Homilies - 2016

First Sunday of Advent [Cycle C]

November 29, 2015

Jeremiah 33:14-16	I will raise up a just shoot
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10, 14	Teach me your paths
I Thessalonians 3:12—4:2	Conduct yourselves to please God
Luke 21:25-28, 34-36	Be vigilant at all times

One popular interpretation of the name of the city, Jerusalem,
is that it is made of two words: "Ir," for city, and "Salem" for peace.
The "City of Peace."

We recognize this to be more a matter of hope for the future
than of present reality.
And we know that this has often been the case.
But the name expresses a dream, a hope,
for Israel and for the future.

This Advent we will take as our symbol of hope,
for the world as well as for the personal lives we lead,
this symbol of a city called Jerusalem.

It is the city that David captured when he became king,
formerly occupied by the Jebusites in the land,
but now by the children of Israel.
It is also the name that the book of Revelation gives
to the redeemed community gathered in eternity,
the Heavenly Jerusalem.

And this Advent, it is featured in the prophetic passages
that called for an exiled people to return,
to the city from which they had been removed.
Jerusalem, whose name in poetry is Zion,
the site of God's Temple, destroyed and then rebuilt.

This Advent Jerusalem will receive some new names.
Each is an expression of the hope of the people, and our own hope.
Each is more dream than reality,
but it is an essential dream,
a hope we cannot do without.

Today we hear, from the book of Jeremiah the hope for justice:
In those days Judah shall be safe
and Jerusalem shall dwell secure;
this is what they shall call her:
"The LORD our justice."

This hope for justice is a dream, but it is also more.
It is a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with any less than justice.
It is a standard by which we judge and hold wanting the present age.
It is the refusal to make do with the imitations of justice
that are presented to us, as if to keep us quiet, to pacify us.

It is what keeps us noticing those who are left out,
who are ignored by our cultural standards.
It keeps us noticing what is occurring around us,
even if we are offered distractions to look elsewhere.

It is what keeps us opening our Thanksgiving tables
to those without meals,
even while we are expected to join
the competitive commercialism of Black Friday.

Advent is a journey to Jerusalem, whatever that may mean for us.
During the season we will be called to come to the city.
We will follow the call and find ourselves coming to the Holy City.

But for today, there is only the announcement, the hope.
For now, the order of the day is to keep vigil. "Be vigilant at all times."
Watch for the day when the promises will be fulfilled.
When Jerusalem will indeed be the city of justice.

Vigilance is the posture of hope. It is not the posture of fear.

In today's world there is a climate of fear roaming our land.
Many look into the future and see fearful omens,
of alien peoples stealing our lives away from us.
Refugees, strangers in our land, people of different colors,
Mexicans, Muslims.

We may remember the world as an orderly place,
with everything in its place, and ourselves well situated in that order.
But now things are in flux, and we need to watch out.

One expression of this climate of fear
is seen among the white male community,
which feels to be losing its due privileges in a world gone crazy,
in their view.

And again yesterday the news was about a mass shooting,
this time in Colorado.

But there is a difference between the vigilant faithful and Vigilantes.
Between survival and Survivalists.
Between Watch For and Watch Out.

And a primary difference is the difference between hope and fear.
One hopes for a more just world;
the other fears the loss of a privileged place.

In the New Testament, the opposite of faith is not doubt.
No, in the New Testament the opposite of faith is fear.
To the synagogue leader whose daughter is dying,
Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; just have faith."
To the disciples in the boat during the storm,
he said, "Why are you fearful? Do you not yet have faith?"
To the woman who touched his cloak,
he commended her faith, despite her fear.

Faith is trust in God. Trust beyond fear.

We are told this is unrealistic.
We are told that we are being naïve,
that emotion is displacing hard-headed realism.
But as a matter of fact, naïveté and emotional decisions
are on their side.

The call to arms, the thirst for responding with force,
the thirst for vengeance is emotional and naïve.
It is emotional because vengeance seeks satisfaction, not justice,
Reason seeks justice. Emotions seek satisfaction.

It is naïve because, despite the overwhelming lessons of history,
it convinces itself that one solid blow will end the matter,
that it will solve the problem.
But what always happens is that it feeds the problem
and sets up a new stage for further retaliation.

And so it is we rely on hope, its restlessness,
its dissatisfaction with any thing that falls short of justice.

And we actually rejoice in our hope,
not because we are not paying attention,
but because we believe in a God
who delivers us from the worst of ourselves.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2015

Baruch 5:1-9	Up Jerusalem! stand upon the heights.
Psalm 126:1-6	The Lord brought back the captives..
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11	How I long for all of you.
Luke 3:1-6	All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Years afterward, an Israelite in the Diaspora,
the name given to the scattering of Jews across the ancient,
as well as today's contemporary, world ...
—this ancient Israelite imagined himself as Baruch,
the secretary of the prophet Jeremiah.

He imagined himself in the exile, and he dreamed of Jerusalem,
the city that represented home to those
scattered across the face of the earth.
He imagined Jerusalem calling them home:

"Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;
put on the splendor of glory from God forever...

"Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;
look to the east and see your children
gathered from the east and the west
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that they are remembered by God."

The return route will be smooth,
a welcoming pathway to safety and security.

For God has commanded
that every lofty mountain be made low,
and that the age-old depths and gorges
be filled to level ground,

The ancient Israelite writing these words
imagined himself among the dispersed, the wandering,
refugees in the ancient world.

In writing these words, he becomes one of the refugees in their need.
The Bible is written from the side of the dispersed and dismissed,
those outside the centers of decision-making
and the halls of the influential.

When we read the Scriptures, we become one with them,

we stand with them.
We become the dispersed, the refugee.

In Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' mature ministry,
we begin with John the Baptist,
and the application of the prophetic announcement
to the arrival of John on the scene.

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.
Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

But it doesn't stop there.
For now it is not only the people of Israel, but all peoples:

The winding roads shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Tuesday is the first day of Hanukkah, beginning tomorrow night,
since the ritual day begins on the previous evening.
It celebrates the victory of the Maccabees,
and the regaining control of Jerusalem and its temple.
Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple,
the recovery of that lost home
and sign of the presence of the one God.

Tuesday is also the start of the Jubilee Year of Mercy,
beginning with the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.
Jubilee, as you know, is a biblical theme,
proclaiming a year of release, of amnesty and restoration,
of freedom from want, debt, and disease,
and in the gospel, death itself.

The words of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth,
which Luke uses to open his gospel story,
tells us most clearly its meaning:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII declared the first Christian jubilee,
signaled by opening the Holy Door,
an entrance to St. Peter's Basilica, usually blocked,
allowing pilgrims to enter.
In Jubilee years, other holy doors are also opened
in Rome and around the world.

On Tuesday, the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica
will be opened by Francis, with a series of events
dedicated to young people, the sick and disabled,
prisoners and those involved in works of charity,
echoing the parable of the Sheep and the Goats:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me as a guest,
I was naked and you clothed me,
I was sick and you cared for me,
I was in prison and you came to me.'

"During a jubilee, Catholics can obtain special indulgences,
or remission for their sins,
if they fulfill certain conditions
and do good works or make pilgrimages.

This Jubilee is one of Mercy. What does that mean?
Alienated Catholics are invited to return.
Programs and pilgrimages have been planned,
with "Mercy" as their theme.

But I suspect that that programs of mercy-related activities
do not quite reach the level that Francis is seeking.
I suspect that he has in mind more than receiving mercy.
He also is thinking of showing it.

It is not a simple coincidence that his first trip outside Italy as pope
was to the migrant island of Lampedusa,
halfway between Italy and Africa.
It has been swamped with refugees.

On July 8, 2013, he came to the island on a coast guard ship.
Dozens of fishing boats met him.
Residents threw flowers into the water to greet him.
He threw a wreath into the sea to commemorate the many
who have drowned trying to make the crossing.

One of the banners read: “Pope Francis, only you can save us.”
A sign hanging from a balcony read: “You are one of us.”

The site of the Mass that he celebrated among them
was a graveyard for the many wrecked boats of migrants,
and his altar was one of those boats,
painted and decorated for the occasion.

He denounced the traffickers and lamented a climate of indifference.
He spoke of a lost sense of brotherly responsibility,
a lost sense of the mutual care for our human family.

This was only the first of his pastoral trips,
for there were many more to follow, as we know.
But it seems to stand for the rest.
And it proclaims in action what he thinks about
when he talks about mercy.

I do not need to talk about the climate of fear in our society today,
since you have already been thinking about that,
making the connections.

I simply want to a note of the convergences which call to us today
—Advent and its call to return,
Hanukkah and its rededication,
Jubilee and its absolutions,
and the Year of Mercy, with its compassion.

These gives names to the summons to a journey
proclaimed today.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2015

Zephaniah 3:14-18	The Lord is in your midst!
Isaiah 12:2-6	In your midst is the Holy One!
Philippians 4:4-7	Rejoice in the Lord always!
Luke 3:10-18	What should we do?

The drama that has been unfolding
in the Old Testament readings during this season of Advent
continues.

First, we heard the rumor that Jerusalem would be renewed.
Then we were alerted that those banished and forgotten
were on their way, the Lord bringing them.

Now today we find ourselves in the Holy City.
And twice we hear, the Lord is "in your midst."
This is our consolation.

God is among us. But where?
We look around. Where is our God in our midst?

In this past week, following the shooting at San Bernadino,
we have experienced a heightening of anxiety about terrorists.
Those who make it their business to sound the alarm
have raised the volume.

No longer do we hear plans for building walls,
because now the terrorists are in our midst.

But if that is so, how can God be in our midst?

John the Baptist has one answer for us,
when he comes announcing a baptism of repentance,
warning that the axe is at the root of the tree,
the winnowing fan is in his hand,
ready to gather the wheat and to burn the chaff.

The Lord is in our midst.
But that is not the only repeated cry we hear in the scriptures today.
Three times John is asked, "What should we do?"
We recognize here our own question: "What should we do?"

His answer seems somewhat muted, somewhat moderated,
in the light of his words of alarm.
To the crowds: Share what you have with those who have not.
To the tax-collectors: Don't overcharge.
To the soldiers: Don't bully and extort.

But these, you might say, are what they should be doing anyway.
How does this address the urgency of the times?
How does the blunt the force of the coming judgment?

John's answer reminds us that there is always something we can do.
It may seem trivial, but it is not.
Every move changes the picture, makes a difference.

God is in our midst.
What should we do?
These words are repeated again and again in the scriptures today.

But they are not the only refrains we hear.
Three times Zephaniah invites us to sing joyfully.
The response from the book of Isaiah repeats that.

And Paul's letter to the Philippians is equally insistent:
"Brothers and sisters:
Rejoice in the Lord always.
I shall say it again: rejoice!"

And, of course, this is the passage that gives us the title
for this Sunday of Advent:
Gaudete Sunday.
"Rejoice Sunday."

But how can we rejoice,
when we are constantly being told to be afraid?
When alarms are being raised on every side,
in the social media, on the talk shows,
in the campaign speeches and ads,
how can anyone paying attention find it possible to rejoice?

Advent has its answer.
Advent's answer is not one of building walls, refusing passports,
frightening the timid or arming the resentful.
Advent's answer is one of hope.

Hope is small and slight,
seemingly unable to be up the task asked of it.
Hope does not bluster, hope does not threaten.
And hope does not hate.

Hope is built on the belief we have a God
who is not only concerned about us,
but who has entered into the story,
who has become part of our history.

This is the meaning of the Incarnation,
which we celebrate under the name of Christmas.

"The terrorists are in our midst" finds its answer
in the assurance, "God is in our midst."

This is hope.
It is not a concealed carry permit.
It is an act of trust.

It may not change the balance by itself, but it will make a difference.
This is hope: that we work without certain assurance
that our effort will bring about success.
But that we are enabled to make our effort
because we have not despaired.

Our rejoicing is not the unsuspecting partying
of the passengers on the Titanic,
unaware of the dangers around them.

Rather, it is the expression of a hope that is larger than our fear,
and even larger than our supreme confidence
that we can take care of things on our own.

It is a hope based on our belief in a loving God,
a hope drawing its strength from a history of God
caring for the survival of those without resources
or the means for forcing their way.

It is the history of the people of God,
from the beginning to today, including you and me.

When I first wrote this homily,
I invoked the threat of climate change
as an example of hope against hope.

At that time, I wrote:

The threat implied in the evidence of climate change
raises the question that was put to the Baptist: What should we do?

This week in Paris the UN Climate change is taking place.
The COP21, the 21st Conference of the Parties,
involves 195 member states
working to negotiate a universal climate agreement.
A tall order, and its progress is not satisfying everyone.

But the question comes back—What should we do?
John the Baptist tells us that there is something we can do.
And we have an encyclical from P. Francis to inform us.
Every individual effort counts.
And it is cumulative.

Since then we have received the word that last night in Paris
195 nations came to a near unanimous agreement.
The struggle has taken two decades,
but finally a decision has been made.

The deal is not perfect, but it is a landmark.
It leaves much yet to be done.
But it demonstrates that moves can be made, things can be done.

But even more, it shows the human family as one,
coming together to speak and act on behalf of our common home,
this planet earth and its many inhabitants.

This year, instead of a white Christmas,
it appears we will be having a green Christmas,
a green Christmas indeed.

Green is the new color of hope.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2015

Micah 5:1-4	You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
Psalm 80:2-3,15-16,18-19	Let us see your face
Hebrews 10:5-10	I come to do your will
Luke 1:39-45	Elizabeth greets Mary

We have now come to the darkest time of the year.
For weeks now, following the call of Advent,
we have been coming to Jerusalem
in the poetry of the Advent scriptures.

Last week we heard that the Lord is in our midst.
But we were not told *where* in our midst.

To our surprise, after those weeks-long journeys,
we find ourselves not in the city itself,
but in the little town nearby—Bethlehem.

And finally, with the help of Elizabeth,
and her unborn child, John,
we discover where the Lord is to be found.

In the story of Mary's visit to her kinswoman, Elizabeth,
we are given a glimpse into the lives of those
the prophet Zephaniah called the *Anawim*, the humble poor.
In these Christmas stories of Luke
we spend some time in their company,
moving among their families, visiting their villages.

Luke's world at Christmas is different from that of Matthew.
In Matthew we hear of King Herod, and Magi.
We learn of the fate of the children in Bethlehem
and the flight to Egypt.

None of this is in Luke.
Instead we hear about Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna,
Mary and Joseph. And the boy Jesus.

Luke's world of the villagers is also far different
from the larger world around them.

In the past, I often contrasted the life of the Roman Empire,
which Luke evokes doing its work in the background,
with the goings-on of the humble people in the foreground.

In the background is Caesar Augustus;
in the foreground, the figures in the Christmas scenes.
Two worlds: the songs and the census;
the canticles and the counting.

It has often struck me how the Empire goes about its business,
carrying on the serious operations of power and of commerce.

Meanwhile, without its knowing it,
in the foreground, among these villagers,
history is turning a corner, and the calendar is starting over again.
A turning point has arrived.

Luke identifies the people in his story
as having certain things in common.

They are devout. Zechariah and Elizabeth are described
as "righteous in the eyes of God, observing
all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly."
Simeon is described as "righteous and devout."

But they have something else in common.
They are waiting upon the Lord,
waiting for God to tip the scales of history,
and bring about the fulfillment of the promises.

Simeon was "awaiting the consolation of Israel."
Anna reported the event "to all
who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem."

Perhaps to our surprise, there is in Luke's gospel
another person similarly described.

Joseph of Arimathea,
who provided a tomb for Jesus at the end of the story,
is also called "a good and upright man."
He too is waiting, for Luke tells us
"he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God."

Joseph too is among the humble faithful of Israel,
sharing a name with Joseph of Nazareth.

They are Jesus' own people, there at the beginning and at the end,
at his birth and his burial.
They send him off and welcome him back home.

In Luke's Christmas story,
those who are awaiting the consolation of Israel,
the redemption of Jerusalem, the kingdom of God
—all names for the coming fulfillment—
these vigilant villagers are witnesses to its arrival.

Unlike Caesar Augustus, who commands the census-taking,
these humble people are not always in control
of the events that shape their lives.

They are not in stations of influence or power.
They must wait upon the Lord's good will, upon the turns of events,
trusting that God in his time will provide.
Their call is to remain faithful.

And they witness the great moment's arrival.
Mary's exclamation in recognition is the Magnificat.
But before that we have her kinswoman, Elizabeth,
offering her own witness, with that of her unborn child,
in today's gospel.

The Lord has come.
And Elizabeth has the assignment of delivering the official welcome.

She is the dignitary at airport, if you will,
welcoming the visitor for whom all have been waiting.
All, that is, who were awaiting the deliverance of Israel.
All, that is, who have no choice
but to wait upon the coming of the Lord.

For weeks we have been hearing that the Lord is coming to Jerusalem.
We have heard finally that he is in our midst.
And now we know where.
He is among the poor and largely powerless.
Those who are largely unable to bend events to their own satisfaction.
Here, says Luke, is where the Lord is to be found.

This should be no surprise. But it is.
Dorothy Day was famous for saying that Jesus was the guest
coming in the door of the Catholic Worker houses.

And then there is the witness of Pope Francis.
Recently he was in war torn Africa.
Shortly he will be traveling to Mexico,
including a stop at Ciudad Juarez on the US/Mexican border
across from El Paso.

He will be acting in solidarity with those refugees
attempting to come to the U.S.
But in so doing,
in another example of his manner of visiting zones of violence,
he also will be visiting a town once known
as the "global murder capital" because of its drug wars.

Why does he take these risks?
Why does he not take better care, if not for himself,
then for the dignity of the office of the Papacy?

I have a theory.
Francis knows that he has a permanent spotlight on him.
The world watches his every move.
In fact, he knows how to cultivate that attention.

But he has it to use it.
He takes that spotlight wherever he goes,
and so he goes to places that need a light
shining on what is happening there. It is his gift to them.

It is his way of reminding the world what is happening here, or there,
even though we in the rest of the world
would like to continue ignoring it.

He refuses to let us forget.
He refuses to let their plight become normal.
He uses his attention to draw out theirs.

Our proper response is to pay heed.
To notice what he is showing us.
Our task is to refuse to let the atrocities
become normal by ignoring them.

In coming to the stricken places in the world, now,
as he did in the barrios of Argentina,
Pope Francis is acting like the Vicar of Christ,
bringing the Lord to the poor.

Today, Elizabeth speaks for them, the poor,
acknowledging and thanking God
for refusing to ignore them.

She is the voice of the humble poor,
delegated by them to welcome the Lord,
    to acknowledge that the vigilance was successful
    and the promises were kept.

She has come to tell us
that the celebrations are about to begin.

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

January I, 2016

Numbers 6:22-27	The blessing of Aaron
Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8	May god bless us
Galatians 4:4-7	In the Fullness of Time
Luke 2:16-21	Shepherds Come to Bethlehem

When I was young, I wondered about the shepherds and the angels.
The shepherds were on the bottom rung of the social ladder.
So why did the angels appear to them
to make the world-shattering announcement?
Did they not know where the authorities lived?

I was reminded of a cartoon I saw, in the style of the New Yorker,
which plays upon incongruous associations.
It showed a UFO in the typical flying saucer style,
landing in a farm field.

The aliens addressed a cow standing there with the words,
"Take us to your leader."
They apparently hadn't done their homework
on the new territory they were invading.
I thought of them in connection with the angels.

Now that I am older, I understand
that this discontinuity is the whole point.
When the angels announce Peace on Earth, to the shepherds,
in apparent ignorance of the Pax Romana of Caesar Augustus
that prevailed upon the earth at the time,
this was not a matter of not knowing their politics.

Rather, it was an announcement that belonged to the people
we find in the Christmas stories
—humble, poor, of little consequence on the international scene.

When the angels say Peace on Earth to People of Good Will,
it is these faithful people with their good will that they have in mind.
It is to these, the Christmas stories tell us, that God comes,
now as then.

It is the disregarded that are now given regard,
the overlooked, those ignored or even harmed
in the mismanagement of justice as it is practiced
with its biases and favoritism,

those who are fair game for abuse because they are homeless,
or refugees without safeguards fleeing for their lives,
or persons of the wrong color who are prime targets
for nervous guardians of the peace,
it is all of those vulnerable in our society,
who lack the protections we take for granted,
that are represented by the humble people in the Christmas stories,
to whom the angels come.

And among whom appears the Incarnate Christ.

Today it is the shepherds who represent them.
But it is also the feast of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.
As we know from her Magnificat,
she is the vocal representative of her people,
the humble among whom the promises to Israel are fulfilled.

It is with them,
and not the princes and dictators of the lands.

Recognizing that, we might be careful
about making her too royal in our appreciation.

We want to crown Mary, make her a princess, a queen,
with glorious robes and jewels that glitter like lights.
However, to do that she would have to leave her old neighborhood.
She would have to leave her old friends behind and move to the city.
She would have to become a member of the royal classes.

And that would change the meaning
of what the Christmas stories are trying to tell us.

It would change the meaning to say that God comes
to those in the royal halls, not the villages and stables.
It would say that God loves the powerful more than the powerless.
And that is not what the story is trying to tell us.

God comes to the poor, and that is where we will find him.
God comes to Mary, and she speaks to us
from a place of quiet and simplicity.

If those who love pomp and privilege want to find God,
they need to find that quiet place, and those simple people,
and Mary, the virgin whom we call the Mother of God.

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 3, 2016

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

On the feast of the Epiphany we celebrate
the coming of the Magi, the gifts, and the star in the sky.
A seasonal pastime of astronomers
is to try to identify the star of Bethlehem.
They have not so far succeeded.

Light is certainly a part of the celebration,
as it should be at this time of the year.
The passage from the book of Isaiah
celebrates the light upon the city of Jerusalem.

> Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
> the glory of the Lord shines upon you.

It imagines that future moment,
with the surrounding world in darkness,
and the city, raised on Mount Zion, bathed in light,
shining on it alone.

A rustle is heard in the surrounding darkness,
which reveals itself to be the movement of caravans and peoples,
moving from the darkness into the light.

It is in this spirit that we celebrate
the arrival of the Gentiles on the scene,
in what has come to be called the Gentiles' Christmas.
The Magi represent the Gentile world
in the gospel reading from Matthew.

Magi are not kings,
though that tradition has grown from the passage in Isaiah.
The Magi are specialists in the occult,
especially that of observing and interpreting the motions of the stars.

The word Magi is obviously related to our word Magic,
and that connection is not too inaccurate.

The singular of Magi is Magus,

and the Magi of today are successors of that Magus
from the book of Numbers, Balaam son of Balak,
whose donkey talked to him,
and who was hired by Balak, king of Moab,
to place a curse on the tribes of Israel
as they sojourned toward the Promised Land.
Instead, he delivered a blessing,
which included mention of a star:

A star shall advance from Jacob,
and a scepter* shall rise from Israel,...

Israel, in its tradition, understood this to be the Star of David.
And after the end of the David kingship,
it became the sign of the coming Messiah, the future son of David.

So it is appropriate that the successors of Balaam,
the Magi coming to Bethlehem,
come at the appearance of a star.

In the ancient world, without electricity,
in semi-arid lands without many clouds,
the star-filled sky was an obvious presence.

Today, the stars are largely hidden from us.
Even when a heavenly phenomenon is called to our attention,
we are likely to be unable to witness it.
This was true recently of the full moon on Christmas—not a star—
that was obscured by overcast skies.

Nonetheless, our own poets and seers
have continued to interpret the signs in the heaven.
The American poet, William Carlos Williams,
famously wrote a short poem about the morning star,
which he called "El Hombre." It reads:

It's a strange courage
you give me ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!

Williams was a major poet
who pioneered a peculiarly American style of free verse
that has now taken over the tradition.
But at that time he was unrecognized, and felt it.

For him, the star was calling him toward his art,
and to be true to himself.

"Follow your star" has become a mantra of sorts in our culture,
meaning, as with Williams, to follow your own path.
Be a fully realized individual.
Do not follow the common herd.
Be like the Magi, and follow your star.

But it was not the Magi's star, it was the Messiah's.
The light was not their own. And they knew that.
They came bringing gifts and homage.
And left quietly after they had given their respects.

Recently, I used the image of light
to describe the attention Pope Francis receives.
Wherever he goes
he has the spotlight of media attention focused on him.
Today I would like to repeat that comparison,
applying it to the feast of the Epiphany.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Magi and the Star,
coming from elsewhere, appear in the Gospel story.
It is the beginning of the action in the story.
Their arrival stirs things up.

Things begin happening, and it all leads finally,
with the inevitability of the chain of cause and effect,
to the Temple Cleansing and the Cross.

It is the Magi who bring the light,
just as the light brings the Magi.

Similarly, Pope Francis brings the light of attention
to those corners of the world that are in darkness,
that need the clarity of the light to dispel the curse of indifference
and bring about the healing that light and air can produce.
The world's attention is summoned,
and thereby we are challenged to care.

In this is an image of discipleship.
In our refusal to ignore the plight of those suffering
the injuries and indignities today's world can inflict,
we follow the example of Francis,
and the Star of the Messiah.

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 3, 2016

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

On the feast of the Epiphany we celebrate
the coming of the Magi, the gifts, and the star in the sky.
A seasonal pastime of astronomers
is to try to identify the star of Bethlehem.
They have not so far succeeded.

Light is certainly a part of the celebration,
as it should be at this time of the year.
The passage from the book of Isaiah
celebrates the light upon the city of Jerusalem.

> Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
> the glory of the Lord shines upon you.

It imagines that future moment,
with the surrounding world in darkness,
and the city, raised on Mount Zion, bathed in light,
shining on it alone.

A rustle is heard in the surrounding darkness,
which reveals itself to be the movement of caravans and peoples,
moving from the darkness into the light.

It is in this spirit that we celebrate
the arrival of the Gentiles on the scene,
in what has come to be called the Gentiles' Christmas.
The Magi represent the Gentile world
in the gospel reading from Matthew.

Magi are not kings,
though that tradition has grown from the passage in Isaiah.
The Magi are specialists in the occult,
especially that of observing and interpreting the motions of the stars.

The word Magi is obviously related to our word Magic,
and that connection is not too inaccurate.

The singular of Magi is Magus,

and the Magi of today are successors of that Magus
from the book of Numbers, Balaam son of Balak,
whose donkey talked to him,
and who was hired by Balak, king of Moab,
to place a curse on the tribes of Israel
as they sojourned toward the Promised Land.
Instead, he delivered a blessing,
which included mention of a star:

A star shall advance from Jacob,
and a scepter* shall rise from Israel,...

Israel, in its tradition, understood this to be the Star of David.
And after the end of the David kingship,
it became the sign of the coming Messiah, the future son of David.

So it is appropriate that the successors of Balaam,
the Magi coming to Bethlehem,
come at the appearance of a star.

In the ancient world, without electricity,
in semi-arid lands without many clouds,
the star-filled sky was an obvious presence.

Today, the stars are largely hidden from us.
Even when a heavenly phenomenon is called to our attention,
we are likely to be unable to witness it.
This was true recently of the full moon on Christmas—not a star—
that was obscured by overcast skies.

Nonetheless, our own poets and seers
have continued to interpret the signs in the heaven.
The American poet, William Carlos Williams,
famously wrote a short poem about the morning star,
which he called "El Hombre." It reads:

It's a strange courage
you give me ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!

Williams was a major poet
who pioneered a peculiarly American style of free verse
that has now taken over the tradition.
But at that time he was unrecognized, and felt it.

For him, the star was calling him toward his art,
and to be true to himself.

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Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 17, 2016

Isaiah 62:1-5	New names for Jerusalem
Psalm 96:1-3, 7-10	Sing to the Lord a new song
1 Corinthians 12:4-11	Many spiritual gifts
John 2:1-11	A Wedding at Cana

Who doesn't love a wedding?
And what biblical story is more beloved than the Wedding Feast at Cana?
There is something here that reaches us at a very human level.

Jesus and his disciples were invited.
The part we hear about seems to be the wedding reception.
Probably Jesus was related to the groom.
Maybe through Mary, since she knows about the problem with the wine.
It would appear, in our terms, that she is helping out in the kitchen.
At any rate, she is close to those who are giving the party.

Running out of wine is not a good sign.
It doesn't speak well of the ability of the groom
to plan or provide for the future.
It would be an ill omen for the success of the marriage,
not to mention a signal dishonor
before the entire gathering of family, friends, and neighbors.

It says that Jesus and his disciples were invited.
Maybe Jesus was invited.
Maybe there were more disciples than anyone had planned for.

In other words, maybe Jesus and his disciples
were the reason for the wine running short.
That would explain Mary's coming to Jesus
with the report on the wine situation.
It would be a way of saying that since
he was at least indirectly responsible for the wine running short,
maybe he should consider doing something about it.

What did she expect him to do?
Did she expect a miracle?
Maybe she was just a mother saying you did this, now you fix it.
It was up to him to figure out what to do.

Archaeologists have discovered that Nazareth in Jesus' day
was rich in vineyards and wineries.

It would seem that it was a specialty of the area,
and a major operation in the business of the place.
Maybe his mother thought that he would know something
or someone who could remedy the situation.

Or maybe she *did* expect something spectacular.
That would explain Jesus' response:
"Woman, how does your concern affect me?
My hour has not yet come."

It seems that this was not
where he planned to begin his public mission.
That would be elsewhere.
That would be the next event in the story,
the cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem.
That would be the dramatic action that begins the story with a flourish.

In all the gospels, it is the temple cleansing
that prompts the religious authorities to take action against Jesus.
In the other gospels, it results in the Passion story
in the final week of Jesus' life.

John has it early, but with the same impact.
It would set the stage for the struggle during the ensuing life of Jesus.
It would be the prophetic action that declares what he is about,
and how a new day has arrived.
A new era in the history of salvation
and God's relationship with the human race.

But now, he has this request from his mother
to do something about the wine.

Why does John bother to begin with this story,
when he also tells us that this was not
what Jesus had in mind for launching his mission?
Why not simply tell the part that Jesus intended,
and not bother to report how he did this miracle at the Cana wedding,
even though it wasn't what he had planned for an opening act?

After all, we know that the evangelist
didn't tell everything that happened.
He says so at the end of the gospel, when he tells us
that "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples
that are not written in this book."

Maybe that is a clue,
since John also tells us that this is the first of his signs.
So it is not simply incidental; it is significant.
Literally.

Signs, by their nature, point to something.
They do not exist for themselves.
Signs on the street are not put there to beautify the landscape.
They point to something.

So what does this sign point to?
First of all, we think that it points to the fact
that there is more to Jesus than what most people think.
We might say that he is divine, but they do not know that yet.

But what about this sign?
What in particular does it point to?

After all, we are talking about a wedding here.
This is not a situation representing major injustices,
social disruption that requires prophetic attention and calling out.
It is not in the arena of social injustice
that we picture Jesus operating in his public ministry,
releasing from debt and disease, death and diminishment.
It is only a wedding.
And it is just that they ran out of wine.

It is not a matter of distorted public policy;
it is only a case of embarrassment in the sphere of private lives.

But maybe we should begin there.
Maybe it sets the stage for what it to follow.

Some point to the biblical passages
that picture the coming age of fulfillment in the end time
as a social gathering, often a wedding.

Weddings seem an appropriate image for celebratory gathering.
There is a certain release from the conventions
that rule us in our daily lives.
There is an atmosphere of possibility and newness,
not to mention fertility and new life.
Weddings can quite successfully represent the spirit of celebration
that our human lives together share at peak moments.
It is an image of what life can offer.

But it also can represent our ordinary lives.
Think about pictures of village life.
Whether you go to the works of Bruegel,
such as his painting of the Peasant Wedding,
or the word paintings of Tolkein
in the hobbit stories of the local celebrations,
the images of the village gatherings always celebrate the common life,
the ordinary life that they share with one another.

And this is no insignificant thing.
The possibility of living in peace, each under his or her own olive tree,
is a thing of considerable value.
It is the portrait of the life for which we were intended.
It is not grandiose, but neither is it to be underestimated.
It is a picture of the life that we are fitted for.

John begins his story of Jesus,
by first showing us the values that he is struggling for,
the lives that he will live and die to win for us.
The injustices that he will prophetically call out in spectacular fashion
are what prevents this picture of domestic peace from being realized.

We need only look at our TV sets or our internet devices
to witness the lives of refugees
who have this common life taken away from them,
finding in its destruction their own.

Jesus' sacrifice is not to make us royalty,
but rather to allow us to be ourselves,
the selves that we were created to be,
without thinking of the threats to that shared common life,
innocently celebrating it,
as when we are at a wedding.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 24, 2016

Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10	Ezra's Covenant Renewal
Psalm 19:8-10, 15	The Law of the Lord is perfect
1 Corinthians 12:12-30	Many parts, one body
Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21	Jesus reads in the Synagogue

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

Luke begins his story of Jesus' ministry
with a reading from the book of Isaiah,
that announces a year of Jubilee.
The Jubilee tradition has its roots in the celebration of the Sabbath,
and the Sabbath rest.

The Sabbath was a time to let the rhythm of life relax,
and regain its customary heart beat.

Jubilee was a year of rest, a time to let the fields lie fallow
and regain their strength and fertility.
It was a time to cancel debts;
a time to release those in prison for indebtedness.

It was a time to experience the favor of the Lord with his people Israel,
by living in the absolute gratuity of grace,
God's unwarranted and unlimited gift.

The passage from Isaiah was written upon the release and return
of the Judeans from the exile in Babylon.
The prophet takes the opportunity to evoke the old Jubilee traditions
and apply them to their moment in time.
A new day has begun, a year of favor from the Lord.

But the reality of the situation is that they were returning
to a land they had left a half-century earlier,
and their return was not welcomed.

They were among hostile neighbors,
and the situation required a different approach,
one that took into account the dangers of the time
and the threats to their continued existence
in the land to which they had returned.

It was Ezra who established the covenant
that solidified their defensive stance in the land,
surrounded by unfriendly neighbors.

They put up their symbolic walls to protect the community,
walls of symbol and ritual that marked them off from their neighbors.
Mixed marriages were disallowed.
Food laws distinguished their diet from the neighboring peoples.
Circumcision and Sabbath regulations
became an important part of their self-identity.

The announcement of Jubilee was put aside,
put in storage where it was largely forgotten.
But it was still there, and it remained part of the dream.

So it was when Jesus appears on the scene in the gospel of Luke,
reviving the dream of Jubilee, and announcing,
"Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

The gospel proclamation of Jubilee has three messages of liberation.
The **first** is good news to the poor.
The **second** is release from that which enslaves,
whether it be debt, disease, death, or destructive life decisions.
The **third** is the announcement that the time has come.

The good news to the poor is a notable part of this gospel of Luke's.
We remember the Magnificat of Mary,
with its upending of the high and low, the rich and poor.
We know about the Beatitudes,
with its blessing to the poor and woe to the rich.

We will see the call to go out to the poor.
"Whenever you give a banquet,
invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind."
But that does not always meet approval.
Recently I read a note from a Dubuquer
who felt we were inviting too many outsiders into the town.
His message was simple:
"Charity begins at home
and stays at home."

The citizens of Nazareth knew this feeling
when they rejected Jesus' message.

Release of debt, whether money owed or injury felt,
is also not easily won.
The women who washed Jesus' feet with her repentant tears
was not viewed favorably by Simon the Pharisee
who was the host at that gathering.

Forgiveness is not a popular message.
When we look around, we see resentment
against those who some feel are getting by too easily.
Maybe it is the poor, conveniently characterized as "lazy."
Maybe it is those who are foreign, or the children of the foreign-born,
who are perceived as getting a break they do not deserve
when they are allowed to stay here.

Release from debt is also known as amnesty,
and the very word drives some people slightly awry.

The announcement of a year acceptable to the Lord,
the third of Jesus' proclamations in the Nazareth synagogue,
had the effect of saying that the ancient dream of Jubilee
was no longer merely a dream, but now had come to life,
had entered history with this moment.

Here Luke is not only announcing the beginning of the gospel story,
but the beginning of a new era in the history of God's people.
And the implications are daunting.

It is impossible to talk about this
without thinking of its present-day revival
in the Jubilee Year of Mercy announced by Pope Francis.

Here too it has its roots in the Sabbath.
For some the Sabbath means an hour in church,
the hour of the week when you act like a Christian,
careful not to let it flow over into Monday,
where the real world has to take precedence.

For them, the Year of Mercy takes the form of temporary exercises.
Set aside a time for this work of mercy: another time for that.
And there you are,
the Year of Mercy is taken care of and we can move on.

But it would seem that more is being called for here,
and the gospel for today signals that.
It is not a set of exercises
but a certain direction in living one's life.
Something like New Year's resolutions when they are actually kept.

In the fortuitous convergences that are so much a part of our lives,
another year of favor also opens up for us at this time,
and that is in the political sphere.
I am speaking, of course, about the Iowa caucuses,
a time of local political engagement with global implications
in a way unusual in our mass-production world.

Whether one believes that the convergence
is one of luck or of Providence,
it is fairly clear that the gospel for today has shown up on the calendar
just in time to provide us with a set of principles
to take with us to the caucuses:

good news to the poor,
release from the various slaveries at home in our world today,
and bring about a year acceptable to the Lord.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 31, 2016

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19	Jeremiah's call to prophecy
Psalm 71:1-6, 15-17	In you I take refuge
1 Corinthians 12:31—13:13	The greatest gift is love
Luke 4:21-30	Negative reaction in Nazareth

It will be sudden and complete.
With neck-snapping abruptness the world will change completely.
On Tuesday morning, Iowa will be the aftermath.

We will hear the deafening silence.
We will have our TVs back.

It will be like the day after the circus leaves town.
First there was the crowd, the sounds of the Midway,
the noise of the calliope.
Then, only the vacant lot, with some loose papers blowing across it.

Change can happen suddenly.
Perhaps it usually does, after a long time building up.
Sometimes it happens without noticing it.

In today's gospel story the people of Nazareth
abruptly change their view of Jesus.
It is disguised by the liturgy,
since we had the good feelings last week,
but this week we find them rising up against him.
For us it is on two different Sundays.
For Jesus, it was the same Sabbath.
What prompted it?

One answer can be found in their feeling that they knew him,
and that they have the feeling not uncommon in small towns,
summed up in the Midwestern expression,
"Who do you think you are?"

When you think about it, which we usually don't,
it is not easy to understand this feeling of resentment
at the success of another.
Most probably, it is the feeling that their means I, or we,
have somehow failed.
How can it be that we came from the same place,
had the same education, apparently the same advantages,
and now that one is doing great, but I am not.

That might be part of it.
A further answer can be found in the promises Jesus made
about a new day, a day of liberation from cares and constraints.

He spoke of a Jubilee year, a year of favor from the Lord.
But then he added the words we heard today:
Surely you will say, 'Do here in your native place
the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'"

He made great promises,
and then announced that he was going elsewhere.

Great promises,
but it sounds like Capernaum will be receiving them,and not Nazareth.
This also could cause a certain feeling of resentment.
It is not uncommon to feel that the good fortune of someone else
is misfortune for you.

Economists talk about a zero-sum society,
in which there are a limited supply of goods.
If one has more, the rest must have been short-changed.
And some people apply that across the board,
applying it not only to material goods, but to spiritual benefits as well.
If God has smiled on her, than he must hate me.

If Jesus has good news for Capernaum,
then it must be bad news for Nazareth.
And then, in a process of interaction we know only too well,
so it will be bad news for Jesus as well.

But there is a third answer to the question of the animosity of Nazareth,
so severe that it prompted them
to drop him from the brow of its steep hill.
It goes beyond Nazareth and Capernaum. But it is similar.

Jesus speaks of the prophets Elijah and Elisha,
who were known for taking their good works
beyond the people of Israel to those in other nations.

The Widow of Zeraphath lived in today's Lebanon.
Naaman, the military commander, was from Syria.
And this was during a time of war with Israel.

Here we see Jesus foreshadowing a movement
that goes beyond this land to other lands.

In other words, he allows us to look forward to the story as Luke tells it,
going beyond the gospel to Acts of the Apostles,
where the mission extends into the other nations.

Last week we anticipated this.
We saw that the message of liberation of the Isaiah scroll
was in conflict with Ezra's covenant renewal.

Where the one opening up Israel to the nations,
the other closed the nations out.
Where the one spoke of a light to the Gentiles,
the other insisted on walls built of rituals
—identity markers that set them apart.

Not only the Sabbath observance,
but also food laws, marriage laws, and more.

And now we see that the villagers of Nazareth understand this.
Or at least Luke shows them anticipating
what will happen in the coming story,
and what kind of harsh response it will produce.

It is not a coincidence that Peter has a vision
that overrules the ritual food laws, on the one hand,
and is arrested a number of times, on the other.
Or that Paul argues against circumcision
and also does a lot of jail time.

There is something about identity markers
that evokes strong emotions.

Most of us remember our own version
—Friday and Lenten food laws, Sunday obligation,
various obligations and prohibitions that identified us as Catholics.

We also remember how the idea was forwarded
that these be voluntary, rather than obligatory,
showing an allegiance that was voluntary rather than enforced.
We remember how this was welcomed by some and abhorred by others.

Some felt it motivated by love, rather than fear.
Others felt is abandoned what was distinctly Catholic
and we would lose our identity,
and there would be no more reason for staying.

We remember that, and we know that we are still there.

Not only do we remember it, but so also do the Scriptures,
suggesting that this is a struggle that endures.

It is a struggle for a balance
between compassion for the suffering individual
and the integrity of the community that exists to offer that compassion.
It is openness to the outsider versus the care of those inside.

It is the balance between care for the one suffering
and care for the caretaker.
And it is crucial to be alert to the needs of both.

But in the synagogue of Nazareth,
Jesus announces the need to reach out beyond the community,
to avoid the closed community.

It suggests that here in its mission of compassion
we find the meaning of this community.
While it needs to attend to its needs as a community and its identity,
it exists to reach out in compassion to those in need.

That, in fact, is its identity.
That identity of compassion cannot be expressed
by closing off the outside.

Not if, in the words of Pope Francis,
the church is to be a field hospital after a battle.
In that case, we not only risk our identity in going out into the fray,
the rough and tumble of the stricken world,
we not only risk our identity, but we also find it there.

First Sunday of Lent

February 14, 2016

Deuteronomy 26:4-10	My father was a wandering Aramean.
Psalm 91:1-2, 10-15	Lest you dash your foot against a stone.
Romans 10:8-13	The Word is near you, in your mouth and heart.
Luke 4:1-13	Jesus encounters Satan in the desert.

Just in time for Valentine's Day, Pope Francis has suggested
that instead of giving up chocolate,
we give up an attitude of indifference to those around us,
especially those in need.
There's a catch, of course.
He knows that it would be easier for us to give up chocolate.

In our minds, the whole idea of giving something up
is firmly connected to observing Lent.
Today's Scripture readings stretch that idea a little bit,
and take us into some areas worth pondering.

The first reading, from Deuteronomy, may sound familiar.
It looks ahead to Passover,
which we associate with the Supper on Holy Thursday.
This year, Passover, following the Jewish liturgical calendar,
comes a month later, however.

You will recall that at the Passover Seder meal,
the youngest child asks the question,
"What makes this night different from any another night?"
The answer takes the form of reciting the passage of our first reading:
"My father was a wandering Aramean ... "

It retells in short form the story of Israel's enslavement,
and then liberation, from Egypt.
It is a story of liberation, guided by the intervention of Israel's God.
It invites us to set this as our theme for Lent.
Liberation, we realize, is one form of giving something up.
It is giving up that which enslaves us.

Here at the beginning of Lent
we are invited to reflect upon its meaning as liberation
from that which distorts our lives and enslaves us.

When we hear the gospel story of the testing of Jesus in the desert,
at the beginning of his ministry,
we might wonder about his fasting for 40 days.

How is it possible to go this long without eating?
Well, perhaps he did eat a bit.
Or perhaps the number 40 is intended to remind us of the 40 years
that Israel spent in the desert at the beginning of its existence.

This thought is confirmed by the frequency
with which Jesus responds with quotations from Deuteronomy,
the book of the desert sojourns.
Three times he cites the example
of the people wandering in the desert.

Three times,
in response to temptations about bread,
about the nations of the world,
and about the temple and its parapet.

Threefold divisions are a common way
we divide up matters for closer consideration.
A fairly standard way of understanding social reality, for instance,
is to separate it into three areas: wealth, power, and knowledge.

The study of wealth gives us economics.
The theory of power gives us politics.
And the realm of knowledge includes philosophy and religion.
It seems there may be a relation between these
and the three temptations in the desert.

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."
Here we might find economics.
A fundamental economic concern is to put bread on the table.
But what are the temptations and liberation to be experienced here?

Material things distort our lives when we have too little, or too much.
The poverty of destitution causes people
to focus exclusively on the next meal, what they need to survive.
They are not allowed to live a fully human life.
Similarly, when the drive to acquire great amounts of possessions
takes over our lives, we are similarly diminished.
"One does not live on bread alone."

Next the devil showed him the kingdoms of the world,
and said, "I shall give to you all this power and glory."
We recognize the temptation.
Is Jesus is to bring the kingdom of God,
why not follow the path of power and dominate the world?
But is this a successful path to community?

In the political reality of living together,
it seems there also are two tempting distortions.

On the one hand, some worry about a culture of dependency.
They worry about a tendency for people
to become less than independent adults
and, in the more crass form of this worry,
that some people depend too much of free stuff.

On the other hand, they may glorify
the self-reliance of the independent person,
as if we all were isolated individuals,
each in his or her own universe, with no natural connections.

But it seems that between dependence and absolute independence,
there is something we might call interdependence
—the reasonable reliance on the gifts and kindnesses of one another.
Between the individual and the collective
there is something we might call community.

Finally, the devil took him to the Temple,
and invited him to trust God,
by casting himself down from the parapet.
After all, the meaning of faith is trust, primarily trust in God.

In addition to economics and politics,
one of the forces that hold a people together is religion.
And even in societies like our own,
which do not share an official religion,
there is something that fills the gap,
a civic religion that acts as a common set of assumptions taken on faith.
It is a faceless faith without much depth, but with its common rituals.

But, in our hands, even religion has its distortions.
If faith involves trust in God, what does it mean when I do not trust,
but rather try to "earn" my own salvation,
win my eternal "reward" on my own terms?
What happens when I rather do it myself, rather than trust in God?

And on the other side, what does it mean when I admit my helplessness,
but, but like someone who suffers publicly to elicit guilt,
subtly use it for my own benefit?
Or when I do good things in order to put God in my debt,
so that he owes me, and I can assure my own eternal success?
Again, am I not inclined to gain control?

As Jesus said to Satan in reply,
"*You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.*"

In a way, then, the three desert temptations point
to three ways in which we can allow distortion into our lives.
In reflecting upon that, we may have an opportunity
to perceive the direction our Lent might take.

These are my reflections, but you may have your own.
Perhaps you are thinking of another triad,
that of the evangelical counsels
—poverty, chastity, and obedience.

I can see how that might work.
The test of stones into bread raises the question about poverty
as a guide to life.
The image of power ruling the nations invites a reflection
on the meaning of obedience.
And the invitation to throw himself from the temple walls
invites a reflection on sacrifice
and the practice of Christian chastity.

I can see how that might work.
But I will leave that reflection up to you.

Second Sunday of Lent

February 21, 2016

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18	The covenant of Abraham
Psalm 27:1, 2-9, 13-14	The Lord is my light, my salvation
Philippians 3:17—4:1	Be imitators of me
Luke 9:28-36	The Transfiguration

Pope Francis visited Mexico this week,
and said Mass at the US border, at Ciudad Juarez,
historically one of most notoriously violent locations in the world.
He protested the treatment of refugees,
as he has throughout the world.

But this wasn't the big Pope Francis story this week.
That would be the indignation that Donald Trump expressed
at the suggestion that the pope might not consider him to be Christian,
if he preferred walls to bridges.

So what does it mean to be Christian?
Pope Francis's vision of a church open to the needs of the world
is something he has been sharing for a long time.
Of course, it is only seems to become news for us
when it relates to the Donald.

For the pope, it appears to be the consequence of a conversion experience.
Something happened to unsettle his previous understanding
of religion and the church.

The question of religion is ultimately a question about God.
Who is God for us?

In the Scripture passages we hear today,
we detect an element of strangeness, even weirdness.
Especially the story of Abraham's covenant with God.

The image of cutting animals and dividing them into two parts
to create an aisle for passing through is vivid enough.
But it is far from our experience,
and we hasten to assign it to alien ancient cultures.

Of course, we might note that the reason is alien to our experience
because we have little direct experience
with the meat industry and slaughterhouses.
We might admit a little selective blindness there.

But still, the notion that slaughtering animals
would be involved in one's relationship with God,
as in the temple sacrifices, not only in Judea
but throughout human cultures,
seems to us disturbing and somehow not authentically religious.

Our question becomes, Who is God for these people?
How can this be part of their religious experience?

But that only prompts the return question:
Who is God for us, that we find this objectionable?
What is it that we believe about God?

We are accustomed to construct our own image of God.
We probably cannot help but do that.
We gather all that we consider virtuous and exemplary,
all that we think is of high, authentic value,
and we dress our image of God in these qualities.

But we tend to forget that we cannot know God directly.
We tend to assume that this familiar image is the true God,
and we know who God is.
Perhaps better than others do.

The literary work of the famous southern Catholic author,
who also studied at the Writing School of the University of Iowa,
Flannery O'Connor,
centered on the insistence that God exceeds our knowledge.

God transcends human experience.
She collected a cast of grotesque, vivid characters for her stories.
They were God-drunk and typically violent.
O'Connor wanted to shock her readers
out of their complacent assumption that they knew
what God and religion were all about.

The story of the Transfiguration in the Gospel
is another example of moving beyond ordinary experience
to a unexpected, even disturbing, insight about God,
and God's purpose for us.
That is signaled by their climbing the mountain,
symbolically approaching the heavens.

In the Gospel, Jesus and his followers
are about to embark on the journey to Jerusalem,
where the final week of Jesus' life will take place.

The vision serves as a promise of a new day
beyond the dark events that are coming.

They are reassured by learning that larger
than the human drama they are about to experience
at the hands of the Jerusalem leaders and the Roman authorities
there is a lord of the universe,
who is there for them throughout.

This glimpse of the larger realm touched by divinity, this "glory,"
the apostles are frightened and awe-struck.
They are taken beyond their common experience,
and Peter no longer knows what he is saying.
For he has nothing to prepare him for this.

But we cannot forget the reason for this overwhelming vision.
They are about to descend into darkness,
as they come to Jerusalem where the Passion will take place.
Easter is on the other side,
as the dazzling white garments of the Transfiguration vision show,
but dark days are ahead.

And there is the painful enigma, the puzzle of the agony to come.
Why not simply omit this?
Why the suffering?

This is not an impertinent question,
since Jesus himself asks it
when praying in the garden of Gethsemane:
"Abba, Father, all things are possible for you!
Take away this cup from me!
Yet not what I will, but what you will."

The God of our own making would do away with all suffering.
That is our wisdom.
But that is not the way it is.
Instead, we have a God who supports us through our suffering,
offers us a light in the dark,
a promise for the journey ahead.

Wisdom comes in discovering more and more why this might be so.
Here in the early part of Lent,
we join with the Apostles on the mountain,
falling silent for the time,
allowing the transcendent presence to make its mark.

Third Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2016

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15 Moses and the Burning Bush
Psalm 103: 1-8, 11 The Lord is kind and merciful
1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 All were baptized into Moses
Luke 13:1-9 Galileans, Tower of Siloam, Fig Tree

It has been a boisterous few weeks in the political news.
Among the many items getting news coverage,
one in particular caught my attention.
It was when Candidate Trump felt it necessary to correct the pope.

It was occasioned by an interview
when Pope Francis,
who has been talking about building bridges instead of walls,
was questioned about the Candidate's proposal
of building a wall on the Mexican border.

"A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be,
and not building bridges, is not Christian.
This is not the gospel," the Pope told journalists.

The Candidate responded,
"For a religious leader to question a person's faith is disgraceful."
"No leader, especially a religious leader,
has the right to question another man's religion or faith."

Let us leave aside whether a religious leader
can make a correct judgment about that religion.
And let us leave aside the difference
between judging outward actions versus internal faith.

Apart from this, I found it striking
to find the Candidate explaining religion to the Pope.
"Presumptuous" might be a good word for it.

But my point isn't about Trump. It is about us.
My sense of Trump is that he is a talented salesman
who adjusts his convictions to fit those of the person
to whom he is selling at the moment.

In other words, as a candidate, speaking to America,
he is a magnifying mirror, reflecting back to us—ourselves.

We have come a long way from unquestioning obedience.
And that is a good thing in so many ways.

We have rediscovered the priority of the individual conscience.
Also a good thing.
But we have been less alert to the need to form our consciences.
It is enough that it is our opinion, we think.
Why any need to justify it?

Or, to put it another way, on what grounds does one correct the pope?
What is the moral high ground that we stand upon to do this?
Is it not, so often, simply because we honor
the special insight of the individual?

Is not every individual special,
like the children in Lake Wobegon,
where, Garrison Keillor assures us, every child is above normal?

For the primacy of individualism so often means
that of the primary individual. Me.
Who else would it be?

The culture of the individual is the culture of "me."
As in "Me TV." As in "look at me."
As in nurtured self-esteem. As in "selfie" photos.

I am led into this line of reflection by the story we just heard
about Moses and the burning bush.
He is told he is on holy ground.
He takes off his shoes, as if entering a mosque.

He is entering another world,
leaving the world he knows so well and takes for granted.
He is entering into mystery.

Rudolf Otto, the philosopher of religion,
defined the Holy as the "wholly other."
As in "entirely other."
It is the world entirely other than our own.

The sense of the holy that is pictured in the story of Moses
is one that seems out of place today.
We live in a secularized world, in which not much is holy,
although much is awe-inspiring.

But the sense of the holy is more than wonder
at the beauty and the power of nature.
We do not always resonate with the power of the holy in our world.

There are some, of the conservative sort,
who are especially sensitive to this.
Their loss, however it seems to expresses itself,
is a loss of the sense of the sacred.

Why should that matter?
Here is one thing: Without the holy,
our relationship with God, our sense of God, can be utilitarian.

God becomes a means to something.
Something I want, I think I need.
I have not yet gone beyond myself,
and my own rules for the universe, and its maker.

I do not yet know about the other, because it hasn't yet occurred to me
that there *can* be something other.
I haven't yet met the burning bush that jolts me
out of the kingdom of myself.

In the Gospel we heard the strange story of the Galileans
whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.
There is no other report of this, but it sounds extravagantly cruel,
and not out of line with other reports about Pontius Pilate.

Those who question Jesus, like the press corps of their day,
may be angling for him to deliver a denunciation
of the Roman authorities and their forced presence in the land.
Perhaps they want him to make a judgment
about the guilt of the victims.

But Jesus does go in that direction.
Instead, after adding another example
about a falling tower in the Siloam valley,
he refuses to read this as a sign of guilt.

After all, his own death by crucifixion
at the decree of this same Pontius Pilate
will have an overwhelming, but false, appearance of guilt.

Guilt is not the issue.
Rather, it is the fact that time has its limits.
They should be aware of that, while they have time.

And they do have time.
For just as the gardener wins some time for the unproductive fig tree,
so Jesus tells them they still have a opportunity
to make the most of the time given them.

Rather than condemning,
Jesus calls for repentance.

And here repentance includes
an open-eyed assessment of one's situation.
It means removing the veils from their eyes,
veils that might disguise the fact that they are vulnerable,
veils that hide from them the burning bush nearby,
that the world is larger than the one they devise for themselves.

Now is the time for them to realize it.
For the burning bush points to an otherness,
a world beyond the one we create for ourselves.

And along with the burning bush,
we have the fig tree of second chances.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 6, 2016

Joshua 5:9, 10-12	The First Passover in the Land
Psalm 34:2-7	Taste and see the goodness
2 Corinthians 5:17-21	We are in a New Creation
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32	The Return of the Prodigal

These Lenten reflections this year
seem to be influenced by the election campaign season
for what might be a very good reason.
Those running for office make it their objective
to appeal to American voters.
So we have a rather vivid image of what Americans value and want,
more than perhaps any other time.

And while this or that particular vision may not be yours or mine,
there is a way in which something American,
something we have in common by being Americans,
something we are immersed in from childhood
simply by being born American,
something that is peculiarly ours that emerges into view.
It is as if the American Soul were pinned on a huge billboard
for all the world to see.

That is what I am thinking as we come to the story of the Prodigal Son.
We know this story all too well.
It has entered our common idiom.
Everyone knows what we mean when we say those words,
"the prodigal son."

But there is another son in the story,
and that is the one I am thinking about today.
We all have a pretty good idea what is wrong with the prodigal son.
But what is the other son's problem?
We might say that it is resentment.
That would be true, but we might look more closely.

Consider Pope Francis's theme of the priority of the poor.
This is not new to us.
We have been hearing about the preferential option for years.
However, not from the Vatican. But now we do.

And in a year when we hear appeals to voters,
some of the feelings about this are more out in the open
than they might otherwise be.

We hear the word, “lazy,” more often now.
But what we hear most is its opposite,
the firm endorsement of “hard work.”
As in “I’ve worked hard all my life,” said as prologue
to the condemnation of those thought not to be so diligent.
Do I hear the voice of the older son here?

Apart from the truth about who is and who isn’t working,
there is something hidden behind this claim.
How did hard work get to be such an American theme?
Why is it considered so good, anyway?
Could our Puritan heritage be speaking up,
with its strict and humorless aftereffects?

I am reminded of Fr. Thomas Moore, OP,
affectionately called Moose Moore,
who was a fund of wise sayings.
His definition of a Puritan, unscientific to be sure,
was “a person who suspects that someone, somewhere, is having fun.”
For those of literary bent, it is Malvolio,
in Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night.”

Another thing we’ve been hearing lately
is a concern about people wanting “free stuff.”
We are not supposed to be looking for free stuff.
To do so is a weakness of character, we are told.

Of course, this is related to the charge about being lazy.
But there is this difference.
It would insist that one only receives what one works for.
One does not get free stuff, and if you do, you shouldn’t be.
It is not virtuous.

Theologically, this insists on a strict moral ledger
that insists that your eternal reward conforms
to what you earn by serious moral actions.
Theologically, it is a denial of grace. Or mercy.

Here is a major point of contention
with Pope Francis’s vision of pastoral care.
He preaches mercy, but that encourages people
to think that they can get something free.

In my weekly column for the *Witness*
I include a discussion question at the end,
as Sr. Carol Hoverman, when she was editor, requested I do.

When I was putting together the column for this Sunday,
somewhat tongue-in-cheek, I ended with the question,
"Why does mercy annoy us so?"
You are supposed to come up with your own answer.

A third thing you hear,
in addition to boasts about hard work and warnings against free stuff,
is the worry that care for the poor is enabling their poverty.
We do not want to be enablers.

Of course, this is the same thing again, in different words.
It is the older son speaking earnestly with his father,
explaining why he should not be coddling his brother the prodigal.
It just encourages him.
It rewards bad behavior.

What we need to do is be firm and unyielding,
not give in to emotional appeals,
because after all it is for his own good.

The fact that when I say these things it is also for my own good
does not enter the picture.
We're not talking about me.
We're talking about him.

So far I have been using the example of resistance to care for the poor
as an example of the older brother's attitude.
Actually, the parable is more extreme than that.

In the example, I have been saying that in American culture
we try to depict the poor as responsible for their own condition,
whether or not this is the case.

And we do that so we have a reason to be morally superior,
to have a case for not helping.
If they are at fault, this line of thinking goes,
we have no obligation to help them.
They deserve what they receive,
for they are not what we call "the deserving poor."

But it is here that the parable takes a nasty turn.
For it insists that even those who are guilty deserve care and pardon.
The Prodigal is unquestionably guilty.
He admits it.
There is no doubt about it.

And yet he is the one who is said to receive the father's love.
For free.

And it is here that we are invited to consider how American values,
in this professedly Christian nation,
might not always conform to the gospel.
    We might consider how opposition to the pope's vision
    of care for the poor finds a resistance here.

And we might further consider how,
even if we are disposed to side with the pope,
even if we deplore some of the things we hear this season,
    we are still Americans
    and might find self examination worth it
        in this Lenten season.

Fifth Sunday Of Lent

March 13, 2016

Isaiah 43:16-21	The desert road
Psalm 126:1-6	The captives' return
Philippians 3:8-14	Straining for the prize
John 8:1-11	A Woman Accused

Where do you find yourself in the gospel story for today?
Perhaps, noticing the unfair numbers,
and the emphasis on only one partner in the accusation,
you find yourself in sympathy with the accused woman.

Or perhaps, conscious of the times
you found yourself in compromised positions,
you recognize something of the elders in your own story.

Or perhaps, in your effort to be a disciple,
and be a reconciler or peacemaker,
you sometimes are in the position of Jesus in the story.

The values in the story are sometimes brought out
by pairing it the story of Suzanna and the elders, in the book of Daniel.
Here too we have a young woman who is threatened by elders
and is rescued by a faithful Israelite.

But there are differences.
In that story the woman is innocent, the elders are guilty,
and Daniel is shrill, sarcastic and aggressive.
None of these are obviously the case in the gospel story.

The woman is in a position of undeniable guilt.
Her accusers insist on carrying out the dictates of the law.
One is reminded of honor killing,
still a problem in parts of the world,
though not restricted to certain Muslim sectors,
as certain Americans would have you believe.

When the community is dishonored,
the shame must be erased from their midst.

However, despite her guilt, in the thinking of Jesus
this woman is not without worth.
She remains a daughter of Abraham, a child of God.
She is not accused by him.

The elders represent righteous anger,
zealous for the upholding of the law.
They are speaking right out of the book of Deuteronomy,
which is harshly vigilant for any departure from the true faith.
The elders are standing on principle, even if it means death.

Of course, we do not need the fuller story
to realize that they are not as innocent as they present themselves.
They are not simply in fidelity to the law;
they are also trying to trap Jesus.
They have an ulterior motive.

In fact, the woman is not their true target.
That would be Jesus.
She is simply a pawn in the game.

This is the true disaster of the honor calculus that drives the law.
They illustrate that for them the principle of honor killing
has an ulterior motive.

They wish to trap him in denying the legacy of Moses.
They are not impressed with his claims
to have a special relationship with the Father.
They are testing that, but also his relationship
to the tradition that makes them Jews.
They are looking for a reason to have him stoned,
as well as her.

They are not yet to the point to which they will turn to Rome for help.
That will come later, when their own efforts fail.
They are looking to stone him, which is a Jewish method of execution.
In this chapter, and then again later, they will attempt to stone him.
But when this isn't working, then they will turn to Rome.

But that will come later. For now we have this story.
And it does not turn out the way the elders expect.

What Jesus does turns things around.
For one thing, he does not pursue the measures
prescribed for those jealous for the law.
He takes another direction.
It is a singular example of nonviolent resolution of conflict.

We sometimes hear that nonviolence is fine
if you are risking only your own skin.
But it is irresponsible to risk the lives of others in such a manner.

Of course, those who make this charge are already convinced
that nonviolence is not a realistic option,
that it is dangerous and foolhardy.

They believe that the only truly effective form of resolving differences
is by the use of superior force.
It shows today, for instance, in our trust in the handguns
as the basis of our security.
Jesus does not follow that line of thinking.

What Jesus does is worth pondering.
He doesn't wade in and forcefully defend her.
He simply raises a question about what they are doing.

In a sense, he risks the woman's life.
It is as if he leaves open the possibility
that the accusing elders will go ahead with their plan,
using his response as permission to punish her.

Yet his approach achieves a number of remarkable things.
For one, it invites those in the story to take long look at themselves.
This is true of the elders, and it is true of the woman.
No doubt she has been doing that all along.
But now they are joined in the common realization
that no one is without guilt.

Not only does Jesus recognize the humanity of the woman,
who is otherwise discounted in the action,
first considered a dispensable sinner,
and then considered a useful tool to get at Jesus,
but he treats her as a human person.

Secondly, he does the same with the elders.
He treats them as persons with inner lives
and a sense of responsibility in their better selves.
He appeals to their better selves. And they respond.
Everyone comes out ahead, but not without risk.

Here in the Fifth Sunday of Lent
we are a week away from Passion Sunday and Holy Week.
We are looking ahead to the ritual recounting
of those final events in the life of Jesus.

We are also looking at their meaning in our own lives.
And so we ask questions like:
Where do you find yourself in the gospel story for today?

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 1, 2016

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29	The Council of Jerusalem meets
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8	Let all the nations praise you.
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23	Twelve gates in that city
John 14:23-29	The Advocate will teach you

Today is May Day.
Many of you have heard me mark this as one of the cross-quarter days.
The second, to be exact.
These are the four days in the year
that come halfway between the solstices and the equinoxes.

They are usually celebrated, and have been for ages.
February 2, May 1, August 2, and November 1
are on the calendars of every culture.

The maypoles and spring rituals of Europe
were seen, however, as pagan, and were banned by the Puritans,
which prevented them from becoming a part of American culture.

In Catholic circles, devotions to Mary, as Queen of the May,
became popular, as we can remember from grade school rituals.

Also, celebrations of St. Joseph the Worker.
This was in part an answer to the socialist celebration of May Day
as the International Workers Day, with its Marxist associations.

This side of May Day is currently being revived
in connection with the presidential campaign.
For instance, MAYDAY.US is a current campaign proposed
"to fight big money corruption in politics by electing reformers."

Today the city of Seattle is bracing for protests
relating to a major march and rock concert
to further the cause of immigration and workers' rights.

Today is also the Sixth Sunday of Easter,
as we move closer to Pentecost,
and the end of the special seasons in the liturgy.

Today we hear about the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.
We used to speak of the Paraclete,
transliterating the Gre bek word that means Advocate.
Now we simply translate it.

What does the word “Advocate” tell us?
What do we think of when we hear it?

We use it in a number of different ways.
One that comes to mind for me is when you go to the emergency room,
or have an operation scheduled.

It is good to take someone with you who can act as advocate.
After all, you are likely to be preoccupied
with the experience you are going through.
It is good to have someone along more likely to be able to hear
what the doctors and nurses are saying,
and help you make decisions.

It is not hard to think of other, somewhat similar situations
that invite the presence of an advocate.
In addition to the medical, there are legal situations
that invite the help of an advocate.

Furthermore, we are aware of so many programs and organizations
that perform advocacy service.
And many of them involve volunteers,
who act as advocates for persons in need of them.

I have friends who are helping young students
through the Americorps program.

I have other friends who are working with the Circles Initiative,
helping what it calls “families wanting to make the journey out of poverty,”
by supporting them in making the cultural changes and assumptions
that they need in successful American society.

I am reminded of the story of Eliza Doolittle
in the musical My Fair Lady,
learning the way to speak properly,
and changing the assumptions that direct her life.

Thinking about advocacy programs in Dubuque,
I think of the Franciscan Common Venture,
offering an opportunity for women and men
to contribute their services by “standing with the poor,”
as the online promotion says.

Other Dubuque programs use similar language.

Robert Kimble's Dream Center provides
"structured group activities where youth and teens
build relationships with caring adults."

The Presentation Lantern Center offers
"advocacy to adult immigrants, especially women."

The Steeple Square project, according to the Archdiocesan promo,
is an inclusive center that will serve as a hub
for social life and community support.

You get the picture. They share a common language.
This is what the word "advocacy" means.
You can easily add to these examples many of your own.

So when we hear in the gospel that Jesus will send
the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, we have an idea what he is talking about.

First of all, it implies *we* are in need of an advocate.
It is a signal of our own vulnerability.
It gives us a chance to recognize that,
a moment of honest self-awareness.

But it also answers the question it raises.
It doesn't reveal the problem without offering the resolution of it.

Furthermore, it recognizes needs of the church,
which is after all what Jesus is talking about
in the time after his departure.
The gift of the Spirit will guide the church.

But this is not simply a matter of persecution,
as many of the more paranoid might want to believe.

It is also about the work of the church,
the activity of the people of God in the world.
It is not based on military force, or political power,
or vast corporate holdings.

It is based on bold risk, and trust.
It is for this that we need the Advocate, the Spirit enabling us.

And it is not too much to say
that the Spirit enables us to become enablers ourselves, in turn.

The Advocate allows us to be advocates.

And so the examples I have listed,
and those that you have quietly added to my list,
are more than examples of the meaning of a word.
They are instances in which the Advocate, the Holy Spirit,
has allowed us to be advocates for others in their needs.

And, come to think of it, this is not that different
from the socialist or communitarian impulses of May Day, either.
Here too the message is that we are joined together,
and we succeed when we assist one another.

It in this interest that we hear those familiar words today:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
Not as the world gives do I give it to you.
Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.

Solemnity Of The Ascension Of The Lord

May 8, 2016

Acts 1:1-11	The Ascension
Psalm 47: 2-3, 6-9	God mounts his throne
Ephesians 1:17-23	Seated at the Right Hand
Luke 24:46-53	The Ascension

Friday, Dan Berrigan was buried.
Liz McAlister, his sister-in-law,
wife of Phil Berrigan and mother of their three children,
gave the eulogy.

Liz is a friend of our Peace initiative at Loras,
and we were there in spirit, if not physically.
People in many places held vigil,
with banners proclaiming "Poet Prophet Priest."

There were other Eulogies given around the nation, and elsewhere.
Jim Wallis, of *Sojourners*, movingly wrote
how Dan had saved his faith, as he put it.

Having left his evangelical church,
over differences about how to respond to the war in Vietnam,

Wallis found his way again when he learned of Dan and Phil
who led the Catonsville Nine, publicly burning stolen draft files
with homemade napalm, like that used
in incinerating villages and populations in the war zone.
He says it was the only Christian voice speaking out at the time,
at least in his hearing.

In my own experience, I remember using the example
of Dan refusing to report to prison when the time came for it.
Phil reported in, Dan didn't.

The FBI went out looking for him.
And despite the fact that he was giving public speeches,
they couldn't locate him, since he was not among
the usual groups they monitored.

I saw similarities with the attempts to arrest Jesus,
in the 7th and 8th chapters of John's Gospel.
The guards sent to arrest Jesus couldn't get it done,
even though he was engaged in public debates.

We also saw reporters and witnesses from younger generations
trying to make an account of Dan's story.
And once again we experienced the frail fabric of historical memory,
as even the sympathetic reports failed to come anywhere near
capturing the sense of the times.

With the passing of Dan we had the feeling
of something irreplaceable leaving the scene.
He was not young, 94 years old, so it was not the same sense we have
when someone dies prematurely.
But it had the feeling of losing the spirit of the age,
the unique particularity of the age.

Something similar happened when S. Dorothy Marie Hennessy left us.
It was time,
and yet we felt a certain sense of things was gone,
not to be replaced.

I am rehearsing these matters partly
in an attempt to get a feeling of what Apostles felt
in the scene we commemorate today,
on the feast of the Ascension.

The person at the center of the common life was leaving.
What to do now?
"Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It seems an absurd thing to ask, in retrospect,
but that was what the Messiah was expected to do.
He was to be the king to restore the house of David.

Time was clearly getting short.
When and how would the promises be kept?

They are reassured:
"You will receive power when the holy Spirit has come upon you.
And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
through Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Are they reassured?
Pentecost is still yet to come.

How can it be the same?
How will later generations come even close to what they experienced?
How will their witness manage to serve the cause?
How will they overcome the frail fabric of historical memory?

How will these Apostles, gathered in the first chapter of Acts,
manage to keep the story going?

The Spirit will come upon them shortly.
They are not left to founder on their own.
The story will continue, and the Holy Spirit will be its guide.
The Spirit will carry the message into a new day,
with its own needs and possibilities.

Paul of Tarsus is not even part of the story yet.
He never knew Jesus, except for the encounter on the road to Damascus.
He met the Risen Christ,
but he never knew him as the carpenter from Nazareth
who walked the hills of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem.
He would carry the message forward, but in his own way.

Would the Twelve Apostles recognize
what he preached to be the message as they knew it?
We trust it was the same truth.
We can also suppose they felt he had changed things
from what they thought was the heart of the message.

We do know that there were problems between them.
A lack of trust, it would seem.
But Paul, coming from another place,
from another set of circumstances,
and speaking to a different world than theirs,
would bring his own perspective into the equation that is Christianity.

It would be a vision strong enough that his letters
would become part of the treasury of New Testament writings,
normative for the church as it moves through time.

And yet, others would come after Paul, moving in new directions.
The confidence in the continuity comes from faith in the Holy Spirit,
dwelling in the community of the faithful.
The thread that moves through time, maintaining fidelity,
is the Spirit's doing.

The situations, the changes, are many.
The expressions of Christian belief take many forms.

We are a long way today, following from this scene we just heard,
with the handful of followers on the Mount of Olives.
Today there are 2.2 billion Christians in the world,
More, as it happens, than any other religion.

The promise has taken the story a long way, to many lands.
From Brazil to Vietnam.
And from Argentina, back to Rome.

These Christians differ by denominations.
They differ in themselves.
And we have concerns that the truth to which we witnessed
may continue to find expression in times to come.

We worry that the concerns we felt deeply may disappear
from the story to which we have given our lives.
And yet the assurances are there.
The Spirit continues to guide the church.

To take Pope Francis as an example,
he is somewhat parallel to Paul,
in that he is the first pope who was not part of the Second Vatican Council.
And yet, we do not see in him a dismissal of the Council,
but rather a much-needed reaffirmation of it.

He is bringing it back into focus in ways
that we who experienced it at the time can recognize as authentic.

At the same time, his witness shifts the message
to a world with different needs and different possibilities.

Again we have the assurance that the Spirit
is dwelling in the community of faith.
We enter the story, do our part,
and then turn it over to those coming next,
confident that they will carry it forward
in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Today is also Mother's Day.
We give them our congratulations and support.

In a particularly vivid way, they live through
the mystery we celebrate today,
namely, that of giving life to the present,
and then offering it to an unknown future.

in them we see brought together a commitment to the present moment,
and a complete trust in the life to come.

Pentecost Sunday - Mass During The Day

May 15, 2016

Acts 2:1-11	On the Feast of Weeks
Psalm 104: 24, 29-31, 34	Renew the face of the earth
I Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13	The Gifts of the Spirit
John 20:19-23	Receive the Holy Spirit

Where is the Spirit in the church?
We know the church is guided by the Spirit,
and so we see the Apostles gathered in the upper room
as the Spirit comes upon the leaders of the church.

We have long learned that the Spirit guides the magisterium of the church in its role as official teacher.
We begin to think that the Spirit is to be found exclusively
in the ordained hierarchy.

But then we look more closely at the Acts of the Apostles,
and we discover that the apostles are not alone,
but are there "together with the women
and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers." (Acts 1:14-15)

In fact, it says, "it was a crowd of persons
of about one hundred twenty at the same place."
And so we begin to wonder if the Spirit
hasn't visited more than the Twelve.

When we turn to Paul's witness in First Corinthians,
we discover the Spirit to have pervaded the early church
with a diversity of gifts and expressions.

The gift of tongues, seen also in Acts,
expressed the democratic tendencies of the Spirit.
It could come on anyone.

And furthermore, it expressed
the spontaneous character of the Holy Spirit.
It was unpredictable, likely to break out without warning,
going where it will like the wind.

Wind and fire.
Another image is water, bubbling under the surface,
finding its way, difficult to dam up,
searching out another route when one is blocked.
Having its way regardless.

So, where is the Spirit in the Church?
One cannot help but think of the news item on this past Friday.
Sr. Carolyn Farrell graced the front page of the TH.
It seems the Pope has promised to set up a study commission
to study the possibility of women deacons in the church.

Carolyn warned against overreacting,
and pointed out the importance of including women
in decision-making roles, and not simply in symbolic positions.

Sr. Kate Katoski was also interviewed by email,
because she was on the spot, in Rome.
She confirmed from firsthand experience
the sense that others have had about this pope.
Her words describing him were "warm, delightful, a candid presence."

Another cited the pope's use of a soccer image,
saying that he felt like a goalie, fielding questions from all directions.
It speaks to the candor of his exchanges.

Vatican spokespersons hastened to downplay
the significance of the moment.

But it seems this was a serious, well-considered exchange,
and not simply an offhand suggestion.

One spokesperson for the women said,
"The UISG (International Union of Superiors General)
spoke very directly about this to him,
and I think when he makes a promise to them in that way,
it's not going to go away."

Pope Francis said that changes must come
"after a process of discernment and discussion with the Holy spirit,
and not just in weighing pros and cons of the possible arguments."
So there it is again—The Holy Spirit.

Where is the Spirit in the church?

The pope suggested that the deaconesses mentioned in the New Testament
were not ordained, as deacons are today.
This statement recognizes that deacons,
like priests and bishops, are ordained.

There are three levels of ordination.
And ordination is a sacrament.

So the big step is not from deacon to priest,
but from unordained to ordained.
Ordaining deacons crosses that important line into ordination.
Hence the Vatican blowback. This is big.

But, the pope says, early deaconesses were not ordained.
Was this because they did ordain then?
Was ordination not around yet?
Were deacons not ordained either?
Nor presbyters, which we now think of as priests?
Does the Spirit speak only, or primarily, through ordained ministers?
A lot of questions to be asked. And answered.

Of course, the route of expanding the ordained ministry
conceives of the role of the Spirit hierarchically.
Still top-down, though wishing to open up the offices at the top,
to make them more representative and inclusive.

But the Spirit operates, as the Scriptures today tell us, in many ways.
Like a life-giving spring, it bubbles up from the people, as well.

And for this reason,
another movement in the church is also important.

Again, it returns us to Pope Francis,
who has made it a program to insist on a church
that moves from the bottom-up, and well as top-down.

Many wish that he would issue an edict
that would resolve this or that reform, once and for all.
But he is doing something deeper, and more permanent.
He is trying to redirect the decision-making processes in the church
so that they represent the larger people.

He has, for instance, established new structures,
such as the special council of cardinals from each part of the world,
as an on-going advisory team. A beginning.
And in this he is simply reviving
a primary principle of the Second Vatican Council.

You will remember that is shifted attention
from the hierarchical notion of the church
to a definition of the church as the People of God.

We have a hard time remembering this,
and often talk about the "Church," when we mean the hierarchy.

Pope Francis, certainly a member of the hierarchy,
is reminding us of the church as People of God.
And he is finding ways for that Church to make its contributions,
to be involved in decision-making and witness
to that world in which we now live.

Today, on the feast of Pentecost,
we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.
We celebrate the guidance provided by the Spirit.

And we celebrate as well the unexpectedness, the surprise,
the often uncomfortable form that this guidance takes.

This is not only the birthday of the Church.
It is the conditions for its continuing life.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

May 22, 2016

Proverbs 8:22-31	Wisdom speaks
Psalm 8:4-9	How wonderful your name!
Romans 5:1-5	We have peace with God through Christ
John 16:12-15	The Spirit of Truth

We come to the feast of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
as we would at the end of a prayer,
invoking the Trinity while making the Sign of the Cross.

We are at the end of the special seasons of the church year,
and we round it off with a doxology,
as we would a decade of the Rosary, or a Collect prayer at Mass.
We take a moment to look back at the seasons now past,
as we are about to turn to the Ordinary Sundays of the year.

In the readings chosen for today we have a progression
of moves in a divine outreach to the human family.
The Three Persons are on a rescue mission
to retrieve a project gone astray—the errant children of God.

The Father, the First Person, sends forth the Second:
The passage from Wisdom evokes the Old Testament theme of Sophia
—the feminine image of Wisdom that is said to guide God in creation.

The image of Logos, the Word, in the opening of John's Gospel,
builds on this Wisdom tradition.

Today's passage from John's gospel brings in the Spirit, the third Person.
The Father and the Son will send the Spirit.

As we heard in the reading today,
"But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.
He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears,
and will declare to you the things that are coming" (John 16:13).

This movement of the Trinity into history and our lives
is repeated in the special seasons we have just concluded—
Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter.

In Advent, leading into Christmas, we celebrate the sending of the Son,
the Incarnation, the divine entering the human—
human person, human world, human history.

In Lent we move toward the completion of that Incarnational mystery,
as the Incarnation moves towards completion.
Adopting human reality would not be complete
without experiencing the most profound human experience,
that of death.

During Lent the divine shares in the darkest human moment,
and redeems it, turning it from dark to light.

Easter celebrates the gift of life after death, of life beyond death.
It proclaims the victory of life over death.
And with the Ascension, the victory is enthroned as the New Order,
the established reality.

With that, the Spirit is sent to deliver and sustain
the new lease on life that is within and throughout
the community of believers, the communal body of Christ.

The story of salvation has been told during the course of the seasons.
And now we arrive at this feast of the Trinity,
as a kind of Mission Accomplished.

It is a message of assurance.
It might be said to be the Catholic equivalent
of the evangelical announcement of being saved,
by Believing On The Lord Jesus Christ.

This is commonly called the Story of Salvation.

But the story as I have sketched it is so idealized and general.
And "salvation" is such an abstract word.
We hear it all the time, and know that it is a good thing,
but we have only a general idea what it means.

Maybe it would be good to look at how the scriptures speak of it.
Here we find the compelling image of "lost children,"
the lost children of God's family.

Paul speaks of finding them and bringing them back.
The parable of the Prodigal Son speaks of this son,
which was lost, and is now found.

What do you think of when you hear that phrase, "lost children"?

Perhaps you think of a child in the grocery store

who has lost track of her mother.
Have you ever noticed that there is an invisible tie
between small children and their mothers,
that will not allow a stranger to unwittingly walk between them?

The child will first dive toward her mother to close the gap,
before the stranger can walk between them. .

Perhaps you think of the lost schoolgirls in Nigeria,
kidnapped by the terrorist group, Boko Haram.
Perhaps you think of girls in our own society,
victims of deranged persons,
or maybe stolen into sex trafficking.

What do you think of when you hear the words "lost boys"?
Perhaps you think of the lost boys of Sudan,
the 20,000 children who lost their parents during the war,
and who trekked across long stretches of the continent on their own,
seeking shelter.

Maybe you think of the refugee children,
and the Syrian boy washed up on the beach of Greece,
looking just like a three-year-old taking a nap.
And then, all the other refugee children traveling with their parents,
and sometimes losing track of them.

I think of my grandfather's older brother,
who was lost on their way to America from Germany,
missing a train in Canada, and never seen again.

Or maybe, like me, you also think of the lost boys of J. M. Barrie's play,
the gang that accompanied Peter Pan,
who acted like any neighborhood group of young boys,
but who evoked the many lost, or even dead, children of the world.

Why have I gone off on this imaginary tour
of desolate images of lost children?

For one reason only. I want to give some emotional weight
to the story of salvation, as we call it.

It is a story of God's care for the lost children of his human family.
In the larger story of the Trinity,
as well as the special seasons of the liturgy,
this narrative of finding and retrieving the lost children is re-enacted.

It is not an abstract diagram of intellectual theological puzzles.
    It is the story of a concerned, even distraught, parent,
    seeking out the lost, hoping against hope
    that nothing so bad has happened that it cannot be repaired.

Paul, in this letter to the Romans, says
that even while we were entirely alienated from God,
we were sought out and recovered.
    The move came from God's side.

After all of this, what we are to understand is that God loves us,
and in fact, has risked all to retrieve us.
    Even to the point of dying.

The story of the Trinity,
the story of the seasons of the liturgy,
and the story of Scripture itself,
    is that of God's going the long way to find us
    and bring us back.

It is this we celebrate at this point of the church year,
having completed another hearing of the story, and celebrating it.

As the father in the parable says of the prodigal son,

    "Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
    Let us celebrate with a feast,
        because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again;
        he was lost, and has been found."

    Then the celebration began.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

May 29, 2016

Genesis 14:18-20	Melchizedek, king of Salem
Psalm 110:1-4	You are a priest for ever
1 Corinthians 11:23-26	"Do this in remembrance of me."
Luke 9:11-17	Loaves and Fishes

Today, because of the norovirus in Clare House,
we will not be receiving from the cup.
There is a certain irony here, since this is the feast of Corpus Christi.

However, it does give us moment of distance
to consider the meaning of this celebration,
and its value in our faith life.

First, we notice that we miss it, when we are accustomed
to receiving from the cup on Sundays.
We realize the central place this part of our worship life enjoys.

Secondly, we realize that omitting it leaves a real gap.
There is a way in which we have placed all our devotion
into one expression, that of the Eucharist.

We are known as a Eucharistic church.
It distinguishes us from other branches of Christianity.
However, it is also true that Catholic means inclusive,
and ever since the growth of the ecumenical movement
we have avoided placing ourselves in a particular box,
as a certain sect within the Christian churches, as it were.

We embrace all dimensions of authentic Christian belief.

This week I received from a young colleague, a moral theologian,
a passage from the liberation theologian, Ignacio Ellacuria. He wrote:

"The Catholic Mass has often slighted the liturgy of the word,
and . . . many average Catholics see the liturgy of the word
as so much time wasted prior to the eucharistic celebration itself.
No real liturgical effort is made to make God's salvific word
a living experience of the congregation,
to turn it into a life-giving reality in and through the light of faith.
It is a short step from there to turning the reception of the sacraments
into an individualistic brand of magic.

> It is no longer concrete human beings living in a concrete historical situation
> who are to give life and breath to the Christian message in their context. . . .
> It is some universal and eternal humanity
> which remains the same in every time and place."

Yes, I thought. We have a feast of the Body and Blood,
but no feast of the Word.
We have a Corpus Christi, but not a Dei Verbum.

Ellacuria's complaint is that without a vibrant liturgy of the Word,
the liturgy of the Eucharist lacks an anchor in history
—the specific history of Jesus' time,
with its critical impact on what is happening in his world.
And as a result, we are unlikely to find our own critical Christian stance
regarding what is happening in our own world.

While the Eucharist provides the heart,
the Scriptures provide the mind of faith.
While the Eucharist gives us the feeling of the faith,
the Word gives us the eyes.
But to have the feeling without the discernment
is frequently a recipe for trouble.

What has happened is that we have stopped
reading the Scriptures in their own terms,
but have used it as a kind of storage box
for interesting themes and motifs.
It is a collection of colorful scraps
for decorating our feasts and programs,
our brochures and banners.

In this way, Eucharist is the main, and perhaps only, act,
and the scripture is interpreted in light of it,
rather than by its own clear expressions.

Examples are easy to find.

This past week, for instance, we encountered Mark's story
of James and John requesting the right and hand seats in the kingdom.
Jesus asked if they could drink of the cup he drank
and be baptized with the same baptism.

The new translation renders "cup" as "chalice."
The reason is that recent directives on liturgical language
prefers the word "chalice,"
because it conforms more closely to the Latin, *calix*,

and the Catholic church is a Latin rite.

The implication is that the Latin translation of the Bible
should be the criterion of its translation into English,
and not the original language,
as has been the practice since the renewals of the Council.

But this obscures what Mark is doing, with his reference to his death,
along with the cup at the supper with its reference to his death.
As when he said in the garden prayer at Gethsemane,
"Abba, Father, all things are possible to you.
Take this cup away from me,
but not what I will but what you will."

As we noted this week, he did not say,
"Take this chalice away from me."

The second reading for today
is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.
It quotes the words of institution of the Eucharist.

Many homilists today will note
that the context of the passage includes these words:
"For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body,
eats and drinks judgment on himself."

They understand this to refer to the real presence in the bread and wine.
Their application of the verse is to insist that this verse prohibits us
from sharing the bread and the cup with any outsiders
who do not believe in the full doctrine of transubstantiation.

However, beyond the fact that this
is using today's understanding to interpret Paul's meaning,
it also ignores the fact that Paul has provided his own interpretation.

He is upset because the Corinthians
are blatantly discriminatory in their gatherings,
and thereby do not recognize they are the body of Christ.
This is the "body" they do not discern, that they violate.

In those days, there was a meal
between the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.
Even today, we say, "when supper was ended, he took the cup."
Or nowadays, "Chalice."

But the Corinthians were divided, separated by class.

Those who could afford it, ate.
The poor who could not, watched them eat.
Paul was disgusted.
He said that Christ was not present at their gathering.

We celebrate Corpus Christi today as an overflow from Holy Thursday.
There is too much to celebrate and memorialize in Holy Week.
We need to come back to revisit some things
that got overlooked in those concentrated days.

On Holy Thursday, we were busy thinking about
the ordination of the first priests.
For many, that is what the washing of the feet is about.

If you begin with the idea that Jesus sometime in his life
personally inaugurated the seven sacraments,
ruling out the possibility that he did some of them
through his body the Church,
then you need to find where in the gospel verses
each sacrament is established.

And sometimes the best you can do
is name the footwashing as representing ordination.
As one young priest said when Pope Francis washed the feet of women,
"If this is not about ordination, what is it about?"
One would think that the action is symbolic enough in itself.

Since we were looking at that, we have another day, Corpus Christi,
to think about another dimension of the Lord's Supper,
which is, in fact, the Lord's Supper itself.

What has happened is a lack of balance.
There is a Liturgy of the Word and a Liturgy of the Eucharist for a reason.
They support one another.
Word without Eucharist is all talk.
Eucharist without Word is all mute feeling.
We need both head *and* heart.

This feast we celebrate is important.
It gives expression to a central part of our Catholic faith.
But it is also important to remember that our Catholic faith
has various avenues to holiness and windows on the divine.
And certainly God's revelation in the Word is one of them,
as the two parts of our liturgy shows us.

The liturgy is both source and goal of Christian life.

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 5, 2016

I Kings 17:17-24	Elijah and the Widow of Sidon
Psalm 30: 2, 4-6, 11-13	You have rescued me.
Galatians 1:11-14-17, 19	Paul speaks of his call
Luke 7:11-17	Jesus and the Widow of Nain

On this 10th Sunday of Ordinary Time, anticipated tonight,
I, with many of my classmates
celebrate the 50th Anniversary of our ordination,
and so on behalf of the Franciscan Sisters, and myself,
I welcome to this liturgy
many of the guests from past and present areas of my life.

So how do I tell the story of these 50 years? One thing occurs to me.

As you might know, my life since ordination
has been largely devoted to the Scriptures, and in a special way
to the Scriptures as they appear in the Sunday readings.

My dissertation project was a program for studying the Bible
through the Sunday scripture selections.
Most recently, I published a Bible study method
based on the Sunday readings. Still playing the same tune.
Every Monday for at least ten years, and ten years at an earlier time,
I have participated in a Bible study based on the Sunday readings.

Also, as you know I write a weekly column based on the Sunday readings.
My biblical education has in large part been a result
of playing close attention to the readings on Sunday,
and exploring their setting and background.
So you will understand that I am committed
to going with the given readings for today,
and not substituting some personal favorites.

If you might allow me to mention an instance:
When I was teaching at Aquinas Institute, there was a semester
during which they were being evaluated for accreditation.
One of the reviewers from the accrediting agency
decided to sit in on my class, which was a workshop
for preparing potential preachers for Sunday duties.
Each week we started out cold,
with only the readings and our resources.
Each week it worked out;

and each week I expected that this time it would fall flat.
It was something of a highwire act.
So the accrediting reviewer sat in on the class, heightening the tension.
And yet, once again it worked out,
and the reviewer took some notes for his Sunday homily.

The premise behind all this is the enduring belief that the scripture
is like a brightly colored box with a surprise inside.
The surprise is always there, but you need to trust.

For any occasion, rather than re-use readings we already like,
whose meanings we have domesticated and found congenial,
we allow something new to enter.
Rather than play it safe, go with the readings for the day.

One comes to the kind of thing not noticed by those
who begin with what they perceive as their faith,
and then backfill with appropriate selections from the Word.

So what do we find today? We might begin with Paul.
Today we have his call, in his own words.
This seems singularly appropriate for a celebration of a vocation.
Of course, there is that troublesome part about his persecuting the church.

But when we consider it further,
we see that he mentions that in order to emphasize
the unexpected surprise of his conversion and call to ministry.
Certainly Peter and the other church members were surprised,
not to mention very suspicious.

The point Paul is making is that the call is a pure gift.
Its gratuity is shown in how it works against expectations.
There clearly is something about this in the experience of vocation.
You follow where it leads.
I expect many of my classmates will be talking
about Paul and his call this weekend.

But then there are those other readings,
about widows whose sons are raised to life.
Rather awkward for today's celebration.
And perhaps the wisest thing is to ignore them. Go with Paul.

But let us say that here too the premise holds.
We trust that there is a surprise hidden in the box,
a message for the moment.

Over the years I have come to appreciate
the biblical theme of the widow and the orphan,
the stranger in the land, the poor neighbor.

It is written into the "constitution" of Israel—the law code of Exodus,
under the heading of "the cry of the poor."

It is in Exodus 22, part of the Covenant Code at Mount Sinai,
a passage I discovered appropriately enough
one time in the Sunday liturgies.
"Do not molest the stranger, the widow and the orphan, the poor neighbor.
If they cry out, I will hear them."

It turns out that every time we come across a widow in the Bible
the writer has this theme in mind in the background.
God's care for the vulnerable.

This note is continually sounded by the prophets,
who urge Israel to make the vulnerable their priority,
as it is for their God.

For many years, my favorite expression of this strain
has been the story of Ruth and Naomi, in the book of Ruth.
Two women taking care of one another, who are widows, poor,
and each, at different times,
foreigners in the land in which they sojourn.

But every widow, every orphan,
every stranger, every poor person in the Bible
evokes the biblical concern for the vulnerable, the marginal,
and the God of the Bible who cares for them
in their circumstances of jeopardy.

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath
shows God bringing succor and comfort to persons ignored,
and socially disfavored.
The story of Jesus and the widow of Nain echoes the story of Elijah,
and demonstrates God's concern for those
low on the usual scale of popular interest.

And nowadays we have a Pope who explores these very themes.
Many feel that he is departing from the true faith
as it has been clearly defined.
Some, as I have recently noticed, call his writings gibberish.

He says his understanding of the faith begins with the poor.
He is an active voice for the refugees,
(2,510 drowned in Europe, 2016; 1000 dead this past week.)

He is calling on countries to harbor them,
and even bringing a dozen families to the Vatican.
He advocates showing mercy
in the face of, and despite, certain clear practices.

Many wonder where he gets this stuff.
Seems Marxist, seems provocatively political.
He appears to have a secret source feeding him naïve ideas.
It turns out that he has been reading the Scriptures,
trying to bring the Gospel into the discussion.
Well no wonder. He isn't supposed to take it seriously, is he?

If we have a tradition that tends to place the Bible in a supporting role,
often adjusted to fit more comfortably our preconceptions,
then its hidden surprises may startle and disturb.
Its subversive potential may seem to need managing.
Wrestle it back into that box.

For myself, the readings for today confirm my own sense
of having spent a lifetime pursuing ancient writings
produced in a foreign land in another language.

And yet what we find there is a call to come home,
a call to our fundamental common humanity
in all its glory, despite its obvious blemishes.

We find reason for attention to our common good.
We find ourselves fundamentally loved, and invited to move beyond
our preoccupations with our own failures, into forgiveness.

It is a call to basics,
to the fundamental value of each person.

And so, I find it confirms a career of exploring these texts.
It describes a worthwhile mission, especially to a church
which has found the Word interesting but largely superfluous.

It is what I find myself celebrating with you today.

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 12, 2016

2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13	Nathan calls out King David
Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 7, 11	Lord, forgive the wrong I have done.
Galatians 2:16, 19-21	Justification a grace, not an achievement
Luke 7:36—8:3	Jesus, a Pharisee, and a repentant woman

Who was Mary Magdalen?
The question acquires some current interest since this past Friday
it was announced that her memorial observance on July 22
was raised to a major feast day by Pope Francis.
And today she is named in the gospel.

Religious news accounts mention her increased popularity in recent years,
especially as regards her prominent role in the gospel story
as the "apostle to the apostles,"
bringing attention to the empty tomb and the resurrection of Christ.
She has been adopted as patron of the rising, or returning,
role of women in the church.

At the same time, in the secular press is reporting
the possibility of the first woman to have a realistic chance
of becoming leader of the free world.
These are signals that changes in our notions of gender roles
are indeed happening.

But who is this Mary of Magdala?
The last part of the gospel for today identifies her
as among the group of prominent women from Galilee,
who supported Jesus' movement from their own means.

They also, it says, were relieved of infirmities and demonic spirits,
which refers to personal troubles and disabilities.
"Mary" was a name favored by prominent families at the time,
in sympathy to the Mariam, the executed wife of Herod the Great,
and member of the royal family he deposed and then married into.

Also, to be named by the city is typically a sign of prominence.
Magdala is a town on the shore of Lake Galilee.

In other words, she is not the woman in the drama for today.
That confusion seems to have begun five centuries later,
with Pope Gregory the Great,
who in a famous homily merged the two figures.

It was a powerful homiletic move to oppose the prostitute and the virgin.
And to have them both named Mary,
as a kind of dramatic contrast.

What happened after that seems to be the tendency to simplify the drama
by reducing all of the gospel "Maries" who are not Jesus' mother
into one person.

The benevolent interpretation
is that this is an image of the power of love, and forgiveness.
And the familiar line about tax-collectors and prostitutes
is given a name and a face.

However, it is not clear either that the woman in the story is a prostitute.
It doesn't say she is.
And she is not told to "go and sin no more."
She could be, as Sharon Ringe notes,
married to someone of a disreputable occupation.
Like tax collecting.

So a less benevolent interpretation
might suspect that Patriarchal attitudes,
with dismissive notions of the role of women,
may have influenced the tradition.

We see signs of that in the verses someone added
to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians,
advising women to keep silent in church,
similar to the cautions in early Rabbinic documents.

And with that we begin to notice
that there is a third person involved in the gospel story,
apart from Mary of Magdala and the woman in the drama.

And that third person, who is rarely mentioned, is Simon the Pharisee.
After all, he is the one who invited Jesus to dinner.
And he is the one who gets all the lines.
But they are not necessarily happy lines.

First of all, we might note that the women
are not the only ones assigned predictable roles in the Gospel.
Pharisees also are caricatured as stock figures
representing those who oppose what Jesus is doing.
Simon the Pharisee is presenting in this image.

But what is his problem?
At first, it appears that his problem is Jesus' attention to this woman.
Does Jesus not know who she is,
that she is what they might call a shameless woman?

But Jesus intercepts this thought with ideas of his own.
He reminds Simon that she has provided for him, as a guest,
all the courtesies that Simon, as a host, neglected.
So maybe the problem isn't the woman.
Maybe the problem is Simon.

Why did he neglect his duties as a host?
We learn there were other guests.
It is not likely that they also were deprived
of the common practices for greeting guests.

So why Jesus? Did Simon think of him
as an interesting entertainment for his other guests?
Was he an amusing itinerant preacher
who would be a lively exhibit for the gathering?

Simon, it seems, believes there are some who are worth honoring,
and others who are not.
Jesus, as well as the woman, are for Simon among those who are not.

For Simon there are standards of value
that tell if a person is worth considering.
They are matters of social standing,
of public standards of proper behavior,
and, of course, gender roles.

Everyone knows who is worth admiring, imitating, and honoring,
and who is not. So it would seem.

But then Jesus weighs in with his own opinion,
in the form of a parable, a very small parable.
Two people were forgiven debts,
one a small amount, the other a great amount.
Which would love that creditor more?

So Jesus looks to love and forgiveness
as his own way of valuing persons.
Active compassion doesn't calculate who is deserving of assistance.
Its only criterion is whether persons are hurting.

It doesn't calculate at all, in fact. It simply acts.
It responds to need, and answers generosity with generosity.

And it is here, perhaps, why we find Mary of Magdala
in the scenario for today,
as one who received, and generously responds,
with support from her own resources, along with the other women.

Which brings to mind an appropriate instance.
Barbara Reid, OP, is a Grand Rapids Dominican and Scripture scholar,
as well as a friend.
Currently she is Academic Dean
of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Barbara had a brilliant idea.
Given the emergence of women
in adademic positions of theology and biblical studies,
why not sponsor a new series of biblical commentaries
from a feminist perspective?

Liturgical Press at Collegeville MN has taken her up on the idea,
and the series is on the way.
Some of the volumes have been published.
Not all are by women, for the series is not about certain female scholars,
but more than that and deeper than that.
It is about a perspective that has been forgotten and ignored.

Predictably, one response to such a project
will be that it takes a biased stance toward the tradition,
privileging a one-sided and marginal view.

However, that is not the spirit of the study.
Rather it is more like restoring an obscured art work in the Sistine Chapel,
peeling away obscuring layers of crusted dust and debris,
to retrieve its lost truth, its original power.

In a sense, she who is the Apostle to the Apostles
is allowed to speak again, and be heard.
Her witness is her own,
and testifies to what is otherwise not even noticed.
But without which the good news remains incomplete.

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 19, 2016

Zechariah 12:10-11; 13:1	The Spirit poured out
Psalm 63:2-9	My soul is thirsting for you
Galatians 3:26-29	You are all baptized into Christ
Luke 9:18-24	You are the Christ of God

It seems contrary. It's not what we would expect.
When Peter says that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah,
he is scolded and told not to tell anyone.
But when he begins to talk about the cross,
he says it openly to all.
It seems wrong, even backwards.

But there is a back story to all this.
And for it, we need to go back to the baptism of Jesus,
and the voice from above.
The heavenly voice is actually quoting Scripture, the Word of God.
"You are my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

In fact, it combines two passages.
These are interesting and informative,
especially insofar as they describe
the coming mission and destiny of Jesus.

One of the passages is from Psalm 2, verse 7.
What is this psalm?

Well, it began as a hymn written
for the occasion of the coronation of the kings of Israel.
But when the kingship was lost,
it was repurposed as a hymn calling for the return of the kingship.
The great king to come was the Messiah,
for the kingship of Israel is at the heart of the messianic hope.

But this psalm is rather harsh in the picture it paints
of the realities of kingship as it was known in those days.
Listen to some of its images.

It starts off by noting the situation since the last king died,
and how the subject nations are seizing the opportunity
to break away from the forced submission to the house of David:
"Kings on earth rise up and princes plot together
against the LORD and against his anointed one."
And "Anointed One" is the phrase we translate
as "Messiah," the Anointed One.

But the new king will put an end to all that.
"The one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord derides them,
Then he speaks to them in his anger, in his wrath he terrifies them."

Then, speaking to the new king:
"You are my son; today I have begotten you.
"I will give you the nations as your inheritance
and, as your possession, the ends of the earth.
With an iron rod you will shepherd them,
like a potter's vessel you will shatter them."

When the voice from heaven says to Jesus, "You are my son,"
everyone knows that this is Psalm two being quoted,
and that the message is that Jesus
Is being named the expected Messiah.

But the language of the psalm is harsh and unforgiving.
It is a picture reflecting the political realities of that time,
and in so many ways even today.

This was the common expectation of the Messiah,
that he would come and forcibly return Israel
to its true place in history and the world.
And those who have been persecuting her
will now find the tables turned.

But that is only one of the Scripture passages cited by the voice.
The other is from Isaiah 42:1,
the first verse of the first Song of the Suffering Servant.
It is absolutely the opposite in tone.
Listen to some of the images.

It begins by naming the Servant:
"Here is my servant* whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am pleased."
That last phrase is echoed by the Baptism Voice.

It goes on: "he shall bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry out, nor shout,
nor make his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed* he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.
He will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will bring forth justice, but not by shattering with an iron rod.
Rather, a bruised reed he will not break.

Not violence, but instead nonviolence.

In other words, at the baptism, the Voice from heaven
identifies Jesus as the expected Messiah,
but in the unexpected role of the suffering Servant of Yahweh.

In our gospel passage, we are now halfway through the story of Jesus.
Finally, the disciples come to realize that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ.
But they are laboring under false impressions.
They share the common expectation
set out by passages like Psalm 2.

This is why Jesus silences them. They do not understand
what the Messiah is to be, in the story in which they find themselves.
In Mark's gospel, the version that Luke is summarizing here,
Jesus and Peter argue, each rebuking the other.

And now Jesus begins to add the missing information.
He has the role of the Servant as well as the King, the Messiah.
Part of the message is that he is not going to Jerusalem to take over,
as a conquering king would.
Another part of the message is that kingship, or authority,
is to be understood as service, not domination.

Later on, when James and John, like Peter,
misunderstand what Jesus is about,
and have the nerve to ask for seats at the right and left-hand seat
of the throne-room they anticipate, Jesus teaches about authority.
It is not like the Gentiles, where they lord it over each other.
It is service.

For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.
And to give his life as a ransom for many.

So it says in Mark's gospel, as they travel to Jerusalem,
learning about servant discipleship as they go.
But in Luke, these words are delivered at the Last Supper itself,
as a central part of their ministry and authority.

This is the thrust of the story that we miss
when we focus on the individual episodes
and ignore the larger sweep of the gospel narrative.

It is about rejecting dominance, supported by violence and cruelty,
and replacing that with service, even at a cost.

And because we tend to miss the larger story,
we are not likely to notice how we contradict it
in our own attempts to live as Christians.

We typically do not see this rejection of dominating power
as an essential part of the Christian message,
and we even may in some circumstances
invoke coercive violence in the name of Christianity.
It has been done.

Today we see a vivid demonstration of the style of the Gentiles,
who lord it over one another, in the candidacy of Donald Trump.

Apart from the dangers he presents
to American democracy and damage to national character,
apart from the semi-fascist threat to any population viewed as other,
we have his personification of what the Gospel denies.
He arrives on the scene fortuitously
as a living demonstration of what the Messiah rejects.

But, of course, we are simply lining up extremes in a facile manner.
Always the situation is more complex.

There are homes being burglarized
in what were thought to be safe neighborhoods.
There are easy ways we used to take for granted
that are now compromised.
There are debates about the differences
between community-based and militarized police departments.
There are any number of negotiations
that are needed on a daily and local basis.

But it is also good to understand the basic principles
that are in conflict in any such negotiation.

And it is especially good to know
where the gospel stands on all of this.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 3, 2016

Isaiah 66:10-14	Jerusalem like a nursing mother
Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20	Shout joyfully to God, all the earth
Galatians 6:14-18	I never boast except in the cross
Luke 10:1-12, 17-20	Seventy-two sent forth on mission

In the Gospel of Luke we have just started
on the long journey to Jerusalem,
where important things will happen.
But for now we are on the way.
Luke tells us that Jesus sent teams ahead, 72 in pairs,
as a sort of advance team to prepare the way.

He is fairly explicit.
First, he gives them instructions on traveling.
They are to take along none of the usual items
—no money bag, no sack, no sandals.
It seems that they are to travel light,
and trust that their needs will be met on the way.

Then he gives instructions about visiting houses.
Greet them in peace,
and if they respond in kind, peace will settle there.
If they do not, peace will return to you.
Stay in the same house,
rather than move about, looking for a better deal.

He also talks about what they should do in entering towns.
If they are welcomed, then eat what they offer,
heal the sick, and announce that the kingdom of God is at hand.

If they do not welcome you, leave,
but still announce that the kingdom of God is at hand.
The story of Sodom is also one of lack of hospitality, too,
and that might stand as a lesson.

When we look over this program, two things stand out.
One is their mission of peace, which they bring with them.
It is in the greeting, it is in the welcome,
it is in the healing that follows.

The other thing that strikes a person is the absolute trust
that is required of the disciples on their mission.
They are to trust in God,
and in the towns and houses they visit.

The peace and the trust go together.
For the peace rests on the relationships they build
in the houses and towns.
Just as the trust takes shape in those relationships.
Their security lies in the relationships,
or they have none at all.

What do you think?
Did it really happen like this?
Or is this story just an ideal picture meant to inspire us?

I suspect that we tend to think of the gospel stories
as taking place in another world than the one we live in.
They are idealistic and we have to be realistic.

In our world, peace comes from security,
but security depends on strength.
Trust is asking a little too much.

In our world, we see this
every time efforts for gun control look like they might succeed.
This apparent threat always generates a rush of gun purchases.

The reason is simple:
This is where our culture believes will find its security.
This is where we find our peace.
Which is why we have nicknamed the Colt .45 firearm,
"the Peacemaker."

This is what we describe as the real world.
Of course, it is a fantasy, a dream of the OK Corral.
To make this point, someone compared it to a playground
in which one of the kids is hitting with the others with a stick.
To give all the kids sticks does not seem a workable solution.

Tomorrow is the Fourth of July.
We reflect our cultural priorities with military displays.
Patriotism is equated with weaponry.
We find justification for this in evoking the Revolutionary War.
And there may be some truth to that.

What we will find tomorrow is the partnership of flags and guns.
We are told, in effect, that these go together.
We cannot have one without the other.

However, what happened on the Fourth of July,
in 1776 in Philadelphia, was not a battle.
It was a gathering of people signing a piece of paper
—the Declaration of Independence.

It was a representative group of leaders
who were making a common decision.
The day celebrates the commitment,
the coming together of diverse people for a common cause.

It would issue in armed conflict as a consequence of that decision.
But what we celebrate is the common cause,
and the community of spirits that it represents.

What we will find tomorrow is the pairing of flags and weapons.
We are told, in effect, that these go together.
We cannot have one without the other.

It is said (on Wikipedia, to be specific) that Independence Day
is commonly associated with fireworks, parades, barbecues, carnivals,
fairs, picnics, concerts, baseball games, family reunions,
and political speeches and ceremonies.

We might consider the Independence Day parade.
Contrast that with the parade in the gospel for today.
Two dreams of peace, we might say.
Two visions of bringing peace to the world.

The question of what is realistic and what is not
is addressed by St Paul in his letter to the Galatians.
We have been spending some time with this letter in the past month or so.
But we have not looked at it much.
Today we say farewell.
But a last lingering look might be in order.

Paul contrasts what he calls living according to the Spirit
with living according to the flesh.
By "according to the flesh," he means
what we might call depending on human resources.
It will only get us so far.
But ultimately, they will fail us,
since they share the limitations of all human enterprises.

Living according to the Spirit is to place our trust in God,
which of course is what Paul recommends.
Trust in God, who is the true source of our security.

But here is the rub.
Human resources I can see and understand.
I can rely on security systems I know.

But where is God?
I cannot see God, and to place my trust there
seems foolhardy in the extreme.
Even irresponsible.

It seems a lot to ask.
And, we say, we probably should not take it literally.

But we might frame it differently.
What is the difference between a peace based on mutual threat,
and one based on mutual respect?

Perhaps the key to the gospel message is the latter,
a peace based on community and community relationships.

Perhaps that is the key to this weekend's celebrations, as well.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 10, 2016

Deuteronomy 30:10-14	These commands, already in your heart
Psalm 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37	Turn to the Lord in your need
Colossians 1:15-20	Hymn of the Firstborn
Luke 10:25-37	The Good Samaritan

We are on our way to Jerusalem, in Luke's Gospel.
We have seen Jesus teaching his disciples,
sending them off to prepare the way before him.
But now a second group enters the conversation
—the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

A lawyer to give him a convenient, though probably inaccurate title,
steps forward and opens this conversation.
"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus answers with words that will set the terms for this line of debate,
all the way to Jerusalem.
He says, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"
This is the first time that the word, "law," is spoken in this gospel,
and Jesus is the one who speaks it.
And then the question: How do you read it?
And that is the whole matter in a nutshell.

The lawyer, answers Jesus with the teaching about the Great Commandment:
"You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your being,
with all your strength,
and with all your mind,
and your neighbor as yourself."

We are familiar with this passage, although usually we find it
among the debates that Jesus faced in his last week in Jerusalem,
as his opponents worked to find something to charge him with.

But Luke introduces it here, at the beginning of the road to Jerusalem.
It tells us that all along the road the Pharisees and Lawyers
will be trying to engage him in debate,
and maybe trap him in his speech.
The attempt begins early.

Jesus approves of the lawyer's answer, but it doesn't stop there.

There is a second question: “And who is my neighbor?”

I used to think that this was simply a lawyer being a lawyer,
trying to limit the instances so as to make clear what one must do
and, especially, what one needn’t do.

However, since then I have learned
that the injunction from Leviticus 18:19
was a big topic of debate in the Jewish community.
The question of the lawyer reflects this.
We are still talking about the law, and how you read it.

In Leviticus, the neighbor indicated is a fellow Israelite.
But in a later chapter, Leviticus would include the sojourner
or stranger in the land. The refugee, or permanent visitor.
The Greek Bible translated this as “convert,”
making it more restrictive.

In Jesus’ day, the Essene community interpreted it very strictly
—only fellow Essenes (and not other Jews) were one’s neighbor.
Among the Pharisees, like this lawyer, there was wide debate.
And the issue was simple: Who do we have to love as ourselves?
(And in a further sense, Who is “ourselves”?)

So this is the question behind the question:
The law, How do you read it?

And then, Jesus answers with the parable that the whole world knows:
the story of the Good Samaritan.

The are many interpretations of this parable, but at the heart of them all
is the realization that the wrong person, a despised Samaritan,
is the one who demonstrates compassion.

This is a shock, and disturbing to those in the community
who for their entire lives were trained to discount the Samaritans
not only as foreigners and rivals for their land,
but also rather heretical believers in Yahweh, the true God.

And then, at the end, Jesus tops it off
by answering a question the Lawyer didn’t ask.
Jesus didn’t answer the question, Who is my neighbor?
Instead he told how to be a neighbor,
answering the unasked question about how to *be* a neighbor.

Who is my neighbor? The law, how do you read it?

These questions, with their answer in the parable of the Good Samaritan,
are in my mind as I review
the disturbing events of the past week in America.

Here are the facts as summarized in the *New York Times* (S. Chan, 6/8/16)

First,
"On Tuesday morning, two police officers fatally shot a black man,
Alton B. Sterling, 37, in Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana,
while trying to arrest him.
The shooting was captured on video that drew widespread attention
after it was released online on Wednesday."

Then,
"On Wednesday evening, a police officer fatally shot a black man,
Philando Castile, 32, during a traffic stop in Falcon Heights, Minn.,
a suburb of St. Paul, the state capital.
The aftermath was streamed on Facebook Live
by Mr. Castile's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds,
a passenger in the car, along with her young daughter."
The incident began with a burnt-out taillight, and involved a man
who was a lunchroom moderator, working with kids.

After that,
"• **Shots were fired** around 9.p.m. on Thursday
as hundreds of demonstrators
were peacefully marching west on Main Street in downtown Dallas. ...
police officers, who were on the scene to maintain order,
took cover and returned fire.
• **Five police officers were killed**, seven other officers were shot
and two civilians were wounded."

Furthermore, the sniper, a military veteran,
was killed by a remote-controlled robot with an explosive device
similar to military drones.
Apparently, this was the first instance of such use in a domestic crisis,
and raised serious questions about militarization of the police work.

Again, who is my neighbor? And: The law, how do you read it?
And: Where is the Good Samaritan?

Peace-oriented moral theologians
have been struggling with these issues for some time now.
One of them, Tobias Winright, almost took a job at Loras.
But St Louis University made a better offer.

Tobias is widely known for his work in this area.
He is from a family of peace officers, and has said
that he worked in the field for summer jobs when he was in college.
And he hated it.
But he sees the argument on both sides.

I would like to share a few of his thoughts,
as a hint to what moral theologians are saying
about the militarization of police in our country.

First, there is the metaphor of the **crime fighter**,
which gained popularity in the past decades.
Here the use of force occupies a central position.
Calls for a "War on Crime" reinforce it. This metaphor
has captured the imagination of both police and the public.

"However (says Winright), this model plants the seeds
of police brutality and excessive force.
Also, the war metaphor fails to recognize
the moral constraints involved, for it to be recognized as just.
It increases the alienation of the police from the people,
viewing everyone as potential 'enemy.'
In sum, it is hard to support this model
for either just war or pacifism proponents."

Second, there are other models, many of which are still compromised.
But one that the author recommends is the "**social peacekeeper**" model.
Here the police are members of the community, not at war with it.

It is more neighborhood-oriented.
The police are keepers of the peace,
and this often means supporting community efforts,
identifying with the people of the neighborhood.
Knowing them by name and being known by name.

The use of force, though sometimes necessary, is a 'last resort.'"
Here, unlike in war, the use of deadly force requires
a suspension and review of the situation
—not something we see in war actions.

They are different,
and need to be understood clearly as different.

So again: Who is my neighbor? The law, how do you read it?
And: Who is the Good Samaritan?

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 17, 2016

Genesis 18:1-10	Abraham's visitors
Psalm 15:2-5	He who does justice
Colossians 1:24-28	I rejoice in my sufferings
Luke 10:38-42	Jesus visits Martha and Mary

We are on our way to Jerusalem with Jesus and his people.
And along the way, Mary and her sister Martha
provide some support and sustenance.

This story has disturbed many.
It seems to reward the person who isn't helping
and blame the person who is doing all the work.

One traditional interpretation says that this refers
to the superiority of contemplative life to the active life.
However, that faces the difficulty that the contemplative life
was not yet a Christian practice
at the time Luke was writing his gospel.

Others have proposed that Martha's problem
had more to do with her attitude than her commendable work.
She shouldn't be complaining, especially to her guest.
That could be.

But it faces the problem of Jesus' answer
that Mary has chosen the better part.
The better part of what?

In line with this tradition of proposing interpretations,
I will make my own, knowing that it also has problems.
When Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part,
we might ask ourselves, "The better part of what?"

I think we assume it is discipleship that he is talking about.
But maybe it is something else.
Maybe it is hospitality.
Maybe he is saying that hospitality has many faces,
and some are the practical arts of making the guest comfortable,
while others are greeting, listening,
and making the guest feel personally at home.

In addition to the practical arts,
there is the personal relationship.

Hospitality has been an issue on this road to Jerusalem.
We saw the unfortunate beginning on the way,
when the disciples were upset by the lack of hospitality
shown by certain Samaritan villages,
and asked permission to call down fire from heaven upon them.

We also saw that when Jesus sent out 72 disciples ahead of him,
he asked them to depend on the hospitality
of those they encountered on the road.
And those who rejected their coming
were compared to the cities of Sodom,
which you will recall also conspicuously failed in hospitality,
and also had fire from heaven called down upon them.

It appears that hospitality is to be considered a serious matter.

We see that in the elaborate hospitality of Abraham
in the Genesis reading for today.
After welcoming his three visitors, he discreetly remarks,
"Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet,
and ... let me bring you a little food,
that you may refresh yourselves."

But then he Abraham hastened into the tent and told Sarah,
"Quick, three measures of fine flour! Knead it and make rolls."
He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice steer,
and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it.
as well as the steer that had been prepared,
and set these before the three visitors.
And he waited on them under the tree while they ate.

In desert and semi-arid territories,
hospitality is a high priority among the tribes that live there,
for the needs of living in a harsh environment
can often be a matter of life or death.

That is part of the Abraham story,
but it clearly goes beyond that.
Again, it appears that hospitality
is to be considered a serious matter.

In all of my Catholic formation,
I never thought of hospitality as a central value.
I never thought of it as representative of Christian life.
It was only when I began to be involved with the Catholic Worker,
and learned of Dorothy Day, and the Houses of Hospitality.

It was then that I began to understand
that along with food and clothing, shelter was a basic human need.

Working as something of an intern for a semester
in one of the homeless shelters run by Mitch Snyder
and the Community for Creative Non-Violence, in D.C.,
brought the desperate need home to me, as it were.

Once hospitality enters your awareness as a basic Christian value,
it appears in unexpected places as a theme for discipleship.
The works of mercy listed in the parable of the sheep and the goats
includes "I was a stranger and you welcomed me as a guest."
Along with satisfying the hungry and thirsty,
clothing the naked, and visiting those imprisoned.

Stories appear in a new light.
The visitation of Mary at the house of the pregnant Elizabeth
becomes an account of mutual hospitality.
The long road to Jerusalem that engages us this Ordinary Year of Luke,
repeatedly plays upon this theme, as we will see.

But in today's world it is also larger than houses of hospitality,
though it certainly includes that.
The image that Pope Francis offered
of the church as a field hospital in a battlefield
points in that direction.
Along with healing, it brings shelter,
a place to back off from the struggle and recover.

Homelessness today overflows the boundaries of the inner city,
or the family living in a car—though it includes that.
The homeless today include the drifting throngs of refugees
that are loose in the world.
Peoples drifting from homeland to nowhere.

Again, the Pope's call to provide them shelter,
and his own gesture of inviting 3 Syrian migrant families to the Vatican,
show us the need and the way.

While one cannot deny the pope's gift for the telling dramatic gesture,
the reason for his effectiveness is the strongly felt, even anguished,
compassion he feels for those who are victims of our unfeeling world.

He invites us to bring our own compassion to the injured world,
not only with the sensible effectiveness of Martha,
but also the personal attentiveness of Mary.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 24, 2016

Genesis 18:20-32	Abraham prays for Sodom
Psalm 138:1-3, 6-8	You have heard the words of my mouth
Colossians 2:12-14	You were buried and raised in baptism
Luke 11:1-13	Jesus teaches the disciples to pray

Jesus' disciples, seeing Jesus pray,
ask him to teach *them* how to pray.
Is there anything more central to religion or faith than prayer?
Today in the Scripture readings we have a tutorial on prayer.

In the Book of Psalms we find a collection of prayers of all types.
Some are praise, some are petition.
Others are laments about present woes,
or thanksgivings for deliverance from past woes.
But today we hear mainly about prayers of petition
—perhaps what we first think of when we think of prayer.

The story of Abraham interceding on behalf of the people of Sodom
is cast in the form of a bargaining exchange,
very familiar to those who have spent some time in the Middle East.
I used to avoid the Suk, the marketplace in the Old City of Jerusalem,
because I did not have time to haggle over an item I needed.

Easier to hop over to Saladin Street,
where they had fixed prices, like here in the U.S.
Pay your money, take your item, and go.
Not twenty minutes deciding who was the better at driving a bargain.
I never was.

Abraham, however, was pretty good, it seems.
His extended exchange with the Lord teaches us
about the need for persistence in prayer, something also stressed
in the story of the midnight visitor in the Gospel:

"I tell you, if he does not get up
to give the visitor the loaves because of their friendship,
he will get up to give him whatever he needs
because of his persistence."

In the case of Abraham, however,
we have a special lesson about persistence.
The story illustrates persistence in prayer.

It does so, not by informing us that such persistence is beneficial.
Rather, it allows to experience that persistence second-hand,
as we sit through the repeated negotiations of Abraham,
bargaining with God.
He tries our patience, as we witness him
expressing his concern about trying the patience of God.

In the midst of all this talk of persistence
we have the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples
when they asked him for guidance.
We call it the Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father.

We may be struck by the brevity of the prayer,
especially in contrast to Abraham's style of beseeching God.

We may be thinking of the words that Matthew's Gospel uses
to introduce this prayer of Jesus, where it says,

"And when you pray, do not babble on like pagans,
for they think that by their many words they will be heard.
Do not be like them, for your Father knows
what you need before you ask Him...." (Matt 6:7-8)

And Luke's version of the prayer, which we heard today,
is even shorter than Matthew's.
Matthew gives us seven petitions,
as does another early writing of the church, the Didache.

Luke provides us with only five petitions.
So what are we to make of this?

In a way, the five petitions seem like a list of possible prayer topics.
They suggest what we should be praying for.
Or maybe what we actually are praying for,
when we say this prayer.
They invite a closer look.

-"Father, hallowed be your name." May your name be honored.
May you be known in a world that needs to know you.

May the false images presented of you
—from the tyrant who is not a father,
to the old man amid the clouds in the cartoons,
more like Thor or Jupiter—

may these be replaced with authentic knowledge of your truth,
as a loving God, eager to welcome your children.

May the caricatures give way to real relationships.
May we understand that God is love.

-"Your kingdom come." May this reign, this kingdom,
be one of justice and welcome to all your children.
May it be where your will is done,
where we understand we are all one family, one people,
and learn to live together as such.

May true justice rule in the society to which you call us.
The word "kingdom" points to a social reality,
and more than a personal integrity.

-"Give us each day our daily bread."
May we receive what we need to live our lives,
sustained for the work of discipleship to which we are called.
Surely "Bread" means more than bakery products,
and implies even more than food only.

And the word "daily," which in its Greek form
appears only in the New Testament,
and then only in this prayer,
points to what is needed, our necessary bread
for each day, for now, for the future.

-"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us."
Allow us to forgive others, for we ourselves have been forgiven.
Teach us to let go of all those felt injuries we nurse obsessively,
the resentments we hold onto,
the list of all those whom we feel owe us something.
Let us accept the fact that we are forgiven
for all those faults and blemishes of our own that we find so unforgivable.
Teach us that we are loved.

-"Do not subject us to the final test."
Spare us from experiencing the crisis
that will place us in ultimate jeopardy,
whether it be personal or social, local or historical.

Whether it be personal tragedy, or the contemporary plight
    of the refugee family, the devastated nation,
    the militarized or environmental catastrophe.

Teach us to be present to those
who are caught in these destructive nets.
    Teach us to be the children who call you “Father.”

Amen.

This is the prayer we recite daily.
It is the prayer that Jesus asked us to pray.
    It may seem automatic by now.
    But it might reward reflection upon its words.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 31, 2016

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23	Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth
Psalm 90:3-6, 12-14, 17	If today you hear his voice...
Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11	Your life is hidden with Christ in God
Luke 12:13-21	The Rich "Fool"

Today, as sometimes happens, there is an unspoken presence
behind the Scripture readings for the day.
Hiding behind the curtain is the figure of King Solomon the Wise.
He doesn't speak, but his influence is noticeable,
something like an unseen planet detected by its gravitational pull.

When the person in the crowd asks Jesus,
"Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me,"
does it make you think of Solomon,
deciding between two women the fate of an infant?

And then there is the book of Ecclesiastes.
"Vanity of vanities!" it repeats, again and again.
"All things are vanity!"
Some translators render this "Vapor of vapors."
Or "Meaninglessness, meaninglessness!"
The message is that all good things satisfy for awhile,
but eventually tend to lose their flavor,
and become dull and boring.

The author of this book adopts the persona of King Solomon.
He goes through the list of all good things
—and who is better attuned to all good things than King Solomon,
who reportedly lacked nothing?

Good works, wisdom, pleasure-seeking, and even wealth.
Good for a time, but they eventually become tedious.
And then we discover that all is vanity.
Or Vapor. Or Meaninglessness.

The book of Ecclesiastes, along with Job,
belong a distinct category of Wisdom writing in the bible,
that of skeptical questioning.

The conventional wisdom writing, like Proverbs,
is busy sorting out the distinctions between the Wise and the Foolish,
the Just and the Wicked, and the Rich and the Poor.
While this is a useful activity, it tended toward stereotyping.
If God rewards the Just, maybe the Rich are the Just.

And if they are successful in this way,
they must be the Wise as well.

You can see where this is going.
That leaves the rest in one category
—the poor are the foolish are the wicked.

And here we have the time-honored rationalization
for condemning the poor, as lazy
and deserving of the sorrows they inherit.
It is the standard program for ignoring the works of mercy.

It is in this frame of mind that we come to the parable in the gospel.
After Jesus tells the person who thought he was Solomon
that no one appointed him, Jesus, as that person's arbiter,
he told the parable of the rich farmer.

We are in the same territory of the wisdom writings.
For we have a rich man, reminding us of the distinction
between the rich and the poor.
And in addition, we have God addressing him as "you fool!"
—something that seems terribly rude, unless we recognize
it is supposed to remind us of the wisdom writing.

And if that isn't enough, we have the rich farmer telling himself
that he should "rest, eat, drink, be merry!"
Which is a quote right out of the book of Ecclesiastes.
It is probably its most famous quote,
right after Vanity of vanities.

And it is probably the reason we have Ecclesiastes for our first reading.
The farmer thinks he following the rules set out in the book,
but it turns out he is wrong.
Where is he wrong? He seems to be doing the prudent thing.
When you have a better than usual harvest,
you need to make the proper provisions.

We might point out that he is failing to give to the poor.
And in the light of the tendencies in wisdom writing,
that might be the case.
That would be a good lesson to the rich who might be hearing this story.

We also have the words of Jesus
presented as an interpretation of the story,
when he says: "one's life does not consist of possessions."

Clearly this is intended for those who have a lot of possessions,
and make them the center of their lives.

But what about us? We are not rich,
at least not by the standards of our day.
And some of us may even have taken a vow of poverty.

So that would put us in the pleasant position of mocking the rich man,
even while we can feel righteous.
This sounds suspicious, however,
especially if we would like to be rich,
only things didn't turn out that way,
and now we can take credit for making the right choice.
Which was not really a choice.

We are not rich, especially by the standards of the day.
And maybe that's the clue.
Again, Jesus says, "one's life does not consist of possessions."

That means, at least in one sense,
that possessions are not the measure we should use
in valuing the just and the wise.
And yet, in our day, that is the measure that is used,
almost exclusively.

It is an old story that with the collapse of the Soviet bloc of nations,
one ideology won the day, and that is Capitalism.
It is the standard of value for our world, and all things are judged by it.
The bottom line is the bottom line for everything.

So there is the chance that we adopt these values for ourselves,
whether in triumph or in resentful default,
if we do not explicitly make a decision about them.

Examples surround us on every side,
from our images of success or failure
to such trivial matters of judging the artistic value of a movie
by how much money it makes.

While this is true, there might be another way
to talk about our culture of possessions.
What does it mean to put public services
in the hands of private entrepreneurs?
Consider the conflict between public service and private profit.

We have our extreme examples.
In health care, there is the notably outrageous example
of the Turing Pharmaceuticals CEO, Martin Shkreli.

As you know, this 32-year-old former hedge fund manager,
acquired a sole-source medication in circulation since 1953
and used frequently by patients with compromised immune systems,
and he raised its price from $13.50 per pill to $750—a 5,000% increase.

He is sometimes called the most hated man in America.
However, he is only an extreme example of a pattern
that is part of our culture.

Currently, drug prices are rising at a rate six times that of inflation,
according to the AARP.
Part of this is private companies taking advantage
of federal dollars available for health care.
The principle is simple—smart people make money.
But is smart the same thing as wise?

Currently, our neighbor, and President of the Iowa Senate, Pam Jochum,
is leading an investigation of what is occurring in our state
with Medicaid privatization.

While is it not clear that anything corrupt is occurring,
there is the problem that it does not seem to be working as promised.
And the promise is efficiency,
which has more to do with concerns about money
than it has to do about service to those needing it.

For-profit health care finds a partner in for-profit prisons,
for here too a public function is put at the mercy of private gain.
And here too we have the glaring examples
that illustrate an underlying structural problem.

Consider, for instance, the "kids for cash" scandal in which
two judges contracted with for-profit juvenile detention centers,
to increase the number of residents by imposing harsh sentences,
often "for offenses as minimal as mocking a principal on Myspace,
trespassing in a vacant building,
or shoplifting DVDs from Wal-Mart." (Wikipedia)

Again, these are dramatic examples that point
to something structural, something cultural,
that allows them to happen.

These examples, health-care, prisons,
take on particular resonance in this year of Mercy,
when we consider them in light of the works of mercy.

As the parable of the sheep and goats, in Matthew's Gospel asks,
"Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked
or sick or in prison and not serve you?"

Today it is often not a matter of ignoring these works,
but profiting from them.

It is true.
We are not rich by the standards of the day.
But those standards deserve our attention.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 14, 2016

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 Jeremiah saved from the cistern
Psalm 40: 2-4, 18 He drew me out of the pit!
Hebrews 12:1-4 Persevere in running the race
Luke 12:49-53 I come to set fire to the earth

Perhaps you know what a Dubuque secret is.
One time it was explained to me that a Dubuque secret
is a secret that everybody knows.
Everybody knows it, but no one says it out loud.
That came to mind when I read the scriptures for today.

I will come to that shortly.
But it begins with the strange pronouncement in today's Gospel.
Jesus asks, "Do you think that I have come
to establish peace on the earth?"
And then he answers his own question:
"No, I tell you, but rather division."

And Matthew's version has it even stronger:
"I have come to bring not peace but the sword."

What can this possibly mean?
Do we not remember Jesus entering Jerusalem as the Prince of Peace,
riding on a donkey, rather than a war horse,
alone rather than with a mighty army?

Did not the angels announce Peace of earth
at the time of his birth?

That is true.
But at the same time,
we remember the visit of the holy family to the Temple,
where they met the righteous and devout Simeon,
who blessed the child.

But he also said: "Behold, this child is destined
for the fall and rise of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be contradicted
(and you yourself a sword will pierce)
so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Of course, that always seemed mysterious, too.
It introduced a discordant note into the Christmas picture.
It tended to put a damper on the season of good cheer.

And now we hear Jesus saying pretty much the same thing.
So—what do we make of this?

It seems to me that the story of Jeremiah
and his difficulties that we heard about today offers some clues.

Jeremiah lived during the final days of the kingdom of Judah.
In fact, King Zedekiah, whose vacillating leadership
we heard about this morning, turned out to be the last king.
After him, the city was sacked
and the original temple of Solomon burned to the ground.

In the story we heard today, the city is under siege,
and Jeremiah is insisting that they will not survive the assault.
His advice is to apply for terms of peace.
But the leaders are convinced that, with God in his temple,
they cannot lose.

They not only call Jeremiah a traitor,
for uttering words of discouragement during a time of national crisis,
but also a heretic, for doubting the power of God,
whose dwelling place is the temple of Solomon.
Jeremiah, however, insists. To him it is obvious.
And, he feels, it should be obvious to them as well.
However, they do not want to hear the truth.

And so they decide to get him out of the way.
And in this dry and arid land of many cisterns, they lower him into one.
He is out of the way.
It would seem to work, at least until Ebed-melech,
whose name means Servant of the King,
who is from Cush, in Africa, intervenes. As we just heard.

Much of Jeremiah's record of prophecy
consists of this attempt to get the Israelites of Judah
to see the truth that is in front of them.
And much of that record is a history of mourning their blindness
and the results that it will bring about.

The great Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann,
compares his prophetic career to the grieving process
as spelled out by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross,
in her five stages of dying.
Jeremiah used up all his energy in trying to get his people
beyond denial into acceptance of what clearly was evident to him.

It was like a Dubuque secret.
Everybody knew, but nobody wanted it said out loud.
It was not to be spoken.

It seems to me that there are lessons here for those of us
who are concerned about the prophetic mission of the church.
There are many themes contained in the call to prophecy.
And one of them is speaking the unspoken.

The prophetic devotion to the truth finds the prophet
compelled to speak what people do not want spoken.
The prophetic devotion is based on the conviction
that the truth is life-saving, and that denial is deadly.

Studies have shown that usually we hear what we want to hear.
We surround ourselves with like-minded people,
and mutually reinforce the take on the truth from our point of view.
Social media provide a vivid illustration of this,
as shared views are cherished
and opposing views are called crude names.

Especially in this election cycle we see the pattern unfolding.
Wildly diverse views are shared among the like-minded,
while those who differ are vilified.
Regarding this, we hear analysts use terms
like “echo-chamber” or “living in a bubble.”

We construct the reality we want,
and we do not welcome any information that might contradict it—
especially that kind of information that threatens to be obviously true,
and concerning which we therefore prefer not to be reminded.

The prophet has a disability, however,
which sets him or her apart from this.
The prophet’s disability is the inability to be consoled
by the echoes in the chamber, or the narrow world of the bubble.
The prophet, like the child in the story,
who announced the emperor was wearing no clothes,
sees what others see, but unlike them cannot keep quiet.

And when it is a matter of consequences,
when the obvious truth that is being denied has serious implications,
the need to speak out is all the more pressing.

Just ask Jeremiah.

As I talk about this, a certain feeling rises up within me
that I associate with an experience I had long ago.
With your indulgence, I might conclude with that.

When I was in college I had a summer job
at Titus Manufacturing in Waterloo, along with Dick Schlindwein,
a classmate who also happened to be dating my sister.

Dick had an old Chevy that ran fairly well,
except that he kept three jugs in the trunk,
one of water, one of oil, and one of brake fluid,
for whatever was needed at any particular the time.
The brakes especially were difficult,
requiring much pumping before stopping.

One time, returning home after work,
Dick saw an old cardboard box in the road
which just begged to be smashed by an old Chevy.
However, what he didn't notice was the big Cadillac
sitting in the road just beyond,
waiting to turn left after the traffic passed.

As we sped up toward the box,
my need was to inform the driver about the Cadillac just beyond.

All along, I was thinking about the time it would take
to pump up the brakes when the box crushing was done,
and the Cadillac loomed in the way, all too near.

I was finally able to get Dick's attention,
and I died a few deaths as I watched him
methodically pumping the brake pedal
in anticipation of actually braking,
as the big car in front of us grew bigger.

We survived, and I am here to tell it.
But I will never forget the feeling.
Sometimes not seeing the obvious has consequences.

Just ask Jeremiah.

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 21, 2016

Isaiah 66:18-21	Gathering of the nations
Psalm 117:1-2	God's fidelity and steadfast kindness
Hebrews 12:5-7,11,13	The case for disciplining
Luke 13:22-30	Enter by the narrow gate

First Jesus says, "Enter by the narrow gate."
Then he says, "people will come from the east and the west
and from the north and the south
and will recline at table in the kingdom of God."

So which is it? The narrow gate, or the wide open door?

In my own work in Luke's gospel, I have come to the conclusion
that he is writing for the Gentile believer
who accepts the biblical story of the People of God,
and would convert to Judaism,
if it weren't for the many restrictive practices
that have been placed around the Jewish faith.

Not only the elaborations of the law, but also practices
such as food rules, marriage rules, circumcision, and such.
Luke is showing the Gentile believer a way into the story,
by becoming a follower of Jesus.

In turn, he shows Jesus promoting a version of Judaism
that was part of the history, but has been put aside,
and yet is still part of the story.
And that neglected tradition is the "light to the Gentiles,"
found in the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah.

In these terms, the sayings about the narrow gate and the open door
begin to make some sense.
The person who asked Jesus about whether many will be saved
is speaking within the tradition of only the few
who keep the many laws and traditions.

Jesus answers in kind, Enter by the narrow gate.
But now the gate is something different, namely, repentance.
It is repentance that Jesus keeps preaching
as we move through the story as presented by Luke.
So now, the narrow gate is repentance,
and the willingness to repent.

This is difficult on its own,
as difficult for the Gentile as for the Israelite.
But it is open to all.
It is also the open door that can admit people
from the east and west, north and south.

It is difficult because it requires coming to terms
with one's own fragility and tendencies to self-importance.
It is difficult because it invites self-examination,
for how else will a person come
to a sense of the need for repentance?

This tension between the narrow gate and the open door
is seldom out of fashion.
While the Gospel speaks of the role of the Gentiles in Luke's church,
it might be applied to certain aspects of today's world as well.

We see in many places a movement to draw back from global society.
It was seen in the Brexit vote in Great Britain.

And it is seen here in the States as well,
as fears about terrorism and loss of place in society
threaten to overwhelm many people.

One thing we see here is the pain of loss.
The familiar world is passing away.

The customs that were part of the culture that surrounded communities,
that were taken as part of the natural world, unchanging and normal,
seem to be fading before their eyes,
to be replaced by strange ways of carrying on,
nothing that they have been prepared for.

In some ways, this is the loss of community.
It is like the loss of habitat in the natural world,
which depends on protected niches in the environment,
where it can flourish.

We hear about the rapid disappearance of human languages,
gone before they can be recorded.
We learn of loss of cultures, native cuisines and styles.
And we mourn those changes, just as we mourn the loss of habitat.

So much of the fear of terrorism and foreigners
is lament for the losses brought about by change.

But there is, on the other side, an invitation to the wider world.
It is an invitation that includes a respect for the habits of the locals,
for the integrity of the many cultures.

This week we have been paying attention
to the global community of that wider world,
as we watch the Olympic Games.
There is a vivid sense that, even while in competition,
we are one human family.
We are able to compete, because we are more or less equal,
and so the competition means something. It is possible.

At the same time, we have difficult moments coming to that vision.
The Olympic events that dominated the news for the last few days
were not the games but the behavior of the American swimmers.

Apart from the disputed actions on that occasion,
the fact that it could become an international incident
is because it tapped into a history
of American obliviousness to the world beyond us.

Ryan Lochte could be identified as an Ugly American,
because there was already available
a category called Ugly American.

And part of this is that in our Western condemnation of terrorism
we do not recognize our own contribution to the turmoil in the world.
We do not have the self-knowledge that would permit us
to make that recognition.

We recognize within our own society the fraternity-like "bro" culture—
"bro" being a short version of "brother,"
but in a certain white-boy privileged sense.
We recognize this in our own culture,
but we do not recognize the ways in which we as Americans
are like this to the other parts of the world.

There are clear and powerful exceptions, of course.
One is the missionary effort of America since the 1970s and 80s,
especially seen in Latin America—
a missionary effort directed toward liberating a people,
rather than dominating them.

But here we see the evidence
of the self-awareness that precedes repentance,
and which allows a vision of a universal family.

Historical anthropologists tell us that in the ancient world,
up to the time of the New Testament,
there was no sense of a universal family.
    There was only my village and the aliens.
    My people and the others who were not quite human.
        The Greeks called them barbarians—
        called such because they talked funny: bar-bar-bar.

The Roman Empire provided a foundation for a cultural mix.
It extended open passage to the edge of the known world at that time,
in fact by that creating what was the known world at that time.
    But every people were identified by their religion,
    into which they were born,
    and through which they had their identity.

It was Christianity, this story goes,
that based itself not on birth, but on conversion.
    You were not born into it, but were baptized into it,
    a different kind of birth.
    It was an intentional community.

And it turns out, anyone could enter in.
Conversion was available to all.
    So Christianity moved out into the imperial expanse,
    which had prepared a space for conversion.
And with it was a vision of the one family of God.
A vision of God's people that expanded
    beyond the chosen people of Israel
    to include the entire human family.

Luke's gospel is important for this vision.
    And so is today's passage
    about the narrow gate and the wide door,
    open to the east and west, north and south.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 28, 2016

Sirach 17-18, 21, 28-29	Conduct your affairs with humility
Psalm 68:4-7, 10-11	You have made a home for the poor
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24	Not Mount Sinai, but Mount Zion
Luke 14:1, 7-14	Taking places at a dinner

Friday was the birthday of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.
The news media that covered the event were largely laudatory,
but following the current principles of journalistic practice,
felt compelled to note that she had her critics.
    Naturally, the name of Christopher Hitchens came up,
    who famously accused her of exploiting the poor.
    One wonders, of course, what Hitchens has done on behalf of the poor.

Hitchens, who along with Richard Dawkins,
are among the contemporary class of atheists,
    aggressively furthering the cause of nonbelief
    with an almost evangelistic fervor.
They are not alone, of course,
as many of our friends and neighbors share their skepticism.
    Being religious is thought to be foolish and uncritical,
    and a sign of weakness and lack of courage.

As one who has been convinced of the views of the theologian Paul Tillich,
I tend to believe that religion is part of our makeup,
and when it seems to disappear it actually shows up in a different form.
    Tillich called it our "Ultimate Concern."
    To oversimplify—whatever we are most deeply concerned about
    is, in effect, our religion.

It seems to me that in our current state of culture,
one thing that has replaced organized religion is a religion of the Self.
    We are in an age of Radical Individualism,
    with its ultimate criterion for action being that of the Absolute Self.
        My gender is my choice, for example.
        Or, I can choose to be another race.

Other trending topics this week make similar signals.
A young woman kills herself after throwing a party
celebrating that decision and action.
    Her life is her own, to keep or dispense as she sees fit.
    It is not a gift given her, but life over which she has complete say.

A retired police captain I Dubuque is arrested for threatening letters.

His defense is that as an American he enjoys freedom of speech.
The same is true of the Alt-Right,
a term for online white male supremacists, seated at their computers,
who also claim the right of free speech.
There is no need to be concerned about social effects,
since the self is speaking, and that is what counts.

Not that the self is unimportant,
but rather that it needs to be placed in the context of others,
of community, of a common good.
Without that it is a rogue religion.

But then, who are we to talk?
We who favor a two thousand year old religion,
and read from a book of ancient writings?
Does it not seem outlandish? Ridiculous?

We might take today's Gospel readings as an example.
What do they have to offer, and why should we care?

Unfortunately, we have only two passages
from a suite of passages in the 14th chapter of Luke, all about meals.
The occasion is a Sabbath, which has to do with what God wants of us.
And it is a meal, for meals are concentrated images of society,
like a hologram of a social situation.
As, for instance, the liturgical sharing of bread and wine.

The first story is about a man with dropsy, today identified as edema,
a swelling of the body, in part or in whole.
In ancient times is was seen as an accumulation of fluids
which the body would not release,
even while the victim endured an unrelenting thirst.

It became a symbol of greed.
It signaled a people who were driven by accumulating, without giving.
The man is released from his condition.
Luke uses a verb, "to release,"
that connects this healing to Jubilee liberation.

After this, which the liturgy omitted today, we have our two stories.
One is about the guests seeking higher places.
Jesus makes the suggestion that they go lower, and so are invited higher.

This advice will not be taken, of course.
If you are concerned about advancing, and your need is desperate,
you are not going to risk it by acting humble. That is crazy talk.

Jesus is suggesting something else, it appears.
He is suggesting that the entire program of self-advancement
be abandoned.

Then comes a shift in the conversation,
as the terms of discussion move from
the higher and lower ends of the table,
to those inside the house itself, versus those outside.

Jesus turns to the host, and makes the suggestion
that invitations not be delivered to friends and neighbors
who can pay you back.
That is still part of the game of social positioning,
through favors and counter-favors.

Rather, go out to the streets and alleys,
and invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.
But again, this implies a vision of the larger society
that would include the poor as part of my human community,
and not only those in my circle of mutual dinner parties.

There is a further story, a parable, that does not get told.
It is the parable of the Great Feast.
Presumably it is because in the year of Matthew's Gospel
we have this parable, and there is a pattern in the lectionary
of avoiding duplications from year to year.

It is too bad, because Luke's version of the parable
is not a duplication of Matthew's.
There are many differences, but among them is how the story ends.

In Luke's version, the host twice asks the servant
to go out and invite others to the feast.
The first time, the servant is sent to the streets and alleys of the city,
to invite the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame.

This is the same group just mentioned in the advice to the host.
It signals an expanded understanding of community
that would include the usually excluded.

But then, the servant is sent out again
to the highways and byways outside the city, in order to fill the hall.
In other words, the vision of community is widened once again.
Now it includes those outside the settlement,
outside the tribe, to involve all human beings.

My earlier question had to do with what these ancient passages
had to offer, and why should we care.
Perhaps the answer is self-explanatory.
    But at the least we can manage to get a glimpse
    of our own cultural assumptions
        by way of hearing from a text coming from outside that circle,
        our comfortable world.

It might be put another way.
This week other religious sisters besides Mother Teresa of Calcutta
    were in the news.

The Telegraph Herald did a series of pieces
on religious communities in the Dubuque area, as you know.
It was a welcome appreciation of what this area tends to take for granted
—the ways in which you have transformed this civic community.
    It is clear that you do not seek recognition for it,
    but on occasion it is important that it be given.
    Sometimes you need to be called to the higher places at the table.

Also, the *Witness*, the Archdiocesan weekly,
printed a piece by a newly-professed Trappestine.
    I first knew her as Janet Callawaert,
    a theology teacher at Clarke, and a colleague.
        Then she became Janet O'Meara, having married Mike.
        And now she is Sr. Anna Mary O'Meara, OCSO.

Not to be omitted, there was the disturbing account
of the two sisters murdered in Durant, Mississippi.
    One could not but think of the Franciscan work in Mississippi,
    and the sisters there now.

The two were nurse practitioners
    who worked where otherwise there would be no medical service,
    and where there now is none.
In their deaths, the work they were doing was made known to the world,
as the news media focused in on something they would ordinarily ignore.

My small thought is this.
That news stories present these dedicated woman
as a sign of contradiction to the values that drive our culture.
    Their dedication is one that is anchored in the gospel,
    this ancient witness that seems to uncontemporary.
        But their witness makes it contemporary,
        and it is shown to be all the more necessary today.

In effect, what is happening is not only
the care of a poor community in Mississippi,
or a slate of services for the Dubuque community,
but something larger and even more necessary.

Like a leaven doing its work quietly and unobtrusively,
but now brought out into public notice,
these lives of service are witnessing to gospel values
that challenge the values of our culture,
and have the promise of transforming it.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 4, 2016

Wisdom 9:113-18	Limits of human wisdom
Psalm 90:3-6, 12-17	Brevity of human life
Philemon 9-10, 12-17	A slave returned
Luke 14:25-33	A tower and a war

Today we hear about a slave that ran away to Paul in prison,
but whom he is sending back to its owner, Philemon,
a Christian and sponsor of the church in Colossae.

Paul doesn't seem to be confronting the institution of slavery,
but in fact he is forcing upon Philemon a difficult choice
—either he release the slave or discontinue being a Christian.
He leaves no middle ground.
In effect, there is no place for slavery in Christian freedom,
and eventually the church will figure that out.

In the gospel reading from Luke, we hear some sayings
about detachment from contrary influences in our lives.
Three times we hear Jesus giving an ultimatum
ending with the words, or else you "cannot be my disciple."
The first concerns family relations,
the second speaks of the cross,
and the third, possessions.

The first is difficult for us,
because it speaks of hating our family members.
But if we realize that the word hate is used here
without the emotional force we put on it today,
but rather in the simple sense
of rejecting one thing in favor of another.

We have seen this elsewhere in Luke. Just a couple of weeks ago
we were hearing about Jesus bringing divisions to the family.
Underlying this whole train of thought
is the nature of the discipleship of Jesus as a matter of choice,
of conversion, rather than simple a matter of family tradition
as prevailed elsewhere in the ancient world.
One chose to be a disciple. Or didn't. Just ask Philemon.

The second saying of Jesus spoke of carrying the cross,
and coming after him.
At the time of this writing, the cross was still being used by Rome
to intimidate and control the many populations it had conquered.

One commentator has this to say:
"While our cultural Christianity
has often extended the meaning of the cross
to include the pain of everyday life ("This is my cross to bear."),
the image had a very specific and terrifying meaning to Jesus' hearers
as the instrument of imperial torture and humiliating death. ...

"Jesus speaks not of being crucified as such,
but of "taking up" and "carrying" the cross,
i.e., being seen and known as someone
who has been marked as "dead" already to the way of empire."

The third saying of Jesus concerns possessions:
"anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions
cannot be my disciple."
The detachment from possessions says
that these will not control the decisions we make about our lives
and what we will do with them.
It is a matter of how we relate to the values of our culture,
and what we understand to be a life successfully lived.

In effect, then, Jesus has sketched out the life of the disciples
as social, as political, and as economic.
The call of discipleship reaches every dimension of our lives.
This has sometimes been called the "cost of discipleship."

Today Mother Teresa is being canonized a saint.
There is room here for a homily appreciating her
as the embodiment of the call and cost of discipleship.
But that phrase takes me in a different direction.

In our day, "the cost of discipleship" has been permanently linked
to a book by that name by the German pastor and theologian,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

As many of you know, Bonhoeffer was a brilliant theologian,
but more famous for being a leader
in the Christian opposition to the rise of the Nazis in Germany.
He saw early and clearly what was going on,
and made his opposition known.
He organized against it, and was eventually executed by them,
after it was clear that they were going to lose the war.

Bonheoffer stands among those
who represent prophetic warning before it is too late.

He stands against the slippery slope
that gradually slides into compliance, almost without realizing it.
Others of that day were the college students,
Sophie and Hans Scholl and their friends,
who called their anti-Nazi resistance movement the White Rose.

We look back upon that time as one that was unique,
never to be repeated again.
But that sense of being inoculated against a repetition of those events
is only as good as our vigilance against it.
Today many see a return of that threat in our politics.

In the gospel for today, Jesus lightens his heavy message
with a couple of parables.
One is about a tower, the other about a war.

Luke talks about towers elsewhere, most notably in Acts,
where he compares Pentecost to the tower of Babel
and the confusion of languages, now repaired.
He may be making that comparison here.

Towers are a way of making a statement, of staking a claim.
The tower that I think about today is promoted as the Trump Tower.
It has become as much a symbol as the others.

For many, Donald Trump is an object of ridicule.
Garrison Kiellor has taken that approach.
Many believe he has no chance of ever being elected.
That may be true.
But I believe it is still important to say clearly and out loud
that his candidacy is not only a bizarre turn in American political life,
but he is also an unprecedented threat.

Trump's background is business, not politics.
The business model is not democratic—anything but.
Transferred to the political arena,
the business model of boss and underlings is very close to fascism.
But that is what many long for, it appears
—someone to take control and put back into place
the world that many feel is disappearing.
This is the authoritarian urge that so many are leaning toward.
It has its attractions. Just ask Philemon.

It may be an overstatement, and oversimplifying,
to compare this possible future to the Nazi past,
and we certainly hope so.

But this comparison is repeatedly being made elsewhere
because it is so important not to return.

The points of comparison are many.
The notion of a strongman personally straightening things out,
rather than through the processes of democracy.
The threat of violence by way of a committed armed cadre
evoking the memory of "brown shirts."
The use of the media in glamorizing the movement,
and keeping the discussion from getting to substantive issues.

Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda,
said, "Think of the press as a great keyboard
on which the government can play."
He also said, "A lie told once remains a lie,
but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth."

And then, of course, there is the demagoguery of rallying behind
what one can only called a trumped-up call to alarm
about a segment of the population seen as alien and threatening.
Once it was Jews; now Muslims, Mexicans,
or anyone not of white European ancestry.

It would not be hard to make this list longer.
Maybe add a turn toward a taste for personal vendetta,
a fear of weakness and the feminine,
a style of slander and derogatory nicknames.
But one has to stop.

In all of this, I sense that I might be overstating the matter,
that I am being alarmist, overwrought.
And also, the feeling one shouldn't preach politics from the pulpit.
These are attitudes that I normally share.

But I do not believe that time is a normal electoral cycle.
And there is this sense of menace, of danger ahead.
So I am speaking in particular ways I normally do not.

Today we are reminded that St. Teresa of Calcutta
stood with the poor and the outcast.
We are reminded that our place is with the marginal,
not against them.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 18, 2016

Amos 8:4-7 A word to the merchants
Psalm 113:1-2, 4-8 The Lord lifts up the poor
1 Timothy 2:1-6 A prayer for authorities
Luke 16:1-13 (10-13) An all-too-clever manager

Reading Ched Myers on this parable we just heard,
I found myself thinking of the comic
at the top of the comics page in the TH,
the one called "Retail."

It features Marla, the manager of a store not unlike Target,
who is struggling to maintain her altruistic attitude,
and Cooper, stockroom manager, cynical but good-hearted,
and Stuart, the district manager who is a company man all the way,
and gives Marla flack and heartburn.

And, of course, there are the customers,
who always believe the customer is right,
even when the customer is spectacularly wrong.

In other words, I was thinking
of the problems of middle management in today's world.
How do you operate successfully, ethically, and honestly,
in a system that doesn't care,
and actually pressures you in the opposite direction?

I am partial to Ched Myers,
since he was the official reader that talked Orbis
into publishing my first book, *Nonviolent Story*.
He's a Mennonite who heads an organization in Oak View, CA,
called Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries.
And he frequently produces a reflection on the Sunday readings.

Since both the owner and Jesus himself commend the steward,
Myers believes that labeling him as the "Unjust" of "Dishonest" Steward,
as many Bible headings do, already is biased against him.
It adopts the moral logic of capitalism,
which takes the "side" of the boss while vilifying the steward.

Myers says: "I find a useful modern analogy to be a mid-level bureaucrat
in a large corporation who, just as he is about to be downsized
because of below-expected sales numbers, improvises
a desperate but ingenuous "fire sale" that ingratiates him to his clients."

Speaking of the steward, he says:
"These literate bureaucrats had a tenuous existence,
having to ensure exorbitant profits for the master
through merciless resource-extraction and labor exploitation,
    while at the same time maintaining working relations
    with peasant producers and competitive merchants. ...
        they were forever caught in the crossfire
        between the master's greed and excessive demands
        ...and the tenants' or debtors' endless complaints."

He feels this parable applies especially to us:
"This is where an analogy with modern middle-class, educated folks
broadly applies: we too are people who are privileged
    within yet subservient to an economic system
    that both benefits and victimizes us.
While most of Jesus' parables feature peasants as their subjects,
this story uniquely addresses *us*."

Which again made me think
of Marla and Cooper and Stuart, in the comic pages,
    struggling to operate successfully in a system
    that they did not design and does not value them.

The parable of Jesus was delivered in a world
dominated by the Roman imperial culture.
    It was a world in which land and wealth
    was concentrating more and more in the hands of a few,
        leaving peasants without land and instead working, if they could,
        for a large landowner—clients of a perhaps benevolent patron.

    Considering the amounts owed,
    the patron's estate in the parable must have been immense.

But the alternative to the social system of patron and client
was another, one that is promoted in the Bible,
in the Covenant provisions for the land.
    Each faithful Israelites "will sit,
    each under their own vine and under their own fig tree,
    and no one will make them afraid." (Micah 4:4).

This is an abiding vision of a society built on mutual help and cooperation,
    one that values the individual, is sometimes called community,
    and is often visualized as the interelated life of the village.

This communal vision lies just behind the parable of the ingenious steward.
The parable implies a ruthless system
in which the job of manager is a tenuous one.
This is the opposite extreme.
The charges against him were brought to the owner.

By whom? Doesn't say.
Some believe it suggests rivals, who wanted the manager's job.

He is dismissed summarily, without appeal.
He can be said to be using the goods
of the system of what the parable calls "unjust wealth"
in order to make a place for himself within that other social reality,
the village economy of mutual aid.

Wendall Berry speaks of the Two Economies.
One uses capital to build social relations.
The other sacrifices social relations to build capital.

The parable says that the two are incompatible.
"No servant can serve two masters.
He will either hate one and love the other,
or be devoted to one and despise the other.
You cannot serve both God and mammon."

It is our own dilemma in living faithfully in the world we are given.
It is a profit-oriented world that we did not choose,
and which will not change during our time here.
So it is a matter of how we deal with it.

I would put this awareness at the center of many of the efforts
of Religious Orders to make use of the properties and assets.
Even as they diminish in size,
they have this fund of resources at their disposal
that they are using carefully.

While caring for their aging population as a priority,
other initiatives such as ethically-selective investment policies,
resource management, housing programs, and so forth,
demonstrate a way of using dishonest wealth
in the service of true wealth.

Using the system against itself, in a sense.
Or, as Dorothy Day, quoting Peter Maurin, put it,
"building a new society in the shell of the old."

Furthermore, this reaches beyond the corridors
of the religious congregations, since it has the value of witness.
It shows those who are looking to live faithfully in a contrary world
a way forward.

And it confounds those
who have adopted the values of capital as their reality,
who find ethical investment policies, for example,
an outrageous insult to the logic of the profit motive,
of which they are so enamored.

This witness is important, because we all need ways
to learn how to live lives in which we value each other,
and the world in which we live.

We need examples of living as faithful disciples
in the world we are given.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 25, 2016

Amos 6:1, 4-7	Woe to the complacent leaders
Psalm 146:7-10	Blessed who secures justice
1 Timothy 6:11-16	Integrity demanded of a church leader
Luke 16:19-31	A rich man, a beggar Lazarus, and Abraham

Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins.
And when we hear Amos elaborate in detail
the menu and extravagance of the feasting of his time,
and then expect that they should be getting sick,
which sounds deadly,
we might think about gluttony.

When we hear about the rich man
who dressed in purple garments and fine linen
and dined sumptuously each day,
and then died and was buried,
it sounds like we might be dealing with one of the deadly sins.

However, I do not think gluttony is the main problem here.
Though I would not want to dismiss it as a possibility.

But when we look at the passage from Amos,
there is something omitted from the reading for today,
and that would be the group that the prophet is addressing.
When we look at the entire introduction, we read
"Woe to those who are complacent in Zion,
secure on the mount of Samaria,
Leaders of the first among nations,
to whom the people of Israel turn."

It is the leaders of the people that are addressed.
It is they who are enjoying these grand feasts, which Amos calls revelry.

And yet, he says, they are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph!
Joseph is not the name of the waiter who is bringing in the large platters,
causing him to collapse.
No, Joseph is a metaphorical name for the kingdom of Israel,
since the Joseph tribes were the main part of it.

In other words, the leaders are feasting
instead of maintaining the welfare of the nation.

Worse than that.

Amos is suggesting that the leaders
are consuming the wealth of the nation, rather than guarding it.
Amos sees something the leaders apparently do not,
namely, that the forces of the world power, Assyria,
are gathering in the distance, looking for territory to conquer.
Israel is on their list,
as it will find out in about fifteen years.

In other words, it is more than gluttony that has Amos's attention.
It is injustice.
It is the injustice of the leadership in the nation
neglecting the task entrusted to them,
preserving and enhancing the welfare of their people.

We might see something similar in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.
While the story doesn't say that the Rich Man ignored Lazarus,
it is notable that he singled out repentance
as something his brothers could use.
It suggests that he himself would have benefited from the same.

Repent from what?
Perhaps the fact that Lazarus was at his door everyday,
and still lacked something to eat
—perhaps that might be the issue.

But there is something more.
While the introduction to the Amos reading doesn't tell us
which group of people he is addressing,
it does describe them: Woe to the complacent.

It seems that Amos is as concerned about his inability
to get the attention of the elite class
as he is about their extravagant lifestyle.
He is as concerned about their inability
to see the consequences of what they are doing,
as he is about the deeds themselves.

And Jesus' parable takes a lot of time showing the Rich Man
in earnest dialogue with Abraham,
specifically on the topic of complacency
—something that he would like his brothers to overcome,
and something from which he himself presumably suffered.

His big problem is finding a way to get their attention.
Sending Lazarus doesn't sound too promising,
even if it could be possible,
given the ability the Rich Man himself had for ignoring him.

And even the revealed word,
the biblical message of Moses and the prophets, would not be enough.
And this presumably would include the writings of Amos, as heard today.

That doesn't sound promising either,
since they have so far spent a lifetime ignoring those very warnings.

So there we have it. Gluttony, yes.
But more than that, the malfeasance
of the unjust abuse of one's duty in a position of authority.
And thirdly, the difficulty of getting the attention of those
who are settled in the manner of life
that has become second nature to them.

The Rich Man and his brothers, like the elite of Israel in Amos's day,
find it hard to alter the lifestyle to which they are accustomed,
even when annoying persons, or circumstances,
rise up to demand their attention.

Which brings us to today. What about us?
Are there any looming issues today that we are blithely ignoring?
Is there anything on the horizon
that threatens to interrupt our familiar lifestyles?

Oh Yes. There is that looming cloud we now call "climate change."
And used to call "global warming,"
until people starting throwing snowballs
on the floor of the House of Representatives
in order to protest the idea of warming as absurd.

Tuesday, the Telegraph Herald carried a story
reporting that the earth has now recorded
the 16th consecutive month of record-breaking heat.

Friday, when the Franciscan Sister Water project sent 12 new volunteers
to dig a trench for a water pipeline in Honduras,
where safe drinking water is a desperate need,
I was thinking about the floods in Iowa.

Half the bridges are closed in my hometown of Waterloo.
My niece's husband, Scott, is now manager of NewBo Market in Cedar Rapids,
having taken the job a year or two ago.
Right now he is organizing volunteers to sandbag this part of the city,
with dire memories of the floods of 2008.

Not enough water in one place; too much in another.

This is the part of the homily where I bring in Pope Francis.
As you know, he has issued an encyclical called Laudato Si',
where he outlines the Christian and Catholic faith response
to environmental issues.

At the beginning of the 6th chapter, beginning with Paragraph 203,
he speaks to the matter of a "new lifestyle."

He mentions something he calls "Compulsive consumerism."
He notes how the market promotes it as a way of promoting its products.
He calls it a "whirlwind of needless buying and spending."

He notes that this "leads people to believe that they are free
as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume."
But they are not really free.

He notes that in our postmodern age
we have not reached a new self-awareness that offers us good guidance,
and that this lack of identity is a source of anxiety.
We have too many means, and too few real ends
toward which to devote them.
That is, we have the capability to do so much,
and yet we have so little idea what to do.

Then he traces a pattern.
"The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty,
which in turn becomes "a seedbed for collective selfishness".
When people become self-centred and self-enclosed, their greed increases.
The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things
to buy, own and consume." Sounds familiar.

But he does not stop there. He adds, "Yet all is not lost."
A change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear
on those who wield political, economic and social power."

He implies that a certain like of lifestyle,
whether because of a vow of poverty,
or because of a need for simplifying one's life,
or because one wishes to reduce his or her carbon footprint,
can bring about change.

And it certainly is a place to begin.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 2, 2016

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4	The Just, through faith, will live
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9	Sing joyfully to the Lord
2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14	Advice to a church leader
Luke 17:5-10	Faith the size of a mustard seed

Sometimes our official liturgical prayer seems little more
than theological poetry, or metaphysical wordplay.
As when we say things like
"Satan, who conquered through a tree, might on a tree be overcome,"
or "transform all our fear into faith and awe."

Compare for instance the prayer in the psalms, or the prophets.
Take Habakkuk today:
"How long, O LORD? I cry for help, but you do not listen!"

Now that's prayer.

I think we can understand his need, and frustration
about the injustice that runs rampant through the land,
and yet God does nothing obvious about it.
Even, it seems, at times seems to allow the worst to happen.

Why make so hard to be a believer
in a God who values social justice,
and to make that case publicly in faith action?
Doesn't Habakkuk pain speak for us today?

We have followed the travails of Amos in the past weeks.
As he warned, the crisis came,
and Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel,
leaving the southern realm of Judah by itself.
Now Assyria itself fades from the scene,
and Habakkuk laments that they still haven't learned their lesson.
The very things Amos lamented continue to happen.

Habakkuk's message is in the form of a dialogue
between the prophet and God.
The liturgy includes only Habakkuk's original outcry,
and God's final answer. There is more.

After the prophet makes his outcry, wondering why God doesn't act,
he gets his response.

God is sending the Babylonian army to conquer Judah.

That doesn't calm the prophet at all, since the Babylonians
are more ruthless and cruel than the Assyrians.
The cure is worse than the disease.
And his response to God points that out.

And then we have God's answer, as today:
"The just one, because of his faith, shall live."
In effect, God is saying, "Trust me. The faithful will survive."

In the case of Judea, this turned out to be true.
When the crisis came,
and the city of Jerusalem and its temple were brought down,
the elites were carried off into exile,
and the villages and local communities of faithful Israelites were spared.

One option that in some circles is being proposed for today's church
is discussed in the current *Commonweal Magazine*,
in an article by Gerald Schlabach,
on the theology faculty of St Thomas, in St Paul.
This is called the "Benedict Option."

As Schlabach notes,
"The basic proposition is this:
American society has become so antagonistic toward Christian values
that faithful Christians should turn their primary attention
away from the public square,
with its fruitless policy debates and doomed culture wars,
and instead focus on building local communities,
sheltered from the hopelessly fallen larger culture,
where Christian values and practices may survive."

While this began in conservative Catholic circles,
it has won some advocates on the left as well.
The issue of concern is radical witness.

So often I see in the social media the demand
that religion get out of the public arena and leave people alone.

But where does this leave the witness for social justice?
Isn't that part of Christian fidelity to the mission as well?

So against this we can quote an article in the current *Sojourners*,
by Stephen Mattson:
"Jesus wasn't *just* preaching a universal salvation message for the world,
but he was also addressing specific political, social, and racial issues.
He was helping those who were being abused, violated, and oppressed."

"Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, "Samaritan lives matter."
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, "Children's lives matter."
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, "Gentile lives matter."
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, "Jewish lives matter."
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, "Women's lives matter."
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, "Lepers' lives matter."

Mattson has a point.
But that doesn't entirely solve our Habakkuk problem.
We are told that the faithful will survive.
But if we are not simply to pull away from the world, like the Amish,
how do we continue to act in the public arena as faithful persons?

In this regard, it seems to be that the Gospel for today
continues the dialogue that Habakkuk began.
After their exchange, God concluded it by saying, "Have faith."
And so Luke shows the Apostles saying,
"Lord, increase our faith!"

But Jesus' answer doesn't seem to be much more satisfying
than that given to Habakkuk.
His example of the mustard seed may be intended
to reassure them and us that it is not negligible,
that it is more of a power than we suspect.
Fair enough. We can use this reminder.

But then the parable about the servant throws us.
It seems anything but Christian
to tell the servant to do his job and eat later, while we eat.

But here we are running afoul of cultural differences of time and place
—20 centuries of time and a place on the other side of the world.
It has to do with the distinction of roles.

Perhaps a rough equivalent for us would be going out to eat.
We would not expect the server to sit down and eat with us.
Nor the kitchen help.

Okay, it is rough. But the point is that Jesus
is telling the disciples that they are servers.
That is the role of the Christian, and they should live it.
Do their job and not be anxious.

At this point, I am going to bring in someone
who has been standing on the sidelines all along.

I am talking about St. Paul.

Not so much the second letter to Timothy,
which was written much later, by one of his followers in his name.
Rather I am thinking about his major letters,
that deal with the central insight of his teaching,
namely, the place of faith in the life of the Christian.

It is worth noting that the prophet Habakkuk
is quoted only a couple of times in the New Testament,
and these citations, from today's reading, would be by Paul,
as his key statement about faith, in Romans and Galatians.

Furthermore, the parable of Jesus about the server
sounds much like the teaching of Paul.

And what is that teaching?
In technical language, that it is not by works that we are saved,
but by faith.

In more ordinary language, that we are never in a position
to earn God's good graces, but that it is not necessary,
since God has already promoted us as a free gift.

In short, God loves us, and has brought us into his circle.
What we are expected to do in response is continue what needs to be done.
Not only live a honest, authentic life,
but to work toward justice and peace in our world.
Not because it looks good, and will get us special benefits,
but simply because it needs to be done, for God's sake.

If we do what needs to be done, then we need not worry about injustices,
and our inability to see that what we do makes any difference.
It does make a difference, whether we can see it or not.

And although we are tempted to wonder if God is good,
given the state of things in the world,
or even if God is around at all,
the gift of faith says Yes.

And allows us to be agents of the justice
that witnesses that there is a world that God wants,
and wants us to bring about.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 9, 2016

2 Kings 5:14-17	Naaman is cured of leprosy
Psalm 98:1-4	The ends of the earth have seen
2 Timothy 2:8-13	The word of God unchained
Luke 17:11-19	Ten lepers, on the way to Jerusalem

Most of the summer, and well into the fall,
we've been on the road with Jesus and his disciples,
traveling toward Jerusalem.
Most of the time we have heard Jesus debating with the Pharisees
or instructing his disciples.
Then there were the times that someone from the crowd
asked him to settle a dispute.

But now we interrupt the discussions
with a story about the healing of ten lepers.
We turn from talk to action.

It is a familiar story.
Nine of the lepers were Jewish, and one was a Samaritan.
Only the "foreigner" returned to give thanks, and thank God.

And in the first reading, we hear about Naaman the leper.
This is not an arbitrary choice on the part of the lectionary editors.
Luke himself reports earlier in the gospel
about Jesus beginning his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth,
when he read from the scroll of Isaiah.

At that time he warned his neighbors
that he would turn toward other communities,
like Elijah, who assisted a foreign widow,
and like his successor, Elisha,
who cured Naaman the Syrian of leprosy.

The stories today have four distinctive traits.
They involve leprosy, they include foreigners,
there is a sense of threat—at least with Naaman—
and they involve thanksgiving, finding an expression in worship.

First, they involve leprosy.
This doesn't seem to be the same
as what we today call leprosy, or Hansen's disease.
Medical anthropologists have a found few cases in ancient Egypt,
but none in Israel.

It appears that what the bible calls leprosy
is a collection of various skin problems.
    It is not clear that they were all contagious, either.
    What they seem to have in common
    is that they were disfiguring, or strange looking.

In any case, lacking modern medical science,
the ancients were not aware of contagion,
which is a property of disease.
    Rather, they were concerned about contamination,
    which is a symbolic corruption of social integrity of purity.

It is not too much to say that the leper symbolized
the constant threat that all societies were prey to
—that unknown internal forces may cause them to collapse.
    And so constant vigilance was necessary
    to monitor the make-up of society.
    Treatment of the lepers demonstrated that vigilance.

All societies have their lepers,
though they come in different versions.
    From the beginning, for Americans, that has meant
    the marginalizing of persons of color.

It would seem that like leprosy, color is only skin deep.
And yet it has allowed us to target an entire class of citizens.
    It began in slavery, persists today.
    Most recently, political tensions in this election cycle
    have sharpened the edges of division.

Second, the stories today include foreigners.
The foreigner is a special concern for Luke,
    who is writing his gospel, along with Acts of the Apostles,
    as a revelation of God's project of reaching out
    beyond Judaism, to the Gentiles.

The word Jesus uses regarding the Samaritan, this "foreigner,"
appears only here in the New Testament.
    It does, however, appear in Greek Old Testament,
    in the passage from Isaiah 56,
        that Jesus cites when he cleanses the temple,
        announcing that it is to be a house for all peoples.

What this passage reminds us is that the foreigner,
like the leper, was considered unclean.

The leper was forbidden from entering the community,
the foreigner was barred from the temple.
Until Jesus arrived.

In this story, the Samaritan represents all of Luke's foreigners.
Samaria was a neighbor of Judea,
and stood between it and Galilee to the north.
Sometimes animosity grows between neighbors.

The concern about foreign influence is common among nations.
National character and identity are important,
and threats to those are easily perceived.
National societies typically express that anxiety
in discomfort with unfamiliar customs,
especially people who conspicuously represent a different national origin.

I do not need to tell you that in the political climate today
this distrust is a smoldering fire that has been fanned into flames.
Our neighbors to the south, in Mexico, receive most of that suspicion.

Alan Riding begins his book,
Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans, with the sentence,
"Probably nowhere in the world do two countries
as different as Mexico and the United States live side by side."
And the differences are seldom to the advantage of the Mexicans.

The third distinctive trait of today's scripture readings
is the undercurrent of threat.
We might especially see this in the story of Naaman the Syrian.
Naaman was not only a foreigner,
but he was also the military commander of Damascus.
And this was at a time when Israel was at war with Damascus, no less.

Syria is still in the news.
It is still in a state of war, this time civil war.
We know that it is a bloodbath right now,
with families desperately attempting to flee the country,
commonly encountering disaster
when crossing the Mediterranean in ramshackle boats.

And we also know that they are not welcome here.
Currently, in the present political climate,
we are invited to reject the victims of terrorism
by suggesting that they may harbor terrorists among them.
We have a label we use—radical Islamism.

But there is also a fourth theme in the scripture message for today.
The stories end with a need to express thanksgiving,
    along with a turn toward a new appreciation
    of God's work in their lives.

Thanksgiving is a redeeming human trait.
Against the harsher sides of our nature,
the many ways we can hurt and diminish each other,
    there is this softening, this civilizing side,
    which prompts us to give credit where credit is due.

In acknowledging the gifts we are given,
we also put on record that we are capable of giving gifts.
    We can be human toward one another.

And in the stories today, it is the other,
the stranger, the one not like us, who is giving thanks.
    It shows us that they are as human as we are.
    They are as generous and kind as we like to think that we are.
    We are one family, it seems.

But this impulse does not stop there, but moves on to thanking God.
Naaman shares the Bronze Age belief
that each god was attached to a land, was the spirit of that land.
    And so he took some Israelite dirt home with him
    to make a shrine to Yahweh God.

He has yet to learn that Yahweh is not tied to a land.
When the covenant was sealed on Mt Sinai, Israel did not have a land,
    and Yahweh God promised to find them one.
    He is not tied to a single land.

And the Samaritan already believed in the Lord God of Israel,
but was not a part of Israel, and they knew it
and blamed the Samaritans for it.

We believe there is only one God.
    But we sometimes act like this is not the case.
    When we say your God is not the true God, maybe it is ours that is not.

Just as we are one family, we worship one God.
    But we struggle to find the common ground
    that shows this to be true.

One day we may learn to be one people under God.

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 16, 2016

Exodus 17:8-13	Moses vs. the Amalekites
Psalm 121:1-8	I lift my eyes to the mountains
2 Timothy 3:14—4:2	All scripture is inspired by God
Luke 18:1-8	A persistent widow

Sometimes one wonders if Jesus had a sense of humor.
This is a difficult question to answer,
since styles of humor translate so poorly between cultures.
    However, I think that today's story
    of the widow and the judge might qualify.

The powerful judge fearing for his safety against a poor widow
has a certain incongruity that must have amused his listeners.

This would seem be true especially when you consider
the background of the traditional role of these two.
    The widow was the personification of the vulnerable in the land,
    mentioned over and over in the prophetic writings
        as representing the type of person most likely to be exploited
        by the ruthless and greedy.

The judge was the one who represented justice in the land.
The judge was the instrument of God's justice
in maintaining an equitable social environment among the people.
    Time and again, the prophets would show God insisting
    on justice for the widow and the orphan.

Jesus shows the conditions flipped.
    The judge is not just; the widow is not weak.
    And the widow prevails.

Our takeaway from these readings,
including that of Moses and Amalek,
    is that they are about persistence in prayer.

But did you notice that prayer is only mentioned once,
at the beginning of the gospel.
    What is constantly emphasized, however, is persistence.
    Persistence in pursuing God's agenda.

This has caused some to see in this story a call
for persistence in acting for justice.

Ched Myers writes,
"Faith is here identified with determined advocacy for justice.
And this sort of faith is all too scarce in our communities
—so much so that Jesus wonders aloud,
'when the Human One comes, will he encounter faith on earth?'"

This call for justice and the contrast of the widow and judge
bring me to think about a matter
that has dominated the news cycle this week.
I am talking about the shameful level of discourse
that the presidential campaign has reached.

I have had my say about the Republican candidate,
and do not wish to continue that conversation.

But I do find it necessary to say something
about the state of American culture
that this week's events have opened to view.

What is sometimes dramatically termed the rape culture
has been placed on public view.
And one of the things that it has done
is to place the issue of women's rights and the role of women
prominently on the national agenda.

More pertinently, the role of men,
and the tradition behind that in our culture, needs to be addressed.
For that is much of the impulse behind the call
to "make America great again."

And here I would like to place another story
alongside that of today's Gospel.
This story is not just any story.
This story is one of the foundational stories of our culture.

I am speaking of Homer's epic, the Iliad.
It stands at the ground story of Greco-Roman culture,
alongside the Judeo-Christian.

When we look at this story with modern eyes, what do we see?
A contest among men.
One is reminded of gang wars.

The story opens in the ninth year of the war against Troy.
Things are not going well, with a plague circling through the Greek camps.

Investigation shows that the Greek leaders, each of whom
has a so-called “war prize” of a young women gained in a recent conflict,
are the source of the problem.

Agamemnon is the first among equals
in the coalition of Greek armies at Troy.
    It turns out that his young woman is the daughter of a priest of Apollo,
    who wants her back.
    Rebuffed, he arranges for Apollo to send a plague.

At this point, the other Greek leaders insist
that for the good of the whole, Agamemnon send her home.
    He refuses, for it would cause him to lose face.
    Achilles, the great hero, insists. Agamemnon, stung by this,
    vows this will happen only if he be given Achilles young woman instead.

They all agree,
Agamemnon hands his girl back, Achilles loses his,
    and goes to his tent to sulk.

Most of the rest of the epic involves trying to get Achilles,
who is crucial to their success, out of his tent
    so they can get this war over and go home.

It is impossible not to notice that this is a contest among the men,
who are the only players in the game.
    The women are in the story only as pawns in the game.

The story is about war,
and its status as one of our foundational stories
    suggests to us that this is the normal state of affairs,
    with its setting as a competition among men.
Violence is the norm of the day. Challenge and counter-challenge
is the standard for behavior in a contest of honor.

This leads to three thoughts
concerning the present situation in our culture
    —I am going to limit it to three.

First, men are the only players.
I look at the attacks on Bill Clinton, and I wonder why.
    As people keep saying, it is Hillary who is running for president.
    But in the old cultural paradigm, the contest is among males,
    and the women are not players in the game.
It is as if Hillary is a distraction from the contest
that the cultural paradigm requires among the men.

Second, the creepy way in which intimidation is employed
by suggestion, implied threat, and body language appears to be
    a way in which to insist that strength and violence
    are the rules of the game, and women had better not get in the way.
        Women are not persons, but objects in the game.

Third, the theme that has cropped up on social media sites:
Are women people?
    This refers to the old theme that women
    are only validated by their connections with men.
Even when those who are disgusted with the tone of the remarks
and actions frame it in terms of caring for their wives and daughters
are still following the pattern.
    The women have value in terms of their men.

I would like to suggest that Jesus stands opposed to this.
Already in the Jewish tradition
    we have a special concern for the vulnerable.
    But here too the vulnerable are typified by the woman without a man.

But the women Jesus talks about,
the woman who will not back off,
    the woman who touches his cloak,
    the woman who argues with him about the propriety
    of a Gentile seeking help
—these persistent women are said to be saved by their "faith."

Here faith is not accepting what is given them.
    It is just the opposite.
    It is refusing to accept the conditions given them.

We have two stories vying for our allegiance.
The Iliad and the Gospel.

My objective is not to justify the gospel for women,
but to insist that the justice claims to full humanity for women
is supported by the Gospel.
    It is the widow pursuing her proper claims
    against the unjust judge.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 23, 2016

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18	A God of Justice
Psalm 34:2-3, 17-19, 23	Hears the cry of the poor
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18	Poured out like a libation
Luke 18:9-14	Two went to the temple to pray

Two things are being compared today. But what are they?
At the level of the parable it is a Pharisee and a Tax Collector.

The Pharisee is described as one who is confident of his own righteousness,
while the Tax Collector simply prays,
'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

He seems overwhelmed by his fallibility and frailty
in the presence of the Creator God, Lord of heaven and earth.

So maybe it is a contrast between Certainty and Mystery.
On the one side is the confidence
that comes from having a set of rules and keeping them.
On the other side is the uncomfortable self-understanding
that comes with experience.

And what does that mean for being Catholic today?
Perhaps a clue can be seen in the call made this week
by Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia
for a smaller church of holier Catholics, as reported by the NCR.
We can see here a continuation of Pope Benedict's call
for a smaller, purer Church.
We can understand the need for a strong faith commitment.

And on the other hand, we have Benedict's successor, Pope Francis,
who identified himself as a sinner.
Not unlike the Tax Collector today.
Pope Francis, who recently named new Cardinals,
not including Archibishop Chaput, for the purpose, it is said,
of moving beyond the culture wars.

Or maybe the comparison today is between Virtue and Compassion.
The Pharisee today spells out one program for life.
The reading from Sirach set out another.
There we hear about the cry of the poor:
The Lord hears the cry of the oppressed.
He is not deaf to the wail of the orphan,
nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint.

Two models of holiness are set before us.
One is focused on purity, and maintaining a virtuous life.
In the pursuit of holiness as purity,
I try to keep myself from entering into sin.
It is generally marked by avoiding certain practices or occasions
that would compromise my state.

But another model of holiness is compassion,
I am concerned about the needs of those I encounter,
and am moved to address them.
Instead of avoidance, I am moved to risk some dangers and occasions
if it means achieving some good.

Or maybe the comparison today
is between two ways of being morally good.
In Moral Theology these two have impossible titles
—one is called Deontology and the other is Teleology.

But these can be translated.
The first, Deontology, is concerned about doing what is Right.
If you do what is the right thing to do,
then you needn't worry about the consequences.
You have done the right thing.

Teleology, on the other hand, is concerned about achieving the Good.
It is focused on results.
The Teleologist feels that my responsibility
is to bring about good in the world,
and getting concerned about maintaining my own virtue
can get in the way of this.

The first risks allowing evil to happen while I maintain my own virtue.
This seems to turn virtue into selfishness.
The second risks making the end justify the means,
if I do not have something that tells me
this set of means is the right one and that is not.

Two positions in sharp contrast.
Both have advocates who are sincere.
In these weeks, Catholics are feeling the division, as elections draw near.

And here I would like to quote a young friend, a Moral Theologian,
who has been posting some clarifying thoughts online.
I think it is helpful to all of us in these times.

Matt Shadle used to teach at Loras, and is now in Virginia.
He has been answering questions online.
Here is one, with his answer.

Q: *Matthew, answer 1 question for me. Being Catholic, how can you possibly vote for someone is Pro Choice, which allows babies to be killed by abortion, among other things? We all know this is against our faith.*

A: Because the US Catholic bishops teach that "There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act [like abortion] may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons." …

… the Catholic Church also teaches many other things, like:
- We should protect the environment, and work with other nations to combat climate change
- We should be welcoming to immigrants and refugees
- We should support unions and protect the rights of workers
- We should have strong government programs that benefit the poor
- We should cooperate with our allies to promote peace and reduce the spread of nuclear weapons
- We should regulate the sale of guns to help reduce violence
- We should never use torture or intentionally bomb civilians during war
- We should work against racism and its social effects, for example on economic inequality and criminal justice
- We should promote the religious liberty of all people, and not discriminate against people based on their religion

Recently, Matt talked at a parish in Virginia.
He posted that for the first time in his experience he was heckled.
It might be because of remarks like this,
with which he concluded the posting quoted above:

Hillary Clinton supports all of these things and Donald Trump does not.
Aside from abortion, Clinton has the far more Catholic positions,
and Trump is lying about abortion anyway, as I already pointed out.

My own intent with these remarks
is not to recommend one candidate over another,
but mainly to remove the false implication that Catholics
are not allowed to vote for a Democratic candidate for President.

To allow that false impression to stand
seems to me to be an abuse of Catholic teaching,
    though admittedly such an opinion is probably produced
    by a strong moral feeling,
    and is not something to be make fun of.

Nevertheless, my own reading of the Gospel, as in the parable today,
causes me to lean more toward Mystery than Certainty,
    more toward Compassion than Purity,
    more toward Repentance than Rules,
    more toward doing the Good than being in the Right.

However, this was not always where I stood,
and so I understand that there are those who disagree.
    However, it is true. We disagree.

But knowing that I have changed my own views
makes me reluctant to say
that those who disagree with me are bad people.

We witness to different truths.

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 30, 2016

Wisdom 11:22—12:2	The universe as a grain of sand
Psalm 145:1-2, 8-11, 13, 14	All your works give you thanks
2 Thessalonians 1:11—2:2	Ignore false reports of the end
Luke 19:1-10	Zacchaeus, a short tax-collector

Last week we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.
The Pharisee had all the lines.
The Tax Collector simply beat his breast and said,
"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."
But this week we have another Tax Collector,
and this time he gets all the lines.

We are familiar with the story of Zacchaeus,
the short person who climbed a tree in order to see Jesus.
So what is his story telling us?
It might be seen as dissecting the act of repentance
for our own benefit.

Here are some thoughts, under three things in the story
that begin with "T"
—the tax-collector, the tree, and the word, "today."

First, the **T**ax-collector.
Who was he, and why are the gospels so hard on these people?

Here is some information from Ched Myers:

> The tax collectors referred to in the New Testament were local Judeans employed to do "tax farming." They were employed directly by the Roman government to extract taxes, customs or tolls on land, products and persons. In this system the authorities received their money up front, and the tax farmer charged commissions on what he then collected.
>
> It's not hard to see how such an arrangement would be ripe for extortion and graft. Because of their position as agents of Rome, and their exploitation of their own people, publicans were socially rejected, religiously excommunicated and viewed as political traitors. The *chief* tax collector would have been the *most* rapacious and thus the *most* despised.
>
> Zacchaeus, as chief tax collector for the Judean frontier, strategically headquartered his operation in Jericho, a center for trade and port of entry for all traffic crossing the Jordan from the east (the river ford five miles east was one of only three points between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea at which the river could be crossed).

This might be put another way.
Considered in terms of the common good,
we can contrast the work of the tax collectors with that of Jesus.

The people of the land were under stress because of social changes
that were in large part introduced by the occupation of the Romans,
along with other new influences.

Land that had belonged to local peasants
was taken over for large estates to feed the new cities.
Jesus is shown traveling around healing
and helping the villages to renew themselves.

But where Jesus was renewing, the tax agents were exploiting.
Their work against the common good
was why they had the public reputation of being sinners.

Then there is the **T**ree.
We all know why Zacchaeus was up in the tree.
He was short and he wanted to see,
so he positioned himself above the crowd.
Of course, another option would be to plant himself
in the front row of the crowd.

But that would not do. He wasn't one of the crowd.
He was the chief tax-collector. He was above that.
And so he went up the tree,
where he was literally above the crowd.

Zacchaeus keeps his distance.
In fact, the story plays upon the manipulation of distances, far and near.
Suddenly, the distance is closed, as Jesus calls him out.
"Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house."

Jesus knows his name, and uses it.
Suddenly, the distance maintained
by the remote and disengaged observer is closed,
as the personal address shrinks the story
to just two people: Jesus and Zacchaeus.

And Zacchaeus responds.
Here we might compare him to another person in the gospel,
a comparison to which Luke draws our attention
by calling them both an *archon*, a "ruler."
This other is the one we usually think of as the Rich Young Man.

There too we have a Call Story,
but it fails, for the Rich Man had many possessions,
and he discovered that he couldn't part with them,
and so he didn't follow Jesus.

In contrast, Zacchaeus is enthusiastically repenting,
according to some rules in the Old Testament
which we will not go into here.
What we see is that his life is changed.

And that brings us to the third item, the word "**T**oday."
It shows up twice in the story, each time on the lips of Jesus:

First, when Jesus calls him out, as I just quoted,
"Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for *today* I must stay at your house."
Then, at the end of the story, when Jesus adds the lesson learned:
"*Today* salvation has come to this house…"
"Today" is when Zacchaeus's life changed.
Along with his household.

Let's think a moment about this word, "Today."
Notice what it is not. It is not "Never." As in "Not on the calendar."
This describes the person for whom change is just simply not an option.
It will never happen.

Today is also not Someday.
Someday keeps it as an option, but just barely.
Someday is not the same as Never, but it is close.
Because Someday is very low on the list of priorities.
In fact, everything else is first.

Today also is not Tomorrow.
Tomorrow is closer to Someday, but as they say,
"Tomorrow never comes."
But Tomorrow at least means I hope to do it,
just not now, not yet.

But Today says it is here. It is now.
No more time to talk about options or priorities.
The time has come.
In fact, change always happens Today,
and never Someday or Tomorrow.

And so Zacchaeus repents.
The distance closes. The time arrives.

And he responds.

Of course, this story is told just for our enjoyment.
It is a surrogate.
The calling out of Zacchaeus is proxy
for our own predicament in present moment of our life.

We are to imagine that we are named Zacchaeus.
Or, perhaps better, that it is our name
that is being called in the story.

There is a way in which it cannot go unnoticed when we hear our name,
whether on the loud speaker or in a conversation nearby.
We are invited to imagine that happening.
Today.

And only you know why.

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 6, 2016

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14	Seven sons and resurrection
Psalm 17:1, 5-6, 8, 15	I shall behold your face
2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5	Encourage your hearts
Luke 20:27-38	Seven brothers and resurrection

As we gather to celebrate those of our family and friends
who have lived and loved, and moved on,
we find the Scriptures for today speak of resurrection.

The first reading, from the book of Maccabees,
comes from a difficult time in the history of Judea, the crisis of 165 B.C.

Under the control of a foreign emperor,
a Hellenist who was pushing them toward accepting Greek culture,
even to the extent of trying to turn the temple of Jerusalem
into a shrine for Zeus, the Judeans resisted.

Judas Maccabeus and his father and brothers revolted.
They eventually won the day and rededicated the temple
in the feast we call Hanukkah.
But they were indeed difficult times.

The account of the seven brothers has some folklore elements to it.
You can be sure anytime things happen seven times
that story time is here.

But beyond that, we can see that today's story
expresses their deep feeling that their way of life was under threat.

Being forced to eat pork was against the tradition and faith,
and the seven brothers and their mother resisted,
preferring death to dishonor,
and knowing that they will live on triumphant.

With the Gospel we turn from the Maccabees to the Sadducees,
some 200 years later, give or take a few months.
These were the high priest party in the days of Jesus.
They held to the old ways,
against the newfangled ideas of the Pharisees,
who believed in resurrection.

The Sadducees rejected that in favor of the law they quote today.
It is called the Levirate law, and, lacking a belief in afterlife,
it looked to immortality in the family name and tradition.

We still believe that today, I think.
In my family, after my five nieces came into the world,
a nephew finally arrived.
My Grandfather Beck was pleased
to have someone carry on the family name.

In today's story, Jesus takes the side of the new, rather than the old,
like the Maccabees and the Sadducees.
He is mocked for abandoning the old ways,
but he responds with his own appeal to the tradition.

God's words to Moses from the burning bush indicates
he is God of the living, and not the God of the living and the dead.
The ancestors are not dead, but living.

Jesus is endorsing the Pharisee belief in the resurrection of the body,
and in so doing, he is celebrating the value of the individual,
as well as the family.
He is telling them that All Lives Matter.

The Sadducees, who represented the wealth and elite classes
were not clear about that. But Jesus was.
He opposed the view that some lives,
some classes of people, were disposable.

Among those lives that he championed, I think,
were those of women.

The farcical story the Sadducees proposed to him
reflected a view in which the needs of the men were valued,
while the woman was a means to achieve their immortality.
But Jesus says that all lives matter.
Individual lives matter.
Including that of the woman in the story.

It should be noted that Jesus has something in common
with the five brothers in the first story.
This is the final week of his life.

We have been traveling with him on the road to Jerusalem
since last June.

Now we have arrived,
and his opponents are trying to trap him in his speech,
in order to have something to bring against him.

They are not proving successful,
and will have to try another approach.
Which they will.

In the meantime, we witness the success of his life
and the failure of those who would end it,
by hearing about resurrection.
Resurrection will prevail in the final chapters of the gospel.
God is a God of the living.

And so we today remember those who have died, but are living.
In a way, we are celebrating both sides of the gospel debate.
We are honoring families.
And we are celebrating individual family members and friends.
They are present to us today.
They are present to us now.

These last few days we have seen a vivid example
of how departed friends and family remain with us,
still alive and participating in our lives.

I am referring, of course, to the remarkable behavior
of many Cubs fans during the World Series.
Especially during the final game.

People remembered those
who had longed to see this day, and never did.
People brought their grandfathers, by proxy as it were,
to witness the event they never saw in their lifetimes.

T-shirts and signs brought former announcers
and prominent fans back to the event.
In one extraordinary case,
a person took his cellphone to his father's grave,
so both of them could hear the game together.

Today we celebrate the supper of the Risen and Living Christ.
And with him, those who lives we celebrate today.
And they are with us, as we are with one another.
For God is a God of the living.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 13, 2016

Malachi 3:19-20	Lo, a day is coming
Psalm 98: 5-9	He comes to rule the earth
2 Thessalonians 3:7-12	Work while waiting
Luke 21:5-19	When will this happen?

Yesterday, an old friend of mine posted this on Facebook:

"I don't necessarily intend to sound apocalyptic,
but when I was young and in college in the early 1970s,
I was fairly certain that the world would not survive until the 21st Century.
I even thought about never having children
because of the imminent, ultimate disaster awaiting us.
I was certain that there would be a massive nuclear war and that would be it.

… So, I was pretty surprised that we made it into the century
without annihilating the world and all of its life forms and sentient beings.
I think that I'm coming to realize that the apocalypse can take many forms:
endless war, environmental degradation, the failure of the Fourth Estate,
the curtailment of rights and liberties
that so many fought for for decades, even centuries,
the end of democracy brought about by ignorance
and the conflation of democracy with capitalism,
the election of a demagogue as the leader of the free world.
How's that for irony? God, I hope that I'm wrong."

Kathleen married, had children, and is now a grandmother.
She is no longer a churchgoer,
so I expect she is not aware how her words connect with the scriptures
here at the end of the church year.

Today there a signs in the heavens.
I read that the full moon tonight looms larger than it has since I was a child.

One thinks of the lines from W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming":
"The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."

And there are worries about the end times.
Kathleen's concern the new administration, of course.
There are promises to end the Environmental Protection Agency,
at probably the worst time to do so,
as the steps we make in the next few years are crucial.
We do not need a climate denier in charge.

Health care is at risk.
Tacit permission has been given for thugs
to commit violent acts against vulnerable people.
Mob protests are happening daily in our larger cities,
as if daring a violent suppression.
An administrative formation team is involved in in-fighting,
apparently recycling their inability to organize a coherent campaign operation.

I have been through many election cycles,
and know how disappointment and sadness can overwhelm the losing side.
But this is the first time that I have seen naked fear
as the overriding emotion among the losers.

And so it is that we come to the apocalyptic words of today's scripture readings.
Malachi speaks of fire,
a fire that will be a burning field of rubble for the wicked,
but the sun of justice for the faithful.

Luke is writing about dire happenings to come.
And we are entitled to make his warnings to heart.

But here is the thing:
when we look closer at his words, and those of Paul today,
we see something else entirely.
The readings are not about the coming of the end,
but rather about the end not coming! At least not right away.

Luke is reworking the words of Mark. In his 13th chapter,
Mark presents the final words of Jesus to his disciples.
It is his farewell immediately before Passion Week.
Mark speaks of great turmoil at the coming of the end.
At the time of his writing, Jerusalem is in its final days.

Mounting discontent has finally burst into the open,
as the Roman governor makes a misguided move,
rifling the temple treasury at the behest of the emperor Nero.
A spontaneous uprising emerged into four years of chaos in the city,
with violent rebellion and rival revolutionaries
mounting a civil war among themselves.

Roman finally leveled the city and incinerated the temple.
These things are happening as Mark writes.
And his report of Jesus' farewell words mixes these events
with those of the end.
For Mark, this is the end.
And it is the end of the world as he knew it.

But Luke is writing later.
Today his words are, "but the end is not yet," and "before all this…"
as he carefully separates what was then from what is yet to come.
Luke's message is not about the coming of the end,
but that the end is not coming, not yet.

And Paul is saying that the end will be coming one day,
but in the meantime there is work to be done.
They are not to feel helpless,
as some say there is no reason to work because the end is near.
As some people felt in the 1970s, during the nuclear threat.

Luke says there is something to be done in the meantime.
And his account is of a time of struggle.
You will be handed over to authorities,
but you are not to worry about what you are to say.
… for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking
that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute.

But the end is not yet. They are not to give up hope.

At this point, some people will think,
what difference does it make that this happened centuries ago?
That was then, and now is now.
And now is reality, not a book of ancient tales from ancient times.
So, why look at these readings,
and think they have anything to say to us now?

To that I would say this:

The Bible is not simply a picture book of spiritual lessons,
like those we give to preschoolers in religion classes.
It is not simply a collection of inspirational sayings
to put on posters and banners.
It is not a deck of tarot cards,
or a Christian version of astrology readings for the day,
telling us what to do or what to watch out for.

Think of the Bible as the journal of a people.
It is the record of God's people journaling through time.
It is the record of a flawed people,
depending on God as new surprises enter their story, to their dismay.
It is that people's way of saying
"We've been though something like this before, and we survived.
This helped; this did not. We can make it. God is with us."

And so we too look to the story of the people,
of which we are a part.
    Now we are called to face the new day
    with imagination, courage, and compassion.

Imagination, because the old ways cannot be taken for granted.
    Courage, because we are in uncertain times.
        And compassion, because love is the only thing that counts now.

    Love of vulnerable friends,
    and love of those frightened enough to harm them.

There is more than needs to be saved than our pride.
There is more than needs to be nursed than our resentments.

We about to have the opportunity, I think,
to show what P. Francis meant
    when he said that the church is a field hospital in a battleground.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

November 20, 2016

2 Samuel 5:1-3	David is king of all Israel
Psalm 122:1-5	Rejoicing to the house of the Lord
Colossians 1:12-20	Hymn to Christ the Firstborn
Luke 23:35-43	Jesus and the Good Thief

Today is the end of the Jubilee Year of Mercy,
and the Wahlert Choir is in Rome, assisting with the celebration.

I saw that on the news.
I was struck by the wording of the announcement.
The anchor person said, speaking of the pope,
that they were visiting one of the most powerful people on the planet.
This was later repeated at another news hour,
with another anchor person.

I thought, this is probably true,
but I wonder if that is how Pope Francis thinks of himself.
I suspected that in one way he did,
but in another way he didn't.

Today is the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.
That has a powerful ring to it.
I am wondering how the scripture chosen for today supports that claim.
Let's look at the evidence.

Exhibit #1 is the passage from Second Samuel.
It describes the beginning of the people of Israel as one nation.

This was the beginning, with David at the helm.
It would last for another generation, as his son, Solomon, would succeed him.
But that would be the end,
since after Solomon, dissatisfied with his handling of the kingdom,
ten tribes would break loose and form the kingdom of Northern Israel.

But for a brief shining moment,
All Israel was a reality, and it became a memory that endured.
It was the dream of a successful nation,
which ruled from the Sea to the Great River.
And one day, a Messiah, one anointed as David was,
would return Israel to the days of glory.
That was the political image of Messiah
that was alive in the days of Jesus,
and of which the New Testament speaks.

The Gospels, however, offer a different reading of the role
than what many were expecting.

Is there a political role for the pope?
John Paul II saw this.
After all, the papacy is the longest standing monarchy in the world today.
We know that John Paul used his authority in political beneficial ways.
He was instrumental in the fall of the Soviet Union.

He also had strict views on the role of politics in the church.
It was his only to exercise.
It was at his behest that clergy and religious were persuaded
to avoid political office.

That was when Robert Drinan, SJ, left the US House of Representatives, in 1981.
It was when Carolyn Farrell, BVM, left the Dubuque City Council,
after becoming the first woman to be mayor of the city.

But it is not likely that the center of papal power is political.
We remember the time Josef Stalin, who upon being told
that the pope favored ending the oppression of Catholics in Russia,
responded with the famous quote:
"The pope? How many divisions does he have?"

The irony here, of course, is that the pope remained a formidable opponent,
even without military forces.
So that is not our answer.

Exhibit #2 is the hymn quoted by St. Paul
in the second reading, from Colossians.
It pictures a cosmic ruler, firstborn of creation, firstborn from the dead.

The image of Christ, ruling at the right hand of the Father,
is probably the basis for the name of the feast, King of the Universe.

Pope Paul VI provided it with this name, in 1969.
And Pope Benedict XVI most likely provided its theology.
Benedict is a powerful theologian, of a certain kind.
While there are many ways to describe theology,
one important difference between theologies is where they begin.

In the traditional manner, they begin at the top and work their way down.
Beginning with the concept of God, they deduce the rest from there.
The other approach is more recent,

and has been called the theology of correlation,
first identified with Paul Tillich.
It begins with aspects of the human predicament as a question
and moves from there to speak of God's answer.
More recently, Benedict revived the earlier version.

But there is a reason to begin with the human question.
It allows us a chance to work on discerning God's answer.
And so it is with the Universe.
That is a large word. It raises all manner of questions.

There are between one billion and four billion stars like our sun
in our galaxy, the Milky Way.
A certain percentage of these have planets like ours.

Until recently it was estimated that in the visible universe
there are 200 billion galaxies like our own Milky Way.
That has recently been upgraded by a factor of 10, to 2 trillion.
Each has billions of stars like our sun,
and a great percentage of these have planets like our earth.

In other words, it is likely that we are not
the only intelligent beings in the universe.

So what do we mean when we say Jesus Christ is King of the Universe?
We can go many ways on this,
from saying we are the only ones who needed saving,
to a picture of the Second Person becoming incarnate
in many worlds in need of salvation.
But it gets complicated.
Or do I not need to point that out?

Perhaps we can say that it is a symbol of ultimate authority,
and that all earthly, or universal, kinds of power
derive from a creator God, who communicates with the creation
through personal involvement, which we call incarnation.

Exhibit #3 is the reading from Luke's Gospel.
This is a strange picture of kingship,
a rather unexpected picture of power.

Jesus is on the cross, an instrument of torture and humiliation,
used by the Romans to discourage any who might disagree
with their uses of power to the extent of rising up against it.
Jesus is pictured as a king with thorns for a crown
and a cross for a throne.

As Luke elaborates the story, there is a barrage of taunts,
all concerning Jesus as king.
    It rises to a pitch,
    until even one of the rebels crucified next to Jesus joins in.

At this point, the other, the revolutionary we call the Good Thief,
brings the mounting torrent to a halt.
    Correcting the other, he turns to Jesus and, in a question
    that no doubt brought him into the feast of Christ the King,
    made his request—
"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And yet, what kind of kingdom is this?
How does the Good Thief recognize the king in the crucified one?
    What power is his?
    He is executed by the political power of Rome.
        He is ridiculed by the world.
        And in all of this he is addressed as king.

It is at this point, I think, that we come
    to the next and latest pope, Francis.
    He whom KWWL calls one of the most powerful people on the planet.

There is irony here too.
The power is not as they think it to be. But it is there.
    It is the power of service.
    It is the power of mercy, in fact,
    though this is the end of the Jubilee Year.
        It is the power that comes from below and trickles up.
        It is the power that we have under our own control.

While this is the end of the Jubilee Year,
it is not the end of Mercy.