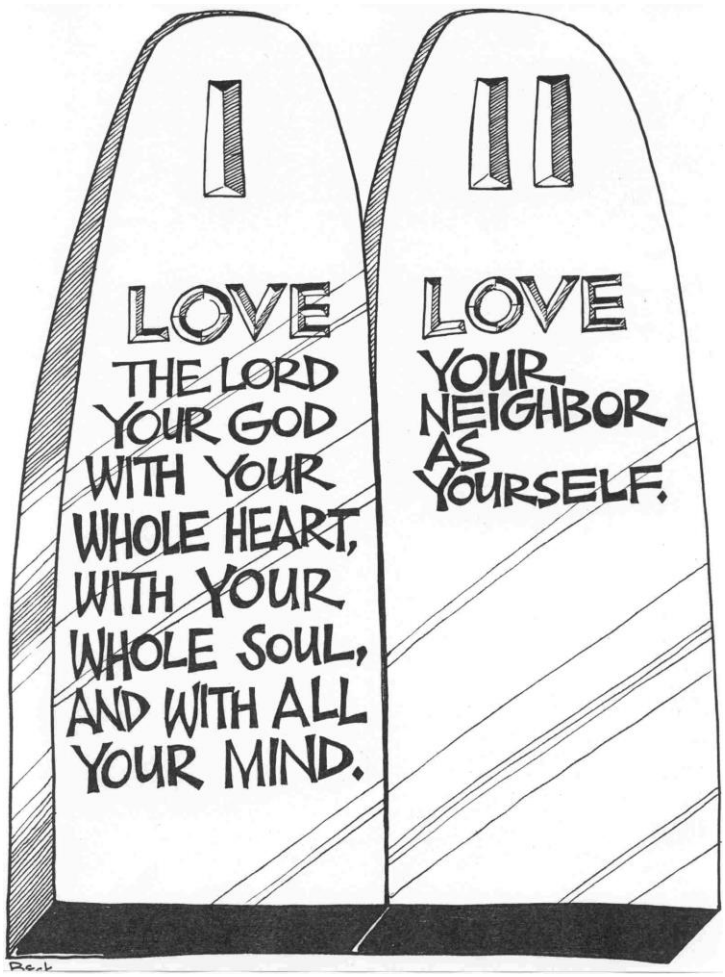
And so it is we come together in this Eucharistic celebration
to remember those near to us who have entered into that eternity.

Which brings us to a third question about today's story,
when the scribe answers Jesus with enthusiasm,
"You are right in saying this.
It is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Which is to say that the scribe agrees with Jesus.
Ritual and public acts of worship take on real meaning
when they are expressions of God's care of his people.

And so when we gather together today,
we are bringing into our common prayer our own concern for others,
those for whom we pray today,
as well as our commitment to the vulnerable,
expressed in this religious community, in our support for it,
and in our own lives of commitment to those in need.

We make our prayer, and we offer to God who loves the poor
our own poverty of spirit
and our hope for those we hold dear.


I
LOVE
THE LORD
YOUR GOD
WITH YOUR
WHOLE HEART,
WITH YOUR
WHOLE SOUL,
AND WITH ALL
YOUR MIND.
II
LOVE
YOUR
NEIGHBOR
AS
YOURSELF.

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 11, 2018

1 Kings 17:10-16	Elijah and the Widow
Psalm 146:7-10	The Lord gives food to the hungry
Hebrews 9:24-28	Not a sanctuary made by hands
Mark 12:38-44	Scribes, and a poor widow

Last week I made reference to the widow and the orphan,
as occupying a privileged place in the law code of the covenant,
under the heading of the cry of the poor.
This week they actually appear on the scene.

Every time a widow or orphan—or stranger or poor person—appears in scripture,
you can be sure that the law insisting on their protection is in the background,
and so it is today.
But this week there is something different added to it.
Their generosity.

Not only are they poor, but they are generous.
Perhaps having experienced poverty,
they are inclined to relieve the burden of others.

Or perhaps they are conscious of the need to care for one another,
and believe that in the community of those who aren't wealthy
the mutual care-taking of one another is essential for living life.
Or perhaps it is something else altogether.

I am reminded of a couple of stories
from a remarkable book I read a long time ago—Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*.
It is a study of the way that gifts work in our lives,
and how they differ, for instance, from the laws of debts and ledgers.

The two stories each involve two women.
One concerns two upperclass Brahmin women in India
who figured they could meet their tithing obligations
by the ingenious method of simply giving each other gifts.
It was pointed out to them that it doesn't work that way.

The other story concerns two sisters on the South Side of Chicago.
Both were married.

They came into a unexpected inheritance,
and were suddenly faced with the prospect
of dealing with a large amount of money,
when neither had any experience in doing so.

They took opposite approaches to this "problem."
One moved out of the neighborhood,
and she and her husband set up a life in another place.

The other stayed in the neighborhood.

The one who moved away
was able to live a fairly decent life from the inheritance.
However, she lost contact with her circle of friends in the old neighborhood.

The one who stayed had a steady procession to her door
of friends and family who thought she could help them in her need,
given her new found fortune.
It was not long before her inheritance was dispersed
among the friends and family in the neighborhood.

The question, of course, is which approach is better.
Which response to the good fortune is the one we would take,
and would that be the best?

The one is prudent, and preserves the fortune given her, but at a price.
The other is imprudent, to some eyes, and the fortune slips through her fingers.
But hers is not a total loss.

So we can add these two stories to those of the women in the readings for today.
For they bring out the aspect that is interesting in the Scripture stories
—the generosity of those who have known the rigors of poverty.

And of course, there is the commonly experienced resistance
to such liberal management of properties as being imprudent and irresponsible,
not properly guarding the goods entrusted to one.

At this point, these reflections can go in many directions,
for a number of implications and lessons arise in response to the stories.
But of these I will pick only one—the gift exchange nature of the life of faith.

For the dynamics of gift exchange are different from those of debts and ledgers.
The law of the ledger is strict accounting.
Debts are marked carefully, and the payments are made on time,
or a stiff penalty is exacted.
There is no wiggle room in the ledger account.

We have often in the past, or maybe even in the present,
considered the life of faith like a ledger.
We do this, and get paid for it by grace. Or eternal life.
We earned it, and so God owes it to us.

But on the other hand, there is the system of gift exchange.
After all, to be precise, the word “grace” means “gift.” Not “merit.”
The rules of gift exchange are different from the ledger.
The gift gives without obligation.
Or else it ceases being a gift, and becomes a payment.

Of course, the gift is part of a system, and so we can talk of a gift exchange.
It is only decent to acknowledge a gift,
at least respond with gratitude.

Or a symbolic gift in return—not worth as much,
but signaling that I have noticed your generosity, and am grateful.

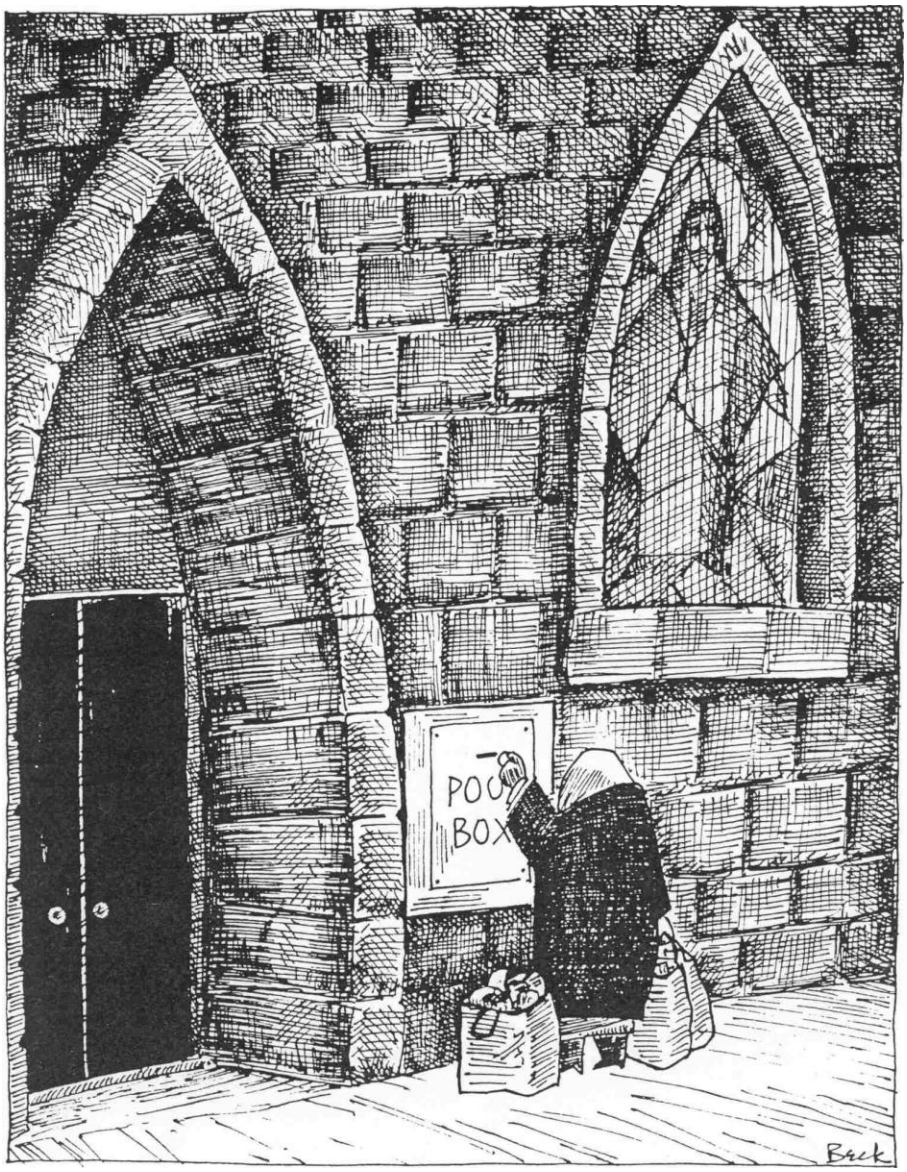
But all of this needs to steer clear of the spirit of payment.
For I can refuse a gift simply by offering to pay for it.
In so doing, I am saying that I do not want a gift,
I want out of the gift exchange.
I am more comfortable with the tit-for-tat of the ledger.

It is easy to slide over to that.
I think of another word for gift, close to the word "grace," and that is "gratuity."
While a gratuity, or simply a tip for a service person, is supposedly a free offering,
it isn't so much any more.
In fact, certain establishments factor tips into the salary.

And so it is with the life of faith.
It is a grace, a gift. And we are gifted.
We have not earned the gift. And we cannot.
But where there is a gift, there is a gift-giver.
And so, we respond in kind.

And returning to the widows in the Scriptures,
we see women who live in a spirit of generosity,
giving to others in the trust that the gift will be returned.

And so it is.
The jar of flour does not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry.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