2011 Lenten Bible Study

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Lent 1

Today’s readings from Genesis and Matthew introduce our “40-day” lenten journey by reflecting on divine wisdom and the call we share as people of faith to leave comfortable places and engage a world that needs the life-giving power of God.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The reading from Genesis is a portion of the story generally thought of in Christian tradition as “the Fall.” In an important sense, that is the right way to think about it. The man and woman choose to disobey the explicit command of God and taste the fruit of knowing right and wrong. As a result, they are expelled from the garden of paradise and kept from “the tree of immortal life” that grows only there. Though now able to tell the difference between right and wrong, the humans are “condemned” to being mortal. They have “fallen” from the opportunity to live forever. But in another sense, this is not so much a story of a “fall” as it is a story of “growing up,” “wising up,” coming to the sometimes painful awareness that the world is a mixed bag, a lot of it good, but some of it really bad. The original couple has “fallen” because they no longer view the world through “rose-colored glasses.”

The second half of Genesis 2:4 starts a new story. The Bible’s first story begins in the first verse of Genesis and concludes in the opening sentence of 2:4. It depicts the creation of the world as a seven-day event that moves from watery chaos to the emergence of dry land and a world teeming with animal and plant life. Human beings are created male and female “in the image of God” as the final creatures made and given the power to “rule” in the earth, that is, to govern in the world as God governs in the universe. That story comes to a climax in the first three verses of chapter 2 with God setting the example of sabbath rest, taking a one-day break from the work of creation to enjoy the glorious work that had been done.

The Bible’s second story begins in the second half of Genesis 2:4 “in the day that Yahweh1 God created the earth and heavens.” By contrast to the watery chaos that begins the first story, the world starts off in 2:4 as universal desert. There is no herb or plant on earth because God hasn’t yet made it rain and “because there was no human to till the ground” (the word translated “till” literally means “to serve”). God begins by creating a human—in the story, it’s just called ha-’adam, “the human,” because it’s created from ha-’adamah, “the humus,” the ground. God plants an oasis in Eden that includes a “tree of life” and a “tree of knowing right and wrong” and puts the human there to “serve” and “safeguard” it.

Immediately, however, God realizes that something is wrong. Up until this point in the Bible, God has only had good things to say about the world. Throughout Genesis 1, God keeps saying, “it is good,” “it is good,” until God finally creates men and women in the image of God and looks at the whole completed world and says, “it is very good!” But here in chapter 2, for the first time in the Bible, God says that something about the world is not good: “And Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good that the human is alone!’” (2:18). The human needs a companion, a partner to help it, an equal who literally can stand “face to face,” “toe to toe,” see “eye to eye” with it. God gets to work. After a number of failed attempts that result in the creation and naming of all the animals on earth, God finally concludes that the only suitable companion for a human is a human. So God puts it to sleep, splits it in two, and for the first time in the story, we see gender-specific terminology. The new human, ‘ishshah, “woman,” is taken to ha-’adam who is now for the first time called ‘ish, “man.” God solves the problem of human loneliness, the very first thing God says is “not good” about the world, by creating a companion who is at once the same and completely different. God solves human loneliness by creating diverse human community.

The story takes an interesting turn with the appearance of a new character, the snake. Because snakes shed their skin on a periodic basis, people in the ancient world thought they had the power to rejuvenate themselves. So in ancient Middle Eastern literature, snakes were associated with healing, im-

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1 In the Hebrew Bible, God has many names. Often God is called by the generic term ‘elohim, “God.” More often, God is called “Yahweh,” translated “the LORD” in most English translations. Before the time of Jesus a tradition developed that you shouldn’t say the name Yahweh out loud. So when scribes read the Bible aloud and came to Yahweh, they substituted ‘adonay, “my Lord” or “the Lord.” When the King James Version was published in 1611, the translators honored the ancient Jewish tradition. Any time the Hebrew text said Yahweh, they translated as if it said ‘adonay. To let us know that Yahweh is what’s actually written in the biblical text, they wrote “LORD” in all capital letters. So when you see “the LORD” in an English translation, you know that “Yahweh” is what’s actually written in the Hebrew text. You should also be aware that many Jewish communities today continue to observe the prohibition on pronouncing the divine name. So in interfaith worship, it is more respectful and appropriate to avoid use of “Yahweh.” It’s better to say “God” or “the Lord.”
mortality, and wisdom—because normally the longer you live, the more you know and the wiser you are. So when, in Genesis 2, a “serpent” suddenly enters the picture, the ancient hearer of the story probably thought that this was going to have something to do with long life and wisdom. And of course that’s right.

The serpent asks the human couple what they’re allowed to eat from the garden. It is important to note here that the conversation is with the couple, not just the woman, though the man is silent: “when the woman saw that ... the tree was desirable for making you wise, she took the fruit, ate it, and gave it to her man who was with her” (3:6). Both are implicated in the decision to take a bite out of wisdom. When God first planted the tree of knowing right and wrong, God warned the human that “on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die” (2:17). The woman, with a bit of exaggeration, now tells the snake that they will die if they even touch the tree (3:3). The snake will have none of that: “You certainly won’t die! Because God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing right and wrong” (3:4–5). In a sense, the snake is proved right. The humans do not die “on the day they eat” from the fruit, as God had warned. In fact, God responds to their disobedience not by killing them, but by making them clothes to cover their nakedness (3:21), which, now that they know better, embarrasses them. God then confirms the prediction of the snake, saying to the other heavenly beings: “Look! The human has become like one of us, knowing right and wrong” (3:22). To preserve some kind of distinction between the divine world and the human, God expels the humans from paradise to keep them from eating the fruit of immortality that grows there (3:22–24).

There are a couple of things worth noting about the way the story unfolds. One is raised by Adam’s response to God’s criticism. Adam’s first impulse is to blame everybody else, especially his companion: “the woman you put with me, she gave me some of the tree (fruit) and I ate!” (3:12). He’s something of a jerk about it, but the man has a bit of a point. God, by creating a companion for the human, contributes to this result. If you’re the only show in town, there’s not much need for a set of rules, a list of what to do when and what not to do ever. But if you’re living in community, it becomes critically important to figure that out. Community requires moral judgment, knowing the difference between right and wrong. When God solves the problem of human loneliness by creating human community, the die is cast. The fruit of knowing right and wrong will be tasted.

Men and women, newly wise, have in one sense “fallen.” We pay a price for growing up. With wisdom comes the burden of knowing things we wish we didn’t know, finding ourselves in situations where there are no simple, unambiguous, morally pure answers, where we’re “damned if we do and damned if we don’t.” Knowing right and wrong is in one sense a “fall,” but it is a fall that is like tripping up the stairs. It may be painful, but we end up at a higher place. Most of us would say that on balance it is better to know than to live our lives without a clue.

This “upside” to the fall is reflected in the note at the end of the story that the human couple left Eden and went out into the desert world to farm (3:23). The story thus comes full circle. The original problem, that the earth was barren, without plant or herb, “because there was no human to till it” (2:5) is now solved. Humans choose wisdom over immortal life. They choose moral conscience over their own security. They take a risk, give up paradise, go into the sometimes harsh world, and make the desert bloom.

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Adam and Eve, wise to the difference between right and wrong, were sent from the garden of paradise out into the desert world. Now Jesus leaves the purifying waters of baptism in Matthew 3 and is led by the spirit into the wilderness to face a series of tests that challenge his moral judgment.

To understand the nature of the tests, it is necessary to consider the broader literary and cultural contexts of these verses.

Immediately before today’s passage, Matthew describes the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. The baptism ends with heaven opening and the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on Jesus (3:16). A voice from heaven, presumably God, says, “This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased” (3:17). The Spirit then immediately leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested (4:1). When the test is finished, Jesus goes to Galilee—though not to his hometown Nazareth—and begins to preach that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). He begins to collect disciples (4:18-22) and starts to preach “the gospel of the kingdom” and to heal all kinds of physical, psychological, and spiritual illnesses, attracting a large crowd of followers throughout the region (4:23–25).

To set the cultural context of these verses, let’s focus on three key terms: “kingdom of heaven,” “son of God,” and “gospel.”

In the world of Jesus, the Greek word basileia, “kingdom” or “empire,” had a common sense meaning. There were plenty of kingdoms in the ancient world, but normally when somebody talked about “the basileia,” most people would have had a very specific kingdom in mind. Just as someone today probably wouldn’t say, “Elvis who?” or “Oprah who?” People in Jesus’s time would not have wondered “which basileia?” “The kingdom” was Rome. And when Jesus and his followers talked about “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven,” they were making a contrast. They were setting up a distinction between the rules that govern the Roman Empire and the rules that govern the alternative empire, “the kingdom of heaven.” We’ll examine those alternate rules in detail when we take a closer look at the verses in today’s lectionary reading.
To appreciate how ancient hearers would have understood the terms “son of God” and “gospel” it might be helpful to take a look at a widely used coin from that time.

On left side of the coin, the word “Augustus” is written. A picture of Augustus Caesar is in the middle of the coin, and on the righthand side is written “DIVI.F,” the abbreviation for the Latin term *divi filius*, “son of God.” This term was stamped on all kinds of Roman coins during the reign of Augustus and subsequent Caesars.

Two years after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E., the Roman Senate voted to make Julius a god of Rome. He became *divus iulius* (“Divine Julius”), and his adopted son Octavian (later given the title Augustus), the heir to Julius’s wealth and prestige, began to call himself *divi filius*, “son of God” and had coins minted in commemoration.

The civil war sparked by Julius's murder heated up as alliances shifted, eventually dragging the entire Mediterranean world into chaos. In a decisive naval battle at Actium, Greece (31 B.C.E.), Octavian's forces dealt a serious blow to his chief rival and former ally Marc Antony, who barely escaped. Shortly thereafter, trapped in Egypt by Octavian's forces, Marc Antony committed suicide in the arms of his lover and ally Queen Cleopatra. She soon followed suit. In 27 B.C.E., the Senate voted to give Octavian the title *augustus*, which means something like “the greatest” or “Mr. Big.” He was later named *princeps* (“first among equals”), *imperator* (“commander”), and *dominus* (“Lord”). He eventually took the title *Imperator Caesar Filius Divi* (“Emperor/Commander Caesar, son of god”). Note the close connection between his military role as “commander in chief” and his religious identification as “son of god.” Might made right. Victory brought security, justice, and peace. It was a sign of divine favor.

To celebrate Caesar and the Pax Romana, the “peace of Rome” he brought to the war-torn Mediterranean, cities began to compete with one another to celebrate Caesar’s victories. They voted to give him a variety of divine titles, built temples to his glory, and staged elaborate festivals in his honor. At these festivals, a public decree was read celebrating Caesar’s military victories and good deeds. The proclamation was called an *euangelion*, the word we get “evangelism” from. It literally means “good news” or “gospel.”

What immediately precedes today’s lectionary passage is the public proclamation from God that Jesus “is my son.” What immediately follows is the note that Jesus began to preach the “good news” about “the kingdom of heaven.” The temptations Jesus faces in today’s text lay out at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry some of the most important ways the “kingdom of heaven” plays by very different rules than the “empire of Rome. It shows us how the “good news” of Jesus, the “son of God,” departs from the “good news” about Caesar, the “son of god,” whose face and name adorned virtually every coin.

Caesar’s rule rested on a three-legged stool: enormous wealth, unequaled military might, and far-reaching political power. In the wilderness, Jesus faces three temptations that reflect the three stools of Caesar’s power.

His forty-day fast following his baptism not surprisingly leaves him “famished.” The first temptation capitalizes on his weakened physical state, zeroing in on his most basic material need. As anyone who ever used a Roman coin knew, a “son of God” could control the flow of wealth. His image and title on a metal coin could transform labor into food.

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2 The length of his period of fasting, 40 days, makes multiple connections with biblical traditions associated with Moses, particularly the gift of the law at Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:18; 34:28; Deut 9:9-25; 10:10) and Israel's wilderness wandering (Exod 16:35; Num 13:25; 14:33-34; 32:13; Deut 2:7; 8:2-4; 29:5; Josh 5:6).
and the other necessities of life. *Divi filius* in an important sense made it possible to feed your family. Without enough of it, you might starve. Was this “son of God” not like the “son of god” on the gold or silver coin? “If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread,” the tempter says. But the reign of heaven operates by different rules. “One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus responds, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” The power of the “son of God” who proclaims the kingdom of heaven resides not in economic prowess, but in faithfulness to the wisdom of God.

The second temptation plays to the human need for security. In the Roman world, security had been established through the military victory of Octavian (Augustus) over his enemies in the civil war. Roman legions maintained the resulting Pax Romana with their mostly peaceful, but always implicitly threatening presence. Great temples had been built to celebrate divine Julius and his son Augustus who brought peace and security to the world. Now the tempter takes Jesus to “the pinnacle of the temple” and challenges him to demonstrate his power to command the legions of heaven to protect and secure him, as they protected Augustus and escorted the divine spirit of Julius to heaven: “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” But the kingdom of heaven has different rules than the empire of Rome. Jesus says to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The third temptation relates to the third stool of Roman imperial power: political control. The tempter takes Jesus to a very high mountain—perhaps the ancient hearers of the story would have thought of the hills of Rome where the seat of imperial government was located. He shows Jesus “all the kingdoms of the earth” and offers him political control of them, the kind of political power wielded in the ancient world by Caesar alone. But the kingdom of heaven plays by different rules than the empire of Rome. “Away with you Satan!” Jesus says. “For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’”

With this final definitive word, the devil leaves Jesus and the angels come to minister to him. The “son of God,” who will now go out into the world to heal the sick and wounded and proclaim the good news of heaven’s *basileia,* has passed the test and clarified the distinction between the imperial logic of Rome and the wisdom of God. Jesus is “son of God” in a completely different way than Caesar is. Caesar’s reign is built on self-protection, accumulation of wealth, security through overwhelming force. The reign of heaven, by contrast, follows rules that call its citizens to take risks, venture out, give up security for the sake of healing a broken world. Jesus passes the test and in so doing calls those who would be his disciples to pass the test as well, to live by the risk-taking, self-giving rules of heaven’s *basileia.*
**Genesis 12:1-4a**

These verses complete the transition to a new major section of the book of Genesis. The first eleven chapters have concerned themselves with what scholars sometimes call the “primeval history,” the “first times” of the world. Those chapters focused on universal human themes that explain why the world is the way it is. Last week’s lectionary reading from Genesis seeks to explain why human beings die and explores the irony of the fact that the more we figure out about how to live in the world, the closer we come to the grave. Wisdom and mortality are inexorably linked. And in spite of that linkage, or perhaps because of it, we are able to do great things in the world, to bring life and hope to places of desolation. Subsequent stories explore the human propensity toward jealousy, greed, and violence. In the end, they conclude that this is simply a feature of the human world that cannot finally be eradicated but can be contained and overcome. Today’s passage marks a major transition in the book and begins to introduce God’s strategy for working within the constraints of the world, revealed in the first eleven chapters, to bring life and hope out of the desolations wrought by human violence and greed.

At the end of the genealogy that follows the Tower of Babel story in chapter 11, we are introduced to the family of Abraham, an immigrant from Mesopotamia in what today would be southeastern Iraq. Though it’s now about a hundred miles away from the Persian Gulf thanks to sediment build-up at the mouth of the Euphrates River, in antiquity Abraham’s hometown Ur was a port city, a center of international trade and at times a center of political power. At the end of chapter 11, Abraham’s father Terah, for reasons we are not told, begins to move his family northwest to the other end of Mesopotamia (modern-day Turkey and Syria), with the intent of then moving south along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea to settle in Canaan, on the narrow fertile strip that sat between Mesopotamia and Egypt (11:31).

Canaan often fell outside the political orbit of the empires that dominated the ancient world. The empires of Mesopotamia were built on agriculture made possible in that arid climate by irrigation canals that tapped the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The ancient empires of Egypt, by contrast, were built on agriculture suited to the annual flood cycle of the Nile River. Canaan could sustain crops because humid winds swept in from the sea and hit the hills and mountains, dropping their moisture in the plains along the coast and the valleys of the hilly country further east. Like the two great centers of imperial power, Egypt and Mesopotamia, Canaan could sustain farms and small cities. But its location on the outer fringes of Egyptian influence on the one hand and Mesopotamian influence on the other sometimes helped it fall between the cracks of imperial power. To be sure, it frequently found itself right in the middle of international politics. But often it was just outside the reach and interest of the big players. We are not told whether Abraham’s family started its long migration toward Canaan in order to find a bit of political and economic “elbow room,” but it’s as likely an explanation as any.

The move west took a long time. Terah finally stopped short of his ultimate destination in Canaan and settled in the vicinity of Haran¹ in modern south Turkey, not far from Syria. Haran was built at the crossroads where two major trade routes met—the east-west highway between Ninevah and Carchemish and the road southwest across the Euphrates to Damascus. Haran was at the westernmost edge of Mesopotamia before Abraham’s family would turn south toward Canaan. At the end of chapter 11, Terah dies in Haran. Now in chapter 12, God speaks to Abraham and urges him to complete the journey his father began, leaving his current country and the rest of his family to go “to the land I will show you” (12:1). Though we often think of Abraham having initiated the journey at God’s suggestion, his call to leave home and go to Canaan is actually just the final step in a journey his parents began.

The key to God's strategy for working within the constraints of a flawed human world is revealed in verse 2: “I will make you become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing.” God will work through one family to bring blessing to the whole human family: “In you, all the clans of the earth will be blessed” (12:3).

The biblical notion that God has selected a “chosen people” to occupy a “promised land” has often wreaked havoc. It has justified invasion, forced relocation, enslavement, and even genocide, as whichever people consider themselves to be “the chosen” at the moment have sought to exercise their claim to God-ordained power. While these interpretations can find traction in some strands of biblical tradition—the book of Joshua is a stark example, but there are others as well—it is important to note the purpose of the promise to Abraham as it actually appears here at the beginning of his story.

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¹ Though in English, they look exactly alike, the name of Abraham’s brother “Haran” who died before they even left Ur is spelled differently in Hebrew. The city name is spelled with a “hard” h—sometimes transliterated as “ch,” like the German “ich” or the Scottish “loch.” The brother’s name is spelled with a “soft” h, as in “Harry.”
The families of Abraham will be blessed for the purpose of blessing all the families of the earth. The vision here is neither narrow nor exclusive. The biblical text is not setting up a small “in-group” to stand over against a much larger “out-group.” God will work through the unfolding stories of the families of Abraham to bring blessing to the whole world. It is also worth noting that Abraham, with God’s guidance, is migrating away from the center of economic, political, and military power in the ancient world to settle in the hinterland. Ironically, the blessing of the whole earth will begin not from the center of power and influence, but at the distant margins. The minute this story is told to excuse the domination of the weak by the powerful it ceases to serve the purpose it serves in its biblical context. Blessing for ourselves and for the world comes when we are willing to take a risk, to venture out, to care more about building God’s future than about preserving our own sense of comfort and security.

John 3:1-17

Today’s reading from John is familiar to many. It contains perhaps the best-known verse of the Bible, an American cultural cliche thanks to the “end-zone” ministry of the creative person who came up with the idea of getting end-zone seats at televised football games and holding up a sign that says “John 3:16.” We’ll come back to the meaning of that verse later.

The risk in reading stories like this is that they are too familiar. We sometimes miss interesting details because we already know what they mean. But this important story is worth a closer look.

The story follows two key events in the ministry of Jesus, according to John’s gospel: the miracle of the wine at the wedding of Cana (2:1-12) and the “cleansing of the temple” (2:13-25). Both of those stories take normal assumptions about what is proper and pure and turn them on their heads. In the first story, a wine shortage at a wedding offers an opportunity for Jesus to reveal an important truth about himself. He orders the servants to fill six twenty or thirty gallon jars with water. It is significant that these jars are specifically designated for “the rites of purification” (2:6). The servants do as they are told, and when they then draw water out of the jars, they draw not water but quality wine (2:8-10). In this miracle, John says, Jesus “revealed his glory” (2:11). Elsewhere in John, “glory” and “glorify” refer specifically to Jesus’s death, resurrection, and union with God (12:23-28; 17:1-5; see also 21:19, referring to Peter’s martyrdom). That the wedding takes place “on the third day” (2:1) further strengthens the connection with the crucifixion and resurrection. Viewed through the lens of Jesus’s “glory,” the wine that is drawn “on the third day” from the jars of purification symbolizes the shed blood of Jesus. The story has a strong “sacramental” character.

The cleansing of the temple continues the theme of death and resurrection. At passover, the annual festival celebrating God’s miraculous rescue of slaves from imperial bondage, Jesus goes to Jerusalem to the temple and attacks the merchants selling animals for sacrifice and the people who converted foreign money into the currency allowed in the temple. Since the time of Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah, prophers had used provocative “street theatre” to challenge what they saw as corruption in the political and religious establishment. So Jesus stood in a long and venerable tradition. This is perhaps why the temple authorities, rather than have him arrested, ask him for a sign to prove the validity of his protest (2:18). His cryptic response, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19), confuses everybody, but in retrospect his disciples come to understand that “he was speaking of the temple of his body” (2:21) which would be crucified and raised from the dead. So both stories in chapter 2 are metaphors of Jesus’s death and resurrection.

Today’s reading from chapter 3 expands on this theme.

The story begins “at night,” a narrative detail that is perhaps more metaphorical than literal: the religious leader Nicodemus is “in the dark” about the true nature of Jesus. Nicodemus begins the conversation with Jesus by acknowledging that Jesus is “a teacher who has come from God” (3:2). Jesus’s response takes the discussion in a surprising direction: “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). Nicodemus asks how it is even possible for someone who is already born to be born a second time? Jesus then draws a distinction between two kinds of birth, a birth “of the flesh” and a birth “of the Spirit” that comes “from above” (3:6-8). Those who “enter the kingdom of God” must be born “of water and Spirit” (3:5). Water here could refer either to the “water” that “breaks” at childbirth or to the waters of baptism. But in either case, Jesus says this kind of birth must be paired with a birth “of the Spirit” “from above” for a person to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus continues his explanation of “Spirit birth” by playing on the double meaning of the Greek word that’s translated here as “Spirit.” Pneuma, the word we get the English word pneumonia from, means “breath” or “wind” or “spirit.” In the ancient world, it was generally thought that life begins when you start breathing and ends when you finally stop. You could occasionally “get the wind knocked out of you.” But as long as it wasn’t a permanent condition, you’d live. Your breath, your wind is your life-force, your animating spirit. The story in Genesis 2, where God creates a human out of the mud and breathes the breath of life into it so it becomes “a living being” (literally, “a living breath”)

2 The Greek word translated “from above” (anothen) can also mean “again” or “anew,” thus Nicodemus’s confusion about Jesus’s statement.
illustrates the idea. Jesus plays on this double meaning of *pneuma* (“wind/breath” and “spirit”), telling Nicodemus that “the wind (*pneuma*) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (*pneuma*)” (3:8). There is an unpredictability to the Spirit. It is impossible to nail down, to capture, to control. It blows where it chooses, often taking us by surprise. Life “in the Spirit” is therefore necessarily open to surprising turns.

“How can these things be?” Nicodemus asks.

Jesus’s response reveals what is perhaps the most surprising thing about Spirit birth: it operates by a completely different logic than “earthly things” do (3:12). This unusual logic is poignantly expressed in verses 14-15: “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever trusts in him will have eternal life.” Jesus is citing the strange story from Numbers 21:4-9 where the Israelites once again grumble against God and Moses for liberating them from Egypt and leading them into a barren desert. God gets mad and sends poisonous snakes into the camp. Several people are bitten and many die. The survivors beg Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. God instructs Moses to make a “fiery” bronze serpent and set it up on a pole. Anyone with a snakebite would now be able to look at the bronze serpent and survive the poison (cf. 2 Kings 18:4). The connection of the snake with healing and life is not in itself surprising. As we saw in last week’s lesson, the ancients believed that snakes had the power to rejuvenate themselves because they shed their skin on a regular basis. The irony of the bronze serpent story is that the sculpted image of the thing that’s killing them becomes the very thing that saves them.

That paradox lies at the heart of the comparison Jesus makes. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so Jesus must be “lifted up.” The reference here is multidimensional: Jesus will be “lifted up” on the cross and as a result be “lifted up” in glorious union with God. As in the miracle of wine at Cana and the cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem, the key to understanding this night-time conversation with Nicodemus is the paradoxical reality that out of death comes life everlasting. The very thing that by the logic of the world would crush Jesus and destroy those who trust in him becomes the means by which the whole world is rescued.

In the strange logic of heaven, by the ever-surprising power of the Spirit, life springs from death, blessing follows the radical decision to give our all.

Finally, it is important to pay close attention to the wording of the most familiar verse. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The word commonly translated “believe” carries a deeper meaning than the English word conveys. The root word in Greek, *pisteuo*, means much more than intellectual assent. It means “to trust fully,” “to rely on.” The kind of trust that leads Jesus to give himself for the life of the world is the kind of trust that his example properly inspires in his disciples. In that deep, self-offering, self-giving trust, the gospel says, we find eternal life.

**Questions**

In today’s world, how are the families of the earth blessed by the families of Abraham? In what ways might the three great “Abrahamic” faiths better realize the promise of Genesis 12? What, if anything, might this passage mean for the way Christian, Muslims, and Jews interact today?

Is it possible to be a “chosen” people and at the same time an agent of blessing for all people? Is this a good way to think of the church? What are some advantages of thinking of the church that way? What are some disadvantages? What difference might it make for the way we actually live our lives as a Christian community?

What are some ways that Christians today are risking their own safety and security to bring Christ’s wholeness to a broken world? How can I as an individual and we as a church support that work?

What are some ways the world today needs “saving”? What can I do about it? What can we as a church do about it? What are we doing about it? How might we do it better? What risks should I take? What risks should we as a church take?

In the life of our church today, what might it mean to “trust” in Jesus, in the total, unreserved sense of John 3:16? Are there specific things worth jumping in with both feet for, worth risking it all? Are there things we should be ready as a church to die for?
Exodus 17:1-7
This is one of several stories in the “murmuring” tradition that describes Israel’s ongoing complaints against God and Moses as the people wander in the desert after God rescues them from Egyptian slavery. These stories begin in Exodus immediately after the Israelites leave Egypt. In chapter 14, with an angry Egyptian army pursuing them, the people complain to Moses that he has led them out of slavery into an uncertain, probably fatal future: “Was it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?... Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? Really, it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness” (14:11-12). In response to their complaint, God and Moses perform a miracle that opens up a path through the Sea, allowing Israel to escape the Egyptian army. Immediately after this stunning rescue, the Israelites start complaining about their lack of decent food (16:2-3). God responds by providing manna every morning and quail every evening (16:4-35), enough for everyone to have exactly what they need to eat (16:16-18).

In today’s story, the Israelites “quarrel” with Moses over the fact that they don’t have water for themselves or their livestock. The word “quarrel” in Hebrew (from the root rō‘) is normally used in legal settings or metaphorically in prophetic oracles that “make the case” against Israel for violating the terms of its contract with God. The people here are not just complaining, they are “indicting,” “prosecuting” Moses and God. In fact, Moses is afraid that they are about to convict and sentence him to death: “What shall I do with this people?” Moses says to God, “They are almost ready to stone me to death!” (17:5). God’s response is ironic. Rocks won’t strike Moses. Moses will strike a rock and thereby save the people. Water will gush up from the stone and the people’s thirst will be quenched.

At God’s instruction, Moses takes some of the elders of Israel with him to the rock at Horeb (also called “Sinai”), the mountain where God first appeared to Moses and where God is now standing (17:6). Moses strikes the rock, and water comes gushing out. He names the place “Massa” and “Meribah” because the Israelites “indicted” (rō‘) God and “put him on trial” (from the verb nasah, “to test or try,” that’s the root of the word “massa”). The “trial” is as straightforward as it is jarring: “Is the LORD in our midst or not?” (16:7).

It may seem shocking to think of “filing a complaint” against God, but the Bible is in many cases not as squeamish about it as we might think. It is true that the “murmuring tradition” more often than not passes a negative judgment on Israel for complaining against God and Moses. The parallel versions of some of the “murmuring” stories in the book of Numbers, for example, are particularly pronounced in their judgment against Israel’s complaining. In the Numbers version of manna and quail, God vows to give the people meat “until it’s coming out of your nostrils” (Num 11:20). God buries their camp three feet deep in quail carcasses a day’s journey in every direction and then strikes the people with food poisoning when they try to eat the meat (11:31-34). In Exodus, the critique is muted and, in fact, at the beginning of Exodus, it is only when Israel “groans,” “cries out,” and “lifts up their cry for help to God” (2:23) that God comes to Israel’s rescue (2:24). In Exodus, the people’s complaint becomes the occasion for God’s gracious gift. Their challenge leads to food and water in the arid, barren desert.

John 4:5-42
John tells the story of an unusual encounter in a culturally marginal place with surprising results.

On his way from Judea to Galilee, Jesus passes through the region of Samaria. Though ethnically and religiously very close to one another, Samaritans and Jews understood themselves to be miles apart on both counts. The temple in Jerusalem was the center of ritual sacrifice for most Jews. Samaritans believed that ritual sacrifice should occur on Mt. Gerizim (see Deut 11:29; 27:12; Joshua 8). They also had very similar, but slightly different versions of the Bible. Through much of this period, Jewish and Samaritan leaders each considered the other group to be heretical and therefore properly shunned. So contact was limited between the two peoples.

Jesus stops to rest in the Samaritan city “Sychar,” almost certainly another name for “Shechem,” the town where Jacob’s daughter Dinah was raped (Genesis 34). The assault occurred as Dinah traveled unaccompanied to visit Jacob’s sons retaliating by using ethnic-religious trickery to massacre the men of Shechem and enslave their women and children. This has the unintended consequence of putting Jacob’s family in danger of blood revenge by the Canaanites. The place Jesus stops thus has a tragic history of sexual and ethnic violence, with a strong element of religious deception. So we don’t miss this ominous connection, John tells us that Jesus sat by “the well of Jacob.”
There he meets an unaccompanied, ethnically different woman coming to the well to draw water. Narrative echoes of the earlier story reverberate as the story of their meeting unfolds. Jesus surprises the woman by asking her for a drink of water. An ancient Jew or Samaritan familiar with their shared biblical tradition would have remembered a series of biblical marriage stories at this point. In Genesis 24, Abraham’s chief servant is sent to find a suitable wife for Abraham’s son Isaac—a woman who is not one of the ethnically different Canaanites, but is from the region around Haran in northern Mesopotamia where Abraham had lived before his father Terah died. The sign that the servant has found the right young woman is that she offers him a drink of water from the well when he asks for it (Gen 24:10-49). The servant takes the young woman Rebekah back to Canaan to marry Isaac. Later, Isaac and Rebekah’s son Jacob first encounters Rachel at a well in the same region and immediately proposes marriage (Gen 29:1-14). At the beginning of the exodus story, Moses meets Zipporah at a well in Midian and quickly marries her (Exod 2:15-22). In all three stories, the groom travels outside his homeland to find a wife. In the case of Isaac and Jacob, the encounter at the well takes place outside Canaan precisely because the family wants to avoid intermarriage with the ethnically and religiously different Canaanites.

With these biblical stories and the ethnic tension between Samaritans and Jews in the background, it is no wonder that the Samaritan woman is surprised by Jesus’s apparent interest in her. “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan, for a drink?” she asks, perhaps with a considerable degree of wariness. But Jesus ignores the question and abruptly changes the subject. “If you only knew the gift of God and who it is who is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Living water” normally was just an idiomatic way of saying “flowing” or “moving” water, the kind of water you would find in a stream or river or bubbling up from a fountain. The woman apparently takes it that way. “The well” is deep and you don’t have a bucket. Where do you get that living water?” she asks. Jesus’s response now suggests that “living water” has a double meaning: “Everyone who drinks of this water (i.e., the water from Jacob’s well) will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Though he apparently is using “living water” as some kind of metaphor, she continues to take him rather literally: “Sir, give me this water, so I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus then abruptly changes the subject back to the implied issue that opened their meeting at the well, but this time with a twist. He asks her to go home and get her husband. Maybe she wonders if at last he’s fishing around to determine her marriage status. “I have no husband,” she replies. His response is astonishing. “You are right!” Jesus says. “You have had five husbands and the one you’re with now is not really your husband.” His uncanny ability to know this very personal information astounds the woman and makes her think that he must be a prophet, perhaps even the “prophet like Moses” that Samaritans thought would come someday or the “messiah” that Jews hoped would come to liberate them from imperial oppression, starting in Jerusalem and working outward. Perhaps her next line of questioning is an effort to clarify just that point. “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem” (4:19-20). Jesus responds by obliterating the religious-ethnic division that separates Jews and Samaritans. “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem .... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:21-24). In the cosmic time that is coming and “now here,” the religious barriers that caused Jews and Samaritans to hate each other collapse. As Paul says elsewhere, in Christ, “the dividing walls of hostility” come crashing down.

The truth begins to dawn on her: “I know that Messiah is coming. Whenever that one comes, he will tell us everything.” Jesus’s response is loaded with meaning. “I am the one who speaking to you.” The first two words in Greek are ego eimi, “I am.” In the gospel of John, this phrase functions to reveal Jesus’s true nature as a divine being. “I am” recalls the revelation of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 3. When Moses asks, “Whom shall I say sent me?” God says ‘ehyeh ‘asher ehyeh, “I am who I am” or “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be.” (The Hebrew is hard to nail down.) God

2 She has endured an unusually high number of divorces. In the ancient world, women’s economic security depended on their marriage. Divorce normally was a one-sided affair, with the husband calling all the shots. That she has been divorced so many times and is now with a man who is not really her husband indicates that she is in a very precarious economic position. It is even possible that she is a debt slave who has been designated as a concubine for the householder. In other words, he is “not really your husband.” While she very likely would have suffered the disdain of others, it is most likely that she had little control over her own sexuality and therefore her own social and economic status. Her unusually high number of husbands is a sign not of her “loose morals,” but of her vulnerable social-economic status.

3 The Greek word translated “Sir” here and in verse 11 above is kyrie, “lord,” the word we get the English word “church” from.
continues, “Tell them ‘ehyeh (I am) sent me” (Exod 3:14). In the gospel of John, Jesus uses the Greek translation (ego eimi) of that Hebrew word ehyeh (I am) to identify himself with the God who was revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In an important sense, when we truly see Christ, we see “I am.” His response to the Samaritan woman can just as easily be translated, “‘I am’ is the one who is speaking to you.”

Jesus's disciples arrive at just this moment. They are too surprised that he is talking to a woman to be properly astonished by his remarkable statement to her. (There are some ancient sources that indicate that a rabbi should avoid having one-on-one conversations with women in public lest someone get the wrong impression that something improper is happening.) The woman, however, finally grasps the deeper significance of the conversation she's just had with Jesus. Apparently now understanding that the “living water” Jesus offers is something significantly different and infinitely better than anything she could draw from the well, she leaves her water jar there and goes into the city to tell people about Jesus. Her dawning insight forms the backdrop for Jesus's conversation with his disciples, who are still clueless, unable to perceive the deeper significance of his words. They urge him to eat, but he speaks of food and fields and fruit ripe for harvest that have nothing at all to do with actual food and fields and fruit. These are metaphors to describe the spiritual transformation that is occurring in the world, now even among people long viewed as religious enemies.

Because of the woman's testimony, many Samaritans believe in Jesus. At their invitation, he stays with them two days, and many more believe. The story ends with Samaritans saying that they now know that Jesus is the soter tou kosmou, the “savior of the world,” a title normally applied to Caesar.

At this surprising place, with its troubled history of religious-ethnic hatred and violence, enemies meet and dividing walls crumble. Through this surprising woman, with her troubled personal history and marginal social-economic status, many come to faith in Christ.

**Bokotola**

The Belgians and other Europeans who lived in Mbandaka before Congo's independence in 1960 called it the “health strip.” In July 1973, when Disciples missionaries Millard and Linda Fuller went with Congolese Disciples leaders to scope out a location to build houses, they were drawn to a wide strip of undeveloped land in the heart of Mbandaka to begin to build houses. The strip had been designed by the Belgians as a line of separation between white Europeans and the Africans they ruled. Congolese were strictly forbidden to live on the European side of the “health strip,” as the Belgians called it. The Congolese called the undeveloped zone, “Bokotola,” which means “man who does not care for others.”

Millard Fuller describes the result of a conversation he had about the house-building project with Bishop Jean Bokeale, the Mbandaka-native Disciples pastor who had become the head of the United Protestant Church of Zaire (the official name of Congo at that time):

“... it dawned on us just what a highly significant and symbolic act the church had undertaken. In
the name of Christ, the one who cares the most for others, we were covering Bokotola with houses for people in need. In the name of Christ, the one who came to break down walls of separation between man and man, and man and God, we were going to eliminate forever this old segregation barrier by covering it with a sparkling Christian community.”

With support from Disciples, grants from our partners in the United Church of Christ, and “sweat equity” from people in Mbandaka, Congo, the Fullers successfully developed the housing model that would soon become Habitat for Humanity.

In a deliberately created wasteland, a visible legacy of racist imperialism, a physical monument to the lack of compassion and care, Disciples missionaries and their colleagues, serving “the one who cares the most for others,” started a movement that has swept the planet and provided quality affordable housing for just under 2 million people worldwide.

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5 http://www.habitat.org/how/historytext.aspx

**Questions**

Name some examples of protest leading to positive change.

What are some things we should be protesting as a church?

Name a few examples of something very positive happening in a surprising place.

What are some examples of something hopeful happening in a situation that seemed hopeless? What made the difference?

Are there things or places in your church, neighborhood, city, or state that have a bad history that might be a good candidate for doing something bold and positive? How might the church “reclaim” it in the name of Christ?

What are some of the “rocks” the church should strike to let the “living water” flow?
In 1 Samuel, God sees the potential in David who by all the social conventions of the day would have been the last person you should have looked to for royal leadership. But perhaps even more surprising is the fact that God is still interested at all in preserving a monarchy. A little background is in order here.

Kingship in the ancient world had a spotty record. To be sure, there were some good things about it. The official records certainly paint a rosy picture. The 8th Century Karatepe Inscription, for example, praises King Azitawada of Adana—who, by the way, commissioned the inscription:

"With Baal’s blessing I have become both father and mother to the Adanites, extending their territory from the rising of the sun to its setting. In my time, they enjoyed all the good things of life, full storehouses, and general prosperity... In all my days the storehouses were full, life was good, and the Adanites lived without care or fear."

King Kilamuwa of Y’dy Sam’al was also a great guy to hear him tell it:

"To some I was a father. To some I was a mother. To some I was a brother. Him who had never seen the face of a sheep, I made the possessor of a flock. Him who had never seen the face of an ox, I made the possessor of a herd of cattle."

Happy days are here again. A sheep in every sheepfold, a chicken in every pot! The king is on the throne and all is right with the world.

Israel ritually symbolized the idea that a good king would bring prosperity to the land by pouring oil over his head. The oil represented the “fatness,” the agricultural fertility of the land. Because of this ritual, kings in Israel were called God’s “anointed”—the Hebrew word comes into English as “messiah.” The king was God’s “anointed one,” God’s “messiah.”

As guarantors of national prosperity, kings bore special responsibility for the most vulnerable members of society: the poor, the widow, and the orphan. The purpose of the Babylonian King Hammurabi’s law code, for example, was "that the strong might not oppress the weak." The king was the “shepherd of the oppressed and of the slaves,” “who cared for the inhabitants in their need.” King Ammisaduqa “established equity for all his people.” King Lipit-Ishtar, prepared “a rod for the wicked” and saved “the people from the evil ones,” so that “the powerful no longer oppress them.”

The Sumerian king Urukagina swore a divine oath not to hand over the widow and the orphan to the powerful. King Urnamu boasted that he protected the interests of the orphan and widow against those of the rich and powerful.

The king’s reputation depended on the well-being of those least able to protect themselves. A king who failed to protect the vulnerable was dishonorable.

This understanding is found in Israel as well. Isaiah says that the ideal king “will judge the poor with righteousness and arbitrate with equity for the meek of the land” (Isa 11:3). Jeremiah praises the recently deceased King Josiah, whose success came because he “advocated the cause of the poor and the needy” (Jer 22:15-16).

The just king causes his nation to prosper, Psalm 72 says, “because he delivers the needy when they cry for help and the poor and those who have no one to help them. He has compassion on the weak and needy, and saves the lives of needy people. He redeems their life from oppression and violence, and puts a high premium on their blood” (vv 12-14).

Under righteous rule, the nation’s prosperity grows because the ruler helps the poor and those in need.

The royal ideal was great. The reality on the ground all too often was not.

In fact, royal policies often were what made people poor in the first place. Just a few chapters before our passage today, God tells Samuel to warn the people about “the way of the king who will reign over you.”

“He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his cavalry and to run before his chariots. He will appoint himself commanders of thousands and fifties, and some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take a tenth of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you will be his slaves!” (1 Sam 8:11-18).

Kings are supposed to support the poor and vulnerable, but royal policies of taxation, forced labor, and military draft make families poor and vulnerable!

Perhaps this inherent contradiction explains God’s
ambiguous attitude toward the monarchy in these middle chapters of 1 Samuel, just as the institution is beginning in Israel. One minute, God seems to hate the idea and the next thing you know, God seems wholeheartedly to approve. So in chapter 8 God describes the people’s desire for a king as a rejection of God (vv 7-8), but when you get to chapter 9, the monarchy is God’s idea: “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you will anoint him as a prince over my people Israel. He will save my people from the grip of the Philistines, because I have seen my people. Their outcry has come to me” (v 16). There are several theologically loaded terms here. “He will save” is the word, hoshia (“save, deliver, rescue”), the word we get “Hosanna” from, the word at the heart of the names, “Joshua” and “Jesus.” It’s the word that describes Israel’s rescue from slavery in the exodus: God “saved Israel from the grip of the Egyptians” (Exod 14:30). Now, God promises, this new king Saul will do the same: “He will save my people from the grip of the Philistines.” This is God’s idea because, “I have seen my people. Their outcry has come to me,” words that echo Exodus 3:7: “I have seen the suffering of my people in Egypt. I have heard their outcry.” Anointing Saul king is like the exodus from Egypt, an extraordinary sign of God’s willingness to save!

Chapter 10-12 continue the back-and-forth till we’re left with an utterly confused picture of whether kingship in Israel is a good thing or bad, whether it’s God’s idea or the people’s, whether it’s punishment or salvation. Finally, at the end of chapter 12, Saul is finally crowned king. And by the end of chapter 13, God has already decided to get rid of him. Chapter 15 gives a second explanation for why Saul needs to be replaced as king.

And that’s where today’s story begins.

Samuel is in grief over Saul’s failure as king. But God tells Samuel to get over it. “How long are you going to mourn Saul? I have rejected him from ruling Israel. Fill your horn with oil and go! I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, because I have provided myself a king from among his sons” (16:1).

Samuel goes to Bethlehem, where all the sons of Jesse come to meet him. Samuel looks at the tall, handsome first son Eliab and thinks, “Surely, his anointed one (messiah) is standing before Yahweh.” But God says to Samuel, “Don’t look at his appearance or his height, because I have rejected him. It’s not what the human sees—because the human looks at the appearance, but Yahweh looks at the conscience” (v 7).

All the other sons come forward, but none suits God. “Is this all of the boys?” Samuel asks Jesse. “There’s just the little one. He’s out tending the sheep.” The word in Hebrew that I’ve translated “the little one” means “small” or “young” or, as a metaphor, “insignificant” or “unimportant.” In a society such as ancient Israel’s, where birth order determined your importance in the family and your share of the family property, to be the youngest was to be the least important and least powerful. By any measure of social worth, David was the least likely to become a leader.

Yet when Jesse sends for David and the young boy arrives, God tells Samuel that David is the one, and God instructs him to take the horn of oil and anoint David in the presence of his brothers.

The irony of course is that David, by any stretch of the imagination, is not king material. But God’s logic is not human logic. God saw that the herder of sheep could become the “shepherd” of the nation. The “little one” would become the one charged to protect “the least of these” in Israel. God saw potential where humans saw insignificance and unimportance.

David leaves a very ambiguous legacy. To say the least, he was ethically challenged (2 Samuel 11-12). He was at points so incompetent that his own son led a military coup against him that succeeded for awhile (2 Samuel 13-20). Even on his deathbed, he managed to ensure political instability following his death, unexpectedly choosing the younger son of a morally questionable marriage over his eldest son and presumptive heir, a decision that ultimately leads to the older son’s death (1 Kings 1-2). David is flawed, but God sees in this flawed human leader the potential for good. And in spite of David’s problems, God calls him to lead.

In this story, as in the broader biblical assessment of the Israelite monarchy, we see a frank assessment of the ambiguities of human leadership. As individuals, we are flawed. It is not surprising therefore that our social and political institutions—our churches, businesses, and governments—are flawed as well. The Bible doesn’t sugar-coat this reality. But neither does the biblical narrative throw up its hands in despair.

God is not blind to our shortcomings, but is willing to work with us as we are in order to accomplish some good. The God who sees potential in a “little one” like the shepherd David, in an old man on his deathbed whose heart is right but whose choices throw things into a mess, continues today to call leaders to lead in spite of their flaws, to lead institutions that must function in spite of their dysfunction. God sees our potential and calls us, not to be perfect, but to be faithful and to lead.

**John 9:1-41**

In John’s gospel, the irony is that religious leaders can’t see the truth about Jesus that a man “blind from birth” can see with perfect clarity.

Before we analyze the message of this passage, we need to address an uncomfortable feature of this story that is a problem throughout the gospel of John — the negative portrayal of “the Jews.” Although the history of Christians’ separation from the synagogue is probably much more
cloudy, complex, and lengthy than we once thought, it is clear that early Christians considered themselves to be Jewish or “God-fearing” gentile supporters of Jewish communities. They worshipped in synagogues, observed Jewish holidays and customs, and read the same Bible Jews had read for centuries. They thought that Jesus was the Jewish messiah, a belief that was not shared by everyone, but that certainly did not put them outside the acceptable range of Jewish thought which was broadly tolerant of a wide diversity of opinion. Things began to change in the fall-out that followed the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in the year 70, as Jewish communities struggled to rethink what it even meant to be Jewish now that there was no central temple. It seems to be the case that John’s audience experienced rejection by non-Christians in their own synagogues, that they were being targeted for expulsion or perhaps had already been expelled because of their faith in Jesus as messiah. Their reaction against their opponents shapes John’s telling of the story of Jesus. John reads his community’s late First Century reality back into the early First Century life of Jesus. Though Jesus and his disciples were all Jewish, in John’s telling Jesus was constantly opposed by “the Jews,” a term that anachronistically refers to everybody in the synagogue who does not share John’s belief that Jesus is the messiah. So John leaves the impression that Jesus stood in opposition to all Jews, though he and the vast majority of his disciples were Jews.

The fact that “the Jews” in John doesn’t mean all Jews is perfectly clear in today’s story where the blind man and his parents, who are themselves Jewish, refer to the leaders who question them as “the Jews,” as if “the Jews” were an entirely different group of people than themselves!

This rhetorical move was less problematic in the late First Century, when Christians were members or committed supporters of synagogues, in other words when Christians were themselves Jews and friends of Jews. Slamming “the Jews” was, in this context, more like self-criticism or criticism of John’s own religious family—just as we might criticize “the intransigent and hostile leadership of my own faith community.” Though it looks like a blanket condemnation of Jews, it is not. John, Jesus, and all of Jesus’s first disciples were thoroughly, totally Jewish or else were “God-fearing” supporters of synagogues. When John rails against “the Jews,” he is criticizing people in his own synagogue who reject his belief that Jesus is the messiah. To catch the flavor of John’s critique in his own late First Century context, we probably should substitute “the hard-headed church that’s set in its ways” wherever we see the term, “the Jews.”

At the very least, we should understand that “the Jews” is John’s way of saying “the intransigent and hostile leadership of my own faith community.” Though it looks like a blanket condemnation of Jews, it is not. John, Jesus, and all of Jesus’s first disciples were thoroughly, totally Jewish or else were “God-fearing” supporters of synagogues. When John rails against “the Jews,” he is criticizing people in his own synagogue who reject his belief that Jesus is the messiah. To catch the flavor of John’s critique in his own late First Century context, we probably should substitute “the hard-headed church that’s set in its ways” wherever we see the term, “the Jews.”

This story is a tightly and elegantly written reflection on the nature of sin. It begins with Jesus and his disciples passing by a man who, we’re told, had been blind from birth. The disciples use this as an opportunity to engage their teacher in a theological discussion about why he was blind: “Rabbi, who sinned—this man or his parents?”

The disciples’ question had a long history in Jewish philosophical discourse. It was a logical issue for a monotheistic religion. Most people in the ancient world were polytheists. They believed that there were a number of different gods and that they frequently meddled in human history as part of their efforts to “one up” each other. Human suffering, in this view, was often just “collateral damage” in some larger cosmic power struggle. Jews too believed that God frequently intervened in human affairs, but their monotheistic faith, coupled with a belief that God is just, meant that they had to look for meaning in suffering. They had to ask, “why is this happening?” The people who wrote the books of the Torah thought that Israel’s suffering often was punishment for sin, a position also held by the biblical prophets. Some, such as the philosopher whose ideas form the core of the book of Ecclesiastes, argued that suffering is completely random. Some, such as the author of the book of Job, agreed that God causes suffering, but came to question whether it really is appropriate to think of God as just.

Among those who believed that suffering is punishment for sin, there was a further question about whose sin caused the punishment. For example, the book of Samuel says that...
David was punished for forcibly having sexual relations with a married woman and then having her husband murdered to cover his tracks once she got pregnant (2 Samuel 11-12). “His” punishment is that his wives will be publicly raped (12:11) and his child will die (12:15-23). So his wives and children will pay the price for the sin David committed!

The issue was particularly acute after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. (The temple the Romans destroyed in John’s time was a second version of the temple the Babylonians destroyed six and a half centuries earlier.) The people who wrote the final edition of the books of Deuteronomy and Kings thought that the collective sins of Israel and its kings throughout the centuries had finally caused God to use the Babylonians to destroy the temple and send the religious and political leadership of Jerusalem into exile (Deuteronomy 31-32; 2 Kings 24-25). Some of those who were exiled, however, thought that they, like David’s wives and child, were paying the price for sins committed on their parents’ and grandparents’ watch, a conviction reflected in this proverb: “The parents are sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18:2). Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, writing after the temple was destroyed and Babylonian exile had begun, argue that this will no longer be the case. “Everyone will die for their own sins,” Jeremiah says (Jer 31:30). “It is only the person who sins that will die,” Ezekiel adds (Ezek 18:4).

This is the issue Jesus’s disciples want to discuss. This man is blind. Someone obviously is being punished for something they’ve done wrong. Since he has been blind from birth, it must be something his parents did.

But Jesus immediately turns the old theological debate on its head and in the process gives “blindness” and “sin” a completely different meaning. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” Jesus says. Suffering, in this case, is not punishment for sin, but opportunity for the power of God to be shown. “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” The man’s suffering has nothing to do with sin or punishment. Ironically, his inability to see will become the lens through which God’s work in the world is revealed. Blindness will lead to sight. To underscore the image, Jesus speaks of being sent to work “while it is day,” as opposed to the “night” that is coming. “I am the light of the world,” he says.

Jesus spits in mud and forms a paste that he smears on the man’s eyelids. He tells him to go to the pool of Siloam and wash. He follows Jesus’s instruction and miraculously begins to see. Ironically, as he gains eyesight, others begin to lose theirs. His neighbors who have seen him every day suddenly are unable to recognize him. They see him, but they can’t believe their eyes. His “disability” has been his defining characteristic, the thing they noticed most about him. Without it, they hardly recognize him. They are blinded by his sight.

They grill him about what happened. “You’re not the same man!” “Yes, I am!” “How did you regain your sight?” “The man named Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and told me to go to Siloam and wash. I did it, and now I can see.”

“Where is he?” “I don’t know.”

His neighbors then bring him to “the Pharisees”3 some of whom, in a complete misunderstanding of standard rabbinic teaching, argue that Jesus is obviously a “sinner” because he healed the man on the sabbath.4

Some of them continue to dispute that this man was ever blind in the first place. They quiz his parents who are scared to death of the authorities. They insist that he was born blind and tell the leaders to ask him how he suddenly is able to see. Here we have a back-reading of John’s experience at the end of the First Century into the time of Jesus several decades earlier: “His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue” (v 22).

3 i.e., Jesus’s opponents
4 In fact, the ancient rabbis are clear that “saving a life” by helping someone in distress or healing someone who is injured is not only acceptable on the sabbath, but required. If you have to ask whether to do it, not only are you in trouble, but your rabbi is in trouble for not teaching you better. See chapter 8 of Richard H. Lowery, Sabbath and Jubilee (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).
They interrogate the man a second time, challenging him to explain how he was healed by Jesus, given the fact that “he is a sinner” (v 24). “I don’t know whether he’s a sinner,” the man says, but “one thing I do know is that though I was blind, now I see” (v 25). After a bit of back-and-forth, the religious leaders try to straddle the fence, plead neutrality: “We know that God has spoken to Moses, but this man, we don’t know where he comes from” (v 29). “Here’s what’s amazing,” the man responds, “you don’t know where he comes from, but he opened my eyes!”

His experience of healing at the hand of Jesus has opened his eyes, literally and figuratively. He now “sees” what the religious leaders, blinded by their preconceived notions, cannot.

Their short-sighted response reveals their own utter failure of vision: “You were born entirely in sin. Are you really trying to teach us?” And they drove him out (v 34).

The story concludes by closing the circle on the discussion about sin that opened the narrative. Jesus hears that the man has been expelled from the synagogue and searches him out. Finally, we see what for John is the true cure for human “blindness.”

“Do you believe in the Human One?” Jesus asks. “Who is he, lord? Tell me, so I can trust him,” the man replies. And Jesus says to him, “You have seen him. He is the one talking to you.” The man says, “Lord, I trust.” And he worships Jesus (vv 35-38).

The story comes full-circle with the closing speech of Jesus: “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

Some of the Pharisees near him hear this and say, “We’re not blind, are we?”

The story ends with Jesus telling them: “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘we see,’ your sin remains.”

The original question was who sinned to cause this man’s blindness. Jesus flips the long-held belief that suffering is punishment on its head: “If you were blind, you would not have sin.” Physical blindness pales in comparison to the spiritual blindness of religious leaders stuck in old ways of thinking. It is because we claim to see it all, while being woefully ignorant of the potential that comes with trust in Christ, that we continue to live in “sin.” God calls us to open our eyes and see.

Questions

Name someone who unexpectedly rose to the occasion and took leadership. Why was it a surprise? In retrospect, were there clues that this person would be up to the task? What does that say about what it takes to make a good leader?

What are we as a church doing to help identify, encourage, and equip leaders? What should we be doing? How might we help?

Can you think of particular people we should be encouraging to think about leadership in the church and the community?

Assuming that it’s an occupational hazard of being a human community to get stuck in outdated ways of thinking and acting, where might we go to find a fresh view on things? If we always run the risk of “blindly” doing what’s comfortable, who should we be asking to help us get a different take?

Who are we overlooking?

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5 The traditional translation for ‘σιόν τού ἀνθρώπου’ is “Son of Man.” It just means “human being.”
6 The Greek word is κύριος, “lord.”
7 The Greek word is “trust” (πίστευω), not just intellectual assent.
Lent 5

Both of these passages speak of resurrection. Ezekiel envisions the collective rebirth of the nation after the devastations of Babylonian exile. John speaks of new life that comes to us now through trust in Jesus. Both passages call us to hope. By the power of God’s presence, faith conquers fear. Death is not final. Life prevails.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Today’s passage is set in the heart of Mesopotamia. Ezekiel ben Buzi is a native of Jerusalem who once served as a priest in the temple there.

Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, a small kingdom on the furthest edge of the Babylonian empire, right on the border of a region allied with Egypt. In fact, for a brief period shortly before it came into the Babylonian imperial orbit, Judah was under the control of Egypt.

Jehoiakim, one of the kings who ruled Judah when Ezekiel worked in the temple, literally owed his kingship to the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco II who in 609 arrested his predecessor and put Jehoiakim on the throne in his place (2 Kgs 23:33-35). In 605, after the Egyptian army lost a decisive battle to the Babylonians at Carchemish, a town northeast of Jerusalem on the west bank of the Euphrates River along the modern border of Turkey and Syria, the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar1 and his army began to push south into Syria and Palestine. Jehoiakim decided at that point that it made good sense to join up with the Babylonians, which he did in 604.

Among the many obligations of being a junior partner in the Babylonian empire, Judah had to pay a series of steep taxes to Babylon. The Babylonians called them “gifts,” but there was nothing voluntary about them. Around 600, the Egyptians began to push back against the Babylonians. Shortly thereafter, Jehoiakim switched allegiance back to Egypt and withheld his “gifts” to Babylon. The Babylonians regrouped and reinvaded Palestine.

In the spring of 597, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem. Jehoiakim apparently died before the imperial army got there, but Nebuchadnezzar arrested Jehoiakim’s son, Jehoiachin (also called “Jeconiah” in the Bible) who had briefly occupied the Judean throne, and deported him and several thousand royal courtiers to the Babylonian heartland (2 Kgs 24:14-16), probably to the southeastern region of modern-day Iraq. Ezekiel was among the royal courtiers who were deported with Jehoiachin (Ezek 1:1).

Nebuchadnezzar put his own puppet on the throne in Jerusalem, Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:17). For the next 11 years, there was an imperially-sanctioned Judean government in Jerusalem and a government-in-exile in Babylon. Ezekiel was part of the government-in-exile.

1 Also called “Nebuchadrezzar” in the Bible (cf. Jer 32:28, for example), his name in the Akkadian language of the Babylonians was nabu-kudurri-usur (“Nabu, defend my firstborn son”). Nabu was a god of wisdom, the son of the Babylonian high god Marduk.

In 587, the government in Jerusalem decided to withhold its taxes and seek independence from Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar’s army marched into Jerusalem and, in 586, destroyed the city and demolished the temple. The Babylonians killed Zedekiah and his family and deported more royal officials from Jerusalem to Babylonia. The indigenous House of David that had ruled in Jerusalem for more than four centuries was deposed, never to reclaim the throne.

It is very important to understand just how devastating this was to the people who had run things in Jerusalem. In the view of Judah’s official religion, the Davidic monarchy had been promised that it would occupy the throne in Jerusalem forever. 2 Sam 11:7-16 is the clearest statement of this conviction, but there are plenty of other passages, such as Psalm 89:19-37, that reflect this basic theological tenet: “Once and for all time I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line will continue forever, and his throne will endure before me like the sun. It will be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies” (Ps 89:35-37). Even if there are Davidic kings who violate God’s laws, they will be punished, “but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my promise” (vv 32-33).

To further complicate things, there was a widespread belief in the ancient world that gods were tied to specific peoples and specific places. This is what lies beneath the curious request of the Syrian official Naaman who was healed of leprosy by the Israelite prophet Elisha. In 2 Kings 5:17, Naaman asks the prophet for “two mule-loads” of Israelite dirt to take back with him to Damascus so he can worship Yahweh there. The God of Israel, he believed, could only be worshiped on Israelite soil. Naaman needed to set up a little “Yahweh embassy” in the foreign capital where Yahweh’s laws would apply. This was a common view in the ancient world. So when the psalmist asks from Babylonian exile, “How can we sing Yahweh’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:4), this is a serious theological question. The destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of its people is not just a political crisis, a social-economic disaster. This is a spiritual catastrophe. Many people simply abandoned faith in the God of Israel who obviously had abandoned Israel. Others concluded that Yahweh had decided to enter into an alliance with Marduk, the god of Babylon. So they continued to worship Yahweh, but also gave Marduk his proper due.

Ezekiel is one of the religious thinkers who are trying to chart a different course, one that maintains exclusive faith in
the God of Israel, while holding out hope that God can nevertheless bring something positive out of this disaster. Today's passage is part of that attempt to rethink Jewish faith in the wake of the twin calamities of 597 and 586.

The passage begins with God transporting Ezekiel "by the spirit/breath of Yahweh" to an unnamed "valley" filled with bones that are "very dry"—so the massacre happened many years before. God makes Ezekiel walk "round and round" through the shattered skeletons and then asks an astounding question, "Mortal,2 can these bones live?" Ezekiel is cautious in his response: "You know, my lord Yahweh."

God's next words are even more astonishing than the original question. "Prophesy against/over/about these bones" (v 4). The Hebrew preposition 'al normally refers to something that is "on" or "over" something. When it's paired with the verb "prophesy," it usually means "against" or "about/concerning." It's hard to know exactly how it should be translated here. Perhaps it's best to preserve the ambiguity. This is a prophecy "about" the dry bones, but it is in a sense "against" them as well. It's a strange picture:

"Say to them: 'Dry bones! Hear the word of Yahweh! Thus says my lord Yahweh to these bones: Look! I am bringing a breath3 into you, and you will live! I will put tendons on you, and I will make muscles come on you, and I will spread skin on you, and I will put a breath in you, and you will live, and you will know that I am Yahweh!" (v 6).

When Ezekiel prophesies against/over/about the bones, they begin to shake like an earthquake. They come together "bone to bone" (v 7). Tendons and muscle begin to cover the skeletons, with skin covering that. "But there was no breath in them" (v 8). God orders Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind: "Thus says my lord Yahweh. 'Come, O wind, from the four winds! Breath into these who have been murdered, so they can live!'" (v 9). Ezekiel does as he is told and a wind enters the lifeless bodies and they come to life! They stand on their feet, "a very, very vast army" (v 10). God explains that these bones are "the whole people of Israel." "They say, 'our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we are cut off!'" (v 11). But God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to/against them: "Thus says my lord Yahweh. ‘Look! I am opening up your graves and bringing you up out of your graves, my people, I am bringing you to the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am Yahweh’ (vv 12-13). "I will put my spirit/breath into you and you will live. I will settle you on your land. Then you will know that I am Yahweh" (v 14).

The "resurrection" in this passage is not an individual, personal "life after death." This is a vision of the "resurrection" of the people Israel.

As far as we know, Ezekiel did not live to see his proph-ecy even partially come true. Several decades later, the Persian King Cyrus would allow Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. Some did. Most did not.

In the end, however, Ezekiel's prophecy "about" or "against" the people of God is important, not as a glimpse of the future, but as a word of hope for the present. Still in shock over the disaster they had experienced, the people lost hope. In their own hearts, they believed themselves to be "dry bones," dead, unable to move, to live and breathe and make a difference in the world. Ezekiel is called to prophesy against their despair.

It is natural to mourn past glory, to worry about tomorrow—especially in the wake of job loss, illness, or other personal disasters. The Bible is full of examples of people crying out to God in anger, in fear, pleading for help. This, the Bible implies, is appropriate. But the situation Ezekiel faces is different than that. The people have given up all hope. They have allowed themselves to succumb to despair. Ezekiel's strange experience in the valley full of dry bones, the prophecy he is ordered to give, says that where God is involved, there is always hope. When God's people open themselves to the animating power of the Spirit of God, they will find life. It is unlikely to be like anything they expect, but by faith and hope in the one who gives life, God's people can live.

**John 11:1-45**

Today's gospel story continues the theme of darkness and light that runs throughout the gospel of John, and deepens it. Darkness and light are explicitly connected in this story with death and life.

In chapter 10, Jesus has created a considerable stir as he walked around Solomon's Portico on the eastern side of the temple compound in Jerusalem. People became so agitated at his claim to be the messiah that they nearly stoned him to death for blasphemy, but finally decided to try to have him arrested (10:22-39). Before that could happen, he fled Jerusalem and settled about 20 miles east on the far side of the Jordan River. That's where he is at the beginning of this week's story.

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2 The Hebrew term is ben 'adam, literally "son of a human." This term is often translated "son of man." It underlines the New Testament title, "Son of Man," often applied to Jesus. In the book of Ezekiel, it is the way God normally addresses the prophet. It functions to underline the difference between God and the human prophet.

3 The Hebrew word is ruah, "wind, breath, spirit." It is the same word that's in the first verse of today's passage, which I translated "the spirit of Yahweh." The way ancient Israelites thought of it, you were alive when you were breathing. When you stopped breathing, you were dead. So your breath was your animating life-force, your "spirit." It's always difficult to know how to translate this into English. But it's usually good to remember that whenever it's used, it carries a connotation of animating life.
He receives a report that one of his close friends Lazarus is seriously ill back at his home in Bethany, a small village just outside Jerusalem on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives.

Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha (cf. Lk 10:38-42; Jn 12:1-8). Their home apparently is a favorite stop-over for Jesus when he has business in Jerusalem. But in light of the recent ruckus at the temple, it would be very dangerous for Jesus to show up there. If he just couldn’t resist going, he at least should keep a low profile.

He doesn’t.

Jesus waits a couple of days, long enough for Lazarus to die. It may be troubling to modern ears to hear that Jesus apparently delayed in order to let Lazarus die “for God’s glory, so the Son of God can be glorified through it” (11:4); but John has a different view. What’s important for John is that this awful death will be an opportunity for the power of God and the true nature of Jesus to be revealed with stunning clarity.

Jesus’s disciples plead with him not to go to Bethany (v 8). Jesus now uses the metaphor of light and darkness with a chilling, thrilling twist. “Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them” (vv 9-10). There will be no stealth visit to Bethany in the middle of the night. What Jesus now must do, he will do in the full light of day. Hearing this, Thomas, no doubt expressing the sentiment of the others, says, “Let’s go too, so we can die with him” (v 16).

When Jesus arrives, he discovers that Lazarus has already been in the tomb four days. As he approaches the house, Martha runs to meet him. “Rabbi, if only you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died!” (v 21). “Your brother will rise again,” he says. “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day,” Martha says (vv 22-24), expressing a common Jewish belief at that time that there would be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of history. Jesus’s response lies at the very heart of the story. It is in fact what the whole episode is about: “I am the resurrection and the life,” he says. “Whoever trusts in me, even though they die, will live” (v 25). “Whoever lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this?” (v 26). Martha offers the appropriate response: “Yes, Lord, I trust that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one who is coming into the world” (v 27).

Jesus continues to the house. Mary runs to him, followed by a crowd of mourners who have come there to comfort the sisters. Seeing Mary and the others in their deep grief, Jesus is overcome with emotion and begins to cry. Still deeply emotional when he reaches the tomb, a cave with a large stone rolled over the opening, he says, “take away the stone!” (v 39). Martha objects. His corpse already has the odor of decomposition, she says. But Jesus insists that they are about to see the glory of God. So they take away the stone. He prays and then with a loud voice cries out, “Lazarus, come out!” (v 43).

And the dead man comes out! With the death-shroud still wrapped around his feet and hands and face, Lazarus walks out of the tomb!

Jesus says to the crowd, “Unbind him and let him go.” Many of the people who had come to mourn with Mary and Martha “trusted in” Jesus because of this (v 45).

In this story, trust in Jesus leads to new life that by every standard of normal logic should no longer be possible. By the transforming power of God, that which is dead can live and breathe and once again see the light of day.

Whether wandering through a valley of dry bones or standing in distress at a dank, dark tomb, we must not lose hope. Where the Spirit of God continues to blow, where the Risen Christ is deeply moved, where the people of God find the courage to trust, there is hope. There is life.

Questions

Name and discuss some examples of something positive coming out of something that initially seemed like a failure or defeat. Examples could be from personal experience, something that happened in church, or some historical event. What are the things people did to turn things around?

Are there fears and anxieties we need to address as a church? Explain.

Are there things we need to let “die” that other things might live? Explain.

What are we doing, what might we do to encourage one another to trust God and have hope, even in the face of difficulty and pain?

4 As elsewhere in John, the word that often is translated into English as “believe” is the Greek word pisteuo, which is more properly translated, “trust.” What’s involved here is much more than intellectual assent.

The view toward the Mount of Olives from Solomon’s Portico on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The village of Bethany lies on the far side of the hill in the distance. Photo by Rick Lowery.
Matthew 21:1-11 (17)

Today’s familiar story contains a number of unfamiliar elements that are worth further reflection. Above all, this is a story about defying expectations and shattering barriers.

To begin with, it is important to expand the scope of the passage recommended by the lectionary. For reasons that will be clearer later, the “triumphal entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem properly culminates in his symbolic act of “cleansing” the temple, which comes to a conclusion in v 17, when he finally leaves the temple precinct and returns to the village of Bethany, perhaps to the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus mentioned in last week’s lectionary reading (John 11). So our study will extend through v 17.

Pushing the passage that far has the advantage of forcing us to address head-on the ambiguity of this Sunday in the Christian calendar. It is usually called, “Palm Sunday,” but sometimes called, “Passion Sunday,”—“passion” in the sense of the Latin word, passio, “to suffer,” from which the English word is derived.¹ The ambiguity lies in the portrayal of Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem as “triumphal,” when just a few days later, he will be tried for imperial treason, publicly tormented, and brutally executed. In both cases, a “crowd” plays an important role. In the first instance, they welcome Jesus with shouts of “Hosanna!” In the second, they mock him and scream for his crucifixion. Are these two different “crowds” or one incredibly fickle one? Are we in some sense supposed to see ourselves in the “crowd”? Do we on this day celebrate the triumphal entry, with palm-leaf-waving shouts of joy, or should we solemnly commemorate the steady march toward death a few days later at the hands of imperial Rome? Should we be festive or somber?

The story has a very political tenor from the very beginning. If we look closely at vv 3-5 and examine the allusions they make to specific Hebrew Scriptures, we see that, at least in Matthew’s mind, Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem in this last week of his life is structured as a kind of political theatre. He seems to be playing out the script of Isaiah 62 and Zechariah 9:9,² which in Jesus’s day were sometimes understood as prophecies about the coming messiah. According to this reading of these passages, the messiah would humbly ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and take political control away from the foreign power that currently ruled it. The Jesus parade that day seems to follow this script exactly.

¹ “Compassion,” for example, is “to suffer with.”
² “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout out loud, O daughter Jerusalem! Look! Your king is coming to you, triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

As we saw in an earlier lenten Bible study, the term “messiah,” from the Hebrew word that means “anointed one,” normally refers to the Davidic king who sits on the throne in Jerusalem. The title is taken from a ceremony that was performed on the king at his election. Oil, the rich “fatness” of the olive, was poured over his head, a symbolic gesture, expressing hope that the land would be “fat” and prosperous during his reign (see 1 Sam 10:1). But when the House of David lost the throne and the Judean monarchy came to an end in 586 B.C.E., the concept of messiah began to evolve. It took a surprising turn toward the end of the Babylonian exile in the writings of an anonymous prophet whose work is preserved in the book of Isaiah. In Isa 45:1, the prophet refers to a foreign king, the Persian emperor Cyrus as the “messiah.” The concept shifts again a few centuries later during the time Jerusalem was ruled by Hellenistic emperors from Syria.

The key event was the successful rebellion of the Maccabees against the Syrian emperor Antiochus IV, between 167 and 164 B.C.E. According to tradition, Antiochus erected some sort of offensive idol in the Jerusalem temple precinct, possibly to his god Baal Shamem whom he associated with the Greek god Zeus. This prompted the Maccabean revolt or perhaps merely continued an intra-Jewish power struggle that had already begun between Hellenists and traditionalists in Jerusalem. Whatever the origin of the struggle, the Maccabees finally drove Antiochus’s forces out of Jerusalem and reestablished an indigenous and, for awhile, independent Judean monarchy. When the Maccabean forces entered Jerusalem, they marched through town up to the temple and began the process of purifying the temple of its foreign corruption (1 Maccabees 4:36–61). They tore down the desecrated altar and tossed out the polluted plates, bowls, and other vessels of worship. They ripped out the furniture and wall hangings and rebuilt the inside of the temple from scratch. When that was done, they began to celebrate an eight-day ceremony of purification. The only problem was that they had only one day’s worth of oil to light the lampstand that sat in front of the altar. Miraculously, however, the lamp burned for the full eight days it took to complete the purification ceremony. This miracle is celebrated today in the festival of Hanukkah with the lighting of the nine Menorah candles, eight for the eight days the lamp miraculously burned, plus a candle signifying the one day’s worth they had to begin with. Each of the other eight is lighted each day from the ninth candle.

To the extent that people in Jesus’s time thought at all about the messiah, they probably thought in terms of the Maccabees. Whatever else the messiah would be and do, he would march into Jerusalem, liberate it from foreign control, and cleanse the temple from the filth that piled up in its years...
of imperial subjugation. Antiochus was long gone. The new imperial overlord was Rome. At the very least, the messiah would kick the Romans and their collaborators out and restore the temple to its unvarnished glory.

Something like this is perhaps what many in the crowd have in mind when they see Jesus riding into town on a donkey, just as Zechariah said the messiah would do. As he approaches, people lay their cloaks on the ground before him. Others cut palm branches and arrange them along the road as Jesus approached. The messiah, the great conquering hero has come to drive the Romans back to Rome and liberate Israel at last from their oppression.

But the prophetic script did not end with the messiah’s triumphal entry. The first order of business would be to cleanse the temple, as Judas Maccabee and his sons had done, as King Josiah had done at the end of Assyrian imperial rule about 650 years before Jesus rode into Jerusalem (2 Kings 22-23). This symbolic act would signify the land’s liberation from foreign rule. This is why the crowd chants, “Hosanna!” “Save!” They are using a variation of the word the Torah uses to describe Israel’s liberation from Egypt: God “saved” Israel from the grip of the Egyptians (Exod 14:30). Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem is like that, the crowd thinks, like the liberation of Israelite slaves from Egypt. That the crowd made this particular connection spelled trouble, at least if you were a Roman or a Roman collaborator—trouble that could not be allowed to get out of hand. Though conceptually they seem miles apart, palms and passion are tightly interwoven.

And as he rode closer to the temple, the crowds grew. Emotion mounted. Jesus rode up to gate, marched through, and began to overthrow tables set up for changing money from foreign currencies to money that could be used in the temple precinct. He attacked the merchants who sold doves for sacrifice.

Doves were the least expensive sacrifice. So they were the sacrifice of choice for poor people and for women, who sacrificed doves to make them ritually clean after childbirth and menstruation.

The symbolism of his attack against money changers and dove sellers seems to relate to those aspects of the temple system that represent foreign imperial control and the struggle of the poor and socially powerless to get by. Religion has become an ally of oppression, when it should be an instrument of justice, especially for the vulnerable poor.

He underlines the point by quoting scripture. As he’s throwing tables around, he cites a little piece of Isaiah 56, “My house shall be called a house of prayer” (Isa 56:7), and adds a brief quote from Jeremiah, “but you are making it a den of robbers” (Jer 7:11). The Jeremiah quote is from a scathing sermon that condemns the temple leadership for complacency, hypocrisy, and injustice (Jer 7:1-15). The Isaiah quote comes from one of the most radical passages in the Bible.

Several biblical passages emphasize the importance of maintaining strict rules of purification and exclusion in the temple precinct. Deuteronomy 23, for example, makes it clear that non-Israelites and eunuchs are not allowed to enter the temple. Leviticus 21 bans anyone who is blind, disfigured, or physically disabled in any way (Lev 21:16-20).3

3 See also the bizarre story in 2 Sam 5:6-8 about David’s hatred of “the blind and the lame,” apparently told to explain the practice of excluding them from the temple precinct.

Disciples of Christ children in Mbandaka, Democratic Republic of Congo, wave palm branches to greet a delegation of Disciples from Indiana. There are more Disciples in Congo than any place else in the world, including the United States and Canada. Most of the roughly 750,000 Disciples in Congo are children and youth. More than six million Congolese have died in an on-again, off-again civil war that has lasted more than a decade, as foreign and domestic militias and armies vie for control of Congo’s rich mineral deposits. Congo has, for example, more than 2/3 of the world’s coltan, an essential mineral in the production of cell phone and computer chips. Militias and foreign companies make hundreds of millions in profits, while most Congolese suffer in poverty. Mass rape has become a standard tactic of war. On Easter Sunday 2010, rebels captured the Mbandaka airport and some government buildings. In the fighting that ensued, Disciples churches celebrating Easter were caught in the crossfire. One church member was shot and killed in church during worship. Our Disciples Mission Fund dollars support a variety of ministries of the Disciples community in Congo. We fund health care, rape counseling, AIDS prevention, education, agricultural projects, economic development, and pastoral and evangelistic programs. Everytime you make a call or surf the web, say a prayer for our brothers and sisters in Congo. Photo by Rick Lowery.
Isaiah 56, written at the end of Babylonian exile, when people are rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple (sometime after 520 B.C.E.), envisions a rebuilt temple that is open to all:

“Don’t let the foreigner joined to Yahweh4 say, ‘Yahweh will surely separate me from God’s people.’ Don’t let the eunuch say, ‘I’m just a dry tree.’ For thus says Yahweh to the eunuchs who keep my sabbath, who hold fast to my covenant: ‘I will give, inside my temple, within my walls, a power and a name5 that is better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will never be cut off.’ As for the foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh, to love the name of Yahweh, and to be his servants... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.’ Thus says my lord Yahweh, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, ‘I will gather others to them, besides those already gathered’” (Isa 56:3-8).

Judging by the scripture he quotes as he “cleanses” the temple, Jesus apparently thinks the temple should reflect a radical Isaiah 56 kind of religion that stands in stark contrast to the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The world of Roman imperial power was built on a strict hierarchy that valued people according to their carefully defined social status. People were divided by wealth, gender, birth order, nationality, and, most importantly, by whether they were slave or free. Jesus and the early Christian community following his lead envision a world where these distinctions are finally unimportant, where “dividing walls” crumble, and all are welcome to join together in the household of God.

This vision of a radically inclusive community is underlined by a brief but powerful statement that is often overlooked in this passage. In v 14, Matthew says: “And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them.” Explicitly excluded by scripture from entering the temple, the blind and the lame come to Jesus in the temple! And he heals them there!

4 As we discussed in an earlier Bible study, Yahweh is the proper name for God in the Hebrew Bible. Before the time of Jesus, a tradition developed that the name should not be pronounced. So whenever they saw “Yahweh” in the text, they substituted the word ‘Adonay, “my lord.” Most English translations honor that ancient Jewish tradition by translating Yahweh as “the LORD.” In interfaith contexts, it usually is inappropriate to verbalize the name. Substitute “God” or “the Lord” or “the Holy One.” At the end of this particular passage, we have evidence that the writers of the Hebrew Bible did not substitute ‘adonay for Yahweh, because the two words appear side by side: “my lord Yahweh.”

5 The phrase here is yad vashem. The yad is the forearm and hand, metaphorically your power to do things. Va is the connecting word, “and.” Shem is “name.” It’s your reputation, your legacy. Yed vashem is your power and your legacy. This passage is the source of the name of the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

Pandemonium breaks out. Children are running everywhere in the temple, crying out, “Hosanna to the son of David!” The officials are outraged. “Do you hear what they are saying?” “Yes,” Jesus says, “Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of children and nursing infants, you have prepared yourself praise.’”

With that, Jesus leaves the temple and goes to spend the night in the village of Bethany. But his guerilla theatre in the temple that day set in motion the events that will finally lead to his execution by the Romans for the crime of high treason. He has publicly attacked the whole social order of finely crafted distinctions that keep everyone in their proper place. He has publicly embraced the radical vision of a community where divisions don’t keep people apart, where all the outcasts are invited inside to dine. The imperialists and their supporters were right to consider this message a threat to their power.

The church today operates in a world that often pits us against one another, that creates and maintains dividing walls that keep us apart. Divided by class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, the human race is fragmented, broken. On this Palm and Passion Sunday, we who claim to follow Jesus are called to reflect on his triumphal entry and symbolic act on the temple mount. We are called to envision a faith and a world where outcasts are gathered to a house of prayer for all people.

Questions

Are there ways that we as a church are less welcoming than we should be?

What are some things we do that well express the vision of Isaiah 56 and Jesus?

Who are the “foreigners” and “eunuchs” today? The “blind and the lame”? How might we as a church “gather them in” as we have been gathered in by God, though we are flawed?

The children and the crowd cry, “Hosanna!” “Save!” How does the church need “saving”? How does the world need “saving”? What part, if any, do we play in that?

6 Ps 8:2.