

Lent 2023

Learning to Live Inside Out

Lent is a bi-directional season. Or at least it should be. That isn't how we usually experience the season, however. Too often, we see the Lenten journey simply as a journey inward. It is a self-reflective time, an inward self-examination guided by the question Methodists have asked since the beginnings of the movement: "How is it with your soul?" A powerful and important question, to be sure, and Lent is the perfect time to take this inward journey and to spend some time in solitude and reflection.

While that is a great start or an important component to a powerful Lenten experience, it can't be the whole story. Examining your soul is more than just looking inward; it is also considering the state of your soul as it walks about in the world. How goes your soul – which is saying, "How do you live in the world around you? How do you impact, or better, how does your faith impact your community, your church, your family?"

This isn't new. Historically, the church has talked about the spiritual disciplines in two directions. There were works of piety or what we might call the inward attention to ourselves, and there were works of charity or the outward living and working in the world around us. Like the great commandment, these two sides of the same coin cannot ultimately be separated. That is why this series is about doing both – looking inward and moving outward. We are learning to live inside out.

Ash Wednesday - The Fast We Choose

February 22, 2023

[Psalm 51](#), [Isaiah 58](#)

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PLANNING NOTES

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Isaiah 58:6-7 NRSV

You might call this verse from our Isaiah text the signature verse for the series, or at least for this first worship experience in Lent. Here we have a very personal or even individual discipline – fasting – turned around to becoming an act of charity, an outward act. This is what we mean by learning to live inside out. How do we take what is often understood to be self-improvement behaviors or practices and turn them into community builders?

So, how can the worship team and worship leaders help worshipers understand this connection? How can we maintain this bifocal vision of living inside out? By leaning into the connections between our life of faith and our impact on the world around us. The prayers we pray contain both an inner examination of our souls – confession, repentance, commitment – and an outer drive to bring the kingdom – service, justice, reconciliation. Let's not only look to ourselves, but to the world around us. Let us not simply be convinced that we have hope; let us proclaim hope to the wider world.

Ash Wednesday is an inside-out act of worship. We come and confess and are reminded of both our sinfulness and our mortality. And yet we are given a visible mark in the imposition of ashes, a way of letting the world know that we are people of faith. Our hope is that such a symbol is a welcome sign, a sign of acceptance and hospitality. Indeed, our pledge to God is that we will live in such a

way that we bring honor to the name of God and glory to Jesus the Christ. We live outwardly the inner beliefs that we hold.

Not that this way of living in the world is easy. That is part of our confession too. We acknowledge that too often we want to keep our faith inside, for ourselves alone. But we hear Isaiah's call to move beyond our inward focus, and we are learning to live inside out.

PREACHING NOTES

This Lenten series is designed to help us look within—not in an exclusive or self-centered way, however. We look inward so that we can move outward. That is what it means to live inside out. Yes, there is work for us to do as individuals; there is our primary relationship with Christ that needs attention. There is confession and repentance and transformation that can take place in this season of contemplation and examination. But we cannot simply stop there. We can't just focus on "getting right with God" and ignore how we live in community and the world. Our relationships – from the most intimate to the most public – all are shaped by that primary relationship with God in Christ. So, we look inward so that we can live outward. We examine the state of our souls so that we understand and enhance the state of our relationships in the world. In fact, that is often how we discover that there is something wrong, something broken, something neglected in our relationship with God because we are struggling with our human relationships too.

You know that feeling. That something is just out of place. Something is broken, or out of sync. The funny wheel on the shopping cart. The tiny stone in the shoe. You just limp along feeling out of sorts. And when someone asks you if everything is ok, you don't even know how to answer. Because nothing is wrong, really. Just not ... right.

Or maybe you do know. Maybe there was a word spoken that you wish you could unspeak. Maybe there was an effort you should have made but didn't, and now it is too late. Maybe there was a response you should have held in, an event you should have acknowledged, a call you should have made. Maybe your brokenness lies heavy on your heart today.

Whether known or unknown, the feeling of disconnect is very real. What we need is not an explanation, but an antidote. And where better to turn than to worship. At least that is the suggestion of the Psalm for this week.

“Wait a minute,” you are thinking. “How is Psalm 51 about worship? It is about sinfulness and the need for confession.” Yes, and ...? It is about the separation from God and the need to be cleansed. Right, and ...? It is about guilt, heavy burdensome guilt and the need for restoration to joy. Certainly, and ...?

And what? You are getting on my nerves with all this “and?” stuff. Where are we going here? What is the point that is being pointedly pointed at? Or something.

Where do you go for restoration to joy? Where do you go to be purged and made clean? Where do you go for a new heart? Worship, of course. The purpose of worship is to glorify God. And the result of worship that glorifies God is to reconcile the worshiper with the Presence. For reconciliation to take place, cleansing must occur. For cleansing to occur, an open heart must be offered. For an open heart to be offered, a hunger must be acknowledged.

When we come to worship hungry, then something happens: we are transformed, we are healed, we are made clean. We are made right with God, and then it becomes possible to be made right with one another. That is why we worship as a body, so that the effect of our worship can be felt between us as well as within us.

That is what is missing when we are missing from worship. That is the “not right” feeling that we get when we are away from the body. Many have spoken about that lack, that unsettled feeling that they get when they miss worship for whatever reason. Maybe you’ve heard it too, pastor. It is hard to name sometimes, but it is real. The truth is, we can have that feeling even when we are present in worship. Because presence doesn’t always mean engagement. Presence doesn’t always mean coming hungry. We are so filled up by the busyness of this life that we forget how hungry we really are. We forget to seek the face that defines us, that accepts us, that loves us with a love almost beyond description. We think we are self-sufficient, when, in fact, we are anything but. We are needy. We are often empty. We are hungry for that word of acceptance, of unconditional love. We are hungry for meaning and direction and hope.

And our unspoken fear is that the one we seek this from won't offer it. That we are somehow not worthy. That we are too dirty to be made clean. Too broken to be made whole. Too rotten to be made healthy. And that feeling of disconnect is not just inside us; it is from that source, and we are cast away from all that will make us "right."

The psalmist feels that too. And yet there is a plea; there is a hope; there is a remembrance of wholeness and joy. So, the psalmist seeks it, even as we seek it. The psalmist worships, even as we worship, that we might be made right again.

Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and put a new and right spirit within me (51:10). That's our prayer, our theme for worship. Then our lips will open, and our mouths will declare praise. Come and worship, come hungry and worship with joy. Amen.

First Sunday in Lent – If You Fall Down

February 26, 2023

[Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7](#); [Mt 4:1-11](#); [Ps 32](#)

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PLANNING NOTES

One of the first questions the worship planning team needs to determine this week is whether these temptations are ours or his. Is this something unique to Jesus and our role as we encounter this event — to stand in awe and wonder and to glory in the power he presents “to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves,” to borrow from our baptismal liturgy. In which case, our worship is focused on Christ this week. We sing praise to him; we pray in awe of him; we pledge to follow him because of who he has revealed himself to be. In short, we lift up the name of Christ as we worship this week, loudly and publicly. We proclaim to the world who he is.

If, on the other hand, these are our temptations that he bore for us, as he bore our sins “even unto death,” then we bow in confession and in hope. We give thanks; we ask for grace and forgiveness; and, most of all, we seek the spiritual power to resist the ongoing temptations that surround us, even as we stand with others in our community who wrestle day by day for a sense of peace. We acknowledge that it is not simply about us alone, but about a world that wrestles with that which will destroy us all. And so, we declare our commitment to be part of the solution, to be kingdom workers in the world.

Of course, the only real answer to the opening question is that it is both. Both his particular journey and at the same time the story of our lives. Worship then lifts up the name of Christ at the same time that we fall on our knees before him and confess and repent and receive that grace and that hope and pledge to be a part of the spiritual transformation of the world around us.

But as with each of the themes this Lenten season, we can’t simply focus on the inward part of the journey. We come in confession and in repentance, but we rise ready to serve and to love in Christ’s name. So, what direction can we give during worship that helps participants catch a glimpse of their place in the mission?

What challenge can we issue that will help worshipers put hands and feet to their redemption so that the world around them is impacted by their inward journey? What hymn of mission can we sing? What prayer of service can we offer? What zeal can we instill to work with the Spirit to build the kin-dom of God in the relationships we treasure?

If we endeavor to work in the world around us, we will fall down. From time to time, we will fail; our efforts will not be received in the spirit intended; the fruit will be slow in coming. So, if we must fall, let us fall down in worship of the one who redeems us.

PREACHING NOTES

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Thank you, Lao Tzu. Whatever that means. I mean, we think we know. It sounds great. Something powerful, something that sounds impossible, has humble beginnings. Supposedly, the original quote said “a thousand *li*” journey. A *li* was an ancient Chinese measurement that equaled three hundred and sixty miles. So, he actually said a journey of 360,000 miles begins with a single step. Wow. How far do you have to go today? More than a quarter of a million, but just short of a half a million miles! Yikes, better sit down. Do you realize that is more than a hundred thousand miles past the moon? OK, now I’m tired. Thanks, Lao Tzu.

We’re on a journey. That’s how we describe the season of Lent. The Lenten Journey. The very concept implies at least two things: one, that we are moving. This isn’t a static, sit-and-contemplate event. We often think of Lent as a time of consideration, self-reflection, and introspection. And certainly, there is an element of that inherent in the design of the season. But movement is built into the pattern of the season. We are walking with Christ. And Christ is on his way somewhere.

That’s the second implication of the season: we have a destination. This journey isn’t just random wandering in the wilderness, even though it often feels that way. We are on a path; we are moving toward the cross. That’s our destination. The culmination of our Lenten journey is not Easter sunrise, as much as we wish it were. No, Easter is something completely different. We can no more journey to

Easter than we could travel a hundred thousand miles past the moon. Easter is another dimension of time and of space. No, actually it is beyond time and space. It is completely out of reach. More on that to come ... really.

No, our destination is much more earthy. Much more real. And, unfortunately, more painful. It requires more sacrifice, more surrender. The journey to the cross is a journey laden with struggle, with a wrestling match with our greatest foe: ourselves. You were hoping for an enemy to conquer. A stranger who's a threat. The bad guy. Them. You know those people, that type, the evil empire, all that stuff. Yeah, no, sorry. It's you. Old Pogo had it right. "We have met the enemy and he is us." And because he is us, because this journey is an inner journey at least in part, we'd just as soon not. We'd give it a pass, and most of the time we do. *No thanks, I'm fine*. Our usual social response. *No thanks, I'm fine*. All on my own, I'm good. It's everyone else who is the problem. If it weren't for them, all would be peachy.

This means that our philosophical aphorism ought to be "a journey of a thousand (or three hundred sixty thousand) miles begins with a single stumble." We fall down a lot. That's kind of our story. We start out that way. Remember when the kids were learning to walk all those years ago? Falling down seemed to be the way of it. Hardly any attempt was made without crashing down on their (thankfully) well-padded existential ground of being. Sometimes there were tears. Sometimes frustration. Sometimes the ground seemed a safer place, and the attempt was put off until another day. We fall down. Any journey that gets us anywhere important is going to include a few stumbles. A stubbed toe, a cracked shin, a bloody nose, a teary moment, an unplanned detour, a lack of resources, a mechanical failure, a ... well, point taken. We fall down.

This leads us to continually ask, "Why bother? If the journey is too great, why take it? If I'm likely to fall down, why set out—especially heading someplace that is 'good for me'?" God, save us from what is good for us. That just seems to scream "painful, exhausting, humiliating, and ultimately asking for change."

Who does that? Who seeks that strenuous, wrestling with self that leads to surrender and sacrifice and then transformation? Who does that? *Read Matthew 4:1-11.*

Yeah, okay. Him. He would go for that. But then he's ... him. Well, take another look. Matthew (and Luke) says that he was led up. He didn't go looking for it. He didn't run to meet it. He shuffled forward in the line at Ash Wednesday with the same slumped shoulders as the rest of us. Mark even goes further and says that the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness. Kicking and screaming perhaps. I don't wanna; I don't wanna. Or maybe not; maybe he knew that this journey was one worth taking, even though it ended at what seemed like a dead end. Even though it ended with a painful betrayal and an agonizing night, and a lonely and broken surrender of life on a hill that looked like a skull, under a blazing sun that didn't weep until it was too late for him to feel it.

But that was his journey, not ours, surely. We don't spend forty hungry days in a desert, hallucinating conversations around impossibilities and sleight of hand. Do we? No, of course not. We can't turn stones into bread; that wouldn't enter our minds. But we can turn every hunger into a physical one and satisfy spiritual needs by stuffing our faces or filling our closets. We can't leap from the pinnacle of the temple and be caught by angels. But we can leap into self-destructive habits that lead to death more often than not in the misguided belief that we are immortal as long as we don't think about it. We aren't shown the kingdoms of the world in their splendor and given the keys to these kingdoms if we just fall down again. Yet we believe we deserve everything, anything our hearts desire, in an odd confusion about rights and freedoms.

We fall down. Over and over. The painful realization is that our journey is not just the forty days of Lent, but the whole of our lives. Every day, we are given opportunities to claim the gift of life that we've been given in Christ, and we fall down. We surrender to our own temptations, to our own selfishness, me time. Instead of surrendering to the cross upon which we can nail all our falling down, all our brokenness. Instead of journeying to the death of self and of sin, we wrestle with the adversary inside us, our own willfulness. And we fall down.

We seem to think Lent is about falling down, about collapsing in tears and remorse and regret and this overwhelming sense of sinfulness. "That's the only way to move forward," we seem to think. But maybe, like the one we follow, our Lenten opportunity is to not fall down. For once. We stand in the arms of the one who stood for us. We stand and we walk with him all the way to the cross.

So, old Lao Tzu was right. It's not about falling down, not about stumbling. It's about standing and stepping. It's about taking the first step, putting our hands in his hand and taking that first step on the road to the cross. It's a long painful journey, but one worth taking. Walk with me. Walk with him. All the way to the cross.

Second Sunday in Lent - Go from Your Country

March 5, 2023

[Gen 12:1-4a](#), [John 3:1-17](#), [Ps 121](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

This is the week that the “moving out” part of our theme is most obvious. Whether we are talking about the call to go to a new place, like Abram in Genesis 12, or to move to a new understanding, like Nicodemus in John 3, movement is required. Movement means change, which is always difficult and scary. So this is a week about faith and about trust and the willingness to commit to the discipleship path.

This might be a good week to celebrate those who have completed a course in your discipleship training system. Or if the church has recommended anyone for the ministry path in your conference, then today you can present them to the congregation, or check in on their progress. Is anyone involved in Lay Servant training? Let them tell their story during worship today. This is a time to recognize those who have followed a call and have left the familiar for something new and deeper and different.

Or maybe it is time for a discernment moment. During the prayer time and with lots of space for silence and listening, the congregation could ask God where they are being sent corporately or individually within the congregation. Who is hearing a call to go to a new place or a new understanding, to go deeper in faith or commitment? Offer some suggestions about what might be available already within the ministries of the church. But always keep open the possibility that there is something completely new bubbling up from amongst the congregation. Be sure to invite folks to record whatever thoughts or inclinations might have come to them during this time. Also be sure to give instructions on how to continue to seek and ask for God to speak clearly as we are sent out into the world to make disciples, if only to remind folks that this is an ongoing process. We are constantly seeking direction from God.

PREACHING NOTES

We start with Genesis this week—the beginning of the saga of the patriarch we know as Abraham. But he doesn't get that name until later. For now, he is just Abram, son of Terah, who just died in Haran, which wasn't really home. Terah was from Ur, further south and east, almost to the Persian Gulf. But now we're in what would become Turkey, a long way from home. Yet it became the new home. But it was a home Abram was asked to leave. He was asked to complete the journey his father started. Chapter 11, verse 31 says Terah set off for Canaan, but only made it to Haran.

You know what that's like. You had a dream; you were going places; you were going to accomplish things; you had worlds to conquer and dragons to slay, so you set off. But somewhere along the way, you settled in Haran. You didn't accomplish all that you imagined, but you did well. You didn't conquer worlds, but you helped make a home for you and your family; and that was enough. What seemed so clear and so compelling some years ago now seems like a dream you begin to lose when you wake up. You remember that it was wonderful, heart-pounding stuff, but the details slip away like the morning mist as you suit up to face the day.

Did Abram hear those dreams from his father as they sat around the fire in the evenings? Did the lure of that original, unknown destination work its way into his soul as he tended the flocks? Genesis twelve says God called. What did it sound like? Was there a deep rumbling voice that formed words in Abram's soul but was thunder to everyone else? Was there, as there so often was in the Bible, a dream that refused to fade in the morning dawn? Or did God sound like Terah, talking of Canaan as though he had been there and was hoping to get back some day?

"How do you know?" That's the question we ask so many times. "How do you know it is God and not the secret desires of your own heart?" We want to know; we want to be certain. They always sound so certain in the Bible. Or do they? "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (12:1). Does that sound like certainty? Oh, sure the narration says "Now the Lord said to Abram..." But what is said? Go! And there is more about what is being left behind than there is about the destination. "To a land that I will show you." "Will show you" not that "I am showing you," not that "I've written

out here in these directions.” There is no printout map with a line drawn from where you are to where you’ll end up.

God doesn’t seem to ask for certainty. We don’t have Abram’s inner dialog in this story; we don’t have the questions he must have asked, at least in his own head and heart. All we have is his action – “So Abram went...” That’s it. He went, and he believed. He went as the Lord had told him. And his uncertainty got him into trouble in just a few verses. He took wrong steps at least as much as he took the right ones. But he went. And that is what God wanted, apparently.

God doesn’t want us to wait until we are certain. God doesn’t want us to figure it all out first, to download the maps and chart our course; he wants us to move. “Move where?” we ask. Anywhere. Somewhere. As the Lord has told us. We don’t know everything, but we know some things. We know God asks us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly. We know that Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers and that when you do it to the least of these, you do it to him. Maybe that isn’t enough to build a life on, but it is a start.

And along the way is a blessing. Not just at the end. There is blessing in the going, blessing in the following, blessing in the unseen destination. But it is time to move.

Nicodemus had to move too. His journey was different. It’s not so much the miles he traveled; rather, his understanding grew. Or was invited to grow. Did he grow? Good question.

Nicodemus was a leader of the people of God. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews in Israel at Jesus’ time. He comes at night, maybe because serious study takes place at night, or maybe because he was afraid to be seen associating with this questionable rabbi from the backwoods. He comes with social niceties, a bit of flattery to grease the wheels of conversation. But Jesus immediately changes the subject. Jesus immediately puts him on the defensive. You have to be a different person to be a part of what God has in store. “What?” Nicodemus is reeling almost immediately. He is knocked off his feet, and he spends the rest of the conversation trying to catch up.

He makes a feeble joke about climbing back in his mother's womb, hoping to disarm the intensity of the teacher. Because being a different person was couched in a metaphor about birth. Born again, he said, born from above. The word in Greek means both things, a reference to time and to direction. Born again, as if the first time wasn't traumatic enough, again as if the first time wasn't as full of potential as it needed to be; again as if drawing breath like never before, filling the lungs with more than air, breathing in Spirit instead, in addition. Spirit from above, as if you were too focused on this life, the one lived out in front of your eyes and anything invisible isn't real. Anything invisible, like love and hope and joy and transformation and possibility isn't what life was about when born from below. It's not a bad life, just a shallow one, just a nose to the grindstone and find your meaning in successes and failures each and every day and not in the love of a creator who stands ready to fill you with vision.

Let go, Nicodemus, let go of the need to control, your need to have everything your way. Let go of the belief that you can build a better world, a more vibrant community by shaping it along the lines of your own preferences and understandings. Grab hold of the Spirit, and be blown about, from one world to the next, from one joy to the next, from one soul to the next. Be born into a new way of seeing; let go of what was, no matter how satisfying it may have been. Grab hold of where God is calling you to go, who God is calling you to be.

I'm not telling you anything new, Nicodemus. I've been saying these things since I got here, since the beginning of time. This is all I have to say; this is all I know, this God thing, this vision of the people of God, the community of faith. I have not stopped saying this. And you are a leader of people and somehow don't get it. How can this be, Nicodemus? What did you miss? Get ready, it's about to get even more intense.

Jesus gave Nicodemus a whole lot of stuff to think about, to process. We don't know how it all impacted him, what he went away with that night. But a few chapters later, when the rest of the leaders are complaining that the police didn't arrest Jesus for speaking of the kingdom of God, Nicodemus speaks up and says, "Don't we have due process?" That was not an affirmation of faith, by any means, but at least he attempted to stand on the side of right. They sneered at him and

accused him of being a hick from the sticks like Jesus. Then Nicodemus shrinks from sight completely.

Well, not completely. He doesn't speak again. But he shows up in the darkness again, the afternoon darkness of a weeping world, and gathers up the body from a horrible death, and wraps it up with about a hundred pounds of spices and puts it in the tomb of another Pharisee named Joseph. A hundred pounds of spices? Was that really necessary? I don't know. Maybe. Or maybe it was overkill. Overboard. Maybe it was apology spice; maybe he finally understood what he had missed that night in the darkness and wanted to make up for it by bringing so much that he could barely carry it, a penance of spice poured out over a dead body that wasn't going to stay dead, though he didn't know that yet.

Summing up this story is a verse we all know. Know by heart. Or maybe know by rote, not yet by heart. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may ... have eternal life" (3:16). Believes as in *puts their life in, surrenders everything to, joins completely. Shares the vision.* Having a vision means more than a slogan we can recite, though that can be helpful. It means grabbing hold of the wind; it means leaning into the Spirit, even when it blows you out of your comfortable spot. The message is, "It's time to go. Go inside out."

Third Sunday in Lent - Give Me Water

March 12, 2023

[Exodus 17:1-7](#); [John 4:5-42](#); [Ps 95](#)

Color: Purple

Woman at Well, "noise" on the journey, thirst

PLANNING NOTES

If the worship planning team does its job well, there will be a line at the water fountain after worship this week. Or maybe there should be a water break in the middle of the service, or someone passing through the sanctuary with cups of cold water.

We're thirsty this week. That's the point. Thirsting for the living waters that Jesus spoke about to the woman at the well. And not simply a one time or easy but unsatisfying spiritual refreshment, but a recognition of the deepest thirsts that we have and how we seem to always be thirsty, no matter how often we drink.

Water is a theme for the week. Find images for projection of water flowing. Set up a worship center with blue cloth spilling out over the table onto the floor and down the aisle, if possible. We are speaking of the abundance of God here. There is enough. Even while we struggle on this earth with water rights, drought conditions, and clean water projects, the living water Jesus offers is plentiful. Not to diminish the real needs in our world, but to speak of a God who provides. And then to participate in equitable use of the earth's resources. This might be a good opportunity for the creation care team in your church to help shape worship. What projects in your community could you emphasize as a way of lifting up the abundance of God?

This is not to diminish the spiritual call to drink from the water of life to know redemption and forgiveness and acceptance. This is a necessary call as well and the subject that Jesus shares with the woman at the well. But the lectionary places the Exodus story of thirsting in the desert alongside the story of Jesus at the well, suggesting that there might be a connection between physical and spiritual thirsts. Or that like the woman, once we have received this water of life,

we want others to have their thirsts quenched as well. The water of life fills us and sends us out into the world to be thirst quenchers.

Let's once again drink deeply of the water of life and pray for eyes opened to see the thirsty ones around us every day. So that we, like the woman at the well, can run and tell what we have found.

PREACHING NOTES

We are a thirsty people. Statistical evidence tells us that, even if theological evidence is harder to discern. Did you know that in 2004, the global consumption of bottled water was 154 billion liters (41 billion gallons)? That's an increase of 57% from 1999. We've gotten thirstier. And that's just bottled water; add in all the other bottled and nonbottled drinks, and we should be swimming in a variety of liquids all the time. Yet, we still find it within our capacity to consume all those drinks. We are thirsty.

There is medical research that tells us consumption of water is a good thing, thirsty or not. It is one of the pathways to health. So, drink up. Of course, it is more fundamental than that. Water is essential to life itself. What is that old quote? You can go nine days without food, but only three days without water? Something like that, anyway. Water is one of the most critical needs of human existence. It ranks right up there with air.

No wonder droughts scare us so much. Did you know that the governor of Utah calling for a prayer meeting across the state to end the drought that has plagued the southwest for years? To pray for rain. That's desperate, in political circles anyway.

Some of us have trouble understanding such desperation, given the availability of so many things that can quench our thirst. Yet, we can see the political struggles that occur over the rights to clean drinking water. Even in our own country, there are debates about who owns the water. Those who live in the Great Lake States are looked upon in envy by those in the dry southwestern states. Those who argue the consequences of climate change tell us the situation will only get worse. A global crisis is looming, according to many reports over the past few years. Based on data from NASA, the World Health Organization, and other

agencies, severe water shortages affecting at least 400 million people today will affect four billion people by 2050. Southwestern states such as Arizona will face other severe freshwater shortages by 2025.

We are thirsty. And we just might be getting thirstier. The concern you might be feeling right now because of some of that information makes it just a little easier to understand the reaction of the people of Israel in this week's Hebrew Bible passage. Without that experiential background, we might just pass off the behavior in our story as more whining about a little bit of discomfort on the long camping trip. But in the right context, it becomes a matter of life and death

If the Exodus 17 story seems vaguely familiar, yet somewhat different from what you remember, it is possible that you are remembering a different incident. This was a recurring theme through the Exodus story. In fact, the last water and the rock event takes place in Numbers 20.

It makes sense, however, that the problem would arise more than once. They were wandering in a desert, after all. And who can pack enough water for all those people for forty years? So, it is no wonder that the lack of potable water would trouble them.

We don't know where "Rephidim" is, though some have hazarded a guess or two over the years. But wherever it is, it is a dry place. Thus, the panic set in. Instead of a question, instead of a concern, verse 2 says they "quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink!" What is hidden in the English translation is the level of this complaint. The word that is used in Hebrew is *rib*, which is to file a complaint. What happened was the people immediately called for Moses's impeachment! Maybe they were just thirsty, or maybe it was left over from two chapters previously where there is the same problem, but it seems an excessive move. They issued an ultimatum: "Give us water or get out!" The water way or the highway! Then Moses yells at them and says that by challenging his leadership, they are actually challenging God! And how dare they distrust the one who rescued them from slavery? But then the people responded by saying, "You call this a rescue? You brought us out here to die! And our children and animals are dying too!!" Then Moses yells at God and says, "I'm in trouble here! What are you going to do about it?"

It is clear to see that when these essential needs are threatened, then trust collapses. The community begins to erode when survival is at stake. The evidence of this little scene says that no one acts terribly graciously in this midst of this crisis. The people threaten regime change, and the leader questions their right to complain. No one acts especially godly here. Well, no one but God, that is.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures expresses a wide range of emotion toward God's people. But in this story, there is an amazing tolerance. Normally, it is the people who stand before God. It is a sign of obedience and worship. We are called into God's presence. But in this story, to show him where the water is, God says to Moses, "I will stand before you." An amazing act, a humbling act for Moses, I would think. Because he, as the appointed representative of God, didn't act with the same graciousness.

Did you ever do a kindness for someone and feel that the individual was not properly grateful? Did it make you less likely to help the next time around? When Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), do you think he meant putting up with complaints and overreactions when people's basic needs aren't being met? Do you think he meant, "Give drink to the thirsty, regardless of how they respond"?

Our "lesson" from this passage, as usual, has many layers. First of all, the passage loudly claims God will provide. And God provides, not because of the worthiness of the recipient, but because of the holiness of the giver. Secondly, as those who are called to represent God, how we respond to human need reflects not just on us, but on the God we proclaim. Our response is not just in the meeting of the need, but in the meeting of the need with grace and with love.

Then perhaps we might also see in this passage a subtle reminder of our own human need. We too are thirsty. We forget because we have what it takes to quench our thirst. We forget we are only a few days away from dying of thirst. We forget that God has provided, and it is up to us to be stewards of what God provides. And worst of all, because we can drink, we forget that there are many who daily die of thirst. We forget that we are all one family, as we are thirsty.

Maybe if we knew how to fill the emptiness, we wouldn't be so frightened. Maybe if we knew how to resolve the loneliness, we wouldn't feel so hollow. Maybe if we could find a way to fill the void that is darkness, we could see our

way through again. Maybe, when we are so dry, we are parched, we could find something so we wouldn't be so thirsty anymore.

We all have our thirsty days. Even Jesus had them. At least if John is right about the story that he tells in our Gospel text for this week. But the difference is, for Jesus, a thirsty day was an opportunity rather than a terror. It was a chance to give out of abundance, rather than a panic to fill an emptiness.

The woman at the well is one of the many nameless women in the Bible, without whom we would be even more lost than we are. Not that she is merely a literary device, a cipher for our needs. She was a flesh and blood person, because that is who Jesus came to save. Like us. Her need is our need, her thirst is our thirst; her fears, our fears.

Jesus comes across all the barriers that we have set up to keep him out. The scandal of this story is that Jesus would even talk to this woman, let alone want to love her. Wait, love her? Wasn't this just about a drink of water on a hot and thirsty day? No, never. There is no "just" with Jesus. And there need be no "just" with us. Everything is deeper if we choose to let it be so. Everything is layered with meaning if we seek it. Every encounter - in the grocery store or sidewalk - is with a genuine human being with a story we may not know, indeed may never know, but can still honor if we choose. If we choose to see them as persons with a bucket and a thirst.

"Give me a drink," he asked her. *He asked her.* Jesus doesn't come and say, "Let me fix you." He meets us in a shared need. He emptied himself so that he would know our emptiness. He succumbed to the ravages, the needs of the flesh so that he could find us in our need, in our thirsts. Then, faced with our shock, he says, "I can help you with your thirst as easily as you could have helped me with mine."

But we are skeptical. "You don't have a bucket," we say. You don't have what I need. You've got words and ideas; you've got emotions and philosophies. Thanks, but what I really need is some water. What I really need is what I can hold in my hand or put in my pocket. What I really need is recognition from people like me. What I really need is stuff I can get with my own bucket. So, thanks but no thanks.

And we drop our own bucket in the well and we drink. And we drop it again and we drink again. And drop and drink. Drop and drink. And still, we thirst. It isn't

enough. It is never enough. Is it? We thirst. We search. We settle for a while, but it is never enough.

Give me this water always. She didn't know what he offered. Not really. She didn't understand what he brought. All she knew was that there was something here that she wanted. Some whisper of hope. Some relieving of long-held pain. And she leaned toward it with a hand outstretched.

Jesus never seems to need a lot of response. A note of hope in the voice is enough. A willingness to see him as the source of that which will quench our thirsts. That's all it takes, it seems. We don't have to understand completely. We don't have to write an essay on salvation theology. We don't have to recite a complex creed or make a well-defined statement of faith. We don't have to perform elaborate rituals or make sacrificial offerings. We just have to want it.

The question I heard asked some time ago that still echoes in my soul is this: "Jesus says if we drink of the water he offers us, we will never be thirsty. So, why are we still thirsty?"

Why do we still live in emptiness? Is it because we don't ask? We think our own buckets are sufficient. Why do we not embrace the life that he offers? It can't be that simple, can it? Just ask? Just want it, and he will give it? What's the catch? Maybe we should just give it a try.

Give me this water always. Fill this emptiness. Chase away these shadows. Please. ... Please?

Fourth Sunday in Lent - In the Presence

March 19, 2023

[Psalm 23](#); [1 Samuel 16:1-13](#); [John 9:1-41](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Do you know what it is like to be chosen? Well, you do because you were. Our texts this week are about being chosen by God. Most of us don't think that we were chosen, certainly not to be king like David. But surely, we chose the jobs that we do and the hobbies that we pursue and the service that we perform, didn't we? Well, yes. But God chose too. And not just in the past tense, God is still choosing.

But too often we think of being chosen by God as something for other people, for special ones like saints or clergy or mission workers or something. So, let's explore the idea of vocation this week. Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, and it means *to call*. A vocation is a calling in the purest sense of the word. What is your calling? That might be a question worship asks of the hearers this week. Perhaps your vocation is the job that you do to make a living. That sometimes happens. Often, however, folks have a job to make money and support their family, but their calling is something else. Maybe some volunteer work in the community or the church. Maybe something done behind the scenes, writing or mentoring, visiting the sick or caring for the church facility. God calls us to all sorts of tasks and opportunities.

In some settings, finding one's calling is partnered with some sort of spiritual gift assessment. Here we explore how God has equipped us for the various ministries that can be done inside and outside the church. If there is such an opportunity available, some information shared as to how one enters into that process would be appropriate today.

If we listen to the gospel text, however, we discover that sometimes God calls us not to a specific task or job, but to be a living witness. The man born blind became an example of how God works in this life. While his story might be more dramatic than most, being available to talk about God working in our lives is a calling that

all of us have. We are called to be witnesses. The blind man's story is a good example of what a witness does. Though there were those who wanted him to interpret, he just wanted to tell. "All I know," he said forthrightly. A witness tells what she knows, not what happened to someone else or what someone else has understood. A witness uses the substance of his own life to be the pointer to what God is doing in the world.

So, in worship, we can pray for God to reveal to us our vocation, and at the same time, we can pray for opportunities to share what we have already come to understand as our mission and ministry. We can sing praise to the God who calls and the God who works within us. We can be sent out to declare the goodness and the ongoing presence of God in our living and our working.

PREACHING NOTES

On the surface, this seems just like any of the other healing stories in the gospels. And there are lots of them. It is a miraculous story, revealing Jesus's power and his bringing healing to one of the many sufferers lining the streets of first-century Israel. But it is so much more. It is an invitation to look at the world through God's eyes. That's what it means, I believe, to stand in the presence of God. It means to see God, yes, but also to see what God sees. To stand with God and see a world that vibrates with the presence of the holy. John gives us a glimpse of a new way to see in this story of healing.

This healing takes place as the result of a question. Normally, Jesus would respond to a question with a story or a teaching of some kind. But here his response to the question is to heal a man blind from birth. The question was about sin. and Jesus stakes his claim as the conqueror of sin. He wanted to move the discussion beyond that of fault and focus on possibility.

He says that this man and this moment is given to show the presence and power of God. And then he bends down and gets some dirt and then spits in it to make a paste that he rubs on the man's eyes. Odd, but ok, we think. But not the first observers of this little circus. They would have been appalled. Dirt is, well, dirt! And spit is worse than dirt. Add to the messy mix that this is taking place on the Sabbath, and it seems like Jesus was intent on upsetting people. It was like he

wanted to poke them in the eye! He uses more than mundane (which is a word from the Latin for of the earth) elements to bring about the glory of God. How can this be? Surely God wants fancy stuff. Surely God wants extraordinary elements and spectacular people to prove the power of God.

No, God doesn't. In fact, it shows God's power even more wonderfully when the simple, the plain, the everyday is used to bring God glory. That is part of what Jesus was trying to tell them, and us. But they didn't want to hear.

Most of the rest of the text after the healing is an argument about whether Jesus really healed or if it was some sort of trick. The adversaries or the religious leaders went out of their way to find some way to prove that what was right there in front of their eyes couldn't possibly be the truth. They challenged the man's parents. Then, when that didn't work, they challenged the man himself. And when that didn't work, they drove him out (vs.34). They didn't like that a man such as this, a sinner, they called him, had something to teach them.

They should have read their own scriptures. God had a tendency to do this sort of thing all the time. The reading from the Hebrew Scriptures for this Sunday is I Samuel: 16:1-13. It is the story of the anointing of David. You remember that David was selected by God to be king of Israel while there was still another king on the throne. You remember that David was chosen while he was but a boy, tending sheep for his father, Jesse, and serving all his older brothers. Some of those older brothers were king material, at least as far as Samuel, the Lord's representative, was concerned. But, for some reason, God overlooked all the others and asked for David. When David came in from the barn, still smelling of sheep and red-faced from running in the wind, God told Samuel that this was it. Samuel dumped the oil and ran out of town, afraid of the wrath of the then king Saul. And David stood in his living room dripping with oil, looking at the surprised and disappointed faces of his brothers and father, wondering what in God's name was next.

The only explanation that we get for this whole event is tucked away in the middle of the story, when God and Samuel are arguing over the leadership abilities of the older brothers. Here is what it says:

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

(1 Samuel 16:7)

Over and over, God has given this message. Over and over, God has told us that the things we normally use to evaluate people are misdirected. Over and over, God has shown us that when we live on the surface, then we miss what is really going on; but when we go deeply into matter of life and of death, then we find what really matters. Then we see what is really important. But we have to learn to look in a new way. We have to learn faith vision. That means giving up what we think is best and surrendering to God's way of looking at the world. And ourselves.

You know, it is one thing to just miss stuff. To be so blind that a snake would have bit us. But it is something else to choose to be blind. The Pharisees had everything they needed to learn to see as God sees, but they chose not to do so. They chose the eye of human judgment, rather than the eye of God's grace. What's that old saying? "There are none so blind as those who will not see."

Psalms 23, one of everyone's favorites, is also about seeing in new ways. Seeing presence when you feel alone. Seeing dinner guests, when, before, all we saw were enemies. Seeing sustenance and abundance where, before, we saw only lack. Seeing

Do you want to see?

Fifth Sunday in Lent - Who Could Stand

March 26, 2023

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#); [John 11:1-45](#); [Psalm 130](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Here at the end of the Lenten observance (well, almost the end anyway), we have hints of Resurrection. We have “a foretaste of glory divine,” as the hymnist Fanny Crosby says. As if the Spirit and the lectionary preparers knew that we would need something to help us through the next couple of weeks. As if they knew that without this reminder, we would find it a very hard road as we made our way stumbling behind the Christ who suffers and dies for us.

We start with the Psalm, which begins with a hard question but then ends with hope. It begins with an admission of guilt, or need, or emptiness and then moves toward grace and reconciliation. Without that grace, who could stand? Without that hope, who could stand? We would be dry bones; we would be three days rotting in a tomb.

But that is not our story; that is not our song. Instead, the bones can live, by the breath of God. Instead, death is not an end, by the word of Christ. No, we don't go to an easy celebration, but to a deep appreciation for what Christ has done – is about to do – for us on the cross. We are humbled by this realization, and repentant that it is our rejection that has caused this pain.

We pray prayers of confession this day and seek not our due but God's grace. We stand vigilant over our lives, like watchers on the walls, aware of our failings and of Christ's redemption with equal fervor. We sing hymns of thankfulness and commitment to this journey of faith and of proclaiming the good news with passion and persistence. This is a worship experience of anticipation and of completion. We await the redeeming work of Christ on the cross, even as we have already received that redemption. We anticipate this journey of suffering, into the depths of sacrifice and death, even as we know the completion of the work. Let us prepare ourselves for what is to come by remembering what has been and by

trusting in the Spirit that gives life, even when all seems lost. Otherwise, who could stand?

PREACHING NOTES

“If you should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (*Psalm 130:3*) The psalmist asks an important question and makes a profound assertion. The question, of course, is obvious: “Who could stand?” If God held everything against us, if God kept an account of wrongs and weighed our worth, what hope would we have? And the answer is just as obvious, though unstated: “No one could stand. No one would have a hope.” That’s about as bleak as it could possibly be.

Except that is not where it ends. In fact, it is a springboard into a wonderful possibility. “But,” says the psalmist, “there is forgiveness with you” (v.4). What a beautiful possibility: what a ground of hope and life. The psalm practically runs from there to the end with joy and wonder both. That’s where I’ll put my life; that’s where I will lean; that’s for what I will wait. That – that forgiveness thing. And I’ll be on the lookout for it with more eagerness than those who watch for danger coming over the hills, those who watch for enemies at the breaking of the day.

And then the natural progression of this hope is to invite. This isn’t just for me, the psalmist sings, it is for all. For any and all, let’s put our eggs in this basket; let’s place our bets on this possibility; let’s live our lives in this truth. It is an all-inclusive grace and an open-ended invitation. This is where we want to go, who we want to be together.

The familiar passage from Ezekiel is also about all, about the community. We sometimes forget that as we read. Maybe it is because the prophet is telling his own story here. “The hand of the Lord came upon ME.” Maybe that’s why this becomes such an individual story when it isn’t about individuals at all. The passage ends with a vast multitude, for heaven’s sake. Yet we insist on hearing it as a multitude of individuals. And this is about being built up. It’s about getting what you need to keep going. It’s about God who can revive you no matter how dry you are. God can breathe into you a new life, no matter how much you are

gasping for air. I've heard and probably have preached too many sermons along those lines.

Full disclosure, that's not all bad. Certainly, souls, individual souls, need reviving. Certainly, breath can come to reanimate those who have had the wind knocked out of them. Certainly, there is something there for the individual yous in this story. I understand the desire to take a personal day off work. I need a personal day. You need a personal day. Everyone needs a personal day. Wonderful. Let's make it happen. Personal days for everyone!

But that limits the power of this passage, both historically and today. The passage includes verses 11-14 because they function as an explanation of Ezekiel's vision. And verse eleven begins "These bones are the whole house of Israel." The whole house. Not just individuals. Not just one on one, but all together. So, then if you go back to verse three, where God says to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" God isn't referring to any specific individuals. Can this one live; can that one? Can you live? Can I live? No, as important as those individuals are, God is talking to Ezekiel about the whole community, the family of God. The body, we have come to call it, the body of Christ.

We live in an era of massive and rapid change. One of those changes is the loss of influence of institutions like the church. Not just the church, by any means, but the one that concerns us in this space. The church is seemingly on its way out. Or at the least the church as we have known it for the last however many years we want to count. And now here we are. Set down in the midst of this valley of bones. Of what once was. Of what our expectations are. This is where we are. This is the world in which we live. But, and this is important, not because we messed up. Not because we lost something, or broke something, or did something wrong to this gift called the church. No, we are here today because this is where God wants us. This is our paradise.

I know, sounds outrageous, right? In the midst of decline, in the midst of struggle, of conflict and disagreement and longing for a past that may not have been real, to call this paradise seems ... offensive. Or a scam of some sort. Like I'm trying to divert the blame for the mistakes we have made or something. Maybe. But look again. "The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones"

(Ezekiel 37:1). Set me down. Did you know that is the same word that is used in the beginning of Genesis? He set them down in the Garden of Eden (*Gen 2:15*). Maybe this is where God wants us—here in this place where what used to be so easy now involves effort and commitment and faith.

He set us down here in a church that is facing an uncertain future and asks us, “Can these bones live?” And our response is often one of despair. If only. If only it was like it used to be. If only we could turn back the clock. If only we just advertised more, just opened the doors wider, just went back to what used to work, even though it was already losing ground. Can these bones live?

Let’s be honest, shall we? Can these bones live? No. Face it. No. Not one of these bones can live. Not one; they are too dry. Too old. Too dead. Not one. But Ezekiel is wise enough to know that he shouldn’t voice that answer. Even though he feels it in his bones, as we feel it in ours. He wants to say, “No these bones can’t live; I can’t make them live. Too many, too dry, too broken.” But he knows better than to say so. Instead, he shrugs his shoulders and says, “You know, Lord.” And God says, “No.” As they are, they can’t, they won’t live. On their own. So, bring them together, Ezekiel. Prophecy to the bones. Bring them together. What happened next took time, and made noise, and didn’t look right for a while. Wasn’t right for a while. Until it became right. Until the breath entered and what was apart came together and stood together. A vast multitude.

We are not whole until we can bring these bones together. We are not complete until these bones can live. The truth is, we can’t make the bones live - the bones of our church, the bones of our families, the bones of our world. But God can. So, we prophesy to the bones and to the breath. To the body that we are becoming and the Spirit that makes us alive. Then maybe we can come together, bone to its bone.

Who can stand? In the face of death, who can stand? We who grieve, who can stand? We who stand amidst the bones, who grieve what was, how can we stand? That’s what Mary and Martha wanted to know, and all those who were close to Lazarus. How do we stand in the face of death?

John, and by implication Jesus, wants us to see beyond the miracle. We could stand in awe of the moment where Jesus bends the laws of creation and works something incomprehensible. But there is so much to this story that we almost

have to force ourselves to look beyond that unexplainable moment. That's why we're overwhelmed with words again this week. Look deeper into the mirror and see your life, even if you don't come hopping out of a tomb wrapped in grave clothes.

Like Martha, we hint at questions rather than ask them. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Okay, thanks for the information. But then later, like Martha, we complain when those unasked questions aren't answered. "If you had been here ..." And then we're known to find an excuse to get away from one who wants more from us than we can give. Did you notice when Jesus starts getting into Martha's faith statement, she slips away and tells Mary to go talk to him. "This is more your area than mine," she says. I'm good with a spatula; you know theology." Even the crowd at the cemetery *tsks* behind their hands, "You would think he could have come a little sooner."

And then those tears. Shortest verse and all. "Jesus wept." "Began to weep" in our translation. Those around him went "Aww, look how much he loved his friend." Completely missing the point. Or rather confirming the reason for the tears. Of course, Jesus loved His friend, He loves all of us so much that our limited sight causes him pain. Jesus wept twice in the Gospels, here and on Palm Sunday, when he rode into Jerusalem and saw the city spread out before him, and his heart broke at the blindness, at the lack of vision, the lack of faith, the inability to see beyond that stone called death into the life of joy and peace and hope.

We sit behind those stones, stymied so long we begin to stink. Until someone comes along and says, "Take away the stone." Wait, what? Take it away? You mean, just like that? Take it away? Or better yet, live as though it were not there? Move forward into the unknown, be unwrapped and live? Notice Lazarus doesn't move his stone. Others move it. Lazarus doesn't unwrap his shroud; others unwrap it. He is set free from that which binds him, from that which takes his life, by the community acting on the direction of the Christ who weeps for our blindness. The Christ who asks whether we believe.

Do you believe this? "I am Lord of life," he says, "I am stronger than the stone called death. You need not live in fear, you need not limit your own life, your own living. Set it aside and embrace life in all its beauty and joy and risk, because I've

got your back.” Do you believe this? Well, says Martha and all of us, kinda. Sorta. Yeah. I guess.

Somehow, with the help of friends and financial institutions of various kinds, we find our way through all sorts of struggles, all sorts of griefs and pains. Somehow, the stone wasn't the end we thought it was. Sure, there are some more stones to move, more struggles to endure. But somehow, we moved forward. Step by step. Taking away the stones as they come. One by one. That's how we stand, by God's grace and Christ's call to move stones and bind bones and within a community that walks with us through whatever comes our way. We can stand. Thanks be to God.