

Lent & Holy Week, Year B

Rend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise

Ash Wednesday – Yet Even Now

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You might be asking why we need Lent. After all, we've been through the "lentiest Lent that has ever lented," as someone said last year. And, in fact, all of 2020 was about as Lenten as we can imagine. Sackcloth and ashes-worthy, tearing of the garments and repenting in the dust; yeah, been there, done that, still wearing what's left of the t-shirt. And self-reflection? What else were you going to do during the months' long pandemic and lock-down? Physical distancing brought out a lot of introspection, don't you think? Yeah, maybe we can give Lent a miss this year.

Except, maybe there is more to Lent than the suffering that we've endured. Maybe there is more than the reflection and analysis that we are prone to doing. Certainly, these are tools and techniques, practices that we have used and continue to use to achieve the ends that Lent calls us to claim. But as always, it is the end and not the means that defines the season for followers of Jesus.

So, what is the end of the season of Lent? Why do we have this period of preparation, of fasting and self-denial, of repentance and confession, of putting our spiritual house in order? Simply so that we can be prepared for Easter. Lent is about embracing the Resurrected One with a whole and longing heart.

What we discover as we make those preparations is that there are so many things that get in the way of our true embrace of the risen Christ. Some of those things are external, but many of them are internal. They are habits and preferences and inclinations that clutter our souls. So, the season of Lent comes along to give us space and appropriate reminders that we need to clean house to receive the one we call Lord.

To do this well is both a painful and a fulfilling exercise. That is why we have two titles for this series, or, if you prefer, a title and a subtitle. You are free, however, to place the emphasis where you believe it needs to be for your faith community. Is the emphasis for this season of Lent the rending of our hearts? Or is it claiming the promise? The truth is, we need both: the rending **and** the claiming. We need to tear out the things that are in the way of truly following Christ, which is not an easy or a simple process. Nor is it something that we can do once and then forget it. It is a constant call for us to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so

closely” (Heb 12:1). But then we also need to lean into the promise of the kingdom. We need to claim the life that Christ describes and lives out before us, to embrace the joy of the life of faith.

Lent doesn’t have to be a somber time; but to be effective, it needs to be intense. It needs to be taken seriously and rigorously, and we can bring our full selves to the table. It is worth the strenuous effort, however, as we are enabled to embrace the fullness of the promise of Resurrection and live as disciples of Jesus Christ; disciples who make disciples. So, despite feeling as though we have been in a yearlong season of Lent, we need the season; we need the observance to open us to all God has in store for us. Rend your hearts, so together we can claim the promise.

Ash Wednesday – Yet Even Now

February 17, 2021 – [Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#)

INTRODUCTION

There is something powerful about a season that starts in the middle of the week, at night (or in the morning, if that is your tradition). It suggests that the Lenten journey is a high calling, not for the faint of heart, not for the casual observer. It requires a level of commitment from the beginning. Issue the call to worship as a reach, a stretch, not as a barrier to access, but as a reminder of the strenuousness of the journey ahead.

The mood is serious, but not oppressive. The ashes remind us of our mortality and our sinfulness, but they don’t crush us to the floor. They are applied with a sense of hope and the confidence in the promise that brings us to this moment. Joel speaks of trembling before the day of darkness at the same time that he speaks of the hope that persists. Let hope have the final word, even over our sin and our fragility. There must be some light of Resurrection that guides our steps, even as we take the first one.

The ashes are the central point of this service. It is an example of the Word enacted. Proclamation stands in service of this enacted word and ought not

detract from it. The center of the service is not the preacher or the worship leaders, but the penitent who receives the reminder, which is also a gift.

What about worshiping online? Even if you are fully back to in-person worship, one hopes that the awareness of the increased reach through online platforms for worship has encouraged you to maintain that virtual presence. The first thing to remember is that the imposition of ashes is not a sacrament; therefore, we need not be as inhibited when considering innovative ways of providing the grace of this ritual. Can you have little bags of ashes available for pick up ahead of time or deliver them throughout the parish and community? How could you instruct those considering joining you for the Ash Wednesday service to prepare some ashes for themselves? What works best to make ashes that will leave a mark?

The mark is important. Some have pointed out that Ash Wednesday is one of the few times when we followers of Jesus are marked in a visible way. If your tradition is to do this early in the day, then you are a visible part of the family of God throughout the day in a way that you aren't usually so visible. Even if the ash is applied in the evening, people can go home and look in the mirror and see the mark. They can know that they bear a visible sign of the need for a savior. It is both humbling and exhilarating. It is both rending of the heart and claiming the promise.

PREACHING NOTES

"Yet even now..." Can you hear the weight of these words? Lean into the reverberation of this promise that hits like a cold splash of water on a blazing sun-drenched day. But you can't hear these words from a place of strength or power. This prophetic utterance won't resonate with those for whom "fine" is not a throw-off answer to the ubiquitous, "How are you?" tossed out at random, but is the shallow truth of the moment. To the one bowed down, however, by the finality of life or the brokenness of relationships of hurting, these words are a shock to the system, a life preserver floating on the storm-tossed waves: "Yet even now..."

Preacher, your privilege this auspicious moment is to enter into the pain of your people and offer them hope. As awe-inspiring as that sounds, however, it cannot

be done without naming that pain. The text from Joel begins with a threat, a warning, trumpeting darkness and the armies hidden in the gloom. Our inclination is to skip these first two verses. Let's move on to the promise; let's start with the hope. Let's make this faith thing easy. Those are the whispers you hear in your ear as you struggle for a message for this unusual service. Make it easy. Make it about giving up chocolate or saying a simple prayer every morning at exactly the same time.

Of course, giving up chocolate or a ritual practice of prayer can be healing; these can be the means by which we open ourselves to the Spirit. But they can also be ways of avoiding or shutting out the Spirit. Ash Wednesday doesn't allow us that luxury. Perhaps that is why the attendance is often smaller on this Wednesday than it is on Sunday.

Joel engages in a dialog with God and with us and with his own understanding of this grace and judgment thing. Watch how the voice changes from first person in verse 12 ("return to me with all your heart") to third person in the next verse ("return to the Lord ... for he is gracious and merciful..."). Joel speaks with the words that God has given him, and then he adds his own pleading and encouragement. "Who knows whether [God] will not turn and relent and leave a blessing..." Joel doesn't *know*; he's not been given those words. But he *knows* because he knows the God who called him into this service, the God he has served faithfully. "Who knows?" Joel asks, but push him, and he would probably say, "I know. I know the character of God; I know the heart of God. And I know that God longs for your heart. This is the God I know. The God who leans into our hurt and brokenness and offers healing and hope."

But wait, we might argue with the prophet, if that's the case, why does God make it so hard to receive that grace? Why do we have to repent in dust and ashes? Why do we have to rend our hearts? Why do you say to us, "Tell the priests to weep and to plead and to beg God in order to get back in this right relationship?" Why does Joel advise us to bargain with God, even to threaten God's reputation among the nations?

Verse 17 certainly sounds like some sort of invitation into a bargaining conversation with God. Joel speaks to the priests quite often, causing some commentators to wonder if he was from the priestly class himself. It is guesswork,

of course, because nothing is said of the prophet himself. He is introduced in the book with only his name and his father's name, neither of which is familiar from other contexts. The name *Joel* translates as "Yahweh is God," which could be his primary message. While he talks about the sin of the people, he doesn't really name the sin. But his name causes some to wonder if the sin is apostasy, putting someone or something in the place of God. The people were distracted from the worship of God. Oh, the forms were there; the rituals were performed. But Joel calls for more than the ritual. He calls for the heart.

"Rend your hearts and not your garments," he proclaims. Make it real. Make it visceral. Repent with more than just the outward show of it, the mouthed words of repentance. In verse 17, then, he invites the priests to weep as they lead the people in worship, in repentance. He calls them to feel it too; to mean it too. And then, though it seems that he is telling them to convince God that it is in God's best interests to redeem the people, it is more likely that he is reminding the priests and the people that their living reflects not just on themselves but on the God they claim to worship. They call themselves the people of God, so then how do they represent that God; how do they live their faith and proclaim their belief?

Joel's call, and indeed the Ash Wednesday invitation, is to join with the community, the whole community, in a deep and heartfelt repentance that brings us together back into right relationship with God. This is not an individual call, but a corporate one. There are no exemptions, no excuses; all are called to gather and rend their hearts.

First Sunday in Lent – This Is the Sign

February 21, 2021 – [Genesis 9:8-17](#)

INTRODUCTION

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday; we admit that. But this first Sunday is when many people become aware of the season. If there are rituals to be adopted, they will often begin today. So, we are on the brink again, or still, or even for the first time, of the journey. That's why we begin with promise; we begin with covenant.

What is the promise of Genesis 9? More will be explored in the preaching notes, but simply, it is about relationship and about presence. Perhaps you noticed in the overall title for the series that “hearts” is plural, but promise is singular. “Rend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise.” That was intentional. There is a corporate call to the Lenten journey, as discussed on Ash Wednesday. Bring the whole community together; no excuses are allowed. We are together in this act of rending, of opening ourselves as a whole body to the promise of God. But the promise is singular, and that promise is that God will be in relationship with us.

Of course, you think, there are lots of promises in the Bible. That is true, but the variety of gifts and encouragements and equipping all stem from the singular promise of presence. “Best of all, God is with us,” as John Wesley supposedly said on his deathbed. We can, of course, and should, enumerate some of these manifestations of the promise of presence throughout the series, but here we focus on that simple and profound truth: God is with us; we are not alone.

The symbol of the rainbow is well known throughout the history of the faith. We should not be afraid of using it in worship, even though there are new connotations to that symbol. Be assured that it is a symbol of acceptance and inclusion, of gathering the community together under a common faith. The Lenten call is corporate, remember; it is about gathering together “all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

In fact, our worship could declare not only that “there is the sign” as we point beyond ourselves to the naturally occurring light refracting through the rain and producing an arc of color and light; but that because of that sign and because of that promise, now we are the sign. The church has become the rainbow sign of the presence of God as we seek to gather up the scattered beloved of God into one covenanted community of faith. We are the sign.

PREACHING NOTES

On the one hand, as dramatic as the story of Noah is, the ending is somewhat anticlimactic. The rainbow appears, and the voice from above pronounces that this is the sign that God won’t destroy the world by a flood again. That is somewhat cold comfort, given the array of other ways that the world could be destroyed. And what makes it worse is that it kinda sounds like God is forgetful,

needing a multihued string tied around the divine finger to be a reminder of that thin promise. It is as if drowning is a favorite way of wiping out the creation, and God needs a visible reminder to not fall back on that habit.

No doubt there are thinking members of your congregation who have parsed all of this out for themselves and are ready to move on to something a little more profound, not to mention comforting. The preacher needs to dig a little deeper and help people hear the profound and revolutionary shift that takes place in this text about the nature of God and humanity.

Begin where the Bible begins, in the chaos of the deep. Before creation, when nothing existed, there was water~ the chaos of water, the primordial deep, the absence of God and all that is. Then, in the seventh chapter, we're back in the deep. The waters threaten, and chaos returns. The Creator, dissatisfied with the creation, wipes it all out in a colossal do-over, a rebooting of the entire universe.

Life is an accident, subject to the whims of nature and a disconnected Creator. Life is cheap, meaningless, empty. At least it could be argued, until Genesis 9. In Genesis 9, everything changed. God the Creator became God the Protector. God chose to stand between the creation and chaos, between meaninglessness and a life of community and purpose. God chose and then committed to that choice, to stand with that which was created out of nothing.

"But wait," you're thinking, "the promise is to remove only one method of destroying creation off the list of potential catastrophes." That is hardly the word of security that we're looking for. But look a little deeper, beyond the words that are used and see the symbolic action underneath. God says, "I have set my bow in the clouds." We read that as "rainbow" because that is the word we've created from this text. But it isn't a feature of light and color; it is a weapon of war. God says, "I am setting aside my weapon that I used to bring destruction to the people. I am shifting from a warrior God to a protector God."

As an aside, and it wouldn't do to put too much weight on this, but the word "bow" in verse 13 has a curious configuration. Some translators aren't quite sure how to translate it. But the word that is attached to the word bow is a word that in other places is translated as "plowshare." Is this God performing the act that later the prophet Isaiah calls upon all the nations to perform? Turning weapons of war into farming implements?

This seems more than simply crossing one method of destruction off a very long list. This is a complete reorientation of the relationship between God and God's people. So the sign carries so much more significance than we might have first thought.

Now we must consider how to become the sign that God is with us, or God is on our side into a world that feels so adversarial these days. How can we move beyond pointing at the signs of God at work in the world—which is a vital and important work for disciples to be about—to being the sign that God is with us?

Certainly, here is the connection for us followers of Christ during this season of Lent. Jesus came as the rainbow personified. He was the sign that God is present and that God is our advocate and not our adversary. Part of the work for us in this season is to assess how well we are doing in following that example and being that sign. The rending of our collective hearts is in the confession that we may have been more of an adversary to the work of God in the world than an advocate. Whether we think individually, as we do and need to from time to time, or corporately, as we don't very often, we need to examine the condition of our hearts and ask whether we can look at us, look at the church and declare, "This is the sign!"

Second Sunday in Lent – Walk Before Me

February 28, 2021 – [Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#)

INTRODUCTION

Get their names! That's a well-known evangelism technique; or it could be argued that it is a hospitality technique. Get their names; find out who they are as people. We like to be known by name. Take the time to share a name in worship today. Your name and the name of the one you are talking to. Declare that this is judgment free on forgetting names day. Give your name when you speak, and ask the name of the one to whom you speak.

Why? Well, our text is about naming, in part. God seems to care about names. In the conversation with Abram, God renames him, and then God renames Sarai too.

She is a part of the covenant, not just added baggage. Knowing names is knowing the people, at least in part. It says you care about them.

At the same time, we go beyond our names and take on a new identity in Christ when we enter into covenantal relationship with God. Or perhaps it would be better said that we become more fully ourselves when we walk before God with our whole selves. God doesn't ask us to set aside who we are, but enables us to use the gifts within us to serve the kin-dom and the community of faith.

So, this might be a day of examining our names; both the one we were given at birth and the one we claimed at our baptism. Of course, in our tradition, we don't rename those who come before us for baptism, whether children or adults. But we do take on the name *disciple*, the name of follower. We take Christ's name as our name – Christian.

The deeper question, of course, is how do we walk before God in the name we have been given? How do we represent that for which we live and breathe and have our being? Testimony is a powerful way for us to hear and experience this walking before God life. Who in the congregation has a story to tell about commitment, about covenant, about grasping hands with another follower to help and be helped on the journey. These could be stories of success, or, perhaps more meaningfully, stories of failure and accepting the grace to start again. We're not so much looking for heroes as for real human beings with bruised knees and humility. The biblical take on heroes is different from popular culture. Let's be real with one another.

More importantly, let's be real with God. Walk before me, says our God, and be blameless.

PREACHING NOTES

This is now the third repetition of the covenant with Abraham. In the first encounter, Abram lost his home. In the second, he lost his security. And here in the third, he lost his name. Of course, that is not the view we take of this encounter. Instead, we want to focus on what he gained. Yet, without an acknowledgement of sacrifice, we run the risk of misrepresenting the call. Yes, there are promises to claim, but there is a necessary rending in order to claim

these promises. Abram was called to leave the familiar and to venture out, without a clear direction, only trust. He was called to believe he had a home, a place despite being surrounded by enemies. And now he is called to take on a new identity and to live that identity with his whole life.

Rending of the hearts, or what we have come to see as giving something up for Lent, has become somewhat anemic these days. Abraham gives an example of a true rending, a true sacrifice. It makes our no chocolate or coffee for a few weeks seem kind of meager. Yet, a sign is a sign. It is about our willingness and our patience.

The Genesis story seems compact when we run through it all at once. But reading the margin notes reveals to us that this was years, decades, for this promise to be fulfilled. In Abram's first encounter with God, the text tells us he was seventy-five years old. Today's text tells us that he is now ninety-nine years old, and still the promise is not fulfilled. There is no son, Isaac; there is no multitude as numerous as the stars in the heavens or the sand in the desert. Yet, God still comes and asks for an investment. God asks for a rending of flesh as a sign that Abraham is still on board, twenty-four years into this— is he still on board?

Oh, sure, he's had his moments when he wasn't so sure; when he felt a need to save that skin that God now wanted a piece of; when he had to count his chickens before God was ready for them to hatch. You can't blame him, really. He was getting on in years. He and Sarah were seeing gerontologists rather than pediatricians. It's a long time to hold on to hope; a long time to see a future that was so far from the reality in which they were living that it became laughable.

And how long in between conversations with God did Abraham have to last? Had it been days, months, years since the voice came to him? And now here it is saying that covenant word again. But now there seems to be another condition. Walk before me and be blameless. Or is that two conditions? Walk before God and be blameless.

Blameless. What does that include? This is only the second time that this word has appeared in the Bible. The first time was when Noah was introduced. Blameless means, then, good enough to save humanity. No pressure there. Genesis 6:9 says, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God."

Maybe the blameless and the walking are tied together somehow. Maybe the covenant-maker God is saying to Abraham, “Keep moving forward. Keep moving forward with me; don’t give up on the promise. Even as the years pass and the body ages, keep walking with me, walking before me.”

Notice the shift? Noah walked with God. Abraham is told to walk before God. Is it the same? Yes, probably. Before means on display, it seems. Before means to represent, perhaps. But perhaps most significantly, before means that Abraham had to walk without all the answers for most of his life of faith. He had to walk before God gave him specific directions. He had to decide for himself how to follow the path of faith. And guess what, he got it wrong sometimes. He made decisions that got him into trouble, and he put loved ones at risk. He messed up, in short. But none of that precluded him from continuing to walk before God. Sure, sometimes he had to pick himself up and go a different direction. Sometimes he hurt those around him by making the wrong choices. But he kept walking. He kept seeking. He kept asking for God’s guidance. And when it came, he changed direction. He changed identity.

Or rather, God changed his identity. He was Abram, exalted father, but he became Abraham, father of many. What’s the difference? Well, perhaps the exalted one needed to be God, and what was needed from Abraham was a sense that there were others who would follow his example. Yes, there was the literal interpretation, a nation of people would come, slowly. But there is also the spiritual interpretation. Abraham’s faithfulness spawned a multitude of children as we who come after seek to walk before God with as much faith, albeit in fits and starts, as did Abraham.

Let’s not forget Sarah, because God didn’t. She was included in this story in a way that women often weren’t in the biblical saga. Sarai is sometimes translated as *contentious* or *quarrelsome*. But now her name would be Sarah, meaning *princess*. She takes her place as a leader, as a ruler, in shaping this nation to be.

But do not discount the importance of time in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Our culture is one of instant gratification. If we don’t see the change we want immediately, then we are likely to abandon that path. Twenty-four years into the journey with God, Abraham and Sarah are still in the dark, still waiting for

fulfillment. And yet, somehow, they are still willing to believe. They are still willing to walk before God, step after step after step.

Third Sunday in Lent – All These Words

March 7, 2021 – [Exodus 20:1-17](#)

INTRODUCTION

Designing a worship experience around the commandments seems a daunting task. Yet it need not be a heavy or finger-wagging experience. Instead, it could focus on the commitments we make to one another within the life of the community of faith. It could be a celebration of who we are as the body of Christ. It could be a reminder that we live in covenant with one another.

It could also become a time of confession. It could be a time of admitting that we might live up to the letter of this law, but that we don't approach its spirit. Like Jesus pointed out to us, we might not have killed anyone, but we might have wished them dead with our words and our hatred. This could be a time of healing, not so much healing of bodies as healing of relationships. Worship can be, must be, a time of binding us together.

It takes courage, certainly, to be vulnerable enough to admit brokenness. But part of the promise we celebrate is the promise of community. Let this be a time of celebration of harmony: the harmony of the body who lives defined or described by these words that we celebrate. Make space for confession, corporate and individual. Provide silence as a way of bringing the people before the vision of these words. Let there be a cleansing, a way of throwing away the confession and embracing the grace; a way of moving beyond the rending of hearts into the claiming of the promise. Or even being a sign of the promise by how we choose to be the body of Christ together.

Whether worshiping online or in person, give a safe space for this movement from rending to claiming. Set up private chats with pastors or Stephen Ministers if available so that folks can be heard. Or suggest avenues for healing the broken

relationships. Provide inspiration to make the first step. Starting with a simple “I’m sorry” can often be the means to bring about a whole new start.

The key is to not wield these words like a hammer, but to hold up this vision of living in community as an invitation, as a choice that the world has not yet tried. And maybe it is time the church leads by example.

PREACHING NOTES

Preaching from a list of laws is almost as exciting as preaching from a genealogy. Certainly, there are ways that we can make it exciting, ways to turn each law into a story. But in the end, we are simply rehashing things that people already know. The deeper questions are, “What do all these words have to do with the kin-dom of God as Jesus describes it? What do all these words have to do with loving our neighbor and living in community right here and right now? What do they have to do with dealing with systemic racism and the destruction of our planet?”

To many people, these words are simply a base level from which we then build a better sense of law and order or a greater sense of responsibility for working beside the Spirit to build the eternity that God has envisioned for us. What do all these words have to do with life and death and covenant and commitment, with promises and community?

They’re about drawing lines. Wait, what? Lines. Boundary lines. We talk about life and death when we gather for a funeral or memorial service. We reflect on the weaving of a covenant when we stand before the altar and perform a wedding. We redefine family when we welcome new members making a commitment to live and learn and love among us. We are sketching the circle around a table of sacrifice and grace when we gather for the sacrament of Communion. We’re drawing lines.

The problem is that we usually see that as a negative. Drawing lines is about limitation, we feel. It is about right and wrong, in and out. “Don’t fence me in,” we complain. “Don’t cramp my style”; “don’t get all up in my grill” ... actually they don’t say that anymore, but you get the point. Drawing lines goes against the great American value of freedom. We put the words “no limits” on the rear

windows of our pickup trucks. We wear them on our jeans. They are not just a slogan; they are how we define ourselves, how we understand ourselves.

Yet, in our rational minds, we know that boundaries and rules are good things. And that is why we reluctantly accept them. Like a kid who wants to play late into the night but trudges up to bed anyway, we say that the lines are good for us. Like broccoli or cod liver oil. Close your eyes, and open up. Here it comes, all these words.

Oh, right. Those rules. Those lines. Got it. (*Sigh.*) We suppose it is for our own good. Right? Well, you have to wonder. Is God one to bring the whole nation of Israel out into the wilderness for a time out? Is this conversation started with a wag of the divine finger and slow shake of the holy head, displaying disappointment and the prelude to punishment? Are these ten words given because the people of God have proved unworthy, have fallen short of the ideal of who they could be, who they were intended to be? Are they being grounded by these words? Restricted, chastened, reprov'd by the law? Take your medicine, you won't like it, but it'll be good for you in the long run.

Or is there something else going on here? What if we took a whole different approach to the lines thing? What if we saw them not as limitations but as definitions? What if we looked at this moment in the history of the people of God not as punishment for less than stellar behavior, but as a gift because of a greater than imagined love?

Sure, there are boundaries in the covenant of marriage, but who would call them a punishment? Instead it is a new way of being, a new way of living and loving. We are redefined when we make that commitment to love and to cherish. We make promises that don't constrain us so much as set us free to love. We aren't hampered by the lines that are drawn so much as we are encouraged to go deeper and higher, to love more profoundly.

Baptism and confirmation are about making vows to love as well. The lines that are drawn are about finding your way into the fellowship and family of the church. It is about making a commitment to serve and to participate and gather with the community of faith. It is about claiming that in this journey that is life and faith, we acknowledge that we need support; we need companionship; we need a community to surround us as we make our pilgrim way.

Communion draws the lines and invites all to be inside. It isn't about separation; it isn't about better than or holier than. It is about invitation and inclusion. It is about welcome and hospitality. It is about a table of grace and finding your way in.

The ten words are not so much commandments that we ought to follow reluctantly or not, as they are descriptions of the kind of people we can choose to be. The people who love God (Words 1 through 4) and who love neighbor (Words 5 through 10). One Hebrew language teacher said we should retranslate them not as "Thou shall" or "Thou shall not" but as description, "You are the people who have one God" and "You are not the people who kill and steal and bear false witness." That is just who we are and who we are not. God doesn't say, "Jump through these hoops and I will love you." Instead, God says, "My love for you will shape you into these kinds of people, this kind of community."

And we live these descriptions into the world around us. We look across some lines, the lines that society has drawn, the lines that history has drawn that cause us to divide up into us and them, into good and bad. Our descriptions cross those worldly lines, those false divisions of race and ethnicity that instill in us the fear of the other. No, Jesus reminds us, these are our neighbors too; these are a part of the family of God, and we treat all with the same love and respect with which we treat those like us. We are all one family; that's what these words are telling us.

Even further, these rules seem anthropocentric, but what if all creation was included? What if we began to treat the air and the water, the living creatures of this world, the resources available to us with the same kind of respect, drawing lines that we will not cross? Not taking benefit that causes harm elsewhere. What if these words were not just for the human community, but for the human community to determine how they were going to walk before God in all things? What if we heard these words as a description of the kin-dom, a redeemed Edenic environment of which we are but a part? What if this is what it meant when these words said, "So that your days may be long."

How long? Into eternity. We draw the lines at a funeral as well. The lines of welcome into the heavenly home. And what we thought was a line, the line that divides life and death, was only a doorway, only a corner to turn, that brings us into a new reality. But the lines of God's people define us here and there. God

announces where the lines are for us to live well now, but also so that we will be at home in eternity with God. So that we will recognize the place when we get there. And we'll go on living between the lines that God has drawn, now and in God's eternity. All these words draw a picture that sees beyond our vision.

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Look Up and Live

March 14, 2021 – [Numbers 21:4-9](#)

INTRODUCTION

Do not, we can't be more clear, do not put a bronze snake on a pole for this service! OK, kidding aside, how do we create an experience of worship around this odd story in the backwaters of the Torah? Well, as observed in the preaching notes, this story seemed to be important to Jesus, at least according to John's Gospel. So, maybe we could start there.

This is another occasion of Jesus predicting his death and the doorway that it opened for all of us. And by "another occasion," we don't mean how repetitive, but instead we mean we need to pay attention here. This is important. Worship, then, should be centered around the offering that Christ makes to all.

So, the songs should be in praise of Jesus and the power of his sacrifice. The prayers should be prayers of thanksgiving for the gift of life eternal, of forgiveness and grace. There could be witness to the power of a reclaimed life, of a renewed start, of healed relationships and healed bodies.

But underneath it all is a call to commitment. That is what "Look Up and Live" means. "Look up" doesn't sound like much of a commitment, but it is a call to move out of ourselves and to allow someone else to take the lead, to take the center of our beings. "Look up" means see the hope for your own life and the lives of those you love and indeed the whole world not in yourself, but in the person of Jesus Christ and his redeeming grace.

How will you issue the call to commitment? What next steps can be provided so that folks understand that this is more than a moment at the altar rail? What

groups, in person or online, are ready to take new attenders and walk alongside those who are ready to take up the call to “look up and live”?

Of the many things we know about how to make disciples, one thing is clear: no one does it on his/her own. What kind of buddy system or group process can we begin to put into place for mutual support and encouragement? Here again the worship team can partner with others in the life of the congregation to help communicate the understanding that worship is not something we do for an hour or so once a week, but something we do every day of our lives.

PREACHING NOTES

It would, of course, be difficult to preach this text from Numbers without making reference to the [Gospel](#) reading for this week. It is John’s explication of this story that fits most neatly into our Lenten journey. John has Jesus reference this story from Numbers as a way of explaining what he, Jesus, was there to do. It is the first reference to being lifted up and goes back to a story with snakes and poison and grumbling people (“Snakes! Why did it have to be snakes?”) What could be so uplifting about a story of a snake on a stick?

That sounds like a question that Nicodemus would ask. Although the Gospel text for this week moves to the explanation verses after the encounter in the night between Jesus and Nicodemus, it would probably be helpful to remember how we got here. We need to consider why Jesus made the reference to the snake in the desert and gives perhaps the most famous verse in the whole New Testament (John 3:16). How did we get here? It started with Nicodemus (John 3:1-13).

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 of being 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. Knocked off his feet, 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 your 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; let go of 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," Jesus might say." 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. We don't know how it all affected him or what he went away with that night. But a few chapters later, when the rest of the leadership is 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?" This is not an affirmation of faith, by any means, but at least he attempts 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? 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.

Because—and we're back where we need to be— Nicodemus finally had the courage or the faith or the desperation to look up and live. The story from Numbers isn't about a snake, and it isn't about worshiping an odd sort of idol. It's about acknowledging that you need help. You need a savior. And it is about obedience to the one who will rescue you from what is killing you. If you *just look up and live*.

It isn't a difficult thing to look up at a snake on stick or a man dying on a cross. And yet it is the hardest thing we could ever do as independent thinking human beings. It is about surrendering ourselves to that which will save us rather than thinking we can do it ourselves if we just plug away at it long enough. It is admitting that there is poison in our system that will kill us if we don't do something radical, something desperate.

It isn't hard to image the squeamishness of the Hebrew people to have a bronze snake on a pole in the midst of the camp while they were surrounded by snakes nipping at their heels. And we can be sure that their prayer was that God would move the snakes out of the way and give them a clear path on their journey. But God chose a different way. God left the snakes around them, left the vulnerable to the poison that could kill them. Yet, God gave them a remedy, a solution to the danger that surrounded them. And all they needed to do was to look up and live.

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Written on the Heart

March 21, 2021 – [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)

INTRODUCTION

No, a tattoo chair set up in the chancel would not be a good idea. On the other hand, we began this season by receiving a mark that represented our faith; represented both our sinfulness or mortality and our confidence in the one who brings us hope. So perhaps there is some sort of mark we could find to represent our desire to be shaped by the law of love that Jeremiah presents to us in our text for the week—maybe a bookmark or a wallet card, something that says, “We know the Lord” or “We are God’s people.” Not a card to give away, but something to remind ourselves.

This is a reminder worship experience. We are who we are, remember? We act how God’s people act, remember? When we haven’t done so, when we’ve acted out of selfishness or in reaction to a perceived slight or frustration, then we confess and cling to the truth that we are God’s people and that isn’t how we act; it isn’t who we are to behave in ways that diminish and demean. So we provide space for confession. We invite honesty before the Lord. We confront the body with the vision of who we are called to be to see if that fits how we have been. This word on our hearts or on our cards is not something to give away, but something to remind ourselves.

Yet, we give it away whenever we act out of that truth, whenever we treat others as though they were God’s people too. Or whenever we treat them with love because we know the Lord and we want them to know the Lord too. So, worship, as always, leads to action; worship leads to life beyond the sanctuary into the streets where we live. Help those who attend make those connections in whatever ways work in your setting. Use images, perhaps, of ministry in your neighborhood, beyond the walls. Tell stories of connections made outside the community of faith. Create opportunities for relationships to be built in the world around us. Let the concerns of the surrounding areas be brought into the life and witness of the church, into the prayers of the people of God.

The text this week comes from the book of consolation in Jeremiah. Like all the prophets, Jeremiah has difficult things to say. But this is a moment where he

wants to build up the people of God. It looks bleak, he admits, but God is still God. God is still in control. And the day is surely coming when God will write on the heart of the people of God. And while even then we may still wonder what the loving thing is, we will desire to do that loving thing with our whole being. We will no longer be half-hearted followers, but fully committed members of the loving force that will bring in the kin-dom.

So, worship is one of hope and of joy, confidence in the goodness of God, even while we confess our unwillingness to love far too often. We proclaim, with song and prayer that we are still under the tutelage of the Spirit, still being shaped by the hand of God into disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And that proclamation is what will be written on our hearts. Praise be to God.

PREACHING NOTES

That the gospel is countercultural is beyond debate. But texts like this one are so subtly against our way of thinking that we might not even realize the pull to deny this proclamation even as we preach it. Yet, how can we make such a claim about a magnificent vision of the kin-dom of God? It seems something that we all long for on a regular basis, particularly during a time of unrest and division. This is a utopia worth claiming, so why would we be reluctant?

If there is one thing this society seems to value, it is self-determinism. If this vision becomes real, am I an independent person anymore? If this law, however benevolent, is written on my heart, do I choose anything anymore? Am I able to decide? Am I even able to think for myself? Or am I lost to this eternal power so much greater than myself? Have I given my deepest self, my thinking self away?

Though in this space, maybe even in your space as you prepare to preach this text to a congregation hungry to hear God's word, this line of argument sounds out of step. It sounds ridiculous, frankly. And yet, it is there in the back of all our minds—if not consciously, then certainly subconsciously. This word goes against some of our most deeply held self-conceptions. Remember, "You're not the boss of me!"

Of course, the irony of our striving for independence is that we would say, "You're not the boss of me" to the people who had the legal and moral responsibility to

be the boss of us. We are always lashing out against those who are in authority over us. We value freedom above all other gifts of a civilized society. We have elevated freedom to such a state that the gospel can barely be heard in this day and age. If it doesn't clang a sour note in your ears, believe that it does in the ears of many in our world today. The law written on the heart doesn't sound like good news to many.

Yet there is a different way to read these words that reveals a world of difference. What is the law that Jeremiah tells us God is wanting to write on our hearts? Well, didn't we cover this a couple of weeks ago? The Commandments, the Word that God gave the people? And then the hundreds or thousands of interpretive laws stemming from those ten? Right? That's the law that God wants to tattoo upon the inner core of our being, isn't it? Well, yes. But go back even further. Go back to the roots of the law. Jeremiah reminds us in this text of the roots of the law: "I will be your God and you will be my people."

It's not a law as we understand law. It is a relationship. It is a law of love and of loving and of acting in loving ways toward all, stranger and neighbor and family. It is only when we hear this promise and this hope through the lens of loving that this makes any sense at all.

Commentator Woody Bartlett, in *Feasting on the Word*, writes that "having the law firmly engraved in one's heart is an adventure in freedom." He continues:

"It is the freedom to act spontaneously; knowing that one's actions will reflect what fills one's heart. It is the freedom to be who one truly is, knowing that one's true character is what is most pleasing to God and therefore reflects the best of what the law requires" (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, p.125).

This is the paradox of the gospel. When we surrender to the will of God, we become more truly ourselves. It is the foolishness that Paul spoke about in I Corinthians. It is the puzzle that Jesus proclaimed to us. that somehow to find myself, I must lose myself; to be one who leads, I must learn how to serve. And this service is not an obligatory servile spirit, but a true desire that everyone we encounter know something of the love that motivates my every action and decision, my every thought and prayer.

At the root of this acting out of love is the knowledge of God. Jeremiah says that no longer will we have to say “know the Lord” because everyone will know. That means, of course, that knowing God is our first task. Knowing and telling about or knowing and sharing that knowledge every chance we get. While we share with urgency, we share in hope. The days are surely coming, we can count on it. We can believe in it. And we can begin right away living as though there were these words, this law of love already written on our hearts.

Of course, we will get it wrong from time to time. Of course, we will lose our grip on it when things get difficult. Of course, we will need to climb back up on that horse and keep riding. That’s why we need a season of Lent to reorient ourselves toward this law, toward this way of living in community. The truth is, we haven’t lived by this law; we haven’t acted out of love. So, we come and confess and invite the Spirit to get back to work writing on our hearts, so that going forward we can live and act more like the kin-dom we proclaim.

This passage is not an invitation to relax and wait for the day that is coming. It is a call to action. It is a call to move, to call out injustice, to tear down divisions, to lift up the oppressed. We don’t sit back saying that God is in control; therefore, all we have to do is take care of our own souls. That has never been the gospel proclamation. That is not what is written on our hearts.

Palm / Passion Sunday – The One Who Comes

**March 28, 2021 – [Mark 11:1-11](#) & [Mark 14:1-15:47](#)
[Isaiah 50:4-9](#)**

INTRODUCTION

As always on these Holy Week events, there are choices to be made. As discussed further in the preaching notes, the first decision is whether this day is totally focused on Palm Sunday or whether there is going to be a hint of Passion Sunday woven into the order of worship. It is too much to expect a worshiper to go from the celebrations of Palm Sunday, with the palm waving and the shouts of Hosanna, to the wonder and glory of Resurrection Sunday on Easter with the

laughing shouts of “He is Risen” without some sense of the valley in between these two high points.

An effective pattern would be to begin the service on the high note of Palm Sunday, with shouts and processions and the waving of palms, whether fronds from a palm tree or the palm of the hand. Be sure and let people know that their shout, “Hosanna,” translates as “Save us” or “Save now.” This is a call to the savior, even though later usage of the term was for the king and was seen as a sound of celebration rather than a plea for help. But we can certainly claim both usages in this reenactment. It might also, depending on safety and distancing, should those still be in force, be a time to move the parade outside around the church building or up and down the street. Let there be joy and celebration, as we invite our neighbors to know who we are declaring king of our lives on this day.

After the highlight of the Palm celebration, it might be time to move into a reflective mode. Let the hymns and songs of praise transition to an acknowledgement of the sacrifice, of the blood that was shed, of the cross that was borne. This need not and should not be an abrupt change in mood and tone, but a gradual shift, accompanied by confession and prayers of intercession and thanksgiving, or perhaps a litany acknowledging the depth of Christ’s love for us.

The focus of the second part of the worship experience ought to be on the Passion story itself. This is not a text that needs a lot of explanation. It is effective to have someone, a good reader, simply read the text while people let the story unfold in their imaginations.

It would be difficult to end the service in silence, as many are inclined to do on Good Friday. Yet, a contrast between the opening exuberance and the closing reflective tone would be striking. A recessional hymn or song that speaks of the need for Christ’s presence as we walk would be an effective closing of the service. Added to this is an invitation to join the community as we walk even closer to our Lord as we enter into the story more deeply on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. If other services are planned, like Holy Saturday or the Easter Vigil, the invitation should be clear and open to all.

PREACHING NOTES

There is always a delicious irony when April Fool's Day falls on or near Holy Week or Easter. Certainly, it is something to be played with in contemplation of the world's view of the events of Jesus's Passion and death and the April Fool's joke of Easter that God played on the whole world. This year April 1 falls on Maundy Thursday. So there are opportunities aplenty to bring these two events together to help us explore the depths of the gospel and how it stands outside of what the culture calls "common sense" and presents a message that seems nonsensical on its face.

As always, there are choices to be made during this season —and particularly on this Palm/Passion Sunday. There is the inclination to let the Palm Sunday event stand on its own and allow the congregation to experience the full weight of the day throughout the service. This allows the preacher to dig deep into the nuance and the symbolism of all that took place on that day.

The problem arises when we admit that the attendance on Palm Sunday and Easter far outweighs the attendance at Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. If Palm Sunday leaves aside the Passion part of the title, our congregations go from a parade to a Resurrection party without ever experiencing the depths of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Some have even argued that we shouldn't allow anyone to attend Easter Sunday services without proof that they attended a Good Friday service somewhere! That is hardly practical, admittedly, but in the secret part of the preacher's soul, there is resonance here.

Most, however, find a way to give a nod to the Passion on Palm Sunday. Both elements enter into the experience of the worshiper on this Sunday before Easter, leaving participants with the desire to return for the rest of the story. We don't want people to leave in despair, but perhaps with something of the feeling of the weight that Jesus bore on our behalf.

Inherent in these matters is the feeling that something is foolish about all this, which is why it might be worth raising the issue of April Fools' Day, either here on Palm Sunday or on the actual day on Maundy Thursday. (See notes for that service.)

But let's remind ourselves of the origins of the secular observance of April Fools' Day. Some have said that New Year's Day used to be on April 1 and when it got moved to January 1, some folks forgot, wanted to hold on to the old date, or

simply refused to acknowledge the change; so they continued to celebrate New Year's on April 1. Naturally, these folks were called April Fools. Others dispute this origin, as you would expect.

Maybe it has connections back to the Roman Festival of Hilaria. Think about it, wouldn't you want to celebrate the Festival of Hilaria? Or the Mediaeval Festival of Fools, that sounds like a don't miss on everyone's vacation schedule. Both of these were in the spring, or vernal equinox celebrations when everyone goes a little crazy after a long cold winter. There was an element of turning the tables on these events, a bottom of the heap folk seeing how the other half lives dimension. These events were designed to vent the pressure that sometimes leads to revolution by acknowledging that sometimes life just isn't fair, that the have-nots are not any less than the haves. It was a chance for just a day, just a moment, to get back, to get even, to get your two cents in, a sort of "so there" in-your-face, thumbing your nose at those who think they are in charge of everything and everyone.

So, of course, Palm Sunday near April Fools' Day is strangely fitting. You know the story; you've marched in the parade. You didn't know you were participating in civil unrest, did you? You didn't realize you were making a statement about how the world was ordered. But that is what this event was designed to do and to be.

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 we do know 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 only 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.

That is hard to miss, really. It was a slap in the face to all those who thought they were in charge. It was a declaration of authority and power in a place of power and authority who saw Jesus as an outsider. It was the best April Fools' 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. It was understood by most folks 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 even 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 one the world considered a fool, the one the world did its best to destroy. And perhaps we are participating in the best April Fools' Day ever.

On the other hand, sometimes April Fools get fooled. 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 April 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 is him,

who continues teaching through the insults, as Isaiah described centuries before he arrived. 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 April Fools' if you want. I'd rather be a fool for Christ anyway.

Maundy Thursday – A Lamb for Each Household

April 1, 2021 – [John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#) & [Exodus 12:1-4, \(5-10\), 11-14](#)

INTRODUCTION

The center of the Maundy Thursday service is, of course, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There are many ways to receive this meal that make it stand out on this solemn occasion. But the preaching and the liturgy, the music, and even the layout of the space for worship should all be focused on the serving, the giving and the receiving of the bread and the cup. Whether you serve to individuals or to groups who gather around a table as a family unit, whether you take the elements in unison or spread out over the course of the serving time, all is intended to help the worshiper receive this grace and participate in the ritual as though from the hand of Christ himself.

Many worship teams have used a reenactment. The problem there becomes one of a performance that the worshiper comes to view rather than a participatory event. It would be better, some argue, to set up a table where the serving of the elements happens in groups around a circle rather than in a line at the altar rail or passing through a station. This is a depiction of the event, but done in a way that captures the experience for all who attend.

Another caution is that though the Hebrew testament text for this evening provides the instructions for the Passover meal, it is better to avoid trying to duplicate the Seder meal. This is a sacred ritual for our Jewish brothers and sisters and even though our intention might be to honor our shared tradition, it could be seen as cultural appropriation. The best solution would be to have a dialog with a local rabbi and discuss a way of sharing the experience with a worshipping synagogue or Jewish faith community. Perhaps the rabbi or a Jewish leader could

come and teach the meanings and practices of the meal at another time than during the worship experience.

Some might still want to set out some of the elements as discussed in the Exodus passage and provide some way of experiencing them. It might be possible to set up a prayer station, for example, with a dish of the bitter herbs as described in the text and a safe and clean way of providing a sample taste or even smell. Strong emotions are triggered by tastes and smells. But it must be clear that this is not a reenactment of the meal, but a reflective sampling of some of the elements.

It is true that many United Methodist communities have participated in the Seder meal in the past. This is not meant to condemn that practice or to cause feelings of guilt or shame. We merely raise these suggestions as a way of helping us be good neighbors to our Jewish friends and sensitive to their worship practices.

PREACHING NOTES

The Exodus passage provides an odd list of instructions on how to have the Passover meal, and the John passage gives us a familiar story of hospitality neglected and taken up. Then, we also need to explain where the Maundy in Maundy Thursday comes from. After the foot washing incident, we have Jesus trying to put words onto his actions and talk about loving one another as he has loved his disciples. All this is somehow reflective of his glory. When we love one another, we are glorifying Christ. No wonder this is April Fools' Day. And yet, for us, it all makes some kind of mysterious sense.

While it might not be useful to focus on what is strange about the instructions for the Passover meal, it could provide some insight to examine a couple of the instructions for deeper meaning. First, this is both a family exercise and a whole community event. Sharing is built into the model. There is also a sense of moving on inherent in this meal. "Eat it hurriedly," say the instructions. As much as we like to dwell on the moment, particularly family moments of eating and drinking, we are preparing for something else, something bigger.

Then if we turn to the Gospel text, we find a story that might be too familiar to really hear. So, listen deeper. Place yourself and your congregation in the room and consider what might be happening on the night.

It might seem useless to try and ascribe inner thoughts to the actors in the Gospel drama, but you can't help but wonder what was going through Jesus' mind when he got up and grabbed the towel and the basin. Did he sigh at how such an important cultural greeting was missed by those who were charged to prepare the meal? Did he have a light bulb moment where he thought, "Maybe if I show them what I mean, they'll finally get it?" Was it yet another opportunity to present his incarnated message, to be the words that he spoke? Or was it just a matter of course - he saw a need and decided to fill it, not thinking for a moment about how the disciples would respond to such an act?

In the minds of the disciples, there was something demeaning about Jesus kneeling to serve in such a humbling way. That's why they all managed to overlook the opportunity. But for Jesus, it wasn't demeaning; it was an opportunity to serve. More than that, it was an opportunity to be who he came to be, to fulfill his purpose. After all, he said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28).

All the teaching about the action came after, and the disciples were confused. "Do you know what I have done for you?" Nope, he could read it in their eyes: they didn't get it. They were still looking for the best seats; they were still looking for their rewards in heaven— or on earth. They didn't know what he had done, which means they didn't know him. At all. We sometimes envy the disciples because they got to spend time with Jesus. They got to hear his voice and see his eyes. They watched his hands. They were right there. And they didn't get it. They didn't have any advantage.

Later, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment" (13:34). That's where the word *Maundy* comes from. The Latin *mandatum* or *command*. The new commandment, he says later is, "Love one another as I have loved you." Except the new commandment wasn't new, not really. Jesus had already acted it out in front of them. "As I have loved you." By serving, by getting on his knees, by bending to a task that even fishermen thought was beneath them, Jesus acted out that commandment. "Love like I loved," says Jesus.

It wasn't supposed to be a once a year command. The church turned Maundy Thursday into quite a ritual over the years. The Pope would find some beggars— or his people would find some beggars—and then very publicly would wash their

feet. The monarch of England would do the same, until it got too uncomfortable. Now, they hand out some money. Maundy Money, it's called. Once a year.

But it was never supposed to be a ritual. It was supposed to be a way of life. Oh, footwashing isn't a part of our culture; that isn't necessarily what is supposed to be carried on. It is the willingness to serve that is the command. The *Maundy*. On Thursday, or Monday. Or any day. Sometimes, it's a good day, all you hoped it to be. Other times, it seems cruel; it is not what you expected. That's a part of the risk of service. Sometimes it doesn't turn out like you hoped; sometimes service isn't received as we intended. Our inclination is to stop rather than to risk doing it wrong.

This Maundy Thursday, we remember what Jesus did; we go back to that moment. But if we stayed in that past, if we didn't see that this command was, as Exodus states, "a perpetual ordinance" to be observed, to be enacted with our whole lives, then we've missed something significant about this moment.

There is indeed a lamb for each household, there is service to be performed by each person, each family in the body. Not just then, but now. Not just once, but always.

Good Friday – By His Bruises

April 2, 2021 – [John 18:1-19:42](#) & [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#)

INTRODUCTION

The first question the worship team needs to ask for this service is what is the mood? Is it quiet and somber? Is it dramatic and heavy? Is the hope to send folks out into the night like the first disciples, despairing and feeling as though all is lost? Or is there a clear pointer toward the glories of Easter to come?

Mood or tone for worship is set by a number of things. The environment is one of those things. How should the lighting be set? What furniture or adornment should be visible? There are some who think the bare chancel is the best way to present the Good Friday message. Stark and colorless, a bleak presentation of the world

sorely in need of a savior. Others prefer a hint of dawn, a light on the horizon so that hope is indicated, even in the gloom of this day.

What songs will you sing? Will there be congregational singing, or only choir or soloists? “Were You There?” speaks of the sacrifice and the pain, but the last verse sings of Easter. Do you include that verse? Conversation about the mood is vital for an effective Good Friday service.

Many communities of worship use the Tenebrae format for Good Friday worship. The scripture, interwoven with music or projected images can provide a powerful reminder of the sacrifice of our Lord. Will there be different readers or the same well-rehearsed voice walking with the congregation through this journey? Are there candles to be put out after each reading? If so, does the reader put them out, or do acolytes perform this task? Do the lights in the worship space also dim with each candle, so that by the end there is near total darkness? Or does one light, one sign of hope, still flicker in the darkness?

Mood is always important in worship, but perhaps doubly so during Holy Week. It is also important to consider all the elements of the worshipers’ experience from the moment they arrive until they are heading home. If the service is online, then what greets those who log in a little early? While you can’t control the worship environment when people are worshiping at a distance, you can certainly suggest and then give time for them to set a worship space in their own place. Have a clear outline for that space with options, since not every home is equipped in the same way. No candles? Turn on a lamp. No colorful cloth? Use a napkin or construction paper. Find ways to help your online congregation feel connected to the event.

In a way, Good Friday is not so much about understanding, but experiencing. That’s why mood is so important. What do you want to have happen in the core of those who participate in worship in this service? We can’t always give a meaning that will satisfy the mind. Who can explain this sacrifice of blood on a cross from one we have come to call Lord or Savior? Much ink has been used to attempt to explain this event over the centuries. But the argument continues. Some might come to ask, “What does this mean?” It is much more likely, however, that the question is, “What does this have to do with me?” Or more specifically, “How am I supposed to feel about this?” We are longing for

something to connect with us. We are looking for a heart experience, a breathtaking moment of wonder and awe, of humility and grace. What will you do to help those who worship with you this day find their way to the heart of this moment?

PREACHING NOTES

Can you preach whole chapters of the Gospel or the prophets? Well, you can, but it isn't advised. Of course, it might be argued that today isn't a day that needs preaching anyway. This is a day that needs tears and awe. It is better to stand silent and merely point to the cross on this wonderful, terrible day.

Yet, how does the preacher stand silent when the church comes to hear. Maybe today, the congregation is more alert to the Word than at other times. So, to be silent is to miss the opportunity to gather the people into a deeper experience of faith. But how might we do that?

One way would be to focus on smaller pieces of the whole. Instead of trying to capture the whole experience and interpret the whole event theologically, grab hold of a small piece – like clinging to the shirt tail of the running back trying to bring him down; like seizing on a line of an epic poem as if it captured the whole of the lyric; like singing the refrain because the verses are too obscure to be grasped. Just a piece.

From the prophet, “by his bruises we are healed.” We’ve often heard it as wounds. Translations differ, of course. This is from the fourth Servant Song passage of Isaiah. You can share, if you wish, how this is part of what is called “Second Isaiah” and how, in this section, the servant might be the whole nation of Israel or how it might be a king or leader who would represent the glory of God in sacrifice. You could mention how the king was thought to be God’s representative, more than the people’s leader, and how his life was to be the sign that God was present with God’s people.

Or you could let all that go and simply stand in awe of the servant we see as Jesus. And because it was Jesus, now it is us, the church called to be bruised for the hurting in our world, called to be wounded from our striving for hope and transformation. No, we aren’t the Savior, but we know the Savior and therefore

represent him to the people today. This is the sign that we are who we say we are and God is who we say God is. By how we love, how we sacrifice, how we take the wounds in defense of God's beloved, the oppressed, the outcast, the poor and the orphan and widowed. All those society says aren't worth much, we say and show are precious in God's sight.

Because that is what the Servant of God did for us. Jesus gathered us up and bore wounds and bruises for our sake. And we are humbled into gratitude and action. This gift we've been given isn't ours to keep to ourselves. We weren't saved for ourselves. We were saved to give the bruised one glory. And so we live, risking bruises in his name.

But not alone. We can turn to the Gospel of John and see that. If we focus on one word. Out of all those words, all that terror and all that glory. Just focus on one word, a word from the cross:

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” *John 19:26-27*.

Why that word out of all the words, all the drama of the story? Why not? It seems to capture something significant about the event. It humanizes it. The seven last words from the cross are significant, yet some seem to carry more weight than others. Some seem more domestic than others, smaller perhaps. The Words from the Cross begin with a word to God - Father forgive - on behalf of all of us guilty ones. Then came a word of welcome to a sinner. Now a word to a mother and a son. But before that word, they were not mother and son. Well, she was a mother and he was a son, but they were not mother and son. If you follow.

For most of his ministry, Jesus seemed unconcerned about family as family is traditionally understood. It began when he was twelve years old and got left behind. When mom and dad found him, Mary's comment to Jesus was, "Your father and I were worried." Jesus' response was, "I was with my father" (Luke 2:49). Uh oh, that must have hurt. Don't you think?

Later, when Mary and the boys showed up to take Jesus home because people thought he was mad, word was sent to Jesus: "Your mother and your brothers are

here!" Jesus responded with, "Who is my mother, who are my brothers?" (Matt. 12:47-48). That must have hurt.

Jesus told that guy to leave the dead to bury the dead when he said he wanted to stay with his father. Jesus said he came to set mother against daughter and father against son. You can't help but wonder sometimes if those guys who are always preaching "family values" ever read the New Testament. It almost seems as though Jesus were anti-family.

Bishop William Willimon tells of how he would get phone calls from angry parents when he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He said that he never got calls from parents asking for help with children who had gotten into trouble with alcohol or casual sex. His calls came from parents who said, "Help, my children have become religious fanatics and want to spend their lives helping the poor, and it is ruining their lives!" What the parents meant was that their children were ruining the plans they had in mind for their children's lives. Darn that Jesus, messing with families again!

It is as if Jesus had a different purpose for families in mind, different from what most of us assume when we talk about family. We feel that blood is thicker than water. But Jesus wants us to understand that water is thicker than blood; that is, when the water is the water of baptism. Willimon says that in baptism we are rescued from our families. That is a pretty contentious statement. Many of us would argue that our families are really pretty good folks. We might bump heads now and then and disappoint one another from time to time, but overall, our family members are pretty good folks, and we love them.

After each baptism, you take a few moments to carry the infant into the new family – the family that brought him or her into the church, but also the new church family. Child, here are your mothers, your fathers, your brothers and sisters, here is your family.

From the cross, Jesus was creating a family, because, he would argue, we need one. We need to be connected to one another. We need to belong to one another. We need to care for and be cared for by one another. We need community. With his dying words Jesus creates and continues to create community. In Jesus' culture, family was everything. Your place in society came from family; your purpose came from family; your inherent worth came from

family. Jesus knew we needed family; he just argued that there was another way to create a family. That locus of meaning, that sense of place was to be found not from an accident of birth or a legal transaction, but from an act of will in a covenant community. We are who we are because of the family that Jesus puts us in. Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother. And a new family is created.

At the first and the second word, we discovered that the purpose of the cross was to put us back into right relationship with God. Now at the third word, we hear that the purpose of the cross is to put us into a right relationship with one another, to build community, which is a place to be bruised, to be sure. Yet, some bruises are worth bearing. Some bruises might even be healing, not that abuse is ever condoned even in “good families.” That isn’t what this is about. These are the bruises we receive from loving, making ourselves vulnerable, building community, creating family.

That is what Jesus was doing, even as he died for us. By his bruises, we are healed. Thanks be to God.