

Depths of Love

Lent & Holy Week 2024 Worship Series

Ash Wednesday: There Your Heart Will Be

February 14, 2024

[Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

“Beware of practicing your piety before others” (Matthew 6:1). Not exactly the exhortation I’m looking for as I’m planning worship for Ash Wednesday. Isn’t the whole point coming together to worship, confess, and repent as enter the season of Lent? Shouldn’t we, as worship planners, be leading our people into practices of individual *and* corporate piety?

Yes and yes! Thankfully, Jesus isn’t telling us not to practice our piety together. Jesus tells us not to practice our piety *before* others. In other words, we need to be clear about why we come to worship on this day. It’s not about showing one another how righteous we are. Our piety is about properly ordering ourselves before God and then neighbor. On Ash Wednesday, especially, we gather to confess and repent to realign ourselves with the truth that God is God, and we are not. And then, properly ordered in relationship to God, we can learn to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Now, before you start checking to make sure you’re not reading the sermon notes, I promise I’m going somewhere with this. There is a gravity to Ash Wednesday that, honestly, feels a bit odd some years. We’ve just encountered the glory of Transfiguration Sunday, and suddenly we’re plunged into the solemn reminder that we are fragile earth beings, made of dust and returning to the dust when we die. The suddenness of this transition can sometimes make us veer into one extreme or another. Some might decide not to make a big deal of Ash Wednesday, to downplay the importance of confession, repentance, and grappling with our frailty within the worship service, if they hold an Ash Wednesday service at all. Others might decide to overcorrect, heaping on double helpings of shame and blame to try to convince congregants to care about their sinfulness and mortality. Such services can feel like previews of Good Friday, and while it’s true that for many of our congregations Lent is bookended with Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, Ash Wednesday is not about over-anticipating the crucifixion.

Instead, Ash Wednesday is about refocusing and realigning ourselves in relationship to God and one another. We must encounter our sinfulness and frailty not with shame and blame but with honesty and truth, trusting that God receives our confession. So, live into the prayer of confession and repentance as an anchor for the whole service. Imbue the confession with honest naming and recognition of individual and systemic sin. Let confession testify to the realities of the brokenness in our world that we perpetuate. *And* guide your people into words and acts of repentance that are as robust as their confession. Celebrate—yes, I said celebrate—that God’s grace empowers us to turn from sin and toward God.

As you drape your altar and/or space in purple, add in reminders of our deep connection to the earth. Fill some vases with rocks and sand. Place some potted plants on the altar or floor of the chancel. You might even want to include a palm branch as a reminder that Sunday’s palms become Wednesday’s

ashes. Prepare the space in a way that draws the congregation into the truth that we are humble creatures, made in the image of God *and* created out of the dirt of the earth. Let this be a way of welcoming your people into the imposition of ashes as a ritual of humility, but also a ritual that celebrates the reality of our existence. *We are dust and to dust we shall return.* This is a statement of truth, not confession. We are called to repent and believe the gospel *so that* we can live in the truth of our beautiful frailty and dependence on God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

PREACHING NOTES

For all that Jesus seems bothered by stuff, he is in favor of treasures. Did you notice? It's not, "Stay away from treasure, it's bad for your health." No, treasuring is ok. It's what we choose to treasure that's the issue. Some treasures aren't worth storing up. Or piling up. Or tucking into the attic so that when you dig it out, you say with a sigh, "What were we thinking, keeping this? The stuff around here just wears out, gets stained and becomes unwearable; it rusts." Rusts? What did they have that rusted in Jesus' day? Well, the word is "*brosis*" in Greek. It often refers to food that gets eaten. Consumed. Used up. Worn away until you don't recognize it anymore.

No, apparently there is treasure; and there is treasure. Some treasures are worth treasuring; some are just fit for the junk heap. How do you know? How can you tell the difference? How do we know we are saving the right things? Treasuring the right things?

Well, some say it is all about the tally sheet. You've got to pile up a good score in heaven. Every act of service is another star in your crown. And our goal is to get lots of stars, lots of jewels—not to earn our place in heaven; that comes by the grace of God. No, this is about the furnishings—a better mansion, plush carpets, bigger windows, more floors. They're building us a dwelling place out of the materials we send up from here. Some say.

I'm not convinced, frankly. Stuff is stuff. It seems that if Jesus were against too much stuff here, he would be against too much stuff there. Don't you think? So, it doesn't sound like the treasure Jesus wants us to treasure is more stuff, divine or otherwise.

What if our math is wrong? What if it isn't, "Do this to get that?" What if the treasure isn't the end product, the reward, or the payment for our acts? What if it is the act itself? What if it is not the result of our action, but the action itself? What if the treasure is not something we can hold in our hands but something we *do* with our hands?

In other passages when Jesus shares this secret, he tells someone, the rich young man, "Sell everything and give the money to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven." We think, "We get something; when we get to heaven, there will be something there because we've done this great thing." Maybe not. He says, "Do this, and you will have." Go and sell and you will have your treasure. In the selling and giving, that's the treasure. That's the gift. That's the blessing—the doing.

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Live your life in such a way that you know the blessing every day. Live your life so that you are treasuring what lasts into eternity. That's what Jesus is trying to point out to us. Some treasure is eaten away, and some treasure lasts and nothing in this world can take it

away. An act of kindness lives forever. Love lived out lasts forever. Goodness outlasts bitterness. Joy endures, while despair fades. An act of generosity is treasured for eternity.

Remember that this passage about treasure is a part of the longer conversation about prayer. It is about not making a show of our piety, about making sure that the focus is not on outward expression. It is not about impressing the gathered crowds and overhearers, but rather, God. Jesus says the treasure is a conversation with God or maybe even simply sitting in the presence of God. That's what we treasure. We fast, not to punish our bodies or even to deny ourselves, but simply so that we can have more time, more focused time, with God. We experience the Spirit best, says Jesus, when we pay attention; when we wake up to the possibilities of presence. Sure "woke" gets a bad rap these days. But better awake than asleep when it comes to spending time with God, to setting aside everything that the world says matters and enjoying communion with God. Ash Wednesday is about setting an agenda to focus on that relationship.

Yeah, it's scary to cast off the stuff that defined a life or seemed to, anyway. That is a loss, to be sure. But what cannot be lost are all the moments we've treasured together, the lives that we've lived, the experiences we've shared. Even when we forget them, and I suspect we will, they will be ours in eternity. When we meet, we will remember and be remembered. And what greater treasure can there be than that?

First Sunday in Lent: Has Come Near

February 18, 2024

[Mark 1:9-15](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

This first Sunday in Lent is quite the roller coaster ride, which is honestly quite typical of Year B in the lectionary cycle. Throughout Year B, we live in the Gospel of Mark, which is jam-packed with action from open to close. Mark often gives us very little narrative space to sit and consider what is happening before jumping to the next thing, which can make worship planning challenging. This week, in the space of seven verses, we go from hearing God's voice at Jesus' baptism to the wilderness where Jesus is tempted by Satan to Jesus beginning his earthly ministry. What do we focus on? How do we help our people enter into this? There's so much and also so little here to hang our hat on as we plan worship.

Perhaps the best path forward is to lean into the roller coaster. Instead of focusing on the joy of Jesus' baptism *or* the struggle of the wilderness *or* the proclamation that the kingdom of God is near, do it all. Since Mark gives us very little commentary on the story, we have to *feel* our way through the narrative. Speak to the moments God seems near and the moments God seems far away. Welcome all the emotions and experiences that people carry with them into worship. Normalize the fact that both joy and struggle are part of our journey with God. Invite a congregant to share a testimony of the way God showed up in a neighbor who tended and supported him/her/them during a difficult time. Infuse the prayers of the people with opportunities to declare the nearness of God's kingdom in times of peace and blessing and in the wilderness seasons. Send the congregation out with a blessing and a charge to discover the inbreaking of God's good news in their homes, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods.

When preparing the space, consider how to place representations of baptism next to representations of wilderness. Perhaps you can place the font in a prominent position along with stones or foliage local to your area. You might want to build on what you already did on Ash Wednesday by adding in representations of water or a depiction of a dove. By visually and/or aurally referencing Ash Wednesday, we remind the congregation of our commitment to live into our frail beauty as creatures made in the image of God. How might that reorientation color our journey with Jesus from baptism to wilderness to proclamation? How might ashes reflect the work of the wilderness in our Lenten journey, even as they prepare us to receive and follow the good news that God's kingdom has come near? You could also play with light and shadow in the space, including in your graphics. Whatever you decide, find ways for the physical space to depict the tension in Mark, the highs and lows out of which Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is near. Whatever you do, think about how you can marry representations of this tension with the symbols and art that are familiar to your context and in your congregation as reminders that God's presence is constant and faithful through every season of our lives.

PREACHING NOTES

Ah, yes, the wilderness experience. Three of the four gospels tell us that after his baptism, Jesus spent time in the wilderness. John's loquacious Jesus doesn't have time to be alone; he's got disciples to call and parties to attend, wine to make. But the other three are pretty clear that Jesus needed time to get things in order. At least that is what it seems like he is doing. What kind of Messiah is he going to be? Matthew and Luke describe the conversation in the wilderness, the temptations. They give us some background into the decisions facing Jesus as he launched his ministry. They provide lots of juicy details about what was going on there and lots of debate about the test.

But no, it is Year B in the lectionary cycle, and we get Mark— Mark, who presents the temptation in the wilderness in two verses, who doesn't itemize the questions, who doesn't tell us how strenuous it was. We just get some bullet points in Mark's PowerPoint on Jesus. Item one: Jesus was there forty days. Item two: He was tempted by Satan. Excuse me? How, sir, how was he tempted by Satan? No time for questions. Moving on. Item three: He was with the wild beasts. What? What do you mean "with the wild beasts"? Attacked by them? Surrounded by them? Fought them for food? Turned them into pets? What? No time for questions. Moving on. Item four: He was waited upon by angels. Waited on? They brought him meals and such? They mopped his brow and fanned him with big leaves? Or they stood on the edge of the wilderness and tapped their toes and checked their iPhones for texts from Jesus? End of lecture.

Um. OK. What was going on there? Mark says we don't know. He says Matthew and Luke made up stuff or had other sources or pestered Jesus until he told them what happened. Mark says it doesn't matter, really, what exactly happened. Mark says the important stuff is there. Back up, he says, look at the process. Baptism, heavens torn open, gentle Spirit like a dove settles, and Jesus is blessed. Then gentle Spirit becomes an irresistible force driving him out into the wilderness. Driving him. Temptation, wild animals, angels. That's all you need to know.

We have those beastly moments from time to time, don't we? We find ourselves cast out into a world we aren't ready for, dealing with things for which we didn't prepare, wondering if we are going to survive. There are choices to be made, paths to follow; and we are never sure which is right, what will

bring us back into the gentle blessing of the Spirit and what will drive us deeper into conflict with the adversary.

And our first thought when we find ourselves in difficult situations is, “What did I do wrong? How did I get off track?” One wonders if Jesus had those thoughts while stumbling around the wilderness. “What did I do wrong?” “Surely not,” we think, “He must have known what he was doing. It must have been his idea to go and spend some quiet time before diving into the busy years of his earthly ministry.” But then, why does it say, “the Spirit drove him out”? Doesn’t that sound like he didn’t want to go? It sounds like punishment. God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden. It sounds like getting rid of something you don’t want; Jesus himself would later drive out demons and drive out disease. It was a way of getting obstacles out of the way. Jesus drove out the mourners when he wanted to rescue Jairus’s daughter from the grip of death.

The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. The Spirit tore open the heavens and drove him into the wilderness. And in the middle, he was blessed with a gentle presence and loving words. He was tempted in the harsh wilderness for forty days; and in the midst of it, he was waited on by emissaries of the God who claimed him at the river. Again, there’s an echo of our own lives that seems to vacillate between moments of love and acceptance and moments of doubt and terror. We seem to be swallowed up in uncertainty, even as we are comforted by the blessings of those who love us.

Mark says that Jesus tells us to lean into the Spirit, even when it blows us into uncharted territory. Even when it seems to be sending us out against our will. Lean into the uncertainty, because it won’t abandon you. And along the way, there will be moments of blessing. Remember them. Cling to them. Let them be sustaining in times of temptation and deprivation. Let those words, “You are my beloved,” ring in your ears over the weeping and moans of your own brokenness, and let the gentle Spirit be what drives you to embrace the suffering of the world to bring healing and wholeness and love.

Wait, though. Light and dark, gentleness and suffering, Satan and angels. OK, we get that tension, that daily struggle to hold on, that hope in the midst of despair, and the suffering that deepens love. But what about the animals? He was with the wild beasts? Who are they? Another danger? Another comfort? Another choice to turn away from or a responsibility to claim? Who are the wild beasts?

We are. He was with the wild beasts. That’s all we get. Did they attack to rend limb from limb, or did they lie down to keep him warm in the cold desert nights? Yes. Maybe both. Maybe some attacked and some came alongside. Maybe some ran from him, and some ran toward him. We have that choice. We always have that choice. And we aren’t told what happened because it is still happening. Every day, we make the choice. Lean into the Spirit, it won’t let you down. And you’ll find resources to face whatever may come in the wilderness.

And out of this moment, out of this beastly, wilderness moment, he comes to announce that the Kingdom of God has come near. Really? Where? Here in the non-wilderness world? Or back there? Where is the kingdom nearest to us? Is it when we are safe and happy and everything is easy, or is it when we are wrestling, like Jacob at Jabbok’s ford? That’s the invitation of this Lenten series, to feel the depths of love, the depths of presence, even at our most beastly.

Second Sunday in Lent: For the Sake of the Gospel

February 25, 2024

[Mark 8:31-38](#) or [Mark 9:2-9](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

If Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday in Lent set us off on our Lenten journey, this week we find out just what this journey will require of us. While Jesus is the one we follow on this path, today's text(s) ought to make us curious about our traveling companions, especially Peter. It's certainly not hard to question Peter here. *What's the deal, Peter? What are you doing rebuking Jesus when you just said he's the Messiah??* And yet, these questions reveal the same lack of curiosity about Peter that Peter showed toward Jesus. So, instead of expecting Peter to know everything that we know, how do we approach Peter with curiosity? For that matter, how do we approach ourselves with curiosity in worship? Because ultimately, being curious about those who travel the Lenten road with us isn't just about Peter. It's also about us. How do we cultivate curiosity about those who sit with us in the pew or online for worship? About our pastor(s)? About *ourselves*?

Perhaps the best place to start is to practice. Perhaps the call to worship or opening prayer might include curious questions. What kind of Messiah is Jesus? Why is Peter so troubled by Jesus' prediction of his own death? Are we troubled by Jesus' prediction of his own death? What stories or experiences might Peter—and we—carry that lead us to resist the truth Jesus shares about his own fate? Or maybe you invite the congregation to meditate on a prayer for curiosity before the prelude begins.

However you prepare the gathered body to enter into this stance of curiosity, consider how the rest of worship can guide the congregation toward answers—and more questions. Open up confession as a time to be curious and honest about our personal and communal struggles, followed by a pardon that reasserts our dependence on God's never-failing grace and love. Intercede with and for one another and the world in a posture of openness, ready to lift up and respond to the struggles of God's image bearers as God's image bearers, in turn. Through the prayers that you pray, the hymns you sing, and even the way you pass the peace, consider that it all culminates in Jesus' answer to our question: *What kind of Messiah are you?*

Jesus' answer comes as a surprise, but a surprise that we are ready for once we've let down the walls of our expectations and chosen a posture of openness and curiosity. Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). To those gathered, his words are a slap in the face. No one wants to take up a cross, because that means they are headed for execution. Today, the cross is so ubiquitous a symbol that we lose a bit of the absurdity of Jesus' statement. And yet, Lent offers us the opportunity to reorient ourselves toward the cross. So, place the cross front and center in your space if it isn't already. If you plan on having a barren cross on Good Friday and a flowered cross on Easter Sunday, how might you emphasize the cross differently this week? Do you surround it with reminders of the way the community participates in service and mission throughout the week? Or maybe you have people come forward and place sticky notes on the cross that testify to the ways Jesus has saved their lives. Or perhaps you invite congregants to place a rock at the foot of the cross during worship as an act of surrendering their expectations for who Jesus should be so that they are released to follow Jesus as the true Messiah—even when following leads to the cross.

PREACHING NOTES

So, our first question needs to be, “Why would the lectionary give us two passages from the Gospel of Mark for this Sunday?” The RCL (Revised Common Lectionary) says for this Sunday, the Second Sunday in Lent, Year B, the Gospel text is Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9. What is that about? Plus, we just had the second one a few weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, where it belongs! They just seem like wildly different moments in the life of Jesus, so we can’t help but wonder why they were paired together. Of course, you’ll point out, they aren’t paired, they’re alternates. This or that. Not this and that. Unless.

What if they were paired? What if we took a quick look at both and tried to see what might pop up? I know that in one, you have Jesus proclaiming a terrible death to come and with it a difficult life for many who would follow. And in the other, we have a special-effects-laden mountaintop moment with a blessing and an instruction. Not the same mood at all, really. Is it?

One thing we might pull out of the juxtaposition of the two is vindication for Peter, who normally gets a bad rap in this scene. Actually, Mark doesn’t tell us what Peter says to rebuke Jesus. But that phrase – rebuke Jesus – is condemnation all by itself. You can’t help but wonder what Peter said to his Lord when he pulled him aside after all this suffering and rejection talk. I think we might have a clue if we back up a few verses. This is the famous, “Who do you say that I am” text that we’ve all preached before. (And it is worth preaching again and again.) It is an important moment for those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ. An important question to answer.

Peter gets it right. And he gets a gold star for his efforts. “You are the Messiah!” Right, Peter. Right. Well, in Mark’s version of the story, Peter doesn’t get a gold star. In fact, all that happens is that Jesus says, “Don’t spread it around. Keep it to yourself.” And that’s a rabbit trail we can’t follow right now. But it needs following, to be sure.

“Jesus speaks to them sternly,” says Mark. Then our text begins for this week. After the “sternly” bit. After the stare from Jesus’ piercing eyes. No wonder they are on the defensive. No wonder Peter pulls him aside after all that and rebukes him. We don’t know what he said because Mark doesn’t seem to care. But I’ll bet it started with, “You’re the Messiah!” It has to do with mindset. Or maybe it’s about vision. What did Peter see when he heard the word “Messiah”? What do we see? And how does suffering and dying fit into that image? It fit into Jesus’ own understanding of what he was there to do.

We would much prefer the alternate reading. Let’s go back up on that mountain. Let’s go watch the light brighten and the clothes begin to shine. That’s the Messiah that we can get excited about following. Maybe that’s why the lectionary preparers gave us an out. Maybe they have said to us that if we can handle these harsh words – stern words – from Jesus, then we can climb up the mountain again and sit with Peter and John and James with our mouths hanging open as the light show takes place and the voice thunders from the clouds. It’s tempting, isn’t it? We like our messiahs up on pedestals. Unassailable, unaffected, unbroken by the powers that be.

Resist that temptation, however. And here’s why. Nowhere in Mark, chapter 9, does it say that what happened to Jesus on that mountain is going to happen to us. But here in Mark, chapter 8, he not only said it is a possibility, but he also says we ought to choose it. Pick up that cross. Enter into that suffering; embrace the brokenness. This is one of those “meaning of life” texts. Did you hear it? Or did you turn

away because it is too hard? Too stern? Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their lives for my sake, for the sake of the gospel, will save it. What are you willing to lose your life for?

This isn't necessarily a risk-yourself-onto-death kind of call. It might be that. It has been that for many people, and still is today. But that's not the only way to read that verse. What are you willing to lose yourself doing? You know what that's like. You know what it is to be so focused, so wrapped up in something or someone that you don't notice the passing of time, you don't notice that you are hungry or sleepy or exhausted. You don't notice anything but that thing, that activity, that person. You've lost yourself. We can't live that way always. But when we find something for which we are willing to lose ourselves, we are on our way to the kingdom that Jesus talks about.

And what if that thing was the gospel? Not the words on the page or in the book. But the life of fully living those words. What if loving one another as we have been loved became something we invested our whole self into? What if the whole church decided to do this? What transformation could take place in our community? It boggles the mind, frankly.

Third Sunday in Lent: I Will Raise It Up

March 3, 2024

[John 2:13-22](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

If you think that this week's text feels a bit misplaced, you're not wrong. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus flips tables in the Temple courtyard just after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But in John, we get this narrative much earlier, following directly on the heels of Jesus performing his first miracle at the wedding at Cana. So, for John, Jesus flipping tables at the Temple is more an inauguration of Jesus' earthly ministry rather than a culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry. Add to that, the lectionary places this text on the Third Sunday in Lent, and we're a bit befuddled. How do we craft worship around this text in the middle of Lent when we'd probably much rather deal with it in relationship to the triumphal entry and the beginning of Holy Week?

I suggest that we start with an important—and perhaps obvious—observation: what happens at the Temple matters to Jesus. For all that Jesus is out in the world teaching, tending, and performing miracles, we can't separate his work in the world from the work that is done in worship. And the same is true today. Worship forms and informs how we live out the good news in the world, and how we live out the good news in the world forms and informs our worship. Now, this does not mean you need to go into your worship space and start turning over pews. Rather, this Third Sunday in Lent is an opportunity to lead the congregation to reflect on the individual and communal work we do in worship. (Remember, "liturgy" comes from the word *leitourgia*, meaning "public work.")

Perhaps worship today includes teaching moments throughout the service. A short explanation of what a creed is and why we say it. A brief comment about why we sing in worship and why particular hymns were chosen. Preparing the congregation to participate in Holy Communion by discussing the role of confession and/or the structure and theology contained in the Great Thanksgiving. Sending congregants forth with a blessing, yes, but also to ponder what it means that we are sent forth into the world to then

be gathered together again. There are so many opportunities to unpack different portions of worship and to remind those who gather for worship the meaning behind what we do, sing, and say in worship.

This is also an opportunity to direct the congregation toward two markers of right worship found in today's text: right presence and raising up. Right presence is about the intention we each bring to worship and the proper ordering or prioritizing of worship in our lives. Are we there to be seen by others as holy or to worship the Most High God who created us, loves us, and redeems us? Do we gather in worship to gain social and political capital or to gain our lives by surrendering our lives to God? At the same time, raising up is the means and the fruit of right presence. As worship leaders, do we plan worship with the intention of pointing toward Resurrection? Are we primarily concerned with raising people up to encounter God, forming them to recognize and experience God's life-giving love in their midst so that they can share that same love with their neighbors?

These are questions for constant discernment in the life of worship planners and leaders. But let us take this Sunday, in particular, as an opportunity to lift the veil a bit and invite the congregation into the intention behind how we plan worship so that they can gain greater understanding of the formative work that happens when we gather together for corporate worship. For we know that even if we need to move out some of the "tables" that distract us, we are also the body of Christ, raised up with and by our Savior to delight in close, intimate life with the Triune God and one another.

PREACHING NOTES

Sure, we're in Lent, but it is hard not to be thrown by the way John orders his Gospel. It seems too early for Jesus to be running into the temple with destruction on his mind. Doesn't it? It's only chapter 2, for heaven's sake. And there is so much we haven't done yet. Of course, we know that while Mathew, Mark, and Luke gave us insight into Jesus' Galilean ministry, John is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem. So, even though we aren't ready for this, here we are, cleansing the temple before we get to the teaching or healing or storytelling that we love so much. It's almost as if Jesus – according to John – has an agenda, and it begins with worship. No, wait, it begins with *right* worship. Not right in form or structure, not right in genre or setting, but right in intention. Right in presence. We spend a lot of time worrying about the songs we sing and the words we say when we design worship, and we should! These are important matters. But here in the second chapter of John, Jesus is concerned with our hearts when we come to worship.

We could spend a lot of time debating what made Jesus so upset that he would turn over the tables in the temple. Some would argue that it was the whole system that he was rebelling against. We don't need animals to sacrifice anymore; that was what he was here to do and to be. Others want to point out the injustice of the exchange and that the poor were suffering to have an offering that was considered pure enough to give. Added to this was the graft of the moneychangers and the system that designated some of the animals as worthy and others as not. It was rampant greed and far removed from the purpose of making sacrifices in the temple.

All we really need to do is to look at the words that Jesus uses, according to John. "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace" (John 2:16 NRSV). The Common English Bible says, "a place of business." The New King James Version says, "a house of merchandise!" And Peterson's

Message writes about turning the temple into a shopping mall. So, was it greed or cheating of the poor, or was it simply the transactional nature of the business of the temple that got Jesus all worked up? We could say it doesn't matter, except that it does. Would Jesus turn over the tables of the youth group selling tickets to the spaghetti supper on Valentine's Day? Would the mission team be in trouble for offering [Ten Thousand Villages](#)' items or handmade bags from Guatemala? Of course not. Would they? Would he turn over those tables? What constitutes a shopping mall in the church these days?

There doesn't seem to be a clear dividing line. What seems like ministry – and the sustaining of ministry – to one, feels like a capitalist intrusion to another. So, how do we know? When Jesus was challenged over his actions, he had an interesting response. True, this might be John's reconstruction and theologizing after the fact. But these are the words we have. The leaders of the Jewish people and temple (which is what "the Jews" means in the Gospel of John. He never meant to lump the whole people into one statement. We need to make that clear when we preach these texts.) came to Jesus and said, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" What an odd question, don't you think? I would have been shouting at him, or pulling out my hair, or calling the police. But instead of all that, they approach Jesus and ask for his credentials. And not his government-issued ID either. They wanted to see his prophetic credentials, his divine spark, perhaps. "What sign," they asked him, "says you can get away with such outrageous actions?"

"Destroy this temple, and I'll raise it up in three days." Oh, that one. Because this is the Gospel of John, they missed it. John's Jesus talks in more layers than an onion (or an ogre), and whether it is Nicodemus or the woman at the well, or this pack of leaders wanting credentials, it is hard to discern what Jesus is talking about. Standing in the temple, he says, "Destroy this temple." You can't blame them for going literal. But John tells us readers that he was predicting his own death and Resurrection. He was moving from building to body, from structure to being, from that thing there to this person here.

Maybe that's the key for us as well. Worship is about Resurrection. We are being raised up as we gather and sing and pray and commune together around word and sacrament. So, we are asking the question about what we do when we gather: "What will raise us up?" What honors God first and lifts the people into God's presence when we come together as the body of Christ? What distracts and demeans ought to be avoided. What elevates and gathers in is where we need to be. We live in a world that can destroy the body and the soul. If we are to stand against that which tears down, we need to consider how we are building up.

We have to be alert to distractions from our true purpose of worshiping God and building up the body. It doesn't always have to be as obvious or sinful as preying upon the people through money changing or greed. In fact, it usually isn't obvious. Yet, we keep alert to those distractions, nonetheless. Here in the Lenten season, we are looking forward to Christ's resurrection, but we can also look toward being raised with him.

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Loving the Light

March 10, 2024

[John 3:14-21](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

This week, we continue our mid-Lent excursion into the Gospel of John by listening in on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. I always feel a bit like a fly on the wall when I read this text. Maybe it's the time of day or the fact that the text presents us with only two interlocutors: Jesus and Nicodemus. How often does Jesus have one-on-one conversations in the gospels with seemingly no one else around to listen? That's not to say that there weren't people there listening to their conversation, but the gospel writer doesn't give us any indication one way or another. That is probably why I always imagine this as an intimate, private dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, gathered close around a lamp or fire, as humans have done for millennia when night falls.

Granted, our passage today picks up in the middle of Jesus' answer to Nicodemus' question, so it is up to us as worship planners to set the stage for how our people will encounter this text. Consider sitting down as you read this text deliberately and wonderingly, giving the richness of Jesus' words time to germinate in and among the gathered body. Place this text in context for the congregation. Remind them that this is part of a conversation, not a sermon given to a crowd. If you are accustomed to standing during the reading of the Gospel, invite the congregation to lift their hearts to God as they honor the reading of the scripture by listening intently for what God might say to us today.

Also think about how you can draw the congregation into worship and prepare them to encounter this very familiar text anew. Perhaps you begin with playing with light and dark in the space through the use of fabrics, candles, rocks, water, or other natural materials. Of course, we need to treat John's language of dark versus light with care, given the way it has been used oppressively in the approximately 2000 years since this gospel was written. So, consider how you might use the call to worship or prayer of confession to name the harm done by such language and separate what John is saying underneath that metaphor from the metaphor itself and the way it has been used to condemn our neighbors throughout history, most especially our African American neighbors.

Of course, as much as we might like to immerse ourselves in John 3:16—and should—John 3:17 is as challenging as the previous verse is familiar. If God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world, then we aren't called to condemn the world either. Ouch! Seems like another opportunity for confession. But also, perhaps it is an opportunity to introduce a spiritual discipline. If we're going to follow Jesus by choosing love instead of condemnation, then we're definitely going to need some opportunities to practice recognizing condemnation internally and externally and turning toward love instead. And while worship is an important place to rehearse our repentance, we also need worship to give us tools to keep rehearsing throughout the week. So, consider where in the service you can lead the congregation in a breath prayer or short liturgy for releasing condemnation and filling up with love. Is this part of the prayers of the people? Or a gathering meditation as the service begins? Or do you use it as a benediction, sending people out with a blessing and charge? Whatever it is, ponder how worship might equip the people of God to be the people of God throughout the week as we continue to learn to turn from condemnation and love the Light.

PREACHING NOTES

I have been a comic book fan since long before the movies made it popular. But even as a kid, I didn't quite get one concept about comics: The bad guys were always easy to spot, because they named themselves that way. "The Injustice League" or the "Society of Evil Mutants," for example. Why in the world would you name yourself something that was just begging Superman and the Justice League, or the X-Men to come and round you up and cart you off to supervillain jail? Besides, while they might have a certain attitude toward the law, villains seemed to believe that their way was the right way, the better way. Their way was more just – brutal and illegal perhaps, but more just.

John says that Jesus told Nicodemus that people – that's most of us, you know – loved the darkness rather than the light because their (our) deeds were evil (John 3:19 NRSV). But what does that mean, to love the darkness rather than the light? Did we sign up for the Evil team? Did we consciously choose to oppose everything that Christ stood for and came to bring us? What is the accusation here?

First, we need to remember that John loved to use binaries throughout the gospel. Light and Dark was one of the favorites. We need to be careful in interpreting this language, lest we give the impression that light is good, and dark is bad. This leads to all sorts of misinterpretations and misuses of these terms. Light skin is good and dark skin is bad, for example. "Surely, we know better," you might think. We can use these terms and not go down that path, right? Aren't we just being overly sensitive?

No, we are paying attention to the things that matter. It is not overly sensitive to pay attention to language that lifts up and language that demeans. It is choosing, with Jesus, to lean into the goodness and the love of God. Our text begins with perhaps the most famous verse from the whole Bible, the verse that is scrawled across cardboard signs and held up in the endzones and street corners around the world. And at the heart of this verse is the idea that God so loved the world. Dwell on that for a moment. The motivation for everything we are called to do as the people of God is love. Not condemnation, not judgment, not defeating the enemy or the misguided or the ones who chose what seems opposite to the gospel of Jesus. It is about love. That's what loving the light means. We choose that which heals, that which transforms, that which honors and respects and sees all the people. We don't overlook anyone, because Jesus didn't overlook anyone.

OK, but what about that line about being condemned already? Isn't that permission to ignore or overlook those who are already lost? Aren't these the ones we should stay away from? No doubt that even reading that, you knew it felt wrong. What this verse is doing is giving you permission to get out of the condemnation business. Jesus says that the Son came not to condemn but to save. And though many of us would gladly take on that responsibility, we love pointing fingers and calling folks out, we aren't given that responsibility. Again and again in the gospel accounts, Jesus says judgment is his job and not ours. Our task is to love as he loved us. As much as we want to draw lines and build walls, it has never been our responsibility.

But then how will people know what it means to love the light? How will they learn to change their hearts and minds? How will they know that they need a savior at all? Simple, because they received mercy and grace and acceptance from us and will, therefore, want to know more. We are the radiance of Christ's love that draws those who have been choosing the opposite. We are the sign that Christ is at work in the world and that there is hope for living, there are resources to be shared, there are opportunities for grace. How will the world know that they are loved by God? Because they are loved by

us, the church, the body of Christ. When they begin to believe that, and experience that, then the recruitment for the Injustice League might begin to decrease.

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Whoever Serves

March 17, 2024

[John 12:20-33](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). Again, Jesus? Or, perhaps more appropriately, *again lectionary*? We just did this in Mark a few weeks ago! The pedagogical value of repetition aside, how do we enliven this text, this saying, this lesson in worship again with Holy Week just one week away? It helps that the scope of the audience is different in John than in Mark. Whereas the audience for this teaching in Mark is the disciples; in John, the audience is not just the disciples but a crowd of people. Even more curious is that these words serve as an answer, of sorts, to the news Jesus receives that two Greeks want to see him. Suddenly, the teaching about surrendering our lives to God in Mark gains an even greater outward focus in John.

At this stage of our Lenten journey, we encounter the fruit and the charge that comes with losing our life to find it in God—service. We cannot follow Jesus without serving our neighbors. So, let this be a day to lift up service that is *already* happening and service that is *needed* in your community. Notice and name the ways in which those outside the doors of the church—“the Greeks,” if you will—not only need but deserve access to the love of God. Highlight how the United Methodist connection supports ministry and service around the world in ways that are made possible by our connectional giving. Pray for the inspiration to discover and the wisdom to know what is yours to do—individually and congregationally—and what is not. Losing our lives to God does not mean we burn ourselves out to save the world all on our own. Losing our lives to God also means trusting that God does not need us to do everything—only the things we are called to do. So, perhaps part of worship needs to be a time to both surrender to God and commit ourselves to discerning God’s call to service in the specific neighborhood and community where we are planted.

Of course, if we’re paying attention to the sensory experiences in today’s text, we can’t miss the booming voice from heaven that some of the crowd mistook for thunder. I can’t blame them. Who’s expecting the sky to start speaking? Now, I’m not necessarily advocating for a recreation of a voice from heaven during the scripture reading (though, if that’s what you decide to do, please let me know!). But I do wonder who else we’re not expecting to speak that we might need to hear from? The children wiggling in the pews next to their parents? A teacher from a nearby school? The local business owner who set up shop across the street? What might these unexpected voices have to tell us about our neighborhood and its needs? And then, how might we, as followers of Jesus, show up where we are needed? Because where there is a need for love and flourishing and community, Jesus is there. And where Jesus is, there we must follow.

PREACHING NOTES

What happened to the Greeks? They just disappeared from the story. They told Philip that they wished to see Jesus. Philip told Andrew, and the two of them went to Jesus. Jesus answered them. Really? That was an answer? What was the question? Jesus takes this moment of potential hospitality and turns it into an invitation to die. “The hour has come,” he says. Why because a couple of tourists from Greece show up?

Well, sort of. Step outside the action for a moment. For John, there are always layers of meaning. Yeah, it seems a bit clumsy in terms of action, Greeks show up and are never heard from again. But on another level, they represent the world. They represent the rest of the world that is clamoring to see Jesus. Jesus has been limited by geography and by history. He has been confined to a little plot of ground and a group of people. But he now knows that his mission is to go to all the world. Philip and Andrew see two nondescript tourists who want to see Jesus. Jesus hears a world crying out in need.

And he is ready to go. Even though he knows how this is going to happen. “It is for this reason that I came,” he declares to a bewildered couple of followers who aren’t quite sure where he is going. To move beyond the limitations of the flesh. To step outside the confines of time. To reach beyond the span of my arms. They can only go so far. And to show them, he stretched them out. “See,” he told them that quiet afternoon, “see; how can I embrace the whole world with arms that only go so far?”

“That’s my son,” came the voice from above. That’s what it meant anyway. “Father, glorify your name,” declares Jesus. “I did,” says the Voice. “I did in you; I did when you became flesh and dwelt among them. I glorified my name in the life that you lived and the words that you spoke and the deeds that you did. I was glorified in your every act, in the breaths you drew, in the light you showed forth.” And there must have been a pause here, “I will glorify my name again.” There had to be a hush in the heavens as those words were spoken—a divine hesitation before declaring what was to come. “I will glorify my name again,” the Voice whispered, the Voice thundered, the Voice wept in the gentle rain that fell.

“What was that?” the folks standing around wondered. A sudden rumble of thunder, and a few drops of tear-shaped rain. “Maybe,” some ventured, “Maybe it was an angel speaking to him.” Jesus smiled that wistful smile as they once again missed the point, and said, “The Voice was for you, not for me. To ask you to raise your eyes and see beyond yourself, see something more significant, see the big picture. The Voice was confirmation that I will indeed be lifted up, hung on a cross to die so that I can live. To die so that you can live.”

See, I skipped over that little bit in there. Went from vanishing Greeks to Jesus’ conversation with God about his true purpose, his burden, and his joy. Skipped right over the middle bit where he talks to us. Where he invited us to follow him, invited us to hate our lives.

Excuse me? Why would the one who came that we might have life now want us to hate it? That seems counterintuitive, to say the least. OK, he doesn’t really want us to hate living; he doesn’t want us to despise ourselves and run around beating our breasts and ringing our bells and calling ourselves unclean. What he wants is for us to hold our lives lightly, to hold ourselves lightly. It is not all about us, despite what various and sundry advertisers want us to believe. It is about something bigger than us. It is about giving ourselves over to a larger truth, a deeper reality, a more profound life than the one we

find at the end of our noses and fingertips. He wants us to extend our reach, just like he is about to extend his.

In fact, he says that very thing. “Where I am, there my servant will be also.” Where he is when he says that is looking at giving his life away for something bigger than his own flesh and blood. And that is exactly where he wants us to be—living beyond ourselves, living more deeply, living through surrender, living through giving ourselves away, living through service. “Whoever serves,” he says. We can find our lives by holding them lightly enough to lose them - not always physically. You know that something really profound is going on when you lose track of time, lose track of yourself because you are wrapped up in something beyond you. It might be art or beauty; it might be nature in its wonder and majesty, in its terror and power; it might be in the love and laughter of a soul friend; it might be the tears shed in sympathy with one you call brother or sister. But you can lose yourself if you learn to let go, to hold yourself lightly.

Liturgy of the Palms: Blessed is the One

March 24, 2024

[Mark 11:1-11](#)

Liturgy of the Passion

[Mark 14:1-15:47](#) or [Mark 15:1-39, \(40-47\)](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

As we return to Mark for Palm/Passion Sunday, it is striking that even Mark has slowed down the action a bit, filling in details about Jesus’ instructions to the disciples and the response of the bystanders who questioned them when they went to find the colt for Jesus to ride. Given the fast pace of most of the book of Mark, the fact that the gospel writer starts stretching out the narrative at this moment ought to get our attention. And in many ways, this reflects what happens to liturgical time as we enter Holy Week. Throughout the church year, we jump around in time in relation to the biblical narrative. If you read all four lectionary readings every Sunday, you are reading texts that span millennia all in the space of twenty minutes. Even if you read only one text each Sunday, one story that takes five minutes to read might be about actions or events that took hours, days, or even weeks and months. Except during Holy Week. During Holy Week, we, like Mark, slow time down so that we can live into the rhythms and observe the details of these few seemingly ordinary days that are, in fact, the culmination of Jesus’ salvific work in and for the world.

One of the challenges before us is how to handle Palm/Passion Sunday. There is a legitimate concern that if you craft the worship service only around the triumphal entry, then congregants who do not attend the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services go from triumph to Resurrection and never encounter the crucifixion. That said, if you plan on having a Maundy Thursday and Good Friday service, it feels oddly redundant to enter into the Passion narrative on Sunday only to then go back and rehash Thursday and/or Friday. So, it seems there are a few options available. One is to emphasize the “Palm” part of Palm/Passion Sunday and make a concerted effort to invite and encourage as many congregants as possible to come to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. Taking this approach might also mean making sure your Holy Week services are available online and that you provide some Holy Week

reflections on social media for those who cannot attend in person or online. A second option is to craft a service that encompasses the major points of the Holy Week narrative from the triumphal entry all the way to the crucifixion. One approach that would work well with this second option is treating the service a bit like lessons and carols wherein you structure the service around the Holy Week narrative interspersed with appropriate hymns, anthems, and prayers.

But there is a third option that I think is worth exploring that includes both Palm and Passion without going all the way to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. In this approach, the service begins with the joy of the triumphal entry but makes a slow descent in energy and tone in preparation for Maundy Thursday (or Good Friday if you are not having a Maundy Thursday service). In this approach, especially, we want to emphasize the precarity of the people during Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Why do they want to be saved? What do they want to be saved from? Will they accept *anyone* who says he's the Messiah out of their own desperation? Will *we* accept anyone or anything who claims to be the Messiah out of our own desperation?

Of course, the question is, "How do we help our congregants experience this precarity?" Perhaps you sing "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna" or "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" while waving palm branches, followed by a prayer of confession centered around our struggle to accept the Messiah that Jesus is instead of who we want him to be. You might also consider interspersing small sermons throughout the service. Near the beginning, you might expound on the significance of Jesus riding a colt and the meaning behind the "Hosanna" the crowds shouted, and then return with a sermonette reflecting on a teaching or event leading up to Maundy Thursday. And, if you are not having a Maundy Thursday service, this is a great opportunity to, at the very least, reference Jesus washing the disciples' feet and the Last Supper, if not read the relevant passages in John 13 (found [here](#)).

In addition, there is much we can do in and to the space to signal the move from triumph toward the Passion. If you do not plan to have a Maundy Thursday service, I highly encourage stripping the altar as the final act of worship during Palm/Passion Sunday. (More is available about why and how to go about stripping the altar in the Maundy Thursday worship planning notes.) If you do plan to hold a Maundy Thursday service, use the end of worship to prepare the altar for Maundy Thursday as a signal of the move we've made away from the palms and toward Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. One way to do this would be to recruit volunteers to remove the palms from the altar and chancel as others remove everything from the altar except the paraments (you may also change to red paraments for Maundy Thursday if you so desire). Then, place a chalice and paten in the center of the altar as a sign of preparing the Table for the Last Supper we remember on Maundy Thursday. Allow all of this to happen in silence and then dismiss the congregation with a blessing. There are certainly other ways to use the space to signal the transition from Palms to Passion. We simply encourage you to use the visual and physical space to help the gathered body experience and encounter the *whole* story of Holy Week once again.

PREACHING NOTES

One of the questions endlessly debated is whether this incident was accidental or planned. Did Jesus one day decide to make a trip into Jerusalem and a parade broke out? Or was this deliberately chosen and planned out to make a statement at this specific time? The truth is, we may never know. But what we do know is that the Jesus who spent the first part of the Gospel of Mark telling people not to tell who he was, to keep it all a secret, all of a sudden makes a big announcement.

He rides this colt into the city of Jerusalem, and his followers walk with him and shout “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Neither of those were random acts. When a king is going to war, he rides a horse; when he is proclaiming himself a king of peace, he rides a donkey and enhances that statement of peace by choosing an unriden colt. The words that were spoken come from one of the enthronement psalms, used when a new king was coming into power.

Hard to miss, really. A slap in the face to all those who thought they were in charge. A declaration of authority and power in a place of power and authority that saw him as an outsider. It was like the best Prank Panel prank ever. The one who appeared powerless is the one who is the King of Kings. The one who rode into a war zone with the authorities out for his blood is the Prince of Peace.

“Hosanna” was a common word in royal psalms. Most folks understood it to be a statement of celebration, a shout of joy and welcome. And it was. But originally it had a translation that meant, “Save us” or “Save now!” For leader after leader, the crowds would shout, “Save us,” to one who more often than not was more concerned about his own safety and prosperity. And now, they shout “Hosanna” to the one who can save them, but most of the city doesn’t know what is going on.

When we lift our palms and wave them on Palm Sunday morning, we declare our allegiance to the Prince of Peace, the very one the world considered a fool and did its best to destroy. And perhaps we are fools for holding this parade, remembering this death. But on the other hand, sometimes the fools become the foolers. Maybe a better description is to acknowledge that the world resists being turned upside down. Or at least it won’t stay that way for long. The powers and principalities of this world come rushing back in, and order, as they understand it, is restored.

That is why Palm Sunday is not just Palm Sunday, it is more properly Palm/Passion Sunday. That slash is important. It is a reminder that there is risk involved in taking the side of the marginalized. There is danger in trying to upset the status quo. And just when you think you’ve won your point and gathered your crowd, you discover you are alone again.

At least that was Jesus’ experience this Holy Week. From the parade to the way of sorrows, from the King of Peace riding on a donkey to a hated criminal hanging on a cross, from “Hosanna” to “Crucify him” in a matter of days. \ Who’s the fool now?

Maybe it is us, for clinging to hope in a hopeless world. Maybe it is us, for embracing life in a world obsessed with death. Maybe it’s us. Maybe it’s him, proclaiming Easter joy in a Good Friday world.

Maybe so. Still, I’ll wave my palm and shout my hosannas, even though... Call it foolish if you want. I’d rather be a fool for Christ anyway.

Monday of Holy Week

March 25, 2024

[John 12:1-11](#)

Tuesday of Holy Week

March 26, 2024

[John 12:20-36](#)

Wednesday of Holy Week

March 27, 2024

[Hebrews 12:1-3](#), [John 13:21-32](#)

Maundy Thursday: By This Everyone Will Know

March 28, 2024

[John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

Color: None

PLANNING NOTES

Though we often think of Maundy Thursday as the day we remember the institution of the Lord's Supper, the "maundy" of this day comes from the Latin *mandatum*, or mandate. Historically, the mandate from which Maundy Thursday gets its name is not about Holy Communion but about foot washing. Or, more accurately, Jesus' answer to the disciples' confusion and alarm after he washed their feet. And before you start talking to the screen to remind me of all of the logistical and hygienic challenges that go into washing peoples' feet during worship—I know. Trust me, I know. Honestly, one of my best experiences of foot washing was an impromptu affair of everyone rinsing off one another's bare feet with a garden hose following an evening of water games at youth group. We weren't following a liturgy or praying as we did it. But I remember feeling the holiness within this mundane act of helping one another clean our feet after a time of fun and fellowship together.

I think this is the point of Maundy Thursday: to be able to recognize when we are loving as Christ loves us because we've encountered and practiced that love together in worship. So, if you're used to doing a foot washing service—do it! If you want to try something new and your worship team has a lot of enthusiasm and energy about hosting a foot washing in the midst of worship—do it! And if you don't have the means or the energy to do a foot washing, that's ok too. The question, ultimately, is how will you make the commandment—or mandate—to love as Christ loves us real and present and active among your people? You might want to try a handwashing ritual before coming forward for Holy Communion. Or you might gather around tables and serve one another as you hear the story of Jesus and the disciples gathering around a table for their last meal together. (I mean, wouldn't a potluck be a great setting for Maundy Thursday worship?!)

If you choose to hold Maundy Thursday in your usual worship space, you might consider emphasizing prayer as a way we love and serve one another. Take the time to hear one another's concerns and

struggles. Go to the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus *and* one another. Renew your commitment to watch and pray together as you witness the suffering in one another's lives and in the world. If you are celebrating Holy Communion, revel in the experience of passing the peace as forgiven and reconciled people. And if this seems to lack the solemnity you expect during Holy Week, consider that Maundy Thursday is a rehearsal for how we practice Christ-like love with and for one another even (and especially) when the world is falling apart around us.

Finally, I encourage you, if you do not do it already, to end worship with a stripping of the altar. This is a long-held tradition in the Christian church that entails removing all ornaments, candles, linens, and paraments from the altar and the area around the altar, leaving it as bare as possible in anticipation of Good Friday. So, the space is to remain through the Good Friday service, a reminder and remembrance of the stark and sobering events of Good Friday leading up to, during, and after the crucifixion. This can be done while soft music is playing in the background or during an appropriate choral anthem, but it is also quite effective when done in silence. Pacing for the stripping of the altar is also incredibly important. You want to have enough volunteers to do this in a timely manner, but you also do not want to rush it. This is a meditative ritual, so encourage volunteers to move with purpose and without haste. Plan ahead of time for who is responsible for what items, no matter how many trips in and out of the space it may take. Whether you choose to strip the altar or not, close the service with a ritual or a prayer that prepares those gathered to encounter all that Good Friday entails once again.

PREACHING NOTES

"They'll know we are Christians by our love." Remember that one? Maybe you still sing it. Maybe it was overused. It was a camp song, years ago. And when we got back to church, we'd try to get everyone to sing it. "By our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." It was easy to learn, to sing, to remember. But maybe not to do. At least when we start including others. Loving Jesus is easy, sort of. But other people? Not so much.

There is a fine line between being too independent and not dependent enough. We want them to be confident in our love, but not be burdened by it. We want them to know that they are loved, but not be smothered by it. We want ... well, to be honest we almost wish that Jesus hadn't made it such a big deal. We almost wish that this faith thing had been an internal, belief relationship just between each of us and Jesus. But no, he had to go and include the whole world and especially those within the community of faith.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35 NRSV).

Loving one another is not just a good idea, not just a clue to better living, not just a suggestion for health and happiness; no, Jesus made it a commandment. *Love one another*. And not only that, but also the sign. The sign that we belong, that we are a part of the fellowship, a part of the family—not by how many Bible passages we read, not by the acts of charity that we perform, not by the hours of pew time we put in throughout our lives, the lives of pure moral character - none of that is the sign that we belong to Christ. All of that is good stuff and stuff we ought to be doing. But the sign is something else entirely:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” It is not about what is inside of you, but what comes out.

How do you show your love for one another? That’s the question in front of us. And who has shown you love like Christ’s love? We gather on Maundy Thursday to remember him, remember what he did for us, what he endured for us. But we can’t help but hear the words he left his followers with. We can’t help but hear the command, see the sign that we are to be. When we receive the sacrament, when we kneel at the rail, or stand before the cup and the bread, we hear the words echo in our heads – “love one another.” And we come confessing that it is harder than it should be, harder than we want it to be.

Except that we have the benefit of living in community, the community of faith. We have the privilege of loving in community. Being loved. And learning to love. Who in our church family has made a difference in your spiritual life, in your growth as a disciple? Who has been the “one another” for you? Teaching you how to be the “one another” for someone else. For some of those “one anothers,” it is the words that you say; for others, it is the deeds that you do; for some, it is the gifts that you give, and for others it is the presence and attention that you give. But the blessing is that here is the place where we can practice in an atmosphere of forgiveness and grace. We can learn how to love as he loved us. For today, we gather to say thank you to the one who called us together, but also to thank one another who show us love day by day. That’s not an easy task, to be sure. Loving takes time, takes sacrifice, takes effort. Especially when we look back and see that what Jesus actually said was not “Love the best you can, love with what is within you.” No, he said, Love as I have loved you.” That’s the sign; that’s how the world will know we are his.

Good Friday: Hail, King of the Jews

March 29, 2024

[John 18:1-19:42](#)

Color: None

PLANNING NOTES

Worship planning on Good Friday may seem like it takes care of itself. Between all four gospels, we have a rich account of the events leading up to and surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* provides a robust liturgy for [A Service of Tenebrae](#), an extended meditation on the Passion of Christ with origins in the twelfth century. In many ways, A Service of Tenebrae or a liturgy modeled after Tenebrae helps the congregation receive the weight and significance of this most holy and terrible day.

At the same time, *how* we tell the story of Jesus’ crucifixion matters. The texts we choose, the prayers we pray, and the hymns we sing all inform how we encounter the Passion of Christ. Plus, if you’ve already gone to look at the Tenebrae liturgy in the *Book of Worship*, you’re probably already deciding which of the fourteen suggested readings you’re going to cut! Some years, you may choose to emphasize the seven last words of Jesus. Another year, you might choose to focus on the Passion from a particular gospel’s perspective. This year, what might it look like to center the readings around a specific question: “What does it mean for Jesus to be our king from the cross when he has willingly handed over his life?”

To be clear, the fact that Jesus as king accepted death on the cross makes him a different kind of ruler from any other human who has borne the title of king or queen. In fact, the irony in John 19:3 is that Jesus' abusers spoke the truth about who Jesus is. The fact that Jesus did not use his power to harm them in return is a mark of the very kingship they mocked. The task before us, then, is to tell the story of Good Friday with the gravity and mourning it deserves while also honoring Jesus' kingship on display in his commitment to the ways of divine love even when that means that the world crucifies him.

One way to approach this task is to resist the impulse to make Good Friday only about our personal sins by leaning into corporate and communal language. Jesus is not just king for us personally but for us as a community and for all creation. Honoring Jesus as king means coming to terms with how our corporate sin as a human community has created cycles of harm toward one another and the earth. So, let confession be about individual sin, yes, but also about how *humanity* has turned from God's love. Bring forward the ways creation responded at Christ's death and the way creation continues to respond when we choose our way instead of God's. Select hymns and prayers that help the gathered body stay present to and honor Christ on the cross and the work done on the cross on our behalf and on behalf of all creation.

Visually, Good Friday calls for a simple and somewhat bare setup. The United Methodist Church does not recommend using any color parament on this day, though many churches use black cloth in some way, either to drape the cross at the end of the service or to cover the altar to symbolize death and mourning. Outside of placing a plain cross on the altar or chancel and using candles for ritual purposes, as in a Service of Tenebrae, nothing else is necessary on Good Friday. That said, if part of our work on Good Friday is to honor the communal and cosmological work of Christ's Passion, consider how you might include visual reminders of the earth in the worship space. While we want to avoid flowers and other elements with bright colors, consider incorporating rocks, sticks, sand, or dirt in the space. Perhaps you could even bring back a few elements from Ash Wednesday to visually connect the first and the last worship service in the season of Lent.

Finally, as you go about planning Good Friday, remember that this service is not only about Jesus' death. It is also about Jesus' life. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 NRSVUE). The cross is not the sole reason the Word became flesh and lived among us. The cross is a crucial part of the whole of the Incarnate Christ's salvific work—and it is not the end. So, don't be afraid to imbue a little hope into the service. Now, we certainly don't want to use hope to shield us from the truth of this. Rather, we come to Good Friday and are able to remember it for what it was because we are Resurrection people who know Sunday is coming.

PREACHING NOTES

What does it mean to be the king in this moment? That's what we are struggling with on Good Friday. If we decide to preach – and there are plenty of reasons why we shouldn't; we should let the scripture be the voice proclaimed today – then we have to figure out some way of addressing the issue of the king who is killed. No, that's not even it. Kings are killed all the time. Just a casual glance through the history of the monarchy in various nations will show us that. But rarely do kings hand over their lives so willingly. We tend to prefer displays of power. We respect strength. It is hard to understand the

goodness of this day or of this act. And yet we gather on this day because our faith says this is a central moment for us. So, we come to wrestle. But where do we start?

There are so many avenues to take for this worship moment. The lectionary gives us two whole chapters from the Gospel of John. Again, we could simply read it or major parts of it, and let it stand as the proclamation for this act of worship. Perhaps offer a Tenebrae style of worship, with the dimming of lights or putting out of candles to signify the encroaching gloom. This might be the most effect sermon you could deliver on this day.

But if you feel the need to preach, choose a moment over which to reflect. A common approach is to look at the seven last words from the cross. Some communities come together with other churches and denominations for a three-hour service touching on all seven words. But that might be a bit much for a single congregation to endure. The last of the seven words seems most appropriate for this service—maybe comparing John's final word with Luke's

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30 NRSV).

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, and said, "Certainly this man was innocent!" And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things (Luke 23:46-49 NRSV).

We could have just chosen verse 46 from Luke 23, like we chose only one verse from John's nineteenth chapter. Of all of the words, these two are the most personal for Jesus. I'm not sure that the centurion's comment adds much to our understanding of what was going on with Jesus. It does show us one response to his death that we might emulate, but it doesn't really help us hear the theological meaning of what Jesus said. Likewise with the other responses presented there in Luke's Gospel. Those who were beating their breasts might have been moved by what took place, might have been troubled and convicted by what they observed, just as we are. Or they might have just been going through the motions, professional mourners doing their jobs, not really being touched, not really being challenged by what they saw. And it is possible that many of us are like those women who followed, and while we want to be present, we want to be connected to this man, to this death, we also want to keep some distance while we watch. To save our own skin perhaps, to keep a little cleaner, to invest a little of ourselves but not too much.

I shouldn't condemn those women, however. At least they were there. And even at a distance, they couldn't help but be affected by what they saw.

But all of that is really beside the point here. Jesus' words would have been just as important, just as rife with possibility, if he had been completely alone on that skull-like hill that Friday afternoon. That is what I mean by saying that these words were the most personal of all the words.

None of the seven words appear in all four gospels. Most of them appear in one only. "My God, My God" appears in two - Matthew and Mark, but the rest only in one each.

However, an argument could be made that the sixth word, "It is finished" appears in all four. Certainly not as written, not in those words, so don't go running for your gospel concordance. However, if you look at Matthew and Mark, you will find the notation that just before he died, just before he gave up his spirit (and that difference is vitally important - as we'll see in a moment), he cried out in a loud voice.

Some folks interpret that cry as a last gasp of pain, as surrender or collapse. But given what else we read, I doubt that very much. In Greek, the sixth word is not a phrase or a sentence, it is one word: "*telesthai*." "*Telesthai*" could be translated as "Finished!" Or "Done!" It is a cry of triumph, of completion, not of resignation or surrender. It is the cry of the runner finishing the marathon; it is the shout of the artist completing the work of art; it is the weary laugh of the mother who has given birth. "Finished!"

Jesus was crossing something off the list that his Father had given him to do. He was beaten and bloody; he was torn and bruised; he was breathing his last ragged breaths, but he was triumphant. And he was in control.

Here is a key understanding to the whole Crucifixion event. Jesus wasn't killed; he gave up his life. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say, "He breathed his last." He was the subject, not the object, of that sentence. He was in control. He was the actor, not the reactor. John says it even more plainly - "He gave up his spirit." He handed over all that he was to the Father. For us.

That brings us to the final word. Luke's loud cry is wrapped around a different word. "Into Your Hands," he shouts. This is the completion of the task that he was given—to return to all that he was before the incarnation, to reclaim his role in the Trinity, or to sit at the right hand of the Father. So, the seventh word doesn't announce completion; it accomplishes it.

And it shows us the way. Jesus' final word from the cross not only shows us how to die, it shows us how to live. In the hands of the Father.

Holy Saturday - March 30, 2024

[John 19:38-42](#)