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# SCRIPTURE, NARRATIVE, AND LITURGICAL REFLECTION: A THREE-LEGGED MODEL FOR LITURGICAL PREACHING

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## ABSTRACT

### SCRIPTURE, NARRATIVE, AND LITURGICAL REFLECTION: A THREE-LEGGED MODEL FOR LITURGICAL PREACHING

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In a world where the church is undergoing rapid changes, those who preach regularly struggle to identify how to preach well. In 2014, Bishop Eugene Sutton suggested that Episcopal parishes must emphasize worshiping well in the face of demographic changes, and he proposed a three-legged stool of liturgical worship: liturgy, music, and preaching. This project attempts to answer his call by identifying excellent preaching in the liturgical tradition, and how it faces various challenges brought on by changes in culture and lack of catechesis. At Fred Craddock's Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1978, he emphasized the preacher as one who acknowledges people's knowledge of the Christian story. By 2009, Tom Long observed this was no longer applicable.

A liturgical sermon is unique in that it belongs to the larger work of the liturgy. When preached ineffectively, a sermon comes off like a "liturgical interruption." When preached well, a liturgical sermon links scripture and proclamation to sacramental action and prayers. Borrowing from Karl Barth, liturgical preachers accomplish this by going into the pulpit with Bible, newspaper, and prayer book in hand. Drawing on each of these allows for a synthesis so a sermon may be more like the liturgy to which it belongs. It allows those who listen multiple ways of connecting to the liturgy, the scriptures of the day, and the stories of life.

Based on Richard Hooker's three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, and in keeping with the practical three-legged stool of Bishop Sutton, this paper identifies a practical three-legged stool of Scripture, Narrative, and Liturgical Reflection. Examples are found specifically in the preaching of Fleming Rutledge and Hans Urs von Balthasar. By identifying and describing liturgical preaching this way, a preacher can more easily understand and emulate excellent preaching in this tradition. The goal in doing so is not to create homiletical excellence *per se*, but to make the claims of the sermon accessable to those who worship, to bring people nearer to the sacraments on multiple levels in order to bring them closer to the means of grace.

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Introduction and Statement of Problem

In a 2014 sermon, Bishop Eugene Sutton (Episcopal Diocese of Maryland) reflected on issues of declining membership, spiritual malaise, and a lack of vision that has plagued Mainline Protestant denominations. His description of the decline was predictable, though his vision for the Episcopal Church (and traditions like it) was unique. *Our first call is to worship well*. He cites Matthew's narrative of the resurrection, of Jesus' instructions to go to the mountain in Galilee, where his disciples worshipped him before he sent them into all the world.[1] This, Bishop Sutton claims, is a foundational image that teaches us the importance of worship in times of uncertainty and doubt. [2] The bishop's sermon ends with both challenge and proposal:

> The problem for [liturgical churches] is *not* that we are neurotically and unhelpfully fixated on music and liturgy. Rather, the problem from an evangelical and church growth stance is that we are not focused *enough* on worship. Good worship consists of its own "three legged stool": music, liturgy and preaching. Each leg of that stool is important, and if one of them is weak, the others will not be able to stand for long. The truth is no matter how earnestly a church may pour itself into serving its community … *if the preaching is uninspiring, the liturgy sloppy, or the music barely listenable, then that church* will *shrink and may have to close its doors as a worshiping community.* This means that growing churches … are going to have to insist that their clergy spend more time, effort, and training on becoming good preachers, not settling for mediocre preaching. Ultimately, the reason for this turn, or "return," to worship isn't … to make us "feel" good, or to achieve some vague spiritual high. The reason [we] must focus on worship is

[2] Eugene Sutton, "The Two Calls," accessed March 7, 2018, https://sedangli.wordpress.com/2014/06/24/decently-writ-xvii-a-sermon-by-the-rt-rev-eugene-taylor-sutton/. Citing Matt. 28:16, Sutton calls for the Episcopal Church to focus on the legacy of worship in the Anglican tradition, which has been overshadowed as of late by cultural wars.

> to prepare to make disciples of all nations. It is to take seriously the first call of Jesus before the great commission to "go to the mountain, see Jesus there, and worship him."[3]

Sutton offers a provocative and generative image of the elements of worship working in tandem, with a "practical three-legged stool" that invokes both priorities and intention. Those of us who stand in the pulpits of churches like his know how challenging it is for such synthesis to occur weekly. For preachers, there is the task of crafting and meaningful sermons Sunday after Sunday, striving for consequential preaching in a particular place and time. Preachers in every generation look for compelling ways of doing this, of attaining to a goal of excellent preaching. I suspect I join others in asking how best to attain to excellent preaching, particularly in a tradition relying heavily on scripture, liturgy, and sacrament.

The second challenge exists outside the pulpit. It is there that people engage sermons by listening and discerning meaning, and it is there that the task has grown increasingly complex. The year that I was born, Fred Craddock was encouraging preachers to understand how their listeners filled the pews each week with the Christian story safely in hand. Preaching needed to forego the temptation of simply telling the story to people who already knew it, he said, and instead it needed to engage the gospel more existentially. He harkened back to Kierkegaard and his observation that there was "no lack of information in a Christian land."[4] Now, years later, the state of affairs in the pews is variegated if not altogether different. Some know the stories of the gospel and understand the patterns of worship. Others have been raised in the church and speak Christian well enough to get by, but poor catechesis and irregular patterns of engagement mean that they lack the kind of fluency in Christianity that Craddock assumed forty years ago. To this

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Persons Who Have Already Heard* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 9-10.

we add those who know so little about Christian stories and practices that almost everything could well be explained anew. Tom Long looks back on the sea change that has occurred in the last forty years and observes how different the world is now than it was for the likes of Craddock and Kierkegaard, writing, "now there *is* a lack of information and it *isn't* a Christian land."[5]

Paul Scott Wilson also speaks of the changing needs of preaching derived from sweeping changes in culture: "Homiletics cannot avoid addressing facts like the decline in mainline church membership, newcomers with little or no church background; many philosophies, religions, and groups competing for an individual's interest, loyalty, and time; mass media altering how people think and the rules for good communication; and erosion of the authority of institutions and their representatives, including preachers."[6] There are not many givens in the pews today, and the preacher has to attend to various levels of fluency and familiarity with the Christian story.

In the liturgical tradition Bishop Sutton describes, preaching almost always occurs in the structure of a prescribed liturgy. This means the rhythm of the liturgy and of common prayer assumes predictable liturgical components that precede and follow preaching. Scripture, liturgy, homilies, prayers, and sacraments live together in each act of worship. Each worshipper has the opportunity to connect to the divine through various means, but it also means that much more is offered to each person than just what is proclaimed from the pulpit. Cultural shifts have not only affected how people are prepared to hear a sermon, but also how they might experience and understand the various claims made throughout the liturgy, or how they might fail to experience and understand such claims. Common prayer no longer means similar assumptions.

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[5] Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 9.

[6] Paul Scott Wilson, "Biblical Studies and Preaching," in *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture*, edited by Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 146.

At its best, preaching in liturgical contexts helps to connect all of these elements so that everyone engaged in the act of common worship can worship fully. At its worst, it can come off like a clumsy interruption amidst liturgical formulations, scriptures, and prayers. With Bishop Sutton's proposal in mind, we might agree that preaching is a matter of life and death for the future of the church, though we must also describe and articulate what we mean by excellent preaching, especially in the face of the present challenges that face the church. Preachers must consider the sea change from Craddock to Long and proclaim the gospel in a world that is no longer so easily described as Christian, and in churches where catechism cannot be assumed.

This paper explores excellence in preaching in order to respond to the new realities that face the church. Particular attention is given to the task in terms of Tom Long's claim, that we are in a world where little can be assumed in terms of faith formation and catechesis. This work explores the particular hallmarks of liturgical preaching in order to identify how a sermon—situated alongside scripture, common prayer, and sacrament—can engage people in a way that helps them to worship more fully.

To anticipate the argument, I will first suggest we think of sermons as an essential part of sacramental action. Second, I will explore how liturgical preaching functions with its own unique assumptions and resources. Third, I will suggest a three-legged stool of liturgical preaching that consists of scripture, narrative, and liturgical reflection, exploring how these elements coexist in the sermons of two exceptional preachers. Finally, I create and evaluate seven sermons with this three-legged stool in mind. The approach identified here will not solve all the challenges facing homiletics in the contemporary world. It should, however, prove useful to preachers who seek to engage changing realities, chiefly (but not limited to) those who preach in a liturgical tradition. That liturgical tradition, in turn, reminds us that preaching is about more than knowledge; it is an essential part of the church's sacramental celebration and the unseen grace that they offer. In this

era of dramatic change, Bishop Sutton suggests a vision of liturgy, music, and preaching that are excellent. This project attempts to attain to such a vision of preaching in a real, concrete way.

Uninterrupted Liturgy: Against Dualism in Word and Sacrament

History and tradition suggest that preaching is fundamental to the function of worship. Justin Martyr thought of preaching as the imitation of noble things that leads to Eucharist.[7] Augustine thought preaching should inform, delight, and persuade.[8] Cranmer wanted people to understand sermons as they understood worship, and the Oxford Movement viewed homiletics as a means to recover devotion. Each of these reminds us how preaching is essential in liturgical worship. Sometimes, however, despite the best of liturgy and music, the sermon comes and we press pause on worship. *The preacher comments on how difficult the scriptures are. He talks about what his family did during the week, trying to relate to the scriptures. The homilist extols a new windmill farm in Scotland,*[9] *making mention of a discussion on NPR.* These scenarios are not just imaginable but they happen, and sometimes the sermon can disrupt the flow of worship.

Robert Waznak, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, calls this a liturgical interruption. "In the early 1960s some liturgists were referring to the homily as an 'interruption' in the liturgy rather than an integral part of it."[10] Worrying about people's ignorance, some saw the liturgy as a platform for doctrinal instruction. Others saw it as unnecessary when the *Zeitgeist* focused on the renewal of liturgy. Under these circumstances, he suggests, the sermon became

[7] Don Saliers, "Worship," in Miller- McLemore *Companion to Practical Theology* (Maulden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 289.

[8] Augustine, *De doctrina Christina*, Book IV.

[9] This is not an imagined scenario, but was the subject of an entire sermon I heard while visiting a historical Episcopal church in Boston. That sermon was a catalyst for this project.

[10] Robert Waznak, S.S., *An Introduction to the Homily* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 18.

"an 'interruption' in the liturgy."[11] Protestants, too, have struggled to imagine how sermons live alongside sacraments after centuries of worship centered on preaching. Sermon and sacrament have different identities, and we often juxtapose them into a dualistic encounter.[12]

The opposite of this dichotomy is to say that sermon and liturgy are of the same essence. R. H. Fuller writes, "the liturgical sermon announces the action of God which is to occur in and through the whole Eucharistic action, including and culminating in the communion of the people… to renew in the individual members the sense that they are members of the *ecclesia*, constituted as such by the redemptive act of God in Christ."[13] Fuller also calls this unity necessary because, "divorced from its proper context in liturgical action, preaching… becomes intellectualism, moralism, or emotionalism."[14]

Todd Townsend says preaching and sacrament "share a 'deep' theological structure… and the deep theological dynamic structure of preaching not only coheres with the deep structure of sacrament, it is identical."[15] He suggests that the sermon exists somewhere "between the font and altar,"[16] and it is preaching that makes sense of the journey from baptism to Eucharist. Jesuit priest Otto Semmelroth echoes this by describing the homily and sacramental action as a "single work" with "complementary functions."[17] Mary Collins suggests, "the church's conviction (is) that the homily is a constitutive element of the eucharistic praxis."[18] Each of these helps both preacher and worshiper to envision the sermon as deeply important to the liturgical action.

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[11] Ibid., ix.
[12] Todd Townshend, *The Sacramentality of Preaching* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 21.
[13] Reginald H. Fuller, *What is Liturgical Preaching? (*London: SCM Press, 1957), 52.
[14] Ibid., 10.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Townshend, 13.
[17] Otto Simmelroth, *Church and Sacrament*, trans., Emily Schossberger (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1965), 41.
[18] Mary Collins, O.S.B., "Liturgical Homily: Connecting the Body," *Eucharist: Toward the Third Millenium*, ed. Gerard Austin (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1997), 88.

A nuanced perspective comes from Wilfried Engemann, who offers an image of the "singleness of Word and sacrament,"[19] that extends a Table image to the sermon. He suggests that a Eucharistic context reminds us that we speak not only of God, but that we are speaking to God, because Christ sits at Table with us. The early church knew nothing of the division of Word and Sacrament, he says. *Eucharistie und Verkuendigung* were an inseparable union of Agape.[20]

Beyond a theological marriage of sermon and sacrament, homiletics can help make sense of liturgical action. John Baldovin offers a helpful definition, that liturgical preaching, "is not about preaching in general but rather about the homily in the context of liturgical celebration."[21] He claims a sermon is part of the broader sacramental action. "When one preaches liturgically," he writes, "people should have some sense of why we proceed to make Eucharist, to witness marriage vows, to baptize, etc."[22] To him, moving beyond dualism of sermon and sacrament is essential on both sides. Not only does the sermon rely on the sacrament, but the sacrament also relies on proclamation in order to make sense of it, for those in the pulpit as well as in the pew.

From Philosophy to Practice: Imagining a Liturgical Sermon

I begin with a sentiment that is echoed wherever preaching is discussed: "Those of us still living in the shadow of Karl Barth whisper the subject, anxious that his ghost may rise to threaten us."[23] No discussion of modern homiletics can proceed without referencing images shaped by Barth. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, at the time of his retirement,

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[19] Wilfried Engemann, *Einfuehrung in die Homiletik* (Tuebingen und Basil: A. Franke Verlag, 2002), 399-400. Author's translation.

[20] Ibid., 398-9.

[21] John Baldovin, S.J., "The Nature and Function of the Liturgical Homily," *The Way: Supplement* (Spring, 1990): 93-94.

[22] Ibid., 94.

[23] Fred Craddock, "The Gospel of God," in Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley, eds., *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 78.

offered a word of advice for his successor. Calling Barth "the greatest theologian of the twentieth century," he reminded Justin Welby, "you have to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."[24] This advice permeates homiletics, from professors to archbishops to pastors; few practitioners of homiletics ignore this as foundational in approaching preaching.

For an investigation of liturgical preaching, it is worth exploring how Barth conceived this unity of proclamation and sacrament. "By reference to baptism and Communion," he wrote, "the origin and aim of preaching [and] the course it pursues, are more clearly defined; the place of the messenger of the word is more plainly seen."[25] "The preacher may point to the sacrament on the one hand and holy Scripture on the other."[26] With this also considered alongside Barth's image of Bible and newspaper, we may envision a new image of the preacher's task. Liturgical preachers go into the pulpit with a Bible in one hand, and with the newspaper and a prayer book in the other. The preacher is tasked with making sense of the scriptures, the stories of life, and also of making sense of liturgical action. The rhythm of the church year, movements of the lectionary, and making sense of the actual words of the liturgy itself on a particular day (moving to font, altar, or some other sacramental rite), fall to the preacher in helping worshipers to make sense of liturgical action. As mentioned previously, this is no small task when parishioners bring with them such a varied corpus of religious understanding. Paul Scott Wilson describes this challenge regarding biblical literacy, though I would extend it also to the fullness of the liturgy:

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[24] Rowan Williams, "Archbishop: My successor needs a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other," accessed March 5, 2018, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2686/archbishop-my-successor-needs-a-newspaper-in-one-hand-and-a-bible-in-the-other.

[25] Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 12.

[26] Ibid., 28.

"Scholars in homiletics are in general agreement concerning Barth's error. The preacher cannot assume to have a biblically literate or even interested congregation."[27]

In the pulpit each Sunday, homiletics is not a philosophy but a practice. Making sense of liturgical action alongside scripture and story might begin as a theoretical proposal, but it also moves us, "from a philosophy of preaching to a practice of preaching,"[28] in order to explore how we engage observations about preaching in a liturgical context practically. In the Anglican tradition, Richard Hooker's image of the three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason, has shaped theology as well as thought and action. It suggests a complexity and interdependence of religious aspects, which extends to preaching. Conceived as such, his image offers us a way of "practicing" liturgical preaching in a practical way. This allows the preacher to go into the pulpit and attempt to make sense of scripture, newspaper, and prayer book, all in a cohesive way.

Building on the three-legged stool images of both Hooker and Sutton, I suggest that there is a practical stool of liturgical preaching that consists of *scripture, narrative,* and *liturgical reflection*. The combination of these three components offers cohesion that is important in liturgical preaching, and it also engages that which is already present in worship. Evidence of this particular combination exists in the sermons of notable liturgical preachers, among them Fleming Rutledge and Hans Urs von Balthasar. It was particularly in Rutledge's *The Undoing of Death* where I saw this model most clearly. Her sermons rely chiefly on scripture, but they engage the listener through means of narrative, both the *newspaper* narratives of Barth as well as through the use of *story*. To this she adds liturgical reflection. She often makes sense of the season or day wondering why the movements of the lectionary and the Church Calendar inform

[27] Paul Scott Wilson, "Biblical Studies and Preaching," in Long and Farley, 146.
[28] Darrell W. Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 103.

the way in which we hear a scripture. Sometimes she simply engages formulations from the *Book of Common Prayer* or words of a hymn in order to advance an idea.

Evidence exists outside the liturgical tradition, though here it is seen in how scripture, news, and story are crafted together in sermons that do not usually include liturgical reflection. An excellent example is Paul Scott Wilson's *The Four Pages of the Sermon*,[29] where he moves from scripture to narrative, again to scripture, and finally to another narrative form. Walter Brueggemann, as another example, follows the lectionary closely and helps his listener understand the scriptures with news or narrative, but he usually stops short of liturgical exploration. Such preachers are helpful in our quest for excellent liturgical preaching, though we rely on them for assistance in engaging scripture and narrative, with additional liturgical reflection still necessary.

## The Three-Legged Stool: Scripture, Narrative, and Liturgical Reflection

As we explore a three-legged stool of liturgical preaching, I am mindful I am proposing something of a unified whole, but also with separate parts. On the one hand, there are individual characteristics belonging to each constituent leg, but on the other hand there is a mutual function and identity that precludes separate identity. Paul Avis suggests that all things in the Anglican tradition rely on an "essence of synthesis." Synthesis "stands for 'the love of balance, restraint, moderation, measure' (P.E.More)," while also invoking, "vision, passion, and risk."[30] A hallmark of my own liturgical tradition, I suggest we should see synthesis as a tool in articulating multiple components in a single sermon. Synthesis allows for balance in the face of risk, and it

[29] Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1999).
[30] Paul Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 28-9.

allows for passion in the face of restraint. It is not only that the whole is the sum of its parts, but the whole allows us to see each differently. Synthesis is at the heart of this model of preaching.

The first leg of liturgical preaching is based on scripture. Susan Karen Hedahl calls it, "the ancient intermediary of preaching: scriptural texts. It is this cache of words that bears most preaching. It is the collection of writings that inescapably sits at the heart of all homiletical meaning-making, explicitly or implicitly."[31] Like the questions asked at a Seder dinner, scripture is read so that preacher and congregation may ask together, "what does this mean?" Brent Strawn, harkening to Deuteronomy's ideal of a good king, says that the preacher functions as the "designated reader"[32] for the liturgy, and thus reads and interprets on behalf of all who worship. A preacher functions as the one to whom the immediate task falls to interpret and make meaning.

Scripture is the heritage of the liturgical tradition, and it drives the Liturgy of the Word. Hedahl begins with the recognition that scripture is always a part of liturgical worship, whether articulated or not. Good preaching discovers an apt way of acknowledging and appreciating this relationship. Beginning with scripture does not mean that a sermon becomes "Bible-based," to use the language of modern evangelicals, but it is to appreciate the foundational role of scripture, not just in doctrine or catechisms, but as it exists fundamentally in worship. There are occasions when a liturgical preacher will rely very subtly on the readings for the day. There are also reasons for differentiating the voice of a liturgical preacher from the ways in which other traditions use scripture, but proclamation is always bound to scripture in a liturgical context.

The second leg of the stool is narrative, which we can separate into *newspaper* and *story narrative*. Both bring the stories of human life into the sacred space of worship, though they do

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[31] Susan Karen Hedahl, "All the King's Men: Constructing Homiletical Meaning," in Long and Farley.

[32] Brent A. Strawn, "Designated Readers: Deuteronomy's Portrait of the Ideal King—or Is it Preacher?"*Journal for Preachers* 32 (2008): 35-40.

this differently. *Newspaper narrative*, following the language of Barth, suggests making sense of current events and issues on the minds and hearts of parishioners. *Story narrative* expresses human experience. It tells the story of a person nearby or holds up the life of one separated by time or space. Including both of these is also an act of engagement: the pews are full of stories.

Guerric DeBona writes, "Narrational preaching is not simply a matter of telling this story and that … a homily that weaves a narrative plot that exalts God's wonderful works in human history and connects this divine activity with everyday life already suggests that a story is at work in the lives of men and women."[33] Mary Catherine Hilkert writes, "Part of the power of narrative preaching derives from the insight that life's most powerful experiences can be shared only in and through personal testimony. Hearing the story of human pain or rejoicing gives access to an experience where abstract description and analysis fails. Precisely because of this ability of stories to communicate experiences that exceed the boundaries of other human language, many would claim today that narrative is the most appropriate, even the necessary category for the holy within the limits of human experience."[34] With this perspective in hand, we can extend narrative to include more than just news and stories, but also metaphor, satire and poetry. Roger Spillers, on the Executive Board of the College of Preachers, encourages preachers to pair the scripture with "the artistic idiom of story, song, praise as well as satire and mockery."[35] Brueggemann encourages the use of poetry "that speaks against a prose world."[36] They remind us that narrative in a sermon has many faces and can be engaged in many ways.

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[33] Guerric DeBona, OSB, *Fulfilled in our Hearing: History and Method of Christian Preaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 102.

[34] Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacrimental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 96-97.

[35] Roger Spiller, "Preaching and Liturgy: An Anglican Perspective," in *The Future of Preaching*, ed. Geoffrey Stevenson (London: SCM Press, 2010), 38. Here Spiller is referencing Bruggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 1989. Spiller consolidates Bruggemann's ideas, encouraging preachers to "reengage the prevailing worldview."

One final point is that narrative can be the driving force of a sermon, or it can be made up of vignettes that undergird a point. The kind of narrative offered will often determine how and when it is engaged. John Claypool often set the stage of his sermons by introducing a longer narrative, one to which he returned multiple times in order to make meaning. Fred Craddock, by contrast, mastered the use of short narratives, often gathered toward the end of a sermon in order to reinforce his point. Andreas Egli identifies four different types of story telling: extremely short narrative points, short narratives, longer narratives, and extremely long narratives.[37] Each, he says, function differently and must be used differently. The shorter the narrative, as in the case of Craddock's vignettes, the more the sermon must already make the theological point, and the narrative can only bring a thought or story to mind. An extremely long narrative, by contrast, can be the driving point of the sermon. This was true for Claypool's art, and Egli reminds us that such longer narratives can be broken up in order to make sense of each facet thereof.[38]

The final leg of the stool is liturgical reflection. This consists of three elements: reflection on the sacrament celebrated, making sense of the calendar or lectionary, and the use of liturgical language to give life to the sermon. In *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: the Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, the National Catholic Conference of Bishops' offers a helpful definition: "The Preacher's purpose will be to turn to these Scriptures to interpret people's lives in such a way that they will be able to celebrate Eucharist—or be reconciled with God and with one another; or

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[36] Walter Bruggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Mineapolis: Fortress, 1989), 3. Here, Bruggemann uses the ideas of poet more liberally than I am using them, though he does suggest the crafting of words and ideas in more poetic ways that help to engage and move the listener.

[37] Andreas Egli, *Erzaehlung in der Predigt: Untersuchung zu Form und Leistungsfaehigkeit erzaehlender Sprache in der Predigt* (Zuerich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995), 107 ff, author's translation. Egli identifies extremely short narrative points as having 1-2 sentences, short narratives as having 3-8 sentences, long narratives as having 9-32 sentences, and extremely long narratives as having 33-128 sentences.

[38] Egli, 111. By his math, a narrative with 65 or more sentences must be broken up in order to make sense. His observations in the book are derived from recordings of Swiss radio preaching.

be baptized into the Body of Christ, depending on the particular liturgy that is being celebrated."[39] That is the first goal of liturgical reflection: to enable those listening to worship fully at the particular liturgy of the day. A liturgical sermon makes sense of the larger action of a worshiping community.

A second goal of liturgical reflection is to make sense of the day or season, or how the scriptures relate to the broader movements of the church. In a practical way, we might admit that we use liturgical words like Advent, Transfiguration, or Ordinary Time in ways that assume more knowledge than is actually present. Encounter with the liturgical calendar is normative in liturgical traditions, but so often the prayers, scriptures, and hymns point to a liturgical reality that a sermon must clarify. It is not enough to say that Advent is about waiting, but rather to understand that claim, both for someone familiar with it and for someone unfamiliar with it. In a similar way, the lectionary crafts the delivery of scriptures across the liturgical year, but sometimes it is incumbent on the preacher to make sense of the flow. This also allows the preacher to make sense of the larger narrative of scripture, by reminding the listeners of what was heard last week, or by anticipating the direction in which the scriptures will go.

The final means of liturgical reflection is found in employing the liturgy outside of its prescribed place. Perhaps borrowing a line from the Eucharistic Prayer will help the listener to engage its celebration better. Perhaps quoting a prayer will take a familiar phrase and give life to something less-closely related. Using words and phrases from baptism, Eucharist, burial, or from the collects and prayers, offers a poetic means of liturgical cross-pollination. Another advantage of sermons that reflect on or incorporate liturgy is that the liturgy helps them resist being only anthropomorphic. So many images of the divine rely on human experience, but it is possible that the words of the liturgy can lead listeners beyond human reality into the nearer realm of God.

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[39] Waznak, *An Introduction to the Homily*, 13-14.

This also keeps the words of liturgy from becoming too distant or stale. By considering phrases of the liturgy in a sermon, the preacher protects the liturgy from becoming what Bonhoeffer calls "cultic language."[40] Bonhoeffer's true concern was with a false objectivity of the words of the liturgy, a concern of *ex opere operato* (that which works without being worked), but engaging liturgy outside of its prescribed place helps to avoid cultic language on the whole. A willingness to utilize these words in the sermon—spoken, with reflection, and perhaps thereby giving new meaning—allows them to operate as a homiletical device. This also enables new reflection upon them, once the sermon is finished, when they are met in the liturgy.

Examples of this three-legged stool exist in the work of many preachers. Fleming Rutledge's sermons provide an excellent starting point to see how scripture, narrative, and liturgical reflection can be used together. In a sermon for Palm Sunday, "A Procession of Fools,"[41] she begins by reflecting on the tradition of Palm Sunday processions, how they have played out in history, and how our participation in them today might seem silly. She references two hymns, "All Glory Laud and Honor" and "Ride on! Ride on in Majesty," and explores the texts of these hymns often sung on Palm Sunday. Next she moves to the gospel, exploring how Jesus knew that he would be betrayed into the hands of sinners, yet he pursued it willingly. After exploring Matthew's version of the crucifixion and the forsakenness of Jesus, she moves to I Cor. and the idea of human foolishness, linking the Palm Sunday procession with Christ's final helpless cries from the cross. She then offers stories about willing victims who have persuaded humanity, including stories of the American Civil Rights movement and Nelson Mandela, arguing that each persuaded us while looking foolish. Finally, she returns to the Palm Sunday

[40] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, edited and translated by Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 140.

[41] Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 26-35.

procession, claiming that it helps us to understand the foolishness of God alive in us. In this she engages each leg of the stool, and she also connects them and moves easily from one to another.

The preaching of Hans Urs von Balthasar offers an example of how a preacher can make sense of a particular day or season in the Christian year. His sermons are full of scripture, dogma, and philosophy, but they connect back through liturgical reflection. At the end of his sermon on Ascension, he says, "In conclusion, we see how profoundly the Feast of the Ascension is woven into the totality of Christian celebrations: it is the conclusion and result of Jesus' entire earthly activity, from his conception and birth, via his public ministry, to his Passion and Resurrection. At the same time it heralds the period of his presence, in his Holy Spirit, in the Church: the Ascension is a direct prelude to the Feast of Pentecost, which fulfills the promise of God's program for the world."[42] Again he says, "Today the Lord leaves this world and returns to the light of the eternal Father. But nothing could be further from this Feast of the Ascension than a mood of resignation. In the almost precipitate succession of feasts between Easter and Pentecost and onto Trinity and Corpus Christi, the Feast of the Ascension is one of the most joyful."[43]

Preaching on Trinity Sunday, he says, "Today's feast joins the others, not as the recalling of some particular, recondite mystery that needs to be brought to mind once a year, but as the sum of them all—Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost—allowing us to see together, in a unity, what up to now we saw as a colorful spectrum of broken light."[44] He begins on Corpus Christi by parsing the meaning of the Feast, *Fronleichnam*, concerning the Lord's body. "Understanding the feast and what its name means serves as a foundation on which the

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[42] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Exalted Lord's Care for the World," *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Sermons through the Liturgical Year* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 128.
[43] Von Balthasar, "The Threefold Presence of Christ," 128-9.
[44] Von Balthasar, "God is 'Being With'," 141.

sermon grows, how bodies are important, how the Word did not become Spirit but the Word became Flesh, and that Flesh invades us with the Word of God."[45]

The Project at Hand: Seven Sermons Using the Three-Legged Stool

Having explored the meaning of liturgical preaching and how others have engaged this formulary, we move to the practical aspect of this paper, my own exploration of how this three-legged stool of liturgical preaching might be used. In what follows, I engage scripture, narrative, and liturgy, and I explore how they can improve preaching. Sermons have been crafted with this approach in mind, stretching from Eastertide to Advent, 2017. Each sermon is evaluated using parameters suggested by David Buttrick according to his moves of the sermon,[46] and identifying how scripture, narrative, and/ or liturgical reflection are used. Based on the author's experience and limited listener feedback, each sermon is evaluated by both its successes and its challenges.

All of the sermons were preached at the parish where I serve. The Parish of the Good Shepherd is one of seven Episcopal parishes in Newton, Mass., and relies on a liturgical practice that is *High Church* or *Anglo-Catholic*. Good Shepherd is one of a few *High Church* Episcopal parishes in Boston, and has self-identified as Anglo-Catholic for decades. [47] This tradition notwithstanding, preaching at Good Shepherd has not followed in the path of many other *Anglo-Catholic* homilies. The previous rector had great success with longer sermons. His narrative preaching became an integral part of Eucharist services. While his practice of liturgy was consistently *High Church* or *Anglo-Catholic*, his practice of homiletics was not. His sermons averaged twenty minutes, and they were filled with stories and references to lived experience,

[45] Von Balthasar, "Flesh Becomes Word,"146-150.
[46] David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).
[47] John Bassett, "Church of the Good Shepherd, Waban," in *The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts 1784-1984* edited by Mark J. Duffey (Boston: Diocese of Massachusetts, 1984).

relating to scripture readings in less didactic ways.[48] By the end of Welch's twenty-three year tenure, Good Shepherd had an identity that was deeply rooted in the *Anglo-Catholic* practice of liturgy and ritual, but combined with a more *Low Church* practice of preaching. For this reason, it is noteworthy that Good Shepherd established its own "preaching tradition" at a parish that identifies otherwise as *Anglo-Catholic*. It is in this particular context that all sermons were preached, and it is for this reason that some references to the liturgy in Rite I of the *Book of Common Prayer* were readily understood and embraced.

Sermon I

The first sermon[49] was preached on the third Sunday of Easter, 2017. The scriptural base was Luke 24: 13-35, the narrative of two men on the road to Emmaus. The narrative component explored a television series called "Undercover Boss," a series in which the CEO of a company takes a menial job in his or own company. The liturgical reflection was based on the Eastertide *Confractorium* (the anthem sung at the breaking of the bread) sung during the season of Easter.

The sermon begins with narrative, with a description of "Undercover Boss." In each episode, there is the intentional masking of a CEO, followed by his or her work in a menial job in the company, resolving with new understanding and transformation on the part of the CEO. I make reference to the first episode of "Undercover Boss," where the CEO of Waste Management goes undercover and drives the trash truck. The language of being unrecognized and working with trash sets the stage, exploring the places and "dumpsters" of life, how transformation comes in the masking and later in the recognition of Christ in the Easter narratives. The second move involves Luke's gospel. The use of scripture is three-fold: the mystery of Christ' presence during

[48] Good Shepherd has an audio archive of his sermons from the last ten years of his tenure, allowing their preservation and investigation.

[49] Appendix, 40.

his ministry, the lack of recognition of Jesus in the Emmaus narrative, and the recognition that comes in the breaking of the bread. I explore the lack of recognition in the life of Christ, beginning in Jesus' interactions with Pharisees and Sadducees, and using this as a bridge to explore the lack of recognition that is common in the resurrection narratives.

The third move is liturgical reflection. It begins by extending the recognition of Christ from the Easter narratives into our world, suggesting that recognizing Christ in our world is an ongoing task for the church. Here, the Easter *Confractorium*[50] is introduced, *be known to us in the breaking of the bread*, but it quickly incorporates the narrative of the sermon, suggesting that we also find Christ among the trash heaps of life. "Whether you are the CEO or the trash truck driver, some days we are all left with the dumpsters of life."

The fourth move of the sermon stays with liturgical reflection, and it considers Bishop Jeffrey Lee's understanding of sacraments, that they reveal what is already true. The fifth move of the sermon returns to the narrative of "Undercover Boss," but here it explores how episodes are resolved. The unmasking of the CEOs and their recognition of employees is linked to the Emmaus Road narrative, as Christ was unmasked as one who had been assigned to the trash heap of life but then revealed to have lived beyond it.

Three liturgical elements conclude the sermon. The first is a prayer of fidelity, from the marriage office, implying fidelity between Christ and humanity. The second is the Eastertide *Confractorium*, *be known to us Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread*. The third incorporates a quote from Eucharistic Prayer C. The sermon concludes with a blending of all three elements:

> That Christ has deigned to come among us, we presume. But that he has climbed into the trash truck of life—the trash truck that most of us spend our lives trying not to have to drive!— and there he is with us: in our work and in our companionship, in our sleeping

> and in our waking, in our joys and in our sorrows, in our life and in our death. So today, pray as the Choir sings descriptively of what we encounter in this holy sacrament, *be known to us Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread.* And today, pray as the Choir sings instructively, as we leave the altar, *be known to us Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread*. And after you leave, pray every time the trash truck drives by, rushing through Waban at 80 MPH. *Be present with us Lord Jesus, our great High Priest, and be known to us as you were known to your disciples, in scripture and the breaking of the bread. Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen.*

It ends also with a prayerful move from worship to world. Bonhoeffer described this dual nature of gift and sending in homiletics as *Gabe und Aufgabe*, gift and assignment. "With this gift there is already the presupposition of the task."[51]

The success of this sermon came in its balanced use of scripture, narrative, and liturgy. It began with emphasis placed on the narrative (and a television reality show, at that), but it moved into a substantial reflection on the gospel reading, both the initial Easter experience as well as an indication of how people today continue to find Christ. The sermon incorporated elements of the liturgy, inspired by the Emmaus Road narrative in the continuing Eucharistic practice of the church. Not all Easter sermons are given such a gift, but Luke's Emmaus Road narrative is part of Eastertide, even on Sundays and in years when the gospel reading itself is not included.

The challenge of this sermon was that I attempted to do too much. Although the sermon included many liturgical reflections that were appropriate to the gospel reading and to the Easter season, it was clear in the delivery that too much was being offered. The reflections on Bishop Lee's understanding of sacraments came late in the sermon and lost much of the congregation. This was unfortunate, as the Emmaus Road story is one of recognizing what is already true, but

[51] Bonhoeffer, 150.

the reaction showed that this (at least as this sermon was delivered), had already given the listener enough to consider. Here, John Baldovin's reminder is accurate: the preacher must avoid the temptation of incorporating everything germane to the subject into a single sermon. "Everything cannot be accomplished all at once on a particular Sunday."[52]

Sermon II

The second sermon[53] was preached on Sunday, August 6, 2017. Transfiguration is a fixed day on the calendar, and it falls on Sunday every six or seven years. In the weeks leading up to it, I did informal survey work among parishioners that revealed most knew little about the day, especially regarding its place on the Calendar. This gave opportunity to explore the story of the Transfiguration alongside its celebration. The introduction begins by establishing the celebration of Transfiguration alongside a brief summary of the gospel story, placed together to establish the subject of the sermon. It moves quickly to liturgical reflection, exploring Transfiguration as a day otherwise surrounded by Ordinary Time, and with a gospel narrative that the RCL prescribes each year for the final Sunday before Lent. The second move is similar, exploring the history of this feast day through the centuries, and why it is celebrated on August 6th.

The third move incorporates the gospel and places its use as a preparation for Lent in keeping with the intentions of the gospel writers, as it usually exists in the RCL. This move ends by offering an opportunity to think differently about the story because of its occurrence in August: "There is no Christmas and Epiphany to put behind us, no Lent and Easter ahead; it is God's glory in the middle of times more ordinary. And perhaps therein lies the mystery."

[52] Baldovin, 99.
[53] Appendix, 45.

The third move explores Ordinary Time in two ways, both as it occurs in summer for us in the Northern Hemisphere, and as the scripture readings had led us through the summer until that point, with the stories of the Patriarchs in Genesis and with parables in the gospels. It ends with the suggestion that we learn to expect God to show up unexpectedly, not just at prescribed times like Christmas and Easter, but that often this experience leaves us like those included in the Transfiguration gospel, who departed saying nothing to anyone.

The fourth move included short, vignette-style stories, in the style of Fred Craddock[54]. Each of them was short enough to make a point, but without the need to explore the narratives individually. This section concludes with one sentence that makes sense of the common theme of these short narratives: "God's glory shows up in the midst of ordinary life, and it leaves us overwhelmed and silenced, and that ought to be celebrated."

The fourth move in this sermon returns to the gospel reading and explores something that is unique in Luke's telling of the Transfiguration, that Jesus describes his death as his *exodos*[55]. It also includes a reminder of something already explored in the narrative portion of the sermon, how the disciples heard this but were too overwhelmed for words.

The final move of this sermon is an exploration of II Peter 1:13-21. II Peter also uses *exodos* to describe the author's anticipated death or departure. This sermon explores that as a way in which Christ's death and crossing over are instructional for us, as they had been for Peter. It celebrates how II Peter suggests that the Transfiguration ended not in silence, but years later it engendered confidence. "But in the end, Peter's life had been so transformed and transfigured by that same glory, he wrote to friends in words of final celebration. He had heard the Voice on the

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[54] Indeed, as indicated in the sermon text, two came from Craddock himself.

[55] The NRSV renders *Exodos* as departure, while others render it death. Familiarity with the Greek word, as well as its link to the second book of the Hebrew scriptures, led me to believe that we could explore this idea with multiple meanings imputed in the single word.

mountain and it had changed his life forever. Just as the Voice had said, he had listened. He remembered the word. He was silent about it no more. He took one final chance to celebrate and give thanks before it was time for him to pass over."

The successes of this sermon begin with its ability to make sense of the Feast of the Transfiguration appearing on a Sunday in the summer. Conversations and reactions revealed that most have come to expect this gospel reading just before Lent, although this has only been the case in our tradition for approximately twenty years. Another success was the ability of liturgical reflection, as opposed to narrative, to be the guiding motif. Liturgical reflection here included the feast day as well as how the RCL uses the scriptures for the Transfiguration. Narrative was an important part of the sermon, but it came later and helped make sense of the scripture and liturgical reflection instead of guiding us into those elements. The short narratives were mainly left unexplained, in keeping with the idea that some experiences leave us with silence.

The challenge after this sermon was one of questioning what difference it made in the life of the listener. The sermon exhibited great effort in explaining why Transfiguration is on the Calendar and why its celebration continues, though it relies on a listener that is interested in liturgical practice and biblical literacy, something increasingly seldom in most churches.

Sermon III

The third sermon[56] was preached on August 20, 2017 (Year A, Proper 15). It came at a pivotal time in the summer, just after the Charlottesville protests that left one woman dead, and on the day after an "Alt Right" group rallied on the Boston Common. This was very much on the minds of both the preacher and the congregation. This sermon uses narrative as its guiding theme, which in this case is personal reflection of encountering racism and prejudice as a child.

[56] Appendix, 51.

The use of scripture is based on the gospel text, Matthew 15: 10-28. It recounts Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman, suggesting that his own *Sitz im Leben* might have caused him to view her with prejudice. The liturgical reflection in this sermon is much smaller, though it is important in the end. It relies on "the Comfortable Words," or scriptural affirmations of forgiveness that follow the Absolution in many Anglican prayer books.

The first move introduced a "newspaper" narrative, the expectation of a solar eclipse expected to cross the US the following day. This move set up the theme of darkness crossing our country, which was soon introduced as a theological realty instead of just a meteorological one. It included other front-page articles, such as the Charlottesville and Boston Common protests.

The second move was also narrative, but it was a personal reflection of childhood, specifically of encountering prejudice for the first time. This narrative pauses along the way in order to ask questions and make sense of it, concluding with a claim that related to the opening exploration of eclipses, that a shadow was still cast across our country.

The third move was sociological, and it was intended to help parishioners think about our *Sitz im Leben* in a wealthy and progressive city. It was also intended as a challenge to our *Sitz im Leben*, that right belief does not equal right action. It pushed back on the idea that we might be heroes simply by identifying differently than Neo-Nazis. The fourth move, also in the genre of "newspaper" narrative, focused on an e-mail from Emory University claiming that Nazi's had no place there. In keeping with the previous move, based on sociology, I challenged the idea that a university with a $6 Million endowment was doing much good by simply sending out e-mails.

The fifth move explored a similarity in the gospel's message, how Jesus was challenged by his own prejudice against the Canaanite woman who came to him for healing. This move challenges the listener with these words, "and Jesus— from whom you and I have learned the power of redemptive and relentless love— seems to accommodate an exclusive identity." It

resolves as the gospel does, with a resolution to this problem, again making reference to the eclipse. “Then in a moment of clarity, Jesus looks deep into the eyes of someone he presumes to be different than he is, and he sees in her the same faith in God that lives in him. Despite the shadows of darkness that have fallen around him, he is able to step out of that shadow and see in her something of God; he goes on to offer to her the hope and transformation of his holy gospel.”

The sixth move includes liturgical reflection. This section introduces the Comfortable Words, which are a part of the weekly Eucharist at Good Shepherd, usually heard as a scriptural assurance of God’s forgiveness. In this sermon, they speak differently. Here they move beyond words of comfort to words of distress, specifically in the sense that they render us equal to those from whom we believe ourselves to be different. Thomas Cranmer’s inclusion of the Comfortable Words in English prayer books is understood to be both comfort and challenge.

The final move returns to a “newspaper” narrative, a final exploration of the metaphor of darkness ending, as well as a brief quote from *The Sun*. “’Everyone wants to change the world, but nobody wants to help mom with the dishes.’ If we expect to attain to Christ’s work of enlightenment and comfort, perhaps we could add the task of doing the dishes.”

The strengths of this sermon lie mainly in its ability to explore major news events in a safe, theological way. The gospel reading assigned by the RCL was a perfect example of reaching across lines of division and prejudice. The first narrative symbol of the eclipse also added a gentle and philosophical way of exploring darkness, in addition to the second narrative of encountering prejudice directly.

The first challenge of this sermon regards its assessment of current events. I was critical of Emory University for issuing a statement regarding Nazi sympathizers, and though parishioners agreed in theory that my evaluation regarding universities with major endowments was correct, they also noted how our president had failed us in not issuing a simple statement

like this. The other challenge in this sermon regards the Comfortable Words, particularly whether this was a helpful effort in liturgical reflection, or if the sermon would have done well to concentrate on the scripture and narrative alone. Most reaction was positive, that hearing the Comfortable Words as a challenge was helpful. A similar, unexpected reaction continued in the coming weeks as people commented on how they heard the Comfortable Words differently after this sermon. This liturgical reflection moved people beyond the immediate situation of national events to an equalizing force between us and our enemies. Perhaps this is as Wilfried Engemann writes, "the sermon must move past secondary motives in order to insist on the primary function of the sermon, to bring a part of people's lives into the Kingdom of God.[57]

Sermon IV

The fourth sermon[58] was preached on September 10, 2017, on a Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A, Proper 18). As school began again, the church was full and there was an opportunity for the larger community to reflect on the experience of the summer, much in keeping with the events described in the previous sermon. This sermon took a step back from immediate "newspaper" narratives to consider broader events in society. It utilized a published article about the Internet in order to consider issues like fear, Muslim suspicion, the legacy of September 11th, and radical forgiveness. It centers on a Matthean parable of radical forgiveness and the Pauline imperative that loving another fulfills the law.

The first move in this sermon is based on a "newspaper" narrative, an article in *the Atlantic* about the popup box, which it calls the original sin of the Internet. This article suggests that the popup box was rooted in fear and sin, the fear of being associated with something

[57] Engemann, 63, author's translation.
[58] Appendix, 58.

anathema to a company or organization's identity. This served as a well-known metaphor in which to explore Jesus' parable of radical forgiveness.

The second move in the sermon moves to scripture and the gospel reading for the day, immediately asking the question, "what do we do when forgiveness come difficultly?" Here, the sermon explores the possible influences of the Matthean formula of working toward reconciliation found in this teaching.

The third move is related to the scripture, but it steps back and wonders about the logical conclusion that we often reach, that forgiveness has an end. It reframes this idea as a common reality of living with the consequences of sin, and it understands this along the gospel's teaching of treating someone like a Scribe or Pharisee. Instead of hearing this as an allowance for separation, the sermon pursues how Jesus sought to reconcile and persuade the likes of Scribes and Pharisees. The fourth move is also related to scripture and the language of binding and loosing in this gospel reading, suggesting that binding and loosing is a choice as to whether or not we exercise the radical forgiveness that the gospel has in mind.

The fifth move incorporates both liturgical reflection and narrative. The liturgical reflection is based on the reading of scripture, how the RCL always presents us with teachings about radical forgiveness around the anniversary of September 11$^{th}$, and particularly how this gospel reading appeared on the first anniversary of September 11$^{th}$. It incorporates the gospel's teaching about binding and loosing with the reality of the fear and prejudice we have bound in the years since 2001, expressed in a short narrative account from that timeframe.

The sixth move is based on the Pauline directive, "the one who loves another fulfills the Law." At this point, the sermon has mentioned this verse of scripture multiple times, but for the first time it explores what meaning might be found in these words. The sermon explores *heteron*

translated as “another,” suggesting that it could mean, “one who is different.” Here the quote from I Corinthians suggests that the person who loves one who is different has fulfilled the Law.

The final move is based on narrative and utilizes the opening narrative, though differently. It moves past popup boxes, rooted in the era of September 11th, to the reality of related content in the present era. It moves to Charleston in the days after the Mother Emmanuel shooting. This is a compelling example of radical forgiveness and of loving someone anathema to oneself. Here, harkening back to the language of the previous sermon and its question of who the heroes of the gospel might be, and incorporating the survivors of the Charleston shooting to the ranks of hero, this sermon concludes with this final imperative: “They were heroes of the gospel. That is the kind of content to which you and I must be related.”

The success of this sermon consisted in how narrative, scripture, and liturgical reflection was relevant to the lives of the listeners, and in its creative link of past with present. It considered narrative from the era of September 11th, both the story of that day and an element from that era, as well a more recent narrative of radical forgiveness and its more-recent label as related content, all building on the parable of radical forgiveness. This is how Trygve Johnson says the preacher, like Jesus, becomes a liturgical artist and assigns to the sermon a homiletic identity. “As a preacher, Jesus trusts creative and artistic speech, the use of story, parable, and metaphor to do more than just color and clothe the meaning of abstract reasoning; rather, he uses his imaginative forms to create meaning. This is how we should properly understand Jesus’ preaching through parables.”[59] Also, it incorporated a very prescient item of liturgical reflection, how the lectionary often brings teachings about radical forgiveness around the anniversary of September 11th. Whether or not this is coincidence, it pushes us toward greater consideration of the implications.

[59] Trygve David Johnson, *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 150.

The challenge of this sermon began in the introduction. Though relevant, the article from *the Atlantic* was older and it took up too much time in the sermon. The exegesis of the text was tedious and could have moved more quickly toward the theme of radical forgiveness, which was more central toward this sermon. The central liturgical reflection, that the lectionary brings up radical forgiveness each year on September 11th, always rests somewhere between coincidence and divine inspiration. Finally, the concluding narrative about the radical forgiveness of the victims at the Mother Emmanuel shooting seemed a bit out of reach. It was certainly in keeping with the gospel's teaching on radical forgiveness, though perhaps it should have ended by asking, is this the kind of content to which you and I could actually be related?

Sermon V

The fifth sermon[60] was preached on October 8, 2017 (Year A, Proper 22). It is based on the Parable of the Angry Tenants and Paul's teaching on gain and loss. It incorporates a narrative based on genealogy and exploring one's own family as a way of relating to the hearers of Jesus' parable. The liturgical reflection is Eucharistic and focuses on a poignant line in a Eucharistic Prayer: "here we offer and present unto thee, o Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies."

The first move introduces the scripture from Philippians, Paul's statement that whatever he gained he has come to count as loss, as a brief preponderance before moving into the narrative about genealogy. Referencing ancestry.com, the opening move reflects on genealogical discovery and what people learn from it. It relies on the preacher's own experience, cumulating with the discovery of tenant farmers in a family tree. This move ends by considering whether or not they, as tenant farmers, would have considered the work of their labor as gain or loss.

[60] Appendix, 64.

The second move incorporates scripture and the parable of the Angry Tenants. Here, the sermon connects the previous narrative of tenant farmers with the tenant farmers of the parable; it suggests that the vineyard owners were like sharecroppers from a century ago, tending to land that was not their own. “I suspect that some of them considered it a blessing that they had life at all, but some only looked at how much they had to give up in the end. Some still thought of it as gain, but Jesus said many of God’s beloved sharecroppers had come to think of it as loss.” The third move, still concentrating on scripture, concentrates on the “loss” that the tenant farmers experienced. It explores the Vineyard Owner’s attempts to reconcile with the tenants, while exploring why the vineyard workers only experienced loss instead of gain. “They had forgotten the goodness of the Vineyard Owner, and their forgetfulness led to that tragedy.”

The fourth move returns to Paul’s teaching on gain and loss, based on the New Testament lesson for the day. This part of the sermon attempts to explore and understand more fully what is intended in the “gain and loss” theme already established. Here the sermon pushes the listener to understand gain and loss to encompass more than just objects, but also identities and things learned in life. This move concludes by suggesting that relationship with the Vineyard Owner changes the equation, and it also suggests that Christ, like a leaf on ancestry.com (reiterating the opening narrative), helps to connect us to the Vineyard Owner.

The fifth move relies on narrative and explores the experience of giving with a realization based on the birth of a child. It is an example of moving from gain and loss to relationship with the Vineyard Owner. Here the sermon also moves to liturgical reflection, though briefly, to consider words of the Eucharistic prayer. “Here we present unto thee, o Lord, our selves our souls and bodies.” This connects the experience of the realization previously mentioned with the perpetual language of the Eucharistic Prayer, which echoes the words of Romans 12.

The final move of the story returns to the grievance of the tenant farmers, that they were presented with loss, because moving from loss to gain is difficult. Here the sermon connects the parable with the experience of gain over loss one last time, "because learning to see from a radically different perspective—like gain instead of loss, like communion with the Vineyard Owner—is not easy. Yet it is the dream of the gospel: as God's beloved sharecroppers, to remember how everything we have belongs to the Vineyard Owner, because everything the Vineyard Owner possesses has already been given to us." Finally the sermon returns to the words of the Eucharistic Prayer as a concluding supplication.

One success of this sermon was in relating the gospel's parable to the story of genealogy. Reaction during the sermon as well as feedback after the sermon suggested that this metaphor connected well with the listeners. Another success of the sermon was my brief vignette about the evening of my daughter's birth. Though a minor part of this sermon, this account connected with listeners and reinforced the narrative of being related to the Vineyard Owner, having received the best of what the Vineyard Owner possesses. Ian Paul writes, "In making claims about reality, metaphors don't simply describe one thing as another, but bring two aspects of our perceptual world into contact with one another."[61] This story seems to have accomplished this.

The first challenge of this sermon came immediately after its delivery. A teenager suggested that my language about sharecroppers was prejudiced. Sharecropping was an extension of slavery, and my casual use of the term seemed insensitive. Anytime the language of a sermon creates such connections, it has failed in communicating the gospel for some listening. Another challenge came in the liturgical reflection. It came late in the sermon, and though it connected well with the scripture and narratives, it was less cohesive than I had hoped.

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[61] Ian Paul, "The Future of Language in Preaching," in *The Future of Preaching.*

Sermon VI

The sixth sermon[62] was preached on November 12, 2017 (Year A, Proper 27). Though a Sunday in Ordinary Time, this sermon emphasizes a connection to Advent, as the lectionary readings for the Sundays after November 11 commence Advent before it actually begins as a liturgical season. This sermon references the Medieval Calendar, when Advent had as many as seven Sundays,[63] and explores the gospel and New Testament reading within in this tradition. This sermon uses the longer tradition of Advent in order to offer better context for understanding the gospel's directive to "keep awake," and I Thessalonians' teachings about the Parousia.

The first move of the sermon is narrative-based, and it introduces the gospel's directive to keep awake with a brief narrative on coffee, commenting on Starbuck's introduction of its Christmas blend each year in November. The second move is rooted in liturgical reflection, and it connects the first move with more ancient traditions of a longer Advent, which correspondingly begin earlier in November. It goes on to offer reflection on the New Testament reading and gospel reading, how they make sense as proclamations of Advent.

The third move continues with liturgical reflection, moving to the collects for Advent, and exploring how Cranmer, in his first English prayer books, preserved the collects from a longer Advent in a particular way. Particular attention is given to the Collect of the Day, which speaks of Christ coming into the world to destroy the works of darkness, and to the Collect for Advent IV, that when Christ comes he will find in us a mansion prepared for himself.

The fourth move explores scripture, understanding its meaning for the original audience as well as for a modern reader. After exploring each reading, the sermon summarizes them with

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[62] Appendix, 70.

[63] See Philip H Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013), 14-15. In the Orthodox Nativity Fast, Advent has seven Sundays. The Ambrosian and Mozarabic Rites inaugurate Advent on St. Martin's Day. The Gelasian Sacramentary provides collects and scripture readings for the five Sundays before Christmas.

what it compares to a text message. The first from humanity to the divine (from I Thess.): *We are not going to sleep until you get home, so please come home soon.* The second from the divine realm to humanity (from Matthew): *I am on my way. But you'll have to leave the lights on.*

The fifth move harkens back to the opening narrative, the experience of seeing Starbuck's Christmas blend each year early in November. "The next time you see Christmas blend on display before Thanksgiving, remember Christ's call to keep awake, because we do not know exactly when and where and how he will come, but we keep the faith. That is why we pray that God would keep us awake and hold us to our holy intentions, that we might become like he is, and that when he comes he would find in us something completely transformed and prepared."

The sixth move is narrative-based and a personal story. I describe my experience in the first days that my wife and I were married, how keeping the lights on was an act of love, suggesting a practical and common way of understanding the Parable of the Foolish Virgins. The final move concludes the sermon, trying to tie together the various pieces offered and explored. "We are bound to Christ and his ways of compassion and mutual concern and loving kindness, not out of fear or obligation, but simply out of love. And we keep the lamp burning and try to stay awake, because we love the bridegroom. All of those things that were important to him have now become important to us."

The first success of this sermon was the way in which it made sense of the modern experience of the Christmas season beginning early in November. Though that was not the true aim of the sermon, most of the feedback suggested that I opened some sacred room for dealing with the commercial onslaught that was beginning. This also spilled over to those who were interested in the liturgical history of Advent, with some commenting that they noticed the change in language on the Sundays preceding Advent, but they did not know why this was the case. Connecting a story about coffee to Jesus' teaching to keep awake, though a minor metaphor in

this sermon, resonated with parishioners. The short text messages resonated with parishioners, and they recalled these in the ensuing weeks. Finally, the last reflection on "keeping the lights on" offered people a different way of understanding Matthew's Parable of the Foolish Virgins.

One challenge in this sermon relies on the assumption that anyone cares about the pre-Reformation traditions. Though this was important in making sense of the prayers and the scriptures, it is clear that there is a narrow group of people for whom this resonates. Too much discussion of ancient liturgical practice can alienate people from the traditions they follow. Another challenge came in my reflection on the final narrative. I live with the advantage of being able to share personal stories about my family because we are a "traditional" family. I worry that using stories like this could have the unintended consequence of alienating someone who does not identify with a traditional family, or that another preacher would not be as broadly accepted.

Sermon VII

The seventh sermon[64] was preached on December 10, 2017, the second Sunday in Advent (Year B). The scriptural base for the sermon comes from II Peter 3: 8-15 and explored the early Christians' expectation that the return of Christ meant the destruction of the world and a new heaven and earth. It also makes reference to Mark 1: 1-8, the introduction of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. It contains a narrative component, based on personal story, and the liturgical reflection is two-fold: that Advent as a season emphasizes patience and waiting, and that Advent as a season stresses both the first and second comings of Christ.

The first move of the sermon introduces Advent as a season of waiting, and it highlights that this is commonly expressed in churches with little investigation of what is meant. The

[64] Appendix, 76.

second move uses narrative to recall a personal story that ends with the moral that each person must know what he or she is waiting for, thereby returning to the question in the opening move.

The third move of the sermon offers broad answers to the question of waiting, recounting particular answers rooted in Christology, both of the birth of Christ and of his coming again. This move intentionally quotes the prayer book and hymnal, with one reference to the first Collect for Christmas, and the other to the Advent hymn, "Lo! He comes with clouds descending." The fourth move of the sermon is based on from II Peter, and it looks at the expectations of early Christians regarding what they meant by Christ's return, how for them it meant immediate destruction. "They were expecting it any day now. Every time they heard a camel backfire, I expect that their hearts skipped a beat in hopeful anticipation that Christ was about to return and the whole world was about to go up in flames and his kingdom would finally come."

The fifth move claims that modern Christian waiting is quite different from what is expressed in II Peter. "We don't light Advent candles hoping to spark deadly fire. We don't buy gifts for people we love, and we don't pray for justice and peace to take root on earth, in the hope that the world is about to be destroyed." This understands the original message of immediate expectations and how, in the readings, we hear the early Christians making sense of the delay.

The sixth move offers Christ's delay as a word of grace, that it provides us with time to accomplish the goals of his kingdom. Specifically, it offers a litany of hope, allowing ways of finding oneself among those dissatisfied yet working toward the goals of the Kingdom of God.

> If you turn on the television and end up throwing the remote control at it less than three minutes after the news has begun, but you vow to do something about the sins of life that aggravate you, you qualify for his salvation. If you look at Christmas in America and notice how little it has to do with Bethlehem's child, but you ensure that such will not be the sad lot for you and your family, you fall into the hope of his salvation. If you look at

> the state of affairs in the world and see how desperately the world still needs the advent of the Kingdom of God among us, his salvation has you in mind. If you believe that every valley hasn't been raised up and every mountain hasn't been made low, and every crooked thing hasn't been made straight— then maybe the reason is that Christ is still giving us a chance. He still extends to us a chance at imitating him and fighting for justice and righteousness without excuses. Maybe what he intended was for his ways to come more fully in us, and so he is waiting still so that we might find his salvation, and to make it known, and to cause it into being in the world while we still have life.

The final move of the sermon suggests whatever we believe ought to be the hallmarks of Kingdom of God, that they direct us towards the goals of Christianity. It ends with a prayer that connects waiting and dissatisfaction with II Peter's claim that the Lord's patience offers us time to attain to his salvation. "Come Lord Jesus, to us who wait/ Who need your guidance and hope and righteous indignation. Come Lord Jesus, to us who are never satisfied/ Because your kingdom has not yet come as we imagined. Come Lord Jesus, to us who are impatient/ Because we pray fervently that your kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. Come Lord Jesus, but hasten the coming of your kingdom/ Give us another day to attain to your salvation."

One success of this sermon came in its exploration of waiting, often mentioned in churches but seldom investigated. One parishioner's feedback confirmed that we offer pithy words and phrases that quickly become unhelpful without investigated meaning. The narrative portion early in the sermon was a success, as it clearly piqued the attention of the congregation. Another success was achieved in helping people to understand how the scriptural expectations of the second coming of Christ must be understood and approached differently two millennia later, and a few commented that they felt relief in having different expectations of the Kingdom of

God than what is expressed often in the New Testament. Finally, the litany that welcomed people into a place of dissatisfaction also connected with people and their experiences.

The challenge of this sermon was in its liturgical reflection. It took seriously Advent's theme of waiting and explored this deeply, but it was another sermon about Advent. This runs the risk of giving the impression that we preach the Church Calendar instead of preaching Christ crucified. This was not actually true in this case, but a listener could easily make that connection. Here again, Wilfried Engemann's quote is prescient, "the sermon must move past secondary motives," in this case making sense of the Calendar, "in order to insist on the primary function of the sermon, to bring a part of people's lives into the Kingdom of God."[65]

## Conclusion

In reflecting on liturgical preaching as someone who engages this task weekly, I am constantly pursuing ways to engage people. This model expands the number of resources available to a preacher. By including prayers of the liturgy and liturgical experience, the preacher gains valuable resources in preparing for a sermon. The preacher also frees the words of the liturgy, beyond keeping them from becoming cultic language, but helping the listener to engage them differently and perhaps in an unexpected, generative way. Preaching in this way also allows the *liturgist* to announce and articulate what the liturgy intends to do, seldom a goal of preaching but important in pastoral ministry.

In the short time that I have preached, I have witnessed firsthand changes in culture that challenge the pews and pulpits of churches. I have looked to excellent preachers to discover helpful tools and patterns, and it is here that I am persuaded that the three-legged stool I suggest replicates excellent preaching in a way that might engage a changing demographic. Excellence in

[65] Engemann, 63, author's translation.

preaching does not end with the preacher, so success must also consider how well those listening were incorporated in the wider liturgical action. Parishioners bring with them varying levels of familiarity with the stories and practices of Christianity, and a model based on synthesis allows people to connect with elements of worship in different ways. Including various points of contact in homiletics increases the opportunity to connect with the listener, which must always be a goal of preaching. It is here that this model allows for new and different ways of engaging listeners.

Beyond the development and exploration of this model *per se*, I began to sense a need for projects that explore new models of preaching. Karl Barth may not be relevant forever. Tom Long suspects that narrative preaching is dying, or that it will have to change to survive.[66] Churches are undergoing rapid change, and new and renewed forms of homiletics will need to be discovered, critiqued, and improved. Preaching must continue to explore and evolve in order to do what it has always done, to welcome people more closely into relationship with the divine.

In the implementation of the project, I discovered unexpected elements that were both positive and negative. Relying on sermons that were made up of scripture, narrative, and liturgy, I found myself able to approach and articulate subjects that might otherwise have been too political or provocative. This was especially true in the sermon preached after the events in Charlottesville, Virginia. Many liturgical preachers have felt relief when the appointed lections reflect their own intentions, thereby giving some cover for what is said. The words of the liturgy also function in this way, and they can be engaged to help with this task more directly than just waiting for them in the liturgical flow. This was not without its problems. The intention of including liturgical reflection was at times the most tedious, and it often came with unintended consequences, as happened with the theme of Advent that seemed to go on forever. On the

[66] Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 15.

whole, however, the positive points of discovery engendered homiletically Paul Avis' suggestion that synthesis offers balance and restraint as well as passion and risk.[67]

Future reflection will allow space to identify other positive and negative experiences of using this three-legged stool. One unexplored item is the issue of context, as all seven sermons were preached in the same parish with its own set of assumptions and common life. It is of particular interest whether or not this model could be used successfully in a liturgical context that does not readily identify as *High Church* or *Anglo-Catholic*. So many references to the *Book of Common Prayer* and the liturgical calendar were easily received in this context. I suspect a preacher in a different liturgical tradition might not implement this model as easily.

This project focused primarily on the composition and delivery of sermons, and future work should engage their reception on the part of those who listened. Though much thought is given to the various people who sit in the pews to listen to sermons, this project did not focus on evaluating their reactions comprehensively. Future work should be devoted to finding people who represent various levels of familiarity with Christianity, and then discerning whether or not this approach was helpful in allowing them to hear things on different levels.

In the end I was reminded of what Engemann writes in his introduction to preaching. The point of a sermon is not to be "a presentation about Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners," but it is "*anhand eines Themas*," the means by which we make the story plausible enough to invite us to the same table 2,000 years later.[68] I believe this is the goal of preaching with scripture, narrative, and liturgy in mind. Sacraments bring grace to the lives of people, and sacramental or liturgical preaching brings people closer to those means of grace.

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[67] Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism*, 29.
[68] Engemann, *Einfuehrung in die Homiletik*, 64. Author's translation and emphasis.

# Appendix

Sermon I

Year A Easter III—originally preached on April 30, 2017

From Luke's Gospel: While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

There is a reality television show that has achieved success for a decade now called *Undercover Boss*. Reruns of it come on late in the evening after our children have gone to bed. I watch it with a glass of wine in one hand and Kleenex in the other hand, because both of them are useful. The premise of the show is that the CEO of a company disguises himself or herself as an entry-level employee in the company, in order to work alongside the men and women in the lower echelons. Most are boardroom types, so they get the unique experience of seeing what their company is like at the bottom. There is usually a disguise and some made-up assertion about why they are there, all done to make sure that their true identity as CEO isn't revealed until the end of the show. The first episode of Undercover Boss was paradigmatic: it featured the CEO of Waste Management. He went from the boardroom to the trash truck, and had the lofty experience of what it is like to unload dumpsters all day long.

Most of the episodes feature an element of comedy, because the bosses struggle to do simple, minimum wage tasks. Many of the shows feature an element of tragedy, as the bosses discover how difficult life can be at the other end of the spectrum. And there is emotion: as they hear stories of sickness and sadness and resilience and perseverance. *The employee who sold his car to pay for his mother's cancer treatment and now walks to work seven miles every day.* That's where you need wine *and* Kleenex.

Then comes the end of the show, the moment when the CEO's disguise comes off and he sits at a table, face to face with those whom he has come to know. There is shock, of course, and some who don't believe it. There are some who know they have blown it, who napped in front of the cameras and the CEO. There are wonderful moments, where the CEO, now a changed person, offers a car to that young man who had been walking to work, a fund to help his mother finish chemo, a scholarship to help with those medical bills that remained unpaid.

The show has won Emmy Awards for reality television. But today, with this as a reflection on our gospel this morning, I want to suggest that it is a metaphor of Easter. This undercover boss came to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to the God and father of all. He embraced the poor and outcast, announcing that they, too, exist in the very heart of God. And in the end, he sat at the table with them—mysteriously— in one final expression of reconciliation and love.

In all the stories of Jesus there is an element of mystery, how no one ever seemed to recognize him for who he was. First it was the Pharisees and Sadducees, and for them it was grounded in opposition. But even in the resurrection, not even his friends recognized him. In the Garden on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene thought he was the gardener. On the beach one morning at the end of John's gospel, none of the disciples dared to ask who he was. And in our gospel narrative today, he walks alongside Cleopas and his friend for seven long miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and they are so overcome by grief and disappointment that they remain unable to believe when he is standing there next to them. But finally, in the end, there is a moment of recognition: they sit together at a table, and the disguise comes off, and he is known to them in the breaking of the bread. And they are left behind but with life changed, endowed with every good gift that Christ has given to those who follow him.

The conclusion of Luke's gospel speaks to the ongoing mystery of recognizing—or perhaps not recognizing—Christ in our world. In the case of the original story, it was an immediate task, to recognize him in what seemed unlikely. It was written to attest to the unlikeliness of it all, but I think it was preserved so that we might find ourselves with a similar task of discerning such mystery.

If that is true, this gospel has lived both descriptively and instructively in the church. It is descriptive in the sense that it illustrates how we and generations before us have discerned him in the great gift that he left for us. But it is instructive, too, how it points us beyond the simple mystery of him in bread and wine, to the second mystery of his spirit, infused in us, so we might be his people in the world.

There is the ecclesiastical way, the church way, of saying this: that in this holy ritual Christ comes among us in bread and wine and sends us into the world to be his hands and feet.[69] *The bread which we break… alleluia… is the Communion of the body of Christ.*[70] But there is another way of saying it, the Undercover Boss way perhaps. Whether you are the CEO or the trash truck driver, some days we are all left with the dumpsters of life. We know sadness and despair and diagnoses and loss, but we have come to believe that he is with us in all of that. The road to Emmaus is not just a journey to find Christ, but an experience of his life in the back roads and amidst the rubbish of life. *One body are we… alleluia… for though many we share the one bread*. The mystery of our faith lives on the altars, just as it does among the dumpsters.

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[69] Bonhoeffer calls this *Gabe und Aufgabe*, gift and assignment in Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics, 150.

[70] This text, and the similar verses that follow, are from an Eastertide Fraction Anthem sung after the Eucharistic Prayer, which we used at Good Shepherd from the Easter Vigil until Pentecost. By Easter III, the text was familiar enough to use it in this poetic way without explaining its quotation.

Jeffrey Lee, Episcopal bishop of Chicago, says sacraments don't make things true; they confirm what is in fact true. Baptism reveals that we are loved by God and are marked as Christ's own forever. Eucharist confirms that Christ is with us—in ways that are spiritual but also in ways that are tangible. Broken bread and outpoured wine lead us back to him. Something like this is reflected in our gospel, how Christ walked with them and talked with them and taught them, yet their eyes were hidden from it. He had been with them but they had not recognized it, until finally as the bread was broken again, Jesus confirmed what was already true: that he would always live beyond the grave, that love for him was indeed stronger than death.

The last moment of Undercover Boss is wonderful, if you have wine and Kleenex left! Each character reflects on how this drama has changed him or her completely. The CEO vows that life will never be the same. The employee marvels that he has been recognized, that she has been valued for what she does every day. And there is the paradox of it, that someone from up top came to live and work among them, and to know them and to be known to them, and to love something about them—there in the trash truck, amidst rubbish and waste—to be embraced in this way.

That, the gospel says, is true for us. That God has loved us, we believe. That Christ has deigned to come among us, we presume. But that he has climbed into the trash truck of life—the trash truck that most of us spend our lives trying not to have to drive!— and there he is with us: in our work and in our companionship, in our sleeping and in our waking, in our joys and in our sorrows, in our life and in our death.[71] And it is true, but not because we make it true. What we do is simply the means whereby God confirms it.

[71] This text is quoted without reference or citation, but it is intentionally taken from the blessing at a marriage, BCP 430.

So today, pray as the Choir sings descriptively of what we encounter in this holy sacrament, *be known to us Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread.*

And today, pray as the Choir sings instructively, as we leave the altar, *be known to us Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread*.

And after you leave, pray every time the trash truck drives by, rushing through Waban at 80 MPH. *Be present with us Lord Jesus, our great High Priest, and be known to us as you were known to your disciples, in scripture and the breaking of the bread.*[72] *Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen.*

[72] This final prayer loosely quotes Eucharistic Prayer C, BCP 372.

Sermon II

Transfiguration—August 6

It is the Feast of the Transfiguration. Today we climb the holy mountain to its top. Together we traverse the incline in the scriptures and prayers. And there, at the top, is the story of the glory of God, no longer hidden by the complexion of our Galilean conqueror, but shining through his face, his body, even his clothes. And there are Moses and Elijah at the top of the mountain, and they converse with him. And there are Peter, James, and John, drowsy onlookers and holy eavesdroppers. And there is the Voice at the top of the mountain. *This is my Son. This is my glory. Listen to him and never forget what he says.*

Look around today. Something is different. It's the middle of summer and we are celebrating Transfiguration. Some of you, being honest, have told me recently that you didn't know that this was a feast day, and certainly not in August. Some knew the story of the disciples, the mountain, the prophets, and the great Voice, but they knew nothing of all of this as a celebration of its own.

There are many good reasons for not knowing, the best of which is that we usually read this gospel the Sunday before Lent begins. The last Sunday after Epiphany, usually somewhere around the middle of February, acts as a turnstile that moves us from Epiphany to Easter. The stars and shepherds behind us, the cross and grave before us, it is there that we change course. That is how we have come to hear this gospel, as a gentle warning, as a friendly reminder that Lent is almost here, and we are given a vision of Christ's glory to sustain us across similarly difficult terrain until Easter. If that is how you identify with this gospel reading, you are in good company.

But of course, that isn't true today. It's summer and most of Boston is at the Cape, and I have asked you to come and to sing like it is Easter or Christmas, because Transfiguration, even in summer, ought to be celebrated. Much of this started with Origen, the saint and scholar who lived in the second and third centuries. He was fascinated with Christ's Transfiguration and how God's glory rested in him. Origen was the first to suggest that the glory that showed on the holy mountain was the same as the glory revealed in the Resurrection, and if we celebrate Easter because it showed this glory, then we ought to celebrate the Transfiguration, too. So it was that it became a Feast.

The date, the middle of summer, has less to do with theology and more to do with weather. People liked to mark Transfiguration with processionals up mountains, Eucharist in mountaintop chapels. Summer, of course, was the time for this. Thus August 6th came to be the date and this the mountaintop feast.[73]

The way that all of the gospel writers describe it, there is good reason to believe that this story probably played out directly before the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it seems that Origen was correct in linking the mystery of the Transfiguration with the wonderful mystery of the Empty Tomb. But today the link is different. There is no Christmas and Epiphany to put behind us, no Lent and Easter ahead; it is God's glory in the middle of times more ordinary. And perhaps therein lies the mystery.

Think about what Ordinary Time has looked like here. There were youth on pilgrimage to England. There have been parables about mustard seeds and good seeds and scattered seeds and different kinds of soil. We have been awash with extraordinary Old Testament stories about Abraham and his wandering ways and the things he did trying to follow God. We have been

[73] The date of Transfiguration is a bit more complicated than this story suggests. Its specific date is linked first to the consecration of the Church of the Transfiguration, though the Church of the Transfiguration was consecrated in summer because it is on top of a mountain.

following Jacob—tricky Jacob, bad boy Jacob—whose life of faith sometimes seems more like an episode of dramatic television than it does biblical value. He outwitted his brother, he tricked his father, he stole the birthright, and he had to get out of town to avoid getting killed. And just before he accidentally married two sisters, he had a dream and saw angels ascending and descending and heard the Voice—that same voice, presumably—introducing itself and promising to be with him.

That's the story of Ordinary Time, isn't it? It's August and it's hot and most people are at the Cape—but in the middle of it all, in a quiet moment of reflection and prayer, God shows up again. And there are Moses and Elijah, and they are talking about Christ's departure. And there is the cloud of smoke and the Voice in the most unexpected of places.

This is true in many ways. Sometimes the divine Mystery shows up in expected places like Christmas and Easter, and that is worth celebrating. But sometimes God shows up in unexpected places. On the mountain in the middle of summer, in places we figured God probably didn't bother to go. We struggle to listen in and make sense of it like Peter and James and John. We try to do what the Voice says, to listen, and not to forget a word. We carry it with us. Sometimes, like them, we just don't know how to describe it, how to make it makes sense. So we just don't say anything to anyone.

I remember when it was time for me to ask Alison to marry me. I had the ring and I had the proposal planned out. I made the trip to see her parents to ask for her hand in marriage. I was nervous. I went in to All Saints, the Episcopal Church across from the Coca-Cola Building in Atlanta, and I just wanted to pray. There was nobody there, so I went up to the altar and knelled. It occurred to me that I had gone two hours down I-75 on a motorcycle to ask her parents officially, but I hadn't asked God officially. So I kneeled and I asked. And the answer was more powerful than I knew to expect. It overwhelmed me. And the sexton, just doing his job, thought I

was on drugs and he told me to leave, and I didn't know what to say. I haven't told many people about that. The experience was embarrassing.

I remember when we found out we were going to have Ella. We had started wondering if we would ever have children. It was August and it was hot, but we had the test and it was positive. On opposite ends of the phone, we didn't say much. We cried a little and kept saying really? Really? And we couldn't say anything to anyone.

They say of William Wordsworth that he had such a love affair with Nature that sometimes it overwhelmed him. And sometimes it overwhelmed those around him. In the mountains. At the beach. At sunset. He had to learn not to say anything. He learned to distract himself, counting rocks and counting trees. It was all too wonderful for him, and he was trying to keep quiet.

When Toscanini finished sixty rehearsals of Bellini's *Norma*, at the dress rehearsal, he put down his baton and announced that the concert was canceled; he couldn't go on. Why? "The music is too great," he said. "It's beyond human powers. I cannot do it."[74]

Two years ago, Alison and I were at Salisbury Cathedral. And during Evensong, I prayed that God would help me know when it was time to move on. We had wonderful years at St. Patrick's, but I thought the moving on was soon. And after Evensong, as we stood outside the marvelous Cathedral, I sensed God telling me it was time. It was okay. But of course I didn't know yet about Good Shepherd and I was afraid to tell anyone. And then last month, I was there with our youth. And I told them how much I love Salisbury. And how for Episcopalians it is a holy and sacred place. And I asked them if we could stop and pray for a minute where I once sensed God dwelling with me, and how I sensed there God telling me it was okay to move on.

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[74] Here I am intentionally mimicking the style of Fred Craddock, how he would use a series of brief vignettes to illustrate a point. Both the story of Wordsworth and Toscanini come from Craddock's Collected Sermons.

But I didn't say anything to them about that. How could I? They are teenagers and maybe something like that is just too wonderful for words.

God's glory shows up in the midst of ordinary life, and it leaves us overwhelmed and silenced, and that ought to be celebrated.

As I looked more carefully at our gospel today, one of the things that caught my attention was the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Luke says they were talking about his departure, which he would accomplish in Jerusalem. That is what our translation says, though the King James Version says they were talking about his death. I wondered which it was so I looked in my Greek New Testament, and the answer was more wonderful. It says they were talking about his Exodus. That is the Greek word: Exodus. Jesus was talking to Moses about his own crossing over. There in the cloud, Jesus has finally come to understand and embody the reality that God's glory would lead him, not from life to death, but from death to life. And he would lead others out of sin and death into life. That would be his passing over. That would be his Exodus. The disciples heard this wonderful thing, but they didn't know what to say. They were silent and told no one.

But if you look closely, you might see how the experience never left them. One example of this comes in II Peter. II Peter uses the same word: Exodus. It is how Peter has come to think of the end of his life. And I wondered if that was typical, if that it was common. So I looked up the word Exodus in the New Testament. It only occurs three times. Two out of three occur in our readings today. That is what Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah about: his Exodus. And so many years later, when Peter came to think of his own death, he used that same word.

My theory is that this is no accident. In an unexpected moment for Peter, he was praying and the glory of God showed up and Christ was transfigured, and he heard Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah about his Exodus. And it was all so wonderful that he couldn't find the words,

and for years he was left with silence.  But in the end, Peter's life had been so transformed and transfigured by that same glory, he wrote to friends in words of final celebration. He had heard the Voice on the mountain and it had changed his life forever. Just as the Voice had said, he had listened. He remembered the word. He was silent about it no more. He took one final chance to celebrate and give thanks before it was time for him to pass over.

Sermon III

Year A, Proper 15—Originally Preached on August 20, 2017

Scripture: Mt 15: 10-28, Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman, why his own *Sitz im Leben* might have caused him to view her with prejudice, and how he had to overcome that

Narrative: the eclipse that crossed the US on August 21, 2017, the Charlottesville and Boston Common protests, a personal elegy of growing up in the South in the shadow of prejudice, large universities and their endowments

Liturgical Reflection: the Comfortable Words, how they are both comfortable and uncomfortable, and how they offer forgiveness to us as well as to the whole world

Tomorrow, much of America will experience a total eclipse. For a moment or two, the moon will block out the direct rays of the sun. Darkness will encroach at midday, cooler breezes will blow, and the moon's corona will light up for those fortunate enough to experience totality. Eclipses have long been the work of poets, philosophers, and theologians. Homer and Shakespeare both made them a part of their corpus. The bible records its share of them, with people ascribing meaning to the work of God through the dimming of the sun.

Astronomers and philosophers live for events like these, though in truth eclipses are uncomplicated and predictable. The moon passes directly between earth and sun, and the moon casts a shadow over a swath of land, darkening our lightness and confusing animals and humans alike. From an astronomical point of view, that is all that happens.

But theologians get their perspective too, and I am going to take the philosophical bent here and think of this eclipse as a metaphor, because it seems to me that we have been standing in the shadow of the moon the last week, at least since the violence in Charlottesville last week.

There are even protesters in our own back yard at the Boston Common. None of us is alone in feeling like unexpected darkness has left us feeling a bit dazed and confused.

Most of you know that I grew up in the South. I can tell you that this isn't the first time I have felt like I was standing in the shadow of this awful darkness, though I will admit I thought most of it was all behind us. Thank God, as a child I only stood in its shadows. The days of Jim Crow and the Klan and desegregation were long since gone. I consider myself fortunate only to have read about it in Harper Lee's novels, but I would be untruthful if I told you that the shadows didn't linger.

Playing little-league baseball was the first time I became profoundly aware that true prejudice existed, and that there were people who would share them proudly and boastfully, even in the company of children. You see, baseball acted as a unifying force for children of all sorts. It meant that we— we, the children of mid-century ranch homes and manicured yards— played baseball with children from the country— children who lived in spartan houses and trailers, whose fathers worked making bath towels at the mill or at the Post Office, grown men who seemed unashamed to blurt out racial slurs and request that their children not play on teams with black children. In retrospect, I realized that is why baseball was my introduction to this dark shadow. I was absolutely terrible at baseball, but for reasons I did not yet appreciate, they wanted me on their team.

And as children, we *were* on the same team. Whatever differences we had meant nothing in our collective endeavor. It is ironic to me how much we actually did have in common. People often ask me for some determinative exception in my family lineage to explain why I fared better. *Maybe a grandfather from New York? Maybe a relocation from Canada?* No, none of those existed. I haven't found anyone in my family who owned a slave, for which I am over the moon, but they all took up arms against the Union and its war of Northern Aggression. My three-

times great grandfather was with General Lee at Appomattox the day he surrendered, and I still have his family bible. In that way, I was absolutely no different than they were.

So what was the difference? I ask this question more than anyone. My parents never uttered a prejudiced word in their life, which is one of the single-greatest gifts a child could receive. My father was quick to stop us from following that path, or repeating those jokes, or laughing to be polite. I remember one of the boys on my baseball team. He wore a shirt with a picture of Robert E Lee and a Confederate flag, holding an Ante-Bellum musket. It said, “Lee surrendered, I didn’t.” I thought it was funny, so I mentioned the t-shirt to my dad, and he was swift to remind me that Elijah Burrell Weldon had in fact been at Appomattox, and that he did surrender, and that we had surrendered, too, and that we were thankful to be from the South but were also grateful that we lost because it was an immoral undertaking. The lost cause of the Confederacy had no place in our family.

But he couldn’t protect us from the shadow that lived around us. You needed more than special glasses to avoid those harmful rays. One thing that haunts me still is the accommodation of evil that I witnessed. There was a way in which space was made for people whose prejudices lived on. Some didn’t know better, some did, but accommodation was made. They showed up at baseball fields and dinner tables. Now looking back, I am not sure if the root prejudices were worse, or if it was the accommodations people made for them.

Until recently, I had come to believe that was behind us, that my stories of childhood Rebel sympathizers would sound distant and preposterous. If anything, usually I laugh at them because they seem so remote and absurd. Every once and a while a shadow of that evil would rear its ugly head, but I always assumed it was the final gasps of a dying tyrant. Maybe you thought so, too. Perhaps that is why it has surprised us recently that we might have been quite wrong.

Across America, today, I suspect Episcopal priests and those like us are decrying white nationalists and Klansmen and Nazis, saying that hate has no place in America. They are correct, of course, though sadly I don't think that making that claim is as prophetic or transformational as we wish it were. This is what I mean. Nazi sympathizers generally stay clear of the Episcopal Church in Waban, don't they? Every sign I have seen in Newton—in English and Spanish and Arabic— says hate has no place here. I would be mystified if anyone here today were a white nationalist or a white supremacist. That is why I find the proclamation that hate has no home—among like-minded, progressive, upwardly mobile people—is not as powerful as we wish.

There are places where that proclamation is powerful. At the Presbyterian Church in Dawson, GA, today— a few miles from the hated Sasser Jail of the failed protests in Albany in 1962— the pastor will tell his flock that notions of white supremacy are anathema to the gospel. He will tell them to give up on prejudice and to follow the call of the gospel instead. Some will agree, but some will say that he is being too political. Some have already threatened to leave the church. He is a hero. He is a hero of the gospel. Gathering on the steps of the courthouse in Newton may make us correct about the dynamics of life, but we are no heroes like those who take chances in places where the distinctions are staggering. I know. I left there and came here. Call friends in dying towns in rural New Hampshire overrun by opoids and unemployment and tell them to make similar proclamations. They might be heroes.

While I was at Emory this week, the president of the university issued a statement that Emory was opposed to White supremacy and the prejudices associated with it. In truth it is important for people of import to say those things, just as we witnessed how dangerous it is when people of import do not say those things, but the whole statement came off as sanctimonious to me. Nobody thought Emory was a home to NAZIs. The e-mail made clear that supremacist ideology does not and will not have a seat at Emory's table. But it rang empty to me. One of the

reasons it rang empty is because Emory has the ability to work toward true transformation in the world if it wanted to do that.

Emory has an endowment of 6.4 billion dollars. I suspect the endowments of your alma maters may be similar. If they wanted to be transformative, they could use some of that money to go into places where financial and racial and opportunity segregation still live. They could open a campus in a poor neighborhood in order to educate racial minorities who need outside factors to enable change in their lives. They could announce free or reduced tuition to people from places whose factories have closed and whose fear is pushing them toward such dangerous ideas. In addition to recruiting in the suburbs of Connecticut they could go to the trailer parks outside of the flowering suburbs and use that 6.4 billion dollars to convert the hearts and minds of children who grow up believing that people who are different than they are the enemies.

I don't mean to be unfair toward Emory or toward the flowering parts of America where we live and where supremacy of most kinds is denounced. I am thankful for it, except that we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking we have done enough to live out the radical claims of the gospel by looking down on people and their terrible prejudices and their fear-laden expressions thereof. They are a sad lot to me, but I also learned on the baseball field years ago that we have a lot in common. Each of us here has something in common with them. That is the awful truth about all of this! As Dr. King once said, "all life is inter-related. All people are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."[75] Imagining that we are better than anyone because of our ideas or geography in life ironically makes us more like those we detest.

I was struck when I discovered that our gospel reading for today comes from the heart of Matthew's gospel, the story of Jesus and the Cannanite woman. It is perhaps one of the most

[75] Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail.

difficult stories in the entire bible. She is an outsider, a foreigner; the disciples express their own ethnic prejudices, and Jesus— from whom you and I have learned the power of redemptive and relentless love— seems to accommodate an exclusive identity.

Then in a moment of clarity, Jesus looks deep into the eyes of someone he presumes to be different than he is, and he sees in her the same faith in God that lives in him. Despite the shadows of darkness that have fallen all around him, he is able to step out of that shadow and see in her something of God, and he goes on to offer to her the hope and transformation of his holy gospel. Such words of comfort are the compassion that has become his legacy, though we see in this story that it was not as natural as we might imagine. Perhaps we should imagine that of ourselves, that transformation is a hard endeavor.

Each week, just after the Confession, we come to what are called the Comfortable Words. Many of you will remember that they are called this because previous prayer books introduced them by saying, "Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him."[76] Thomas Cranmer put them after the Confession so that the assurance of forgiveness would come in both the absolution and in words of scripture.

They assure us of the forgiveness of our sins. But if you listen closely, they offer forgiveness to us as well as to those around us, to those whose lives are different than ours. They insist that Christ is there, speaking comfortable words to those who are far off and those who are near. I suspect if you hear the fullness of the grace that they impart, it may leave you realizing that we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single necessity of

[76] This, or something similar, was included in English and American Prayer Books until 1928. The term, "comfortable words," was edited out of the 1979 BCP, though this phrase is still used to describe what survives in Rite I.

forgiveness and grace. “God so loved the whole world that he gave his only son.”[77] “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden you will be refreshed.” “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” And then comes the *tour de force* of the Comfortable Words! “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.”

Do you see what Cranmer suggests? Do you appreciate what I John, from which those comfortable words come, insists? *Christ is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.* Are these comfortable words or afflicting words? Look around at everyone who stands in darkness. Look around the baseball field. Look around the Boston Common. That’s the way of Christ and his gospel, isn’t it? His gospel comforts the afflicted, just as it afflicts the comforted. And I suspect if we are going to find him in this awful darkness, the comfortable places of our life might need to speak words of grace, not just to ourselves, but to all who need forgiveness and redemption.

The eclipse will be over soon. It will make its way across our country, from west to east, and soon enough the phenomenon will be over. From an astronomical point of view, the end of the darkness is guaranteed to end. For the other darkness to end, sadly, it will not be so simple. It will require us to match our action with our righteous indignation. I came across a wonderful quote this week. “Everyone wants to change the world, but nobody wants to help mom with the dishes.”[78] If we expect to attain to Christ’s work of enlightenment and comfort, perhaps we could add the task of doing the dishes.

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[77] The four partial quotations listed here reflect the four verses of scripture listed as “comfortable words” that follow the absolution in the 1979 BCP, 331.
[78] P.J. O’Rourke, “Sunbeams,” *The Sun*, August, 2017.

Sermon IV

Year A Proper 18—preached September 10

Scripture: Matthew 18: 15-20 and Jesus' teachings on radical forgiveness, and Romans 13:8, how loving the other fulfills the Law

Narrative: *The Atlantic*'s article about the evolution of the pop-up box as rooted in fear and sin, reflections on our own stories after September 11, 2001, and the stories of radical forgiveness after the Mother Emmanuel shootings

Liturgical Reflection: In the RCL, September always includes teachings on radical forgiveness, and this gospel was the reading for the first anniversary of September 11

An article recently appeared in *The Atlantic* called, "The Internet's Original Sin."[79] Below the provocative title was a picture of Adam and Eve, reclining in the shade of a tree, while she held that forbidden fruit in her hand. Ivy covered those places best described as "unmentionable." What was the Original Sin of the Internet? What awful transgression was described in such dramatic terms? Was it human trafficking or fake news? No, according to this, it was the pop-up box. In this article, Ethan Zuckerman at MIT admits it was he who first developed what would later riddle the internet with those pesky boxes that pop up again and

[79] Ethan Zuckerman, "The Internet's Original Sin: It's not too late to ditch the ad-based business model and build a better web," The Atlantic, August 14, 2014.

again, telling us that we were the lucky one-millionth visitor, frustrating us to no end by having to close box after box.

In his confession, he claims his intentions were good, and that only later he realized that he had created something so awful. Now he is apologizing, both for the sin of the pop-up box and for the fallen nature that it produced in the Internet. As I read, many things struck me about his words, but there was something almost theological in his explanation: he said that the pop-up block, the Original Sin of the Internet, was rooted in fear.

Web pages needed to be funded. Advertising was the answer. The problem, though, was fear. *What if your ad appeared next to something it shouldn't? A vegetarian website sponsored by Burger King?* There was fear on both sides, he said, that pages would be combined with ads that didn't match. The solution was the pop-up box. If the ad were separate from the page, then the fear of association was gone, and thus the problem was solved. Though now, years later, we all know those unexpected consequences, so bad the word sin applies. And that seems appropriate. The sin of separation is often rooted in fear.

*Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law.*[80]

Our gospel today gets at a similar question: what do we do when forgiveness come difficultly? The answer that we are offered, one that is unique to Matthew's gospel, offers a multi-step formula to reconciliation. The first we attribute to the Essenes, a group that lived around the time of Jesus. They, like John the Baptist, left Jerusalem and its ways of public reckoning, for the simpler life. One of their guiding principles was that people ought to be able to

[80] In repeating this scripture multiple times throughout the sermon, I was mimicking John Donne and George Herbert, how they were able to use words of scripture like poetry. I also change them during the sermon to support the point, as both of these men did. I noticed, in the delivery, that I sounded more like an American Evangelical than an English priest, but perhaps that is because the poetic sermons of that era are not common to us.

work out things on their own, foregoing the need to point out sin unnecessarily or rely on the Temple priests. And Jesus must have picked up on this, thinking perhaps of how Joseph had once planned this kindness for Jesus' own mother, and he said that the first step was to work out sin kindly. If step one didn't work, step two took a page from Deuteronomy. It was there in the ancient Law that this second idea was found, so that two or three witnesses could assist in the work of reconciliation. Step three was on to the church, an idea first recorded in Matthew's gospel. If none of that worked, you were to treat the sinner like gentiles and tax collectors. That, Jesus said, was the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. What was forgiven was forgiven and what was unforgiven was like those pop-up ads of days gone by, to be avoided, as bad as gentiles and tax collectors.

It is here in Jesus' teaching that I have to stop and wonder something aloud. Did Jesus think that there was a point where forgiveness ends? At first reading, it is tempting to think that Jesus offers us to "forgive and forget," the same marginal advice offered to children and wounded adolescents, as the best the gospel has. It occurs to me that something like that doesn't really seem like Jesus at all. Perhaps we could hear his final challenge differently: What do we do when we have to live with the very real problems of sin and unlikely forgiveness, especially when reconciliation seems so difficult? It is there that we hear Jesus. He says, when you have come to the end of your rope trying all of those things that others have told you, treat *them* like gentiles and tax collectors.

You remember that Jesus' interactions with gentiles and tax collectors was something that seemed to separate him from those around him. People accused him so often of associating with people who were different. There was an ongoing fear of being associated with those who were different, like gentiles from other cultures and religions, like tax collectors, wealthy and

constantly frustrating the lives of the poor. This separation that lived in Jesus' day is reflected in the fears of association with those who were different culturally, religiously, or economically.

That attitude for which we know Jesus, that way in which his gospel stands outside the crowd and challenges us still, is how he refused to avoid gentiles or tax collectors. The gospels agree that he sought them out. The gospels agree he challenged both himself and those around him to see people differently. His forgiveness and reconciliation was not done until it included *them*, until they too were a part of the hope of his gospel.

There was a consequence to all of this, he said. Binding and loosing, he called it. The choice of whether or not to forgive. The choice to reconcile, he suggested, is something that has consequences: when things that we forgive are transformed, and things that we do not forgive remain as they were. The way we characterize others, too, can have real consequences, like how we think of "gentiles and tax collectors" in our own world. That, too, is part of the binding and loosing. We shouldn't be surprised when those whom we characterize as different or feared go on to fulfill our expectations.

That is one of the greatest challenges of all. What we bind can remain bound longer than we intended. It seems to me we are good at binding and loosing *reasonable forgiveness*. But when it is challenging, when it tempts those things we have believed and want to be true, when we have constructed our worlds around them *radical reconciliation* and *difficult forgiveness* are even harder, what then?

For the last few years, I have always marveled at how our lectionary, each year, when it is time for September 11th to come, seems to bring up radical forgiveness. The Lectionary we use was structured ten years before 2001,[81] so this wasn't intentional. But each year, it seems to me

[81] The Consultation on Common Texts, "Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary."

we always come across a difficult teaching on the radical nature of forgiveness. The Sunday of the first anniversary of 9/11, our text today was the gospel reading, how we must forgive when it is the most difficult, and that those things we bind just might remain bound.

I worry about the things bound in our own heart in the years since 2001. As I watched the news the other day, I thought for a second that I don't remember what it felt like before that first September 11th. I hardly remember a time before *Muslim* and *terrorist* were synonymous in our culture. And our children may never know that the two were not always bound. I remember a Church History professor in seminary telling us that Muslims and Christians had been friends for much longer than we had been enemies. We struggled to believe that, because in 2005 all we felt was fear.

*Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law.*

It is interesting, in looking at this beautiful verse from the thirteenth chapter of Romans, how Paul says that the one who loves another fulfills the Law. I suspect that if we looked at the original text in Greek, one word might jump off the page: *heteron*—other, different. The one who loves someone who is the opposite of him or herself, that person has fulfilled the law. It occurs to me that is what Jesus had in mind when he associated gentiles and tax collectors with forgiveness, and with the consequences of being bound to each other. We must be bound to the loving of those who are truly other; for the one who loves someone so different has fulfilled the law.

One of the most compelling moments for me, this summer, happened because of the descendent of the pop-up box. Now it is called "related content." They have gotten smart enough to associate items for us. I watched, along with you, the frightening images of Nazis and Klansmen in our backyard this summer. It was then that I clicked on a piece of related content. It

was from Dylann Roof's first court appearance the day after he murdered in cold blood the people at Mother Emanuel's bible study.

In South Carolina, the families of the victims have the right to speak at the bond hearing. So they did. One by one, the family of those who died in that awful act of hate stood, and their voices quivered and their hands shook, and they told him that they forgave him. They prayed aloud that God would have mercy on him. "You hurt me," one woman said. "You hurt us all. But God forgives you, and so I forgive you too." They were heroes of the gospel. That is the kind of content to which you and I must be related.

*Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law.*

Sermon V

Year A Proper 22—Originally preached October 8, 2017

Scripture: Phil. 3: 4-14 and Paul's reflections on gain and loss, and Matt. 21: 33-46 the parable of the Angry Tenants

Narrative: Ancestry.com leading me to find tenant farmers in my family tree and reflections on their lives, questions I get about tithing each year during stewardship and the epiphany I had when asked about stewardship the night my daughter was born

Liturgical Reflection: Holy Communion as an outward and visible sign of communion with the Vineyard Owner, words from the Eucharistic Prayer, "here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls, and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy sacrifice."

From Paul's letter to the Philippians: Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Gain and Loss, Paul calls it. The things in life that are our own, the things that we call our own, that make us who we are; and the things in life that we give up—because others are in need, or because the gospel calls us to it, or because those things aren't ours completely. Gain and Loss.[82]

[82] Here I was imitating Presiding Bp. Michael Curry. In his sermons, he often gives a summary of what he is going to preach about as his opening move, before moving on to the corpus of the sermon. He often ends his first move with a lofty theological claim and then says, "let's unpack that a little bit." I have simplified that here, just as I do at the beginning of Sermon VII.

Genealogy is the rage, as many of you know. I have taken part on ancestry.com. I went looking for relatives to determine once and for all who I am, and who Alison is, so that one day we would have a decent family tree to pass along to Ella and James. By “decent,” I mean that it would be a decent size. As you know, you can’t do much about your family tree to make it any more decent. Many of the discoveries I have made were in keeping with what I expected. Occasionally, though, one of the ancestry.com leaves pops up and a discovery comes that really makes you reconsider who you are.

For example, the first Mr. Weldon to come from England came to Dedham. It was 1636 and he was one of the original settlers right around the corner from us, seven and a half miles from the Parish of the Good Shepherd. He had been a Church Warden in Lincolnshire and took a chance on this new settlement in a place that was not yet called Massachusetts.

I want to tell you about another ancestor we lived near. When we lived in Albany, I discovered that one branch of my family tree had wandered through the hot afternoons of Southwest Georgia before. A hundred years ago, part of my family on my mother’s side had lived there. They were farmers at the turn of the last century.

I found them in the 1910 Census, listed as farmers who rented their land. They were sharecroppers, not rich enough to own land, so they gave away part of what they grew in order to farm. I wonder if being a sharecropper 100 years ago was as miserable as I imagine, or if they were thankful to have the opportunity to work—at least mainly—for themselves. I wonder how they would have understood our parable today, as tenant farmers—if they were angry to give up what they had worked so hard to produce and hid vegetables in their pockets, or if they were thankful to have the opportunity to live and work. I wonder if they would call it gain or loss.

Jesus told a parable about tenant farmers and a land owner because the crowd there, he said, also had tenant farmers in their family tree.[83] That image began in the Old Testament with the prophet Isaiah, who said Israel was the vineyard and God the Vineyard Owner, that they were God's people and he was their God. They lived and worked in God's vineyard, tending to the land and to each other, and God watched over them.

They were God's sharecroppers, we might say, and that meant something wonderful as well as difficult. It meant that they were God's beloved, but it also meant they worked every day and reaped the land's benefits and treated it as if it were their own, but it never really was their own. They were working for an unseen Vineyard Owner. I suspect that some of them considered it a blessing that they had life at all, but some only looked at how much they had to give up in the end. Some still thought of it as gain, but Jesus said many of God's beloved sharecroppers had come to think of it as loss.

In this parable, Jesus painted a picture of how God had sent the prophets to remind them of what it meant to be holy sharecroppers; and that he, as the only begotten Son of the Vineyard Owner, had come to make one last attempt to set things right between the Vineyard Owner and people. That last attempt didn't seem to be working, he said. Sometimes God's people struggle to embrace generosity. Sometimes we see things from the perspective of loss. Sometimes we have the opportunity to work and put up a nice harvest, but all we see is the landowner's truck driving away what we worked for. That is one problem in the vineyard.

Another problem in the vineyard is forgetfulness. From the beginning, God had created the vineyard—built it and fortified it and made it grow, the parable says—so that both they would have life. God wanted them to have life, but as the generations passed, some forgot why

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[83] I owe the original connection here, one I probably discovered six or nine years ago to Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon "God's Sharecroppers" in Gospel Medicine, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995. I use her term and some of her thoughts throughout this sermon.

they were there. Ultimately, this forgetfulness kept them from trusting the Vineyard Owner, and appreciating how he trusted them with all that was his. Ironically, wanting to have it all of it for themselves kept them from maintaining any sort of relationship with the Vineyard Owner, which is what this Vineyard Owner wanted from the beginning. They even killed his son, the ultimate insult, because they didn't see benevolence at the heart of it all. They had forgotten the goodness of the Vineyard Owner, and their forgetfulness led to that tragedy.

Paul frames it differently: he calls it gain and loss, giving up those things that we thought were ours, only to realize that they were never ours to lose in the first place. By that, I don't think Paul only means things. I suspect he means all of those effects that make us who we are. In these words from Philippians we read today, he writes about how he had to put behind him so much of what he had learned in life, and so many of the things that he had earned and accumulated along the way, so that God's vineyard would grow new fruit, and so that new people would come to work in the vineyard, that through him others would have life.

And he admits that sometimes that equation of gain and loss is difficult when you frame it the wrong way. When we start with all of those things that are ours that the gospel often tells us aren't really ours, it can feel like loss, like some stranger in a pickup truck taking it unfairly. "Knowing Jesus," Paul says, being in relationship with the Vineyard Owner, changes that perspective.

In his parable, Jesus seems to me like one of those leaves that pop up on ancestry.com and surprises you with information about your family tree. It turns out we are all descended from a long line of tenant farmers, Jesus says. Everything we have belongs to the Vineyard Owner because everything that the Vineyard Owner has, he has already given to us.

We are approaching stewardship time. That means every year that the issue of tithing comes up—that is, the idea of giving away a percent of what we make. Someone always asks me

privately if I *actually* believe in tithing, so I will tell you. Tithing is something that has been important to Alison and me since we were first married, and the truth is that it has really become a source of joy for us. Part of that we can attribute to our family tree. Part of that has been the vineyards where we have worked; it has been places like Good Shepherd where we learned that kind of generosity. It is this vineyard where we live, where so many of you demonstrate generosity, that we have learned the transforming power of giving.

There is a dirty secret that I have, one that could rock the vineyard! The truth is, even though we *do*, I *don't* think God wants us to tithe, not exactly. Giving ten percent is a number rooted in Hebrew farming and sacrifice. It is an agreement between a Vineyard Owner and sharecroppers who, perhaps, have little in common except that they are required to give up ten percent of what they grew and give it away. But don't misunderstand!

The night that Ella was born, some friends invited me over for dinner, to celebrate the new tenant in God's vineyard. And for whatever reason, the host thought that would be a good time to ask me my theology of stewardship. *Congratulations on your new daughter! Do you actually think God wants us to tithe?*

That was when I realized something. Tired beyond belief, it occurred to me that the gospel's number for giving is actually much higher. That expectation always hovers around 100%. I think that is what the Eucharistic Prayer has in mind when it says, "here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls, and bodies… to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice."[84] Not because 10% wasn't a good deal, but because giving up a requisite portion has never been the dream of the Vineyard Owner. And that is what the only begotten son of the Vineyard Owner wanted so badly to persuade us, that we consider the entire relationship we have to God as gain, and to see in it the mutual act of self-giving love that we know in the Eucharist.

[84] Eucharistic Prayer I, BCP 336.

Otherwise, like my ancestors must have done, we end up stuffing okra and cucumbers into our pockets instead of being thankful to be in the vineyard.

Maybe that is why Jesus told us that those sharecroppers protested so much, because learning to see from a radically different perspective—like gain instead of loss, like communion with the Vineyard Owner—is not easy. Yet it is the dream of the gospel: as God's beloved sharecroppers, to remember how everything we have belongs to the Vineyard Owner, because everything the Vineyard Owner possesses has already been given to us.

"Here we present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls, and bodies, to be a reasonable sacrifice… that he may dwell in us, and we in him." Amen.

Sermon VI

Year A Proper 27—November 12, 2017

Scripture: I Thess. 4: 13-18 and the early Christians' concern regarding the delay in the Parousia, and Matt. 25: 1-13 as a parable used to explain the delay

Narrative: Starbuck's introduction of Christmas Dark Roast each year in early November, a reflection on marriage and someone keeping the candles burning as a sign of love

Liturgical Reflection: exploration of the Medieval seven-week Advent and its influence on our prayers and scriptures at the end of Ordinary Time, specific use of three collects (Pentecost 23, Advent I, and Advent IV)

Jesus said, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas… and it is only November. I lamented this week the return of the Christmas dark roast at Starbucks. It isn't that I don't like it, and it isn't as if there aren't real problems in our world, but I always feel like the Thanksgiving dark roast ought to be brewed until Thanksgiving, after which Advent would come and the Christmas coffee would be fine. That is my mundane life.

With this in mind, I want to segue into a little-known liturgical fact, that starting today we have already begun the journey to Bethlehem. This is obvious in a consumerist way, but this is also true in an ecclesial way, that Advent is upon us whether you are ready for it or not. You see, in the medieval church, Advent had as many as seven Sundays instead of just four. All Saints

Sunday ended the Christian year, and the Sunday that followed began Advent, and the story of Christ began again. I think I like that better, two clear halves of the Christian year: Advent to Easter, and Pentecost to All Saints. The first of those halves, Advent to Easter, tells the story of how the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and how finally God vindicated him and raised him from the dead. Then comes Pentecost to All Saints with the second claim of the Christian narrative, that the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead lives in us, and how it has come to live in all his saints.

We don't follow this tradition anymore, with seven Sundays of Advent, but in some ways, it endures. You might want to think of it like Christmas dark roast appearing in early November each year, because remnants of the seven-week Advent remain and you can see them if you know to look. You can hear it in our readings. I Thessalonians is profoundly focused on the future hope that Christianity espouses. Our gospel readings beginning today will talk about being prepared and staying awake. This happens every year in our readings because they are still based in a small way on the Medieval lectionary.

You also hear the gentle whispers of Advent—which really aren't ever gentle— in the collects, the prayers that begin each service starting today. Thomas Cranmer, when he was composing the first Books of Common Prayer, kept most of the prayers the same—in English instead of Latin—which means that you hear the first collect of Advent today on the twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time. We remember how, for Cranmer, it was both the scriptures and the collects that set the stage and guide us into worship, that serve as lamps burning in order to guide us to the banquet hall. Today I want to highlight those watchful words of Advent in our Collect for today: "O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we

may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom...”[85]

So it began, in the Medieval church, with that prayer, a season of holy intention and with scriptures to match. And so it would continue until the final collect of Advent, just before Christmas: “Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself.”[86] *That when he comes, he might find in us a mansion prepared for himself*. It’s beautiful, isn’t it, when we get to that final prayer and remember how unexpected his first Advent truly was, we also find ourselves as an unlikely yet intentional destination for his coming.

Our scriptures today echo these themes. In I Thessalonians, we hear a word of hope, a word of hope even when the waiting and expectation is not playing out as we might have imagined it would. This text from I Thessalonians may be the earliest New Testament scripture ever written down. We hear in it a rather unabashed expectation that Christ would return any moment, probably today, maybe by early afternoon. They called his return the Parousia, and they thought it was immanent. I don’t think we share that with them, at least not as they meant it. I cannot imagine the thought that Christ might return this afternoon. We have so much left to do.

For them, it was not the immediacy of the Parousia that was problematic; it was the delay. They wondered what was taking Christ so long. They worried what his return would mean for those who had already died, that the dead might move to the back of the line, even as people waiting for him continued to die. I doubt you and I worry about that very much anymore either. But I do think we often find ourselves carrying the burden of life when our expectations do not

[85] “Proper 27,” BCP, 236.
[86] “Fourth Sunday of Advent,” BCP, 212.

match reality, and when the arc of history, though bent toward justice, seems to have a rather gradual slope. And we cry to God—as they did—what is taking so long? Like a gentle text message sent to the divine realm. *We are not going to sleep until you get home, so please come home soon.*

In Matthew, we encounter a different take on this theme. It is the Parable of the ten young women. If I Thessalonians still hopes for a timely Parousia, this parable tries to make sense of the delay. I will admit to you that I have struggled with this parable as much as I have struggled with any of them, mainly because of the images in it that seem so unfair. All young women were found sleeping, but only half would pay the price, even though it was not their fault that the bridegroom came so late. Five locked out of the banquet and unknown to God because those who made it in were unwilling to share with them the means by which salvation came to them. I think that those subtexts are worth raising, because we live in a world that needs compassion and mutual concern and loving kindness. In fact, these millennia later, I think we have grown quite convinced that it is things like compassion and mutual concern and loving kindness that are the bridegroom's lasting legacy, and that will in fact bring us closer to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is also worth saying that we live in a world with enough fancy banquets with their doors shut.

Here, though, we might also hear more clearly what Jesus intended with this story. This parable was directed to his followers, and not to his adversaries. That is important because I suspect he meant it as an encouragement to them to keep the faith, especially on days when they felt like life was not playing out as they had expected. Matthew located it toward the end of his gospel, just before the narrative of the crucifixion, perhaps also as a word of encouragement before that his passion. And we can hear that. The point, of course, is Jesus' encouragement to us to remain committed to his gospel of justice and holy intention and faith. If I Thessalonians is

like a text asking someone to hurry home, this one is like the message sent in return. *I am on my way. But you'll have to leave the lights on.*

If any of this leaves you feeling less than certain, I suspect it has done its job. The next time you see he Christmas blend on display before Thanksgiving, remember Christ's call to keep awake, because we do not know exactly when and where and how he will come, but we keep the faith. That is why we pray that God would purify us and keep us awake and hold us to our holy intentions, that we might become more like he is, and that when he comes he would find in us something completely transformed and prepared.

One final thought. Jesus tells this parable and intends to reveal something about the Kingdom of God, and how it is like a bride and bridegroom beginning their lives together. Well that reminded me of one of the first joys of marriage that I discovered, how coming home to someone who actually cared about the boring and mundane things of life made them seem quite different.

Before I met my wife, I would get to work a few minutes late and need to get prescriptions filled at lunch, only my lunch break wasn't long enough to stand in line at Walgreens and eat, so I had to eat in the car and it spilled on the floor, but the people at work didn't care. In fact, I learned quickly, they didn't want to hear about it at all. They had enough problems of their own.

But suddenly, after we married, there was this person, bound to me in love, who stayed up past her bedtime with her bedside lamp on, even though she is a morning person and wanted to sleep, all because she was waiting for me. She was waiting to hear about all of these boring things—like getting to work late and spilling food in the car—like they were some kind of Shakespearean poetry. And she was a pharmacist, so no more standing in line at Walgreens! She wanted to tell me about getting her oil changed and buying someone's lunch because he forgot

his wallet. She would yawn and fall asleep in the middle of her stories because she was so tired, and she would wake back up listening to me ramble about my day, because it was an act of love. Finally, when she couldn't take it anymore, she would take off her glasses and turn off her light and tell me that she loved me and that she couldn't wait to hear about it all over again tomorrow. Suddenly the mundane things of life meant something they had never meant before.

It occurs to me that is part of what you and I are persuaded today to believe about the kingdom of heaven. We are bound to Christ and his ways of compassion and mutual concern and loving kindness, not out of fear or obligation, but simply out of love. And we keep the lamp burning and try to stay awake, because we love the bridegroom. All of those things that were important to him have now become important to us. And we believe that we are profoundly loved by him, and that our mundane lives are important to him. And God willing, when he comes, whether it is sooner or later than we expect, he will find in us a mansion prepared for himself.

Sermon VII

Year B Advent II—originally preached December 10, 2017

Scripture: II Peter 3: 8-15 and the early Christians' expectation that the return of Christ meant the destruction of the world and a new heaven and earth, Mark 1: 1-8 with Mark not containing a Christmas story or Incarnational beginning and with reference to John the Baptist and his call to repentance

Narrative: Getting into the *Hofbrauhaus* in Munich, reflection on modern experiences of disappointment that lead us to action

Liturgical Reflection: Advent as a season that emphasizes patience and waiting, Advent as a season that emphasizes the first and second comings of Christ

From II Peter: In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. So, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. Waiting: it is one of the great themes of Advent, though sometimes it seems like we just say that Advent is about waiting without any real introspection. Memes on the internet furnish this message, that "Advent is a season to wait," but with less endeavor to ask why or for what we wait, as if it were just assumed to be something worth waiting for.

Years ago, when I had first gone to study in Germany, I was in Munich with a friend, another American. We read in our guide books how to get to the *Hofbrauhaus*, but we hadn't read how to get into the *Hofbrauhaus*. There were multiple entrances and many lines and people from every corner of the world standing outside and hoping to get in. So we found a line shorter than the rest, and there we waited. And we waited. We asked the Italians in front of us what this line was for, and they didn't know. They were waiting and hoping to get in. The Canadians behind us told us they were only there because they had seen us waiting there, too.

So finally, I was persuaded to go and inquire about this line. My German at that point was marginally better than my friend's, which meant I had to ask all of the questions. I found a waiter dressed in lederhosen and smelling of sauerkraut, and I told him that we were all standing in line at that door over there. *What*, I asked him, *what were we waiting for*? His response was typically German, though in fairness, there was truth to it. "What are you waiting for over there?" He asked me. "Sorry," he said, "only you could know the answer to that."

Fortunately, his helpfulness improved not long after his quizzical response, and he got us all in and we spent the evening eating sausage and pretzels; yet all these years later, I still remember his words to me. And they strike me as a worthy point of introspection every year in Advent with its message of patience and waiting.

What are we waiting for? Like excited children, just for Christmas to get here? Or are we, like our prayers and Scriptures suggest, expecting the arrival of the Kingdom of God among us?

In the church, we know some of the things for which we are waiting. One is that baby in Bethlehem, the long-awaited son of David's lineage, told of prophets, here to fulfill God's promises of old; and to teach us how to love, and how to live out compassion, and how to withhold judgment, and to ignite holy indignation, and to make peace with God. We are waiting,

because we celebrate with joy each year the remembrance[87] of how he came unexpectedly amid cattle and sheep, how the heavens rejoiced, and how outcasts like shepherds were the first to know.

And then, of course, in keeping with the greater proclamation of Advent, we are waiting for him to come again. That is the other thing the Scriptures remind us of each year as the days grow shorter and darker, that we share in this hope that one day, that Kingdom that he once inaugurated will truly be fulfilled, that he will come with clouds descending, and that with thousands of saints attending[88] he will return, and finally set right all of those things that we have been waiting for so long for him to come and set right. And we are waiting, still.

In some ways, I think both of these describes the story of the earliest Christians, how they had seen and known him, how they had experienced in his life and in his death the Holy Otherness that is beyond humanity, yet that was alive uniquely in this person they knew as a friend, and how in him they had seen and come to know the love and compassion and righteousness of God that could live, that could be at home, in humanity. In him they had learned a love that was stronger than death. They remembered how he said he would be with them forever. And they were waiting for him to come again to establish that Kingdom in a beautiful and lasting way. So, in some way, it occurs to me that in this season of Advent, a season that remembers the waiting and fulfillment of all things past and present in Jesus, and the waiting for the fulfillment of all things future in Christ, we share with them in that beautiful hope.

But there is also something quite different about what they were expecting: for them, it wasn't going to be pretty. Advent here is celebrated by lighting candles and buying gifts and singing beautiful songs. Not so for them. They were looking for fire and explosions, for the sun

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[87] This phrase is loosely based on the first Collect for Christmas in the BCP.
[88] This intentionally quotes the words of the Advent hymn, "Lo! He comes with clouds descending."

to melt and the earth to be blown away. When Jesus returned, he would finally destroy this world and get rid of all of it that was wrong, and there would be a new heaven and a new earth, a place where that justice and righteousness that had seemed so elusive on this planet, would finally be at home, and finally they could be with him. They were expecting it any day now. Every time they heard a camel backfire, I expect that their hearts skipped a beat in hopeful anticipation that Christ was about to return and the whole world was about to go up in flames and his kingdom would finally come.

It is fair to say that most of us don't share that same type of expectation that they did. We don't light Advent candles hoping to spark deadly fire. We don't buy gifts for people we love, and we don't pray for justice and peace to take root on earth, in the hope that the world is about to be destroyed. Yet we must ask, what are we waiting for? Are we like that group from every tongue and tribe and nation—just waiting, we hoped, to find a way to a single meal and festivity? Or are we waiting for the Kingdom of God?

Our text from Mark's gospel speaks to this. Notice that Mark is not one to get bogged down in details or stories. There is immediacy to his gospel, to what is happening. If you like Christmas stories, too bad! John the Baptist is about the closest things you are going to get. There are no shepherds and angels, not even a mystical Word made Flesh. The front of his Christmas card contains the portrait of a man eating locusts, and it says, *Repent!* On the inside, it continues with the season's greetings: *He will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit. Merry Christmas!*

But don't throw away the card too quickly. This strange, terse proclamation is part and parcel of the immediacy in the way in which Mark and the earliest followers of Jesus heard the gospel story, how it was playing out fast and furiously and immediately, and how it would be completed soon. Then another generation came after them, still seeing how the story of Jesus

was playing out, but it was beginning to lose that furiousness and immediacy. It was there that they had to start to think seriously about why the fulfillment of the Kingdom and the Day of the Lord was taking longer than they had expected.

It is in this vein that our reading from II Peter is rooted. You can see how the author is still thinking that the earth will be destroyed and Christ will make a new heaven and earth where righteousness will be at home, but you can also see how they are frustrated by the delay. They were learning patience and they were trying to understand why, and they were sewing the seeds of the holy waiting that you and I reap every year when December comes, but honestly they seem like the kind of people who didn't really know what they were waiting for.

Then at the end of this reading comes a word of grace, a different idea than was common among the early Christians, one that we might share with them in more ways than we might have thought. Why is the Lord delayed? Because he is being patient! He is waiting. What is he waiting for? He is waiting for us to experience salvation.

If you turn on the television and end up throwing the remote control at it less than three minutes after the news has begun, but you vow to do something about the sins of life that aggravate you, then you qualify for his salvation. If you look at Christmas in America and notice how little it has to do with the legacy of Bethlehem's child, but you ensure that such will not be the sad lot for you and your family, you fall into the hope of his salvation. If you look at the state of affairs in the world and see how desperately the world still needs the advent of the Kingdom of God among us, his salvation has you in mind. If you believe that every valley hasn't been raised up and every mountain hasn't been made low, and every crooked thing hasn't been made straight— then maybe the reason is that Christ is still giving us a chance. He still extends to us a chance at imitating him and fighting for justice and righteousness without excuses. Maybe what he intended was for his ways to come more fully in us, and so he is waiting still so that we might

find his salvation, and to make it known, and to cause it into being in the world while we still have life.

Whatever we think that his Kingdom will look like when it comes—where the Holy Other tends his flock like a shepherd, where justice and righteousness are at home, and where the very ways of God are present and exist in all things—those things must become our expectations. So that the Word becoming Flesh is not just a story we have heard in ages past or hope for years to come, but something that happens in us and through us and will continue as time marches on.

Come Lord Jesus, to us who wait.
Who need your guidance and hope and righteous indignation.
Come Lord Jesus, to us who are never satisfied
Because your kingdom has not yet come as we imagined
Come Lord Jesus, to us who are impatient
Because we pray fervently that your kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven
Come Lord Jesus, but hasten the coming of your kingdom
Give us another day to attain to your salvation.

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