

Abiding in the Reign

November 2019

[Nov. 3](#): Choosing to Abide

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Isaiah 1:10-18

II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19:1-10

[Nov. 10](#): The Spirit Abides

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Psalms 145:1-5, 17-21

II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

[Nov. 17](#): Shaped by the Reign

Isaiah 65:17-25

Isaiah 12 (or Psalm 118)

II Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Nov. 24: Allegiance to the Reign

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Luke 1:68-69 (or Psalm 46)

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

Abiding in the Reign

No, not singing in the rain, although there might be some songs of praise once we grasp the full reality of this promise, or even catch a glimpse of the promise. This series is about claiming the gifts of living in this life and yet fully participating in the reign of God, or what has been traditionally called the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was the number one subject that Jesus came to share; therefore, it is something we continue to try to understand and embrace.

Let's unpack this idea of "the reign of God" a little bit, as it is crucial to the concept of this lectionary series. There has been some push back recently over certain traditional terms, and it is instructive to understand why. On the one hand, North American Christians see the idea of kings and kingdoms as something belonging to the past, and our images most often come from fantasy novels and television shows like "Game of Thrones" and other manifestations of kingly rule. While you may have been fascinated by the story in "Game of Thrones," it is safe to say that show doesn't represent the God we worship in any form or fashion. And to those unfamiliar with the nature of God, the correlation of this fantasy kingdom behavior to the God we are attempting to represent to the world would be detrimental to our witness. At the same time, an overemphasis on "king" as the patriarchal presentation of God leads to a single gender identification that doesn't allow for the fullness of the Spirit nature of God, which can be experienced as the divine feminine as well as masculine manifestations. So, to fully claim this more expansive description of God, many have moved away from "king" and "kingdom" toward other terms, such as "reign."

While we can clearly see that this term is more gender neutral, we might argue that it is still an archaic term referring to an era of history gone by. However, we do refer to the "reigning Super Bowl Champs," for example, or the reign of a certain technology, or best place to live, or news story that is "breaking the internet." The word "reign" does have more use than we might suspect and does communicate a sense of authority or power that seems fitting. The idea of time is also bound up in the word. Whereas "king" is a person, and "kingdom" might be a place, reign suggests a time during which we might choose to live or a period of time by which we are redefined as participants in the reign. This is the argument of this worship series—choosing to be a part of the reign of God is an opportunity we want to offer those who worship with us and, indeed, to the whole world. As we begin to "see all the people," we are inviting people to come and live with us in the reign of God and experience the glory of belonging and walking with the one who reigns over us.

Does this mean we should never use the terms "king" or "kingdom" again? Of course not; they are words with a lot of historical and biblical precedent. To banish the words is to make reading historical documents much more difficult. In fact, we need more words, not fewer, to help us embrace the fullness of God. Even at that, however, we acknowledge that human words fall short of the task. Therefore, it is helpful to use new words and broader words to help us see God more fully and experience God more closely.

The lectionary readings for this last month of the Christian year point us toward a reality beyond our vision, yet that reality is central to our faith. Jesus implies that we can live in this reality today, and not simply wait for the "someday" of our future. He tells us that this is a choice we

make now, a way of seeing, a way of being members of God's family and making our way through the world of today – a complex and often troubling world – fully engaged with God's vision and promise. That's what it means to be "abiding in the reign."

If you choose to concentrate on the All Saints Observance on the first Sunday of November, you may select from the texts given for that celebration: Daniel 7:1-3,15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; and Luke 6:20-31. Our liturgical notes give links to plenty of information about All Saints Day. However, it is also possible to have the local church remembrance, as the tradition might be fit it into the overall theme of the month. The saints we celebrate and remember are those who helped us abide in God's reign by living a life of witness around us.

Derek is an ordained elder of the United Methodist Church and has served in Indiana, Arkansas, England, and Scotland. He received his PhD in Preaching from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Married to La Donna for almost 40 years, father of Rhys and Maddie, he now lives in Nashville and is Director of Preaching Ministries at Discipleship Ministries.

Week 1 | Abiding WORSHIP SERIES

NRSV texts, artwork and [Revised Common Lectionary Prayers](#) for this service are available at the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectionnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

October

October 31 [Reformation Day](#) / Halloween

November

November 1 [All Saints Day](#)

November 2 All Souls Day / Adjust Clocks for the end of Daylight Saving Time

November 3 [All Saints Sunday](#)

November 10 [Organ & Tissue Donor Sunday](#); [International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church](#)

November 11 [Veterans' Day](#)

November 17 Bible Day

November 24 [Reign of Christ / Christ the King Sunday](#); [UM Student Day](#)

November 28 Thanksgiving Day (USA)

December

December 1 First Sunday of Advent; World AIDS Day

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December 25 Christmas Day
December 26–Jan 1 Kwanza
December 31 New Year's Eve / Watch Night

For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

In the United Methodist Church, the first Sunday in November is usually a combination observance of two major feasts: All Saints Day (Nov. 1) and All Souls Day (Nov. 2). Whereas All Saints Day commemorates the great historical forerunners to our faith, All Souls Day helps us remember some of the “everyday saints” who have gone before us and have entered into God’s rest. Both of these observances coalesce well with this week’s theme of “abiding.”

In the [Zacchaeus story from Luke 19](#), Dr. Carol McPherson in the Preaching Notes points to the notion of “abiding” as a central part of Christ’s ministry with and to Zacchaeus. Christ abides with those who are among the least and the lost, and Zacchaeus the tax collector is well-despised from many angles, situating him among “the lost.” If you have celebrated All Saints Day earlier in the week, consider focusing the prayers of people on those deemed “the least and the lost.” During the time of congregational prayer, provide silent space for people to lift up names, people-groups, and/or nations of those who might fit that category. An example of a simple congregational response is “Abide with them, O God.”

It is also important to name that while God abides with the least and the lost, God also abides with those whom we have lost. If you are celebrating All Saints/All Souls Day for your Sunday worship service, be sure to make the explicit connection to God’s abiding nature when you do your time of ritual remembrance.

Written by guest writer, Nelson Cowan, Ph.D. Liturgical Studies: Boston University School of Theology.

Additional Resources for this Service

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/all-saints-day-a-holy-day-john-wesley-loved>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-great-thanksgiving-for-all-saints-and-memorial-occasions>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/all-saints-day-with-children-and-families>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/acts-of-worship-for-all-saints-day-or-sunday>

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/united-methodist-beliefs-saints>

Week One: Choosing to Abide

November 3 – If you’re a **Hebrew Testament** buff (and even if you’re not, we recommend you give it a try this month), November gives you the opportunity to experience some unfamiliar voices and then to relax with some familiar friends. We begin with **Habakkuk**, that tongue-twister of a minor prophet tucked away in the back of the book. This is the only time that Habakkuk appears in the lectionary, so it is possible that many preachers have never preached from this book and that many congregations have never heard it before. Yet, there is much to be discovered here in these brief three chapters. The writings of Habakkuk are different from most other prophetic works. Rather than giving us proclamations and pronouncements from God through the prophet, we have instead a glimpse of the dialogue between God and the prophet himself. It is as if God were trying to convince Habakkuk, and through that conversation, we get an insight into the promises of God.

Habakkuk is concerned about the lack of justice in the world in which he lives. He continually cries out to God, asking when God is going to put things right—to end the cycle of violence, to heal the deep divisions in the society, to push back the wicked who prey on the righteous. And he gets an answer! “Abide”—which is like “wait” or “hold on.” But (and this is important) abiding doesn’t mean “cooling your heels”; it doesn’t mean “sitting back and keeping your nose clean.” No, the prophet is told to make a sign, a big sign (one that drivers could read if they were driving down the interstate at 75 mph). We are called to proclaim a vision of justice and peace, of inclusion and transformation, of tearing down walls and building bridges. And we are to proclaim that vision loudly and consistently. That is what it means for “the righteous to live by faith.” That is what it means to “abide in the reign.”

The **Psalter** gives us a chance to sing in the reign along with **Isaiah**. When we speak of “psalter,” we usually think of a psalm; and most of the time, the lectionary provides us one. Occasionally, however, the lectionary finds another “psalm” or act of praise not from the book of Psalms, but from another book in the Bible, such as the prophets, as in this case. Our act of praise this week is to acknowledge the brokenness of the world and to accept responsibility for making it right, starting with ourselves! Isaiah reminds us of the interrelation of worship and personal morality and corporate justice seeking. Worship disconnected from a life of holiness that influences self and community is meaningless. In fact, it is less than meaningless; it is offensive to God. We are invited not just to talk or sing or pray about the lordship of God, but we are to abide in the reign each and every day. We are to confess when we forget or lose sight of the “kin-dom” of God—where all are sisters and brothers in Christ. We are to cling to the promise of a new start, where our sinful habits will not impede our progress as the body of Christ.

November gives us a brief (three-week) series within the series from **II Thessalonians**, if you choose to focus on the **epistle**. Since there is some academic debate as to whether Second Thessalonians was written by Paul (see Abraham Smith's helpful article in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, pp.683-684, plus the useful bibliography on pages 685-686), it might be helpful to refer to the author as the "writer of II Thessalonians." Or you could declare that the debate exists and say that you intend to call the writer Paul for simplicity (and because that's what is written in the opening verse).

The assigned verses from the opening chapter of this epistle give a clear indication of the thrust of both letters (I and II Thessalonians)—the invitation to live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Our passage begins with a congratulatory note that faith increases, community is being built, and steadfastness amid suffering abides. All are worthy of commendation, indeed. Yet, as the chapter continues, there is a "work-in-progress" note—"asking that our God will make you worthy . . ." Are we not worthy yet? Can we celebrate the faithfulness of the people, but also call on more faith without sounding as if we are "piling on" or are somehow unsatisfied with the current state of the souls in our care? If you are including an "All Saints" moment in worship, would you reference those you remember as perfect people who had it all together or as "works in progress" who let God's grace shine through but who are themselves in need of that grace?

Abiding in the reign is not a simple reality, nor a switch we can throw. It takes time and attention and encouragement and accountability. That is why we are abiding together as a body, as a family, as a community of faith (often made up of surprising individuals) journeying together.

Nowhere is that more evident than in our **Gospel** passage for this week. **Luke's** story is so familiar to us that we almost miss the dynamic of the moment. We might speculate on the motivations that drove Zacchaeus out on a limb that fateful day, and we could come up with a laundry list of reasons and inner thoughts. But Luke doesn't tell us any of that. All we know is that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so much that he risked the embarrassment of the moment and then embraced the new reality that Jesus offered him without a moment of debate. It is an incredible story, almost fairy-tale like. This is a man doing a job for which he would be hated by everyone in his community and doing it well. He is a man of means who is able to pay back four times any amount he defrauded. And now he is a new man, a changed man, already in the business of making that change. This isn't a promise; it is a description. According to Zacchaeus, his acts of giving to the poor and paying back those who had been cheated are happening already. The verbs are present tense, not future tense. He's doing it— or having it done. Maybe he has his wallet out; maybe he is writing the checks as they talk on the street in the shade of the sycamore tree.

What brought about this change? What is the genesis of this new life? Jesus says to him, "I'm coming to stay with you." Jesus did not say, "I want you to invite me for dinner," or "I want to have a chat; have your people call my people." No, he said, "I'm coming to stay"; "I'm coming to abide with you." When Jesus abides, transformation happens. Jesus comes to help Zacchaeus live up to his name. "Zacchaeus" comes from "*zakchai*os," which means "pure" or "righteous." Perhaps at the beginning of the story, the name serves as a pun, an ironic twist that everyone in the crowd notices; that is, Zacchaeus is the "pure" traitor, the "righteous" collaborator. But now,

in his transformation, his righteousness is found in making right the wrongs he has committed. His purity is in his willingness to abide with the least of these.

How is Jesus' abiding presence so powerful? It is powerful because he abides always in the reign of God, and we are invited to do the same. Zacchaeus takes up residence under the authority of God in that moment on the street of Jericho. Will he live there always? Will he abide in that reign for the rest of his life? Do any of us? Like the Letters to the Thessalonians, we are living in the tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. Zacchaeus stepped into the *now* in that moment, but he may stumble out of it at some point. But the grace of Jesus Christ is such that we can step back in again and again. We may abide under the rule of our own hearts or our loyalties and preferences and prejudices at any time. But when Jesus comes to stay with us, we can choose to abide in the reign of God at any time. The opening sermon of this series, then, should be one of invitation; let us choose to abide.

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Week 2 | Abiding WORSHIP SERIES

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November

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God is doing a new thing among us. In our congregations across the globe, the Holy Spirit is breathing new life into fresh ideas, innovations, and creative demonstrations of faithfulness among us. Multiple scripture passages this week refer to the new things that God is doing, be it the “latter splendor of this house” in [Haggai](#), the joyful and fearful anticipation of Christ’s coming in [2 Thessalonians](#), or the enduring reality of the resurrection in [Luke 20](#).

What is something new in the life of your church that will take place in the next month or so? Perhaps you are starting a new mission initiative, or your choir is singing a new cantata, or you are offering a new program in the life of your church and/or community, or something else. Take an intentional moment in your worship service to honor and pray for the new thing that you are doing. Rather than placing it during a time of announcements, consider placing this “celebration of a new thing” as a response to the Word. Promote it, bless it, pray for it—not because we want to show off, but because we believe in a God that abides with us (Haggai 2:5) in the midst of potential uncertainty about how things will turn out. This response to the Word presents another opportunity to connect the homiletical thread of God “abiding” with us.

Written by guest writer, Nelson Cowan, Ph.D. Liturgical Studies: Boston University School of Theology.

Additional Resources for this Service

<https://www.organdonor.gov/awareness/events/donor-sabbath.html>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/god-each-day-you-give-is-precious>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/resources-for-the-international-day-of-prayer-for-the-persecuted-church>

Week Two: The Spirit Abides

November 10 - Our journey continues this second week with an obscure prophet from the back of the **Hebrew Scriptures**. **Haggai** is even less known than Habakkuk, and his book is even shorter! There are only two chapters in this drama, as Haggai seeks to encourage the populace of Judea to rebuild the temple and hold fast to the glory of God.

Not much is known about Haggai. Some assume he is old because he remembers the temple that was destroyed. Some assume he was a farmer who stayed behind when the Persians overran the nation. Others believe he was an exile who wanted to reclaim something of the former glory of the people of God by focusing on the physical rebuilding of the temple. The truth is, we don't know. We don't know his history; we don't know his family; we don't know much at all about Haggai. But his voice is persistent and urgent. We begin this reading by cleaning up a numbering problem and pulling out the end of chapter 1 as the heading for chapter 2. We begin with a date signature, but this framing of time is around a Persian king not an Israeli one. Darius the First became the ruler of Persia in 522 BCE, so Haggai has very specifically confirmed his place in history. Darius was the person who sent Zerubbabel to be governor of Judah. Some think Haggai was released from exile with Zerubbabel; others believe he was already there. Either way, God sends the prophet to Zerubbabel with a word. And that word was, “How are we doing?”

Zerubbabel was supposed to finish the building of the temple that his predecessor began. There was only a foundation at this point, and it was not much to look at. Haggai says, “Does anyone remember what it used to look like? And how does it look now? Not so great, am I right?” At

this point, the prophet sounds like those folks in the church who think things used to always be better than they are now. If only we could go back; if only we could make the church great again. But Haggai seems to be taking a different tack. When he promises that the future glory of the temple will be better than what it was in the past, was he talking about a building or a people? The words from God speak about God more than about the temple. The glory of any building said to represent God and house the people of God is really more about God than about buildings. “My Spirit abides,” God says through Haggai; that’s the glory you need to focus on, not the building and not who’s here and who’s not here.

True, we want the place to be a place that speaks of God; and we need to take care of what we’ve been handed down. But God says, “I’ve got all the gold in the world; I’ve got all the silver; it’s already mine.” You can’t honor God by giving something that God already owns! Stuff happens out there in the world; God is moving; pay attention to that. Seek the glory of God in the Spirit that abides.

The **Psalm** also speaks of the glory of God abiding before us. [Psalm 145](#) calls us to see and to meditate on that glory. It calls us to set aside what we might be doing to honor God and what monuments or structures we might build to point people to God; it asks us simply to celebrate God’s presence among us. When we pay attention to what God is doing around us, we see both glory and intimacy; we see both grandeur and presence that lead us to praise, individually and corporately, “My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.”

The **epistle** seems to change direction rather abruptly, but a careful reading will reveal the threads of connection. As mentioned in the previous week’s notes, the **Thessalonian** letters are concerned with the community living in the in-between time, in between the *already* and the *not yet* aspect of the reign of God. Here in the second chapter, we find an odd discussion about the return of Christ. The conversation begins quickly in verses 1 and 2 with a call to hold fast—“do not be shaken,” a common apocalyptic call. But what the author (Paul or otherwise – see last week’s notes on the epistle) is warning them against is the idea that the day has already come, that Christ has already returned. In other words, the warning is about too much “already” and not enough “not yet”!

And from where does this lopsided (in the author’s view) understanding come? From a “man of lawlessness.” One could have a field day with this character and set up a straw man upon which all the ills of our church today can be blamed. This is “the devil made me do it” fodder. Be cautioned about this route, however. It is possible that the so-named figure is not a supernatural being or a demon of hell, but a contemporary preacher who tells the story differently. We are well versed in our current political climate of the tactic of name calling our opponents to make them seem worse than they really are. Perhaps it is the writer’s love and concern for the people of the church in Thessalonica that causes this reaction. The warning is remembering what was taught. Hold fast to the truth that you already know; don’t be swayed by inflammatory ideas. These ideas just might cause you to lose your confidence in the gospel. Ultimately, that is what we return to in the second part of the epistle text. After the heat of the discussion dissipates throughout the intervening verses, we return to the idea of the week: the Spirit abides.

The weight of a sermon on this text ought not be on the warning at the beginning, but on the thanksgiving at the end. That is where the power is, the power of transformation at work in the congregation. The Spirit is working sanctification in you and through you, so cling to this truth, to this hope. And then the glory of the reign of Christ will be revealed in your good works and in your words. This process of sanctification, too, is an “already” and “not yet”; that is what the author is pointing toward—giving thanks for the “already” and encouraging the “not yet.” The preacher could adopt the same strategy, celebrating all the Spirit has brought to life in the midst of the community of faith, even while exhorting to continue growing in faith, not as a way of piling on or adding to the burdens of already burdened people, but as a way of offering hope and of keeping people’s eyes on the prize. Remind everyone that this is not simply us working harder, but allowing the Spirit to abide within and transforming our hearts in love. It is a word of encouragement that we offer. Clarence Jordan’s *Cotton Patch Version of Paul’s Epistles* (New Century Publishers, 1968, p.137) paraphrases the final verse of our text as “May he charge your hearts and pep you up in every good deed and word!”

This encouragement continues in our **Gospel** text this week, but from a startling conversation. The twentieth chapter of the Gospel of Luke is a battle worthy of UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship)-level attention. The chapter begins with a challenge to Jesus’ authority. The chief priests and scribes and elders were wandering around *en masse*, wearing matching bowling shirts and looking to pick a fight with this upstart rabbi from the sticks. “By whose authority,” they ask Jesus, who replies, as he often does, with a question. And it’s a question they don’t want to answer because it seems like a no-win situation for them, so they toss it back. Jesus then says there’s no point in going on then and doesn’t answer their original question. He then turns to the crowd gathered and slaps the authorities across the face with a scathing parable that is so obvious even they recognize that they’re the bad guys in this story. So, they turn to a political trap and ask Jesus to weigh in on the tax issue, which Jesus also refuses to answer in a way that satisfies them. Next, they fall back on a last-ditch ploy—call in the Sadducees.

The Sadducees were the social and economic and intellectual one-percenters of their day. Normally, the priests and scribes and Pharisees had little to do with them. But desperate moments call for desperate strategies. One thing is clear in this text, and that is that the theology of the people of God in the time of Jesus was not monolithic; there were variations on all sorts of themes through the different strata of thinkers and teachers of the day. Luke tells us that on the issue of Resurrection, the Sadducees were of the opinion that it was a fairy tale, not supported by scripture. And to be clear, scripture for the Sadducees was the Torah, full stop. The rest was merely commentary in their thinking. Moses was the author of all they needed to know. (See Vernon K. Robbins’s and Patrick J. Willson’s helpful articles in *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, Vol. 4, pp.285-289, for more on the role of the Sadducees in first-century Hebrew culture and faith.)

Having chosen the battleground, Jesus enters the fray perfectly willing to play by their rules. The Sadducees say, “Moses says”; so Jesus replies with “Moses says” to meet them in their arena. He uses their rules and fights on their ground to show them another way to look at the scriptures they love. Jesus is like you, the preacher, helping the people see new light in familiar words. But what new insight does Jesus bring?

This is one of the most radical statements in the whole gospel account. And we skim over it so easily. The Sadducees try to trip Jesus with an outrageous story about the Mosaic law on levirate marriage. They concoct this ridiculous scenario to show that Resurrection as a concept is ludicrous. To the Sadducee, eternity was in the offspring, not in some other world. Jesus responds by saying, “You’re comparing apples to oranges and missing the point of eternity.” Then Jesus stuns them by saying that even Moses knew about life after death, because God’s calling card says, “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and not “used to be God of those former folk.” Jesus says God is the God of the living, not the dead, not the no longer existing. This is such a radical thought that even one of the scribes sidles up and mutters, “Good point!”

But once we’ve depicted this wrestling match, where do we go in the sermon? What’s the payoff for our hearers today? The Spirit abides. That’s the message that Jesus offers us in this exchange. When we stumble over questions of how this world folds into the next one, our answer is “God’s got this.” Even when we don’t understand death or life, God’s got this. Even when our hearts break and our vision is cloudy, God’s got this. Even when it seems like everything is broken and violence rules the day and division is the mode of this life, God’s got this. The Spirit abides, and we are invited to live differently, to value differently, to hope unreservedly, and to praise constantly. Because God’s got this.

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For Your Planning Team

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These scripture passages intersect at the themes of labor ([Isaiah 65](#); [2 Thessalonians 3](#)), God's blessing (Isaiah 65), and the faithfulness of God in equipping us for our labors (Luke 21.)

As the people of God, we have been called and equipped for a variety of careers and ministries in which to partner with God in advancing God's reign here on earth. Whether we serve a congregation of 15 or 1,500, there are always key "doers" in each congregation who are carrying a great load of responsibility. With the themes of this week's lectionary readings, this service provides an excellent avenue to honor the contributions of key leaders and/or ministry teams in your congregation. Depending on your ministry context, as a response to the Word—or even as a part of the sermon itself—take an intentional moment to honor the key laborers in your congregation. You will know how to organize this in the most efficient and tactful manner, but be sure to honor the diversity of all types of leadership within the faith community.

When thinking about organizing this portion of the service, be sure to look for guidance in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*'s "An Order for the Installation or Recognition of Leaders in the Church" (BOW, pgs. 599-603).

Additional Resources for this Service

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/an-order-for-the-installation-or-recognition-of-leaders-in-the-church>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/leadership-development-developing-new-leaders>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/church-leaders>

Written by guest writer, Nelson Cowan, Ph.D. Liturgical Studies: Boston University School of Theology.

Week Three: Shaped by the Reign

November 17 – One of the wonders of nature that can startle into new visions is how the elements can sometimes artistically shape a landscape into something beautiful. Consider a desert rock carved into a sculpture by centuries of wind and sand, or a small piece of glass rounded and smoothed by pounding waves into a jewel of sorts, or a moonscape stone surface pounded into this alien form by the cataract above it, or a tree bent into an odd configuration by nature or human interference that nonetheless grows in this new position and thrives green and lush. Nature can take our breath away.

The reign of God can have a similar shaping effect on the lives of those who choose to enter it. The lectionary texts for this third week of our series offer us a glimpse into that changed life. In fact, change is at the heart of our text from the **Hebrew scriptures** this week. From the more obscure prophets of the previous weeks, we turn to the most familiar, **Isaiah**. We may hesitate to dip into this seemingly bi-polar prophet, never knowing whether we get judgement or hope, warnings or promises. There is plenty of both in Isaiah, and necessarily so. Like any parent raising head-strong offspring, at times the law must be laid down and the failings pointed out, so that the grace can be more fully experienced and the growth properly celebrated.

This week, we are at the end of chapter 65. Some scholars call this final section of the book, "Third Isaiah," signifying the shifts in time and mood and content throughout the book. Third Isaiah begins in chapter 56 with dire warnings and an overwhelming mood of pessimism, as the people wrestle with wickedness and violence, injustice and meaningless worship, and leaders whose lives are an embarrassment to the people they lead. It's a messy world to which the people of God have returned from exile. Yet in the midst of it all, there is a call for hope. In this section of the book, we have the words that Jesus claimed when he launched his ministry, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me!" And then we have this amazing vision here in our text for this week that

has echoes all the way to the Book of Revelation: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth!” Only here and repeated in the next chapter does such a designation appear in the whole of the Hebrew scriptures. What a gift! And in the New Testament, only Revelation and Second Peter repeat the idea.

God is rebuilding, remaking, reworking the creation that was considered good when everything began. Within this description of the activity and plan of God is an invitation to participate in the rebuilding and being shaped by the reign of God into a holier people. And the mark of this participation? It is joy. Surprised? Yes, joy. The people of God should be people of joy. God’s people should be a delight to the world in which they live because they are working in hope of a new reality—a reality in which weeping in distress is a thing of the past. God’s vision for this new reality is surprisingly current. He talks about infant mortality rates and references elder care, home ownership, and fair wages in these verses. Some of the most crucial issues facing people who work for justice in our nation come to light in this vision of God’s reign.

At the heart of it all is this sense of God’s presence throughout. God’s people call upon God, having already heard from God. And there shall be peace. Long-standing, some would say predisposed enemies – like wolves and lambs, or lions and oxen (might we add donkeys and elephants?) – shall set aside their differences and work together for the good of all. We are called by these verses to not just hope for this new world, but to begin living in it. We are called to let this image shape our behavior, our choices, and our priorities. This isn’t pie in the sky, no one believes it is even possible stuff. These are marching orders, blueprints of a new creation—the reign of God in which we can choose to live now.

The **Psalter**, which again this week comes not from the Psalms but from a chapter in **Isaiah**, (Isaiah chapter 12, with an option for Psalm 118, if you so choose) continues this theme of being shaped by the reign of God. Except here, as in many psalms and songs of praise, it is our singing that helps to shape us and the culture around us. We are invited to shout aloud and sing the praises of God, continuing the theme that God’s people are people of joy. And this isn’t simply about singing God’s praise in-house, behind closed doors. No, we are told to let this be known in all the earth—not as a way to knock down those who don’t yet believe, but as a way of lifting up the God who is creating something new. And the motivation for all this isn’t evangelistic zeal, but simple gratitude. Because we are thankful, because we are gracious, we sing and give thanks in all the earth. How might that shape those around you if you and the whole church became gracious people of bubbling gratitude? The possibility staggers the imagination.

The **epistle**, on the other hand, feels like a poke with a sharp stick! **II Thessalonians 3:6-19** seems bent on rousing the lazy into better and more fruitful action. This text easily fits into the week’s theme of being shaped by the reign of God with its call to fruitful and active living. But in an era of rampant workaholicism, do we really want to pound a pulpit to get people to do more—as if they aren’t busy enough? True, there are some idle ones among us who need to be encouraged into action. But for the most part, the issue isn’t about people being lazy as much as it is people being like Martha, worried and distracted by many things. So, how can this text help us with that?

Abraham Smith (*Feasting on the Word, Year C*, Volume 4, exegetical perspective section, pp. 303 -307) suggests that perhaps “idleness” isn’t the best translation of the word used by the writer of II Thessalonians. The word Smith prefers is “disorderliness” (a not unexpected interpretation for a professor in a United Methodist seminary). We are nothing if not ordered. A disorderly worker might not be idle, but he/she might be focused on the wrong things. Or the worker might not be committed to something for the long haul. Or the individual might indeed be engaged in an active pursuit of how to avoid an important task or meeting a crucial need. Therefore, our text begins with a warning to avoid hanging out with such people. They are likely to pull you off track too. Instead, find mentors who can lead you into a more fruitful way of living. Let their reign-of-God behavior shape you.

We now come to a delicate point in this text: “You ought to imitate us” in the second verse feels a little arrogant to many of us. It has a tone of self-aggrandizement, seemingly the opposite of Christian humility and therefore not the kind of attitude we want to promote in the church. We live in an arrogant and narcissistic age, and we are rightly concerned about such attitudes infiltrating the body of believers. Yet there is also a grave need in the body for mentors who are willing to let their lives be a pattern for others to follow. At a simplistic level, this is in the realm of “walking the talk,” to which we often refer. But on a deeper level, it is the nature of the Christian community to let our lives be woven together for the good of all, to learn from and likewise hold accountable each member so that we might grow into a body with the grace and power to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” We have to break out of the mindset of our age that says religion, or faith, is a personal matter and promote the idea that faith is, in fact, a communal enterprise. The African concept of *ubuntu* is a helpful marker to remind us that “I am because we are,” and we are woven together in profound ways, deep and intimate and life changing.

You are being shaped by your involvement in the reign of God, and I can learn from that shaping. Likewise, I am growing and learning as a willing participant in God’s reign, and I can help you along your journey. You can help me, and I can help you find the focus we need to concentrate on the right things, the fruitful things, and learn to set aside the things that distract and diminish.

Focus seems also to be the call in our **Gospel** text for this week from **Luke**. These apocalyptic words toward the end of Luke’s Gospel should give us pause. We can too often become complacent (idle?) with the way things are, and we need to be shaken into an awareness of a need for change. Indeed, change comes frequently, and it is often the marginalized people who most suffer from these catastrophic changes, whether of human origin or natural disaster (and many will argue that natural and human-caused disasters begin to blur in our changing global climate). Jesus is inviting us to consider how we will live in the midst of overwhelming change.

The conversation begins through a moment of tourism. Some of the disciples were agog at the beauty and wonder of the temple around which they moved. Jesus rather abruptly responds to this open-mouthed wonder by declaring that all that beauty will be rubble very soon. The disciples are shocked, probably because they hadn’t been watching the evening news for some time and hadn’t paid attention to the movements of nations and of the war machine that was all around them. “What are you talking about?” they gaped at him. And Jesus, never one to let a

teachable moment pass him by, tells them what he sees and how opportunists of various kinds will seize on the unsettled nature of the cataclysmic change and say, “Only I have the solution. Only I can fix this.” “Don’t go after them,” he warns. Be smart; be aware and alert. And most of all, be ready. A frequent call from our Lord throughout his ministry on earth was to be ready. But in fact, the two main takeaways from this text are nothing, if not surprising.

Well, one of them is anyway. The other, the final one, is a call to hold on. A common refrain in apocalyptic texts, endurance is an important trait for Christians in troubled times. In fact, one could argue that the whole purpose of the genre of apocalyptic literature is not to chart a course for the culmination of history, but to issue a call to the faithful to hold on. And by hold on, what is meant could be two-fold. On the one hand, there is a call to the belief that God is in control and that no matter what might happen in this life, eternity is firmly assured. “But not a hair of your head will perish” is not a promise for physical safety (*or a full head of hair forever! Darn it, anyway*), but a promise that life is bigger than what our eyes can see and that death is not an end, but only a moment in a greater reality.

On the other hand, the call to endure is a call to continue to work for the reign of God even when it seems hopeless. Holding on is not just holding on to your personal faith, but holding on to a larger vision, a more divine reality. And because we hold on to the vision, we continue to work, continue to be shaped, and continue to shape the world we influence so that it can begin to resemble something more like the reign of God and not the fallen world that claims dominance today. We carry the banner of hope and acceptance; we sing the praises of a God who loves and transforms; we order our work along the lines of the community of faith and not our personal preferences. Holding on is not a passive stance, but an active lifestyle that moves forward toward the new heaven and the new earth. In this way, Jesus says, we gain our souls.

But it is the other implication of the Gospel text that seems startling. It is there in verse fourteen, following some harrowing verses about persecution and suffering for the cause of the faith. This description might seem outrageous to those of us in the U.S., who at best have to put up with the kind of “persecution” that views us as somehow out of step with an intelligent and mature society. Despite those who sound alarms about an intolerant society in United States, most of the intolerance comes from within the community. The rest of society views us with bemusement and not disdain, by and large. For Christians in other parts of the world, however, this description that Jesus gives us in our text is not a future prediction, but a daily reality. It is offensive when Christians in the U.S. compare their inconveniences to the life and death persecution perpetrated against our sisters and brothers in many places around the globe. They know far better what Jesus was describing and how best to live into his shocking advice.

What does he say to them and to all of us? “Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance.” Wait, what? That seems like the opposite of what we ought to be doing. We need to think about what we would say if push comes to shove. We need to develop our mission statements, our reasoned defense of what it is that drives us, that makes us what we are and do what we do. Don’t you think? Isn’t that a smarter way to go; isn’t that a part of being prepared? What in the world does Jesus mean by this?

I'm not sure, to be honest. But maybe what he meant was stop worrying about yourself so much. Stop lining up your convincing arguments for why you should be allowed to practice your faith in the way that makes sense to you, with the people who agree with and think like you, in the way that makes you happy. Stop looking inward to find security and comfort. And start looking out for those who don't yet know that they are loved with a powerful love. Stop making this about you, and hear Jesus' call to see all the people around you and love them as he loved them. Wisdom will come, Jesus says, words will come, not from your teleprompter and prepared speech, but from your life shaped by the reign of God and lived in communion with the hurting people of the world.

Week 4 | Abiding WORSHIP SERIES

NRSV texts, artwork and [Revised Common Lectionary Prayers](#) for this service are available at the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectionnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

November

November 24 [Reign of Christ / Christ the King Sunday](#); [UM Student Day](#)

November 28 Thanksgiving Day (USA)

December

December 1 First Sunday of Advent; World AIDS Day

December 8 Second Sunday of Advent

December 15 Third Sunday of Advent

December 22 Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22–December 29 Hanukkah

December 24 Christmas Eve

December 25 Christmas Day

December 26–Jan 1 Kwanza

December 31 New Year's Eve / Watch Night

For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

These [lectionary readings](#) present quite the juxtaposition for Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday, which is the concluding week of the Christian liturgical year. When we think of Christ's lordship, the [Colossians 1](#) passage is an obvious choice, as it speaks to the preeminence of Jesus and his Lordship over all creation. At the same time, Christ is one who was crucified like a standard criminal, offering forgiveness up until his final breath. Put together, these scripture readings paint an image of Christ as our crucified God who reconciles the whole world to himself through his death and Resurrection.

How interesting that these readings appear on the cusp of Advent and the U.S. observance of Thanksgiving! If you are thematically combining Reign of Christ with Thanksgiving, consider a food collection for a local food pantry. Tie the notion of plenitude associated with Thanksgiving to the ethics of Christ—a world in which there is *always enough* for **all** people. At a fitting moment in your service, offer a blessing for the food donations.

If you are not making an explicit connection to Thanksgiving, consider making a connection to Advent. Teach your congregation about the Reign of Christ being the final Sunday of the Christian year—namely that the crucified God who reconciles the world to himself is the same God who will come again in glory (Advent), and is the same God who will come as a humble infant in a manger (Advent & Christmas). This is teaching that you could work in to your sermon, at a Christian education class, or a post-service coffee hour discussion.

Additional Resources for this Service

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-great-thanksgiving-for-thanksgiving-day-or-for-the-gift-of-food>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/thanksgiving-celebrations-for-the-home>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/call-to-worship-for-christ-the-kingreign-of-christ-sunday>

<https://um-insight.net/perspectives/changed-from-glory-into-glory/>

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Week Four: Allegiance to the Reign

November 24 – This week is not only the end of our “Abiding in the Reign” series, but it is also the end of the Christian year. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of Advent, and it begins another journey with the church through the life and witness of Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior. So, we end with a statement of allegiance to the one who reigns over us. Sometimes called Christ the King Sunday, this day is also referred to as Reign of Christ Sunday. Either way, we declare our ultimate allegiance not to a nation, not to an ideal or dream, but to a person. Our faith in its most basic form is about a relationship with this person Jesus, whom we call Christ, or the Messiah. He is the one who reigns over us, the one in whom we find our identity and our being. When we surrender to Christ, we will find ourselves more completely. When we bow to this Christ, we stand stronger and taller than at any other time, with any other allegiance. This week should be a joyous celebration in the life of the church, a time of thanksgiving and of preparation for what is to come. (See N. Cowan’s worship notes for links to various emphases on this rich day.)

Our lectionary texts provide various ways of approaching this theme of pledging allegiance to the one who reigns. We begin with the **Hebrew scriptures** and the familiar words of the Prophet **Jeremiah**. Pastors and leaders in the church should squirm a little bit under these words. Jeremiah says the Lord has harsh words for leaders who don’t lead or, more appropriately, don’t lead in the direction of the one who reigns. The clear message is that while this situation might survive for a time, the destroying and scattering of the people of God, it won’t last forever. God

promises to take a personal interest in the matter and to step in and lead in the way that the people, the church, should go. The Lord will raise up new leaders, ones who are willing to pledge allegiance to the one who reigns and not their own inclinations and preferences.

Jeremiah points to a time when a new leader, one who knows what it is to live in allegiance to the reign of God, will come. And we hear these words and can't help but hear the name of Jesus, who checks all the boxes that Jeremiah draws up. God says, "I myself will gather the remnant." And as the incarnate one, God enfleshed, Jesus is the one who gathers us. God says, "I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign." And Jesus as the "son of David" reigns in righteousness.

We must be careful to avoid claiming that all Jeremiah was doing was pointing to Jesus, because his writings are too rich and too full to reduce to that simple formula. But on this day, this Reign of Christ day, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge the tradition from which the idea of the Messiah comes and to see in Jesus the fulfillment of that hope.

In the **Psalter**, we once again find ourselves staying away from the book of Psalms, unless you choose to select the alternate reading and find yourself in **Psalms 46**, a powerful and appropriate celebration of the one who reigns as well. But if you choose to venture out of the biblical hymnal, this time you'll find our hymn of praise comes from the Gospel of **Luke** and the glorious story of God intervening in history to bring the promised salvation and the hope of the people. In this glorious opening chapter of the Gospel, after a very brief introduction, we leap right into the story and have angel proclamations abounding. The proclamation is first to Zechariah, which has a somewhat unfortunate ending, and then to young Mary, which works out a little better. From there, we have a pregnant mother meeting outside of town, and then a glorious song about the activity of God through a single human life. From there, we have the first remarkable birth as old and formerly barren Elizabeth brings forth her son, John. And at last, Zechariah is released from his inability to speak (and frankly can you think of a worse punishment for a preacher than to be unable to speak for nine months?), and he uses his recently loosened tongue to give praise to God for the work being done, despite those who have trouble getting on board. As hymns of praise and allegiance go, this one is pretty good. It reads as a continuation of the promises of Jeremiah and gets specific about the activity of the God to whom we are called to pledge allegiance.

This hymn is picked up in the **epistle** to powerful effect. **Colossians** is a letter with some powerful themes and a bit of confusing history. There is here considerable debate as to whether Paul was the author of this letter. The text itself names Timothy as co-author, and some speculate as to whether he was the actual writer just before or after Paul's death. (See "The Letter to the Colossians" by Andrew Lincoln in *The New Interpreters Bible, Volume XI*, pp. 577-583, for more on this.) This might not be an important issue for this week's text, however, because a large section of the epistle reading appears to be an ancient hymn of praise and not original to the author at all. Beginning with verse 15, this is a song of praise that invites us to stand and sing along. The unarguably high Christology of Colossians is in full force in these verses that begin with a blessing and hope to which we might all want to cling in difficult and divisive times.

“May you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.” You can’t help but stand in awe of these words, even as we acknowledge our utter failure to live up to them as individuals and as a body. Patience and joy seem in short supply in our culture and in our church these days. And yet we sing with hope that maybe, in the days to come, as we slide ever more closely into the reign of Christ, we will have endurance and joy. It may seem far off most days, but now and again, we can feel the refreshing breezes of the Spirit and drops of grace that renew. Maybe this is a case of preach it until you have it. The more we sing this song, the more we read these words, the more we just might be able to try to live into the hope that is the reign of Christ.

This reign seems to stagger from the epistolary confidence in our text from the **Gospel** this week. For this Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday, as many know it, we turn to the harrowing story of Christ’s passion. But we focus on only one moment in the midst of that panorama of suffering and abuse and the ultimate wrestling of the powers of light and of darkness as played out in this moment in world history. This is a moment not without the rampant ugliness, but a glimpse of the light is allowed to shine through. “Today, you will be with me.” **Luke**’s telling of the Passion story includes a scene no other Gospel records. Two stories—or two words would be a better description. We speak of the seven last sayings of Christ as he was dying on the cross for us; two of them are in our text for this week. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

We’ve come to expect forgiveness from Jesus; that’s what he’s for, we think. And so, we neglect the astounding shock value of this moment as he was being nailed to the cross, humiliated by having his clothing gambled over, mocked by the leaders of the people who were better at name calling than leading, and dying under a sign that read “King of the Jews.” The writer Frederick Buechner suggests that a better understanding of the irony of that crime would be to translate that sign as “Head Jew” (F. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper and Row, 1973, p.11). It was in that moment that Jesus uttered those words, Luke claims. “Father, forgive them; they don’t have a clue.” And we don’t; too often, we don’t. Our inclination is to walk away from people who don’t have a clue, to move on to someone else. Jesus’ inclination was to die for them.

But it is the second part of this passage that sums up his reign like no other. Enduring the abuse, even from one who was hanging beside him (and doesn’t that sum up this sordid affair so completely?), he then accepted a blessing from the other side and blessed him in return. “Remember me,” the dying thief asked. “Remember me.” Not “redeem me, rescue me, restore me.” But “remember me.” You can’t help but wonder what that thief had in mind in that moment. But whatever it was, surely, he got much more than he dreamed: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

It is important to not skip over “today” to get to “paradise.” It is the latter word that occupies all our attention, causing us to think that what Jesus is really saying is that “as soon as we get through this little bit of unpleasantness, we’ll get to the real good stuff. So, hang in there, friend” (no pun intended). But if, on the other hand, we put the emphasis on “today,” we come out in a very different place. We can parse that word in all sorts of ways, but it really comes down to

meaning “right now,” “this present moment.” He was inviting his new friend to join him in this garden of suffering, this moment of glory. It’s all one and the same.

When we speak of the reign of Christ, we usually think of thrones and banners, clouds and angels in retinue. And our Colossians text has that image in spades. But Luke presents a different side of this reign: not thrones and palaces and places high and lifted up, but a wooden cross and a bleeding figure held in place with nails—or a wooden box filled with straw that scratched an infant’s tender skin; a garden of prayer; a table with friends and enemies alike, in a raging storm and under dripping oil poured from a broken flask. “Today you will be with me,” he said. He was; he reigns, exactly where he needs to reign. He reigns where you are, where the broken are, where the hurting and the hungry and forgotten are. He reigns where black men hang from trees by rope; where young girls are stolen away to be playthings used and cast aside; where people question themselves, their sexuality, their purpose, their value. He reigns. And he invites you into this garden. Pledge allegiance to the reign.

Derek is an ordained elder of the United Methodist Church and has served in Indiana, Arkansas, England, and Scotland. He received his PhD in Preaching from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Married to La Donna for almost 40 years, father of Rhys and Maddie, he now lives in Nashville and is Director of Preaching Ministries at Discipleship Ministries.