

SUNDAYS AND SEASONS  
PREACHING  
YEAR A 2017





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## Preface

With this volume of *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching* we complete the first cycle of lectionary years, even if it did begin with year B. We hope you, the preacher, are finding this approach helpful. We are always glad to hear your constructive comments on ways we might improve it. From the beginning, our intent has been to assemble a resource that matches up with the goal of the parent volume, *Sundays and Seasons: Worship Planning Guide*: to provide a rich set of resources for worship built around the Revised Common Lectionary, using the concepts set out in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's document *The Use of the Means of Grace* (1997). In terms of preaching, that means an assumption that the preacher's preparation, at least, will take into account not just a single text, but all of the readings assigned for the day, as well as the psalm response, other portions of the liturgy, the hymns, the season of the church year and civil year, and of course what is happening in the neighborhood, the region, the nation, the world. That's a very large universe to draw from, and no one expects the preacher to mention all of that in the sermon. But when the sermon is on, say, a parable of Jesus, and a reference pops up about the Kyrie here, and a line from the second reading there, and then mention is made of something that happened in the town, the hearers begin to realize that the sermon is woven into the whole worship experience, and that Sunday morning worship is deeply interconnected with all of life. That is liturgical worship at its finest.

Sometimes those connections are easy; sometimes they are challenging. The writers whose thoughts appear in these pages are some of our best preachers and scholars, and we hope that you will find their work helpful. Your own insights may vary, of course, but maybe what you read here will provide a spark, which is often all a sermon needs to get going.

*Sundays and Seasons: Preaching* differs from some other sermon resources in that it doesn't try to replicate the depth of exegetical material that is widely available. We assume that preachers will have their own favorite commentaries for that purpose. The "From a Scholar" section merely tries to lift up some key points to consider in approaching the sermon-writing task. Those who access this publication online through [SundaysandSeasons.com](http://SundaysandSeasons.com) can find there most of the material published in *New Proclamation* over recent years.

This resource is primarily produced by Lutherans with an eye toward Lutheran worship (though we certainly welcome other readers, and occasionally even let them write for us). And we hope it will come as no surprise to any of you that this lectionary year will include the celebration of the five-hundredth anniversary of the day Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses, thus kicking off the Reformation. While many things will be said about that, for right now we have two suggestions: don't make too much of it, and don't make too little of it. Not too much: in most years, Reformation celebrations are pretty limited outside the Lutheran community. In an era when triumphalistic, parochial cheerleading events are passé, and when many of our members are not cradle Lutherans, any event that seems to get too "rah rah" runs the danger of seeming at least odd. Yes, there is much to celebrate about the Reformation, but the tone especially bears careful consideration. In Luther's time, his followers were pitted against Roman Catholics, while most Christians saw Jews and Islamic Turks as the enemy. Nowadays, though prejudices remain, we see the diversity more often as expressing the wideness of God's mercy toward all people, and we begin to realize how much we can learn from the various traditions. How can our observance be full of sincere celebration, while also acknowledging our (and our ancestors') faults, and including others who would like to join us in marking the anniversary?

As for not making too little of the Reformation anniversary, October 31 marks one event in a long string. Looking backward from 1517, we can commemorate those who influenced Luther—people like Augustine (August 28) and Jan Hus (July 6). We can also lift up events and people contemporary with Luther, like the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession and reformer Philipp Melancthon on June 25, and artists Dürer, Grünewald, and Cranach on April 6. And remember that more semimillennial anniversaries are coming up, such as the Diet of Worms (2021), the Small Catechism (2029), and the Augsburg Confession (2030). If we think the Reformation is important, those will give us good opportunities to say why, and to give thanks to God. What's more, Reformation themes can find their way into preaching throughout the year. The seasonal introductions in *Sundays and Seasons* provide some helpful ideas for that.

I would like to draw your attention to one more facet of this year's issue, and that is the essay on page 15, "Preaching in the Age of New Media." Its writer, Pastor Clint Schnekloth, has thought deeply about how today's media can and ought to influence our witness in the world, as well as the shortcomings of reliance on those media. The essay is a helpful distillation of his insights and is well worth a read.

Finally, *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching* is a tool—one of many in your box. We—the editors and writers—hope it will be useful to you. If you think you (or someone else) could do as well or better, great! We are always looking for new, gifted writers. Please contact me: [farleer@augzburgfortress.org](mailto:farleer@augzburgfortress.org). May God bless your ministry of proclaiming the gospel.

*Robert Farlee*  
General editor





## The Year of Matthew

Matthew's gospel—the focus of year A—is often beloved, disliked, or a little of both. It is beloved for how it spotlights Jesus as teacher, gives practical ethical instructions, and includes some of Jesus' most influential statements (e.g., the beatitudes). It is disliked for how harshly Jesus characterizes religious leaders and how often he speaks of judgment and hell (Gehenna). At the end of the day, Matthew's gospel often plays a significant role in people's experiences of the New Testament and of the Christian faith, and with mixed impressions. Neither as enigmatic as Mark nor as attuned to the Greco-Roman world as Luke, Matthew's most distinctive trait is likely how it highlights the Messiah's Jewish heritage from the very start: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). For this reason Matthew's gospel is a fitting "bridge" between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, between the books that precede and follow in the Christian canon.

Selections from Matthew appear on Sundays and festivals in year A more than forty times, depending on one's accounting. Simply by using the assigned readings, one can hear about 60 percent of this gospel over the course of the lectionary year—no small thing since Matthew is one of the longest books in the New Testament. Here are some important considerations for engaging this gospel in the year ahead.

### Matthew's Gospel in Historic Use

Throughout history, Matthew has without question been the "First Gospel" for Christians on many levels. Since earliest times it appears first in the canonical order, likely due to the tradition that it was the first gospel written (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.24.5-7; 3.39.16). Matthew also features a great deal of something highly esteemed by early Christians: Jesus' teaching, organized into designated sections (e.g., 5:1–7:28). For these reasons, until just a century ago Matthew received the most historic attention. For example, Augustine's *Harmony of the Gospels* was simply a volume on Matthew followed by another on non-Matthean gospel pericopes. And the medieval lectionary features Matthew more than any other New Testament writing. Martin Luther expressed a preference for John among the gospels ("Prefaces to the New Testament"). But the ecclesiastical culture of Luther's day esteemed

Matthew highly, making Luther very familiar with preaching and teaching the First Gospel (see, e.g., *Luther's Works* 68, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew 19–24*).

### Background on Matthew's Gospel

Early tradition credits the disciple Matthew with writing this gospel originally in Aramaic, but most scholars today deem this unlikely. The narrative relies heavily on Mark (preserving about 90 percent of it) and shows no evidence of being written in a language other than Greek. More likely, an anonymous Christian steeped in Israel's religious heritage composed the gospel from the context of a Christian community (18:15-22) that valued the abiding significance of the Jewish law (5:17; 17:24-27; 23:2-3). Where this community was located is unknown, but cues in the narrative (2:23; 4:24; 15:22) lead many scholars to suggest Syria, in a city like Antioch. The author likely wrote around 80–90 CE, at a time when Mark's gospel was circulating, deviant teachers were accumulating (Matt. 7:25; 13:21-22; 24:10-12), and interest in Christian teaching was escalating (cf. the *Didache*). Harsh characterizations of religious leaders and "their" synagogues (e.g., Matt. 6:2, 5; 10:17) imply that a rupture between church and synagogue may have recently occurred. These traits make the gospel uniquely poised to navigate the polarities of Jew-Gentile and synagogue-church by embracing both "what is new and what is old" (13:52) in a way that is distinctively Jewish-Christian—or Christian-Jewish.

### Themes

#### Jesus and the heritage of Israel

Unlike other gospels, Matthew engages Jesus' Jewish theological heritage with an eye to prioritizing "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5). Unique within the New Testament, Matthew's gospel emphasizes that Jesus has not come to abolish but to fulfill the Jewish law (5:17-18; cf. Rom. 3:31; Gal. 5:14). Clues within the narrative even imply that Matthew's community continued to observe the sabbath (24:20) and Jewish dietary laws (15:17; cf. Mark 7:19). Clearly questions regarding the enduring significance of the Torah were of utmost importance to Matthew's community.

### The teaching gospel

As many scholars have noticed, Matthew's gospel focuses especially on Jesus' teaching. The narrative revolves around five didactic discourses (5:1–7:27; 10:1–42; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; 24:1–25:46) that all focus on matters of discipleship. Matthew's gospel also models a deliberate catechetical progression: calling disciples (4:18–22), instructing them (5:1ff.), and finally authorizing them to teach others (28:18–20). As Paul Minear observes, these features make Matthew's gospel uniquely designed to be optimally helpful to teachers in Christian congregations (Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003], 3).

### The nature of discipleship

If Jesus is the teacher par excellence, then his followers are those trained—or “discipled” (*mathēteutheis*)—for the reign of heaven (13:52). As the narrative shows, Jesus' disciples are not merely informed intellectually but *formed* holistically: to practice humility, authentic piety, service to the “least of these,” and aversion to social recognition. As the story of the disciple Matthew shows, Jesus calls followers from among “tax collectors and sinners” as a sign of God's mercy (9:10–13). Unique to this gospel, the disciples are frequently called “you of little faith” (e.g., 8:26), which is not inherently a criticism: they do reflect *some* faith! And ultimately they are called and sent out as those embodying the ministry of Jesus himself (10:24–25a; 28:18–20).

### Christian community

Matthew's gospel is the only New Testament writing in which Jesus explicitly names and instructs the “church” (*ekklēsia*), and his instructions are both profound and practical. Jesus “builds” the church with the assurance that “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (16:18). But at the same time this community embraces sinners (9:13) and doubters (28:17), who perennially struggle with temptations (18:6–9), disciplinary issues (18:15–20), and challenges extending forgiveness (18:21–35). Indeed, the fact that the teaching discourse most focused on community (18:1–35) devotes so much space to forgiveness is itself instructive. Far from an abstract meditation, Matthew's gospel is at once theological and practical regarding the practice of Christian community.

### The abiding presence of God

Matthew's gospel alone calls Jesus “Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us’” (1:23). More than simply giving Jesus a name, this gospel associates God's presence with Jesus so much that he is rightly and regularly worshiped (e.g., 2:11; 8:2; 9:18). Even more, the narrative implies that the divine presence continues in the world long afterward through gathered believers (18:20), “the least of these” brothers and sisters (25:40), and by virtue of Jesus' promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). In ways that effectively address questions about God's

perceived absence in the world, Matthew's gospel professes that God is in fact “with us.”

### Peter's prominence

Despite the traditional association of Peter with Mark's gospel (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.15), Peter plays a more prominent role in Matthew's. In the First Gospel alone does Peter walk on water (14:28–31), raise questions about forgiveness (18:21–22; also 17:24–27), and most importantly stand at the center of Jesus' building his church (16:17–20). What precisely Jesus means by “on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church” (16:18, cf. *Petros*, “Peter”) is debated, but at the very least Matthew's gospel portrays Peter as representing both the follies (14:28–31) and future (16:17–20) of Jesus' church.

## Areas of Caution and Special Focus

### Taking Jesus' countercultural ethics seriously

Many of Jesus' teachings in Matthew—like in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:27)—seem idealistic, if not impossible. And many Protestants respond by evaluating them as “law” that aims simply to foster a keen sense of human incapacity. But this interpretation misses the potential of Jesus' radical ethics for countercultural change. Christian reformers throughout history have regularly found inspiration from Jesus' ethics in Matthew's gospel (especially the Sermon on the Mount) for guiding the values of Christian community: for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, André Trocmé, Brother Roger of Taizé, and Martin Luther King Jr. Although these ethics can seem at odds with a theology centered in grace, they inform in remarkable fashion how a graced people can in turn respond by incarnating radical grace in community for others.

### Judgment and polemics

Jesus' teachings in Matthew's gospel reflect a more judgment-oriented vision and more references to hell (*Gehenna*) than is common for some modern Christians (e.g., 5:22, 29–30; 13:24–30, 36–43; 23:15, 33). These emphases reflect the promise of an eschatological judgment that will ultimately fulfill God's righteous standards. And while uncomfortable to many moderns, these texts aim less to condemn and more to encourage faithfulness in disciples, whose deeds will ultimately be shown for their true worth. Despite the occasional harshness of such judgment language, Matthew's overarching vision strives primarily to show disciples how to be faithful, not how to fail.

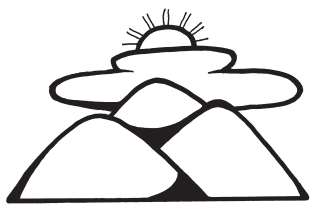
### Honoring our Jewish sisters and brothers

Negative characterizations of Jewish religious leaders appear often in Matthew's gospel—associating them with vipers, hell, and the devil (12:34; 15:13; 23:33). There is also the unfortunate response of the crowd to Pilate's resolve to crucify Jesus: “His blood be on us and on our children!” (27:25). These features have played their part in fostering the anti-Semitic sentiments

of past centuries among Western Christianity. A poignant example of these sentiments is Martin Luther, who expressed beautifully the nature of Christian liberty (“On the Freedom of a Christian”) and later called for violence against Jews (“On the Jews and Their Lies”). In the shadow of the Holocaust, we do well to read Matthew with greater sensitivity. Toward this end, here are some suggestions. First, the Jewish people implicated by Matthew’s narrative are a particular group, with no direct correlation to actual people today. Second, the rhetorical aim of Jesus’ harsh words is typically not to condemn outsiders but to exhort insiders to live differently (23:1-12). Third, much of the vitriol of these words reflects the pain experienced later by Matthew’s community, the product of intrafamilial

fighting among Jews of diverging faiths. As social psychologists today observe, sibling conflicts can often be some of the severest—and outsiders have little right to cast stones one way or the other. Fourth, most of Matthew’s condemnations of Jewish people come from the mouth of a Jewish man who himself experienced the utmost condemnation for the sake of all humanity. In 2017 as we observe the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, we honor Luther well by honoring the eighth commandment (on bearing false witness) regarding our Jewish siblings better than Luther did in his day.

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## November 27, 2016

### First Sunday of Advent

The new church year begins with a wake-up call: Christ is coming soon! In today's readings both Paul and Jesus challenge us to wake from sleep, for we know neither the day nor hour of the Lord's coming. Isaiah proclaims the day when God will gather all people on the holy mountain and there will be no more war or suffering. Though we vigilantly watch for the promised day of salvation, we wait for what we already have: Christ comes among us this day as the word and meal that strengthens our faith in the promises of God.

## Readings and Responses for the Day

### Isaiah 2:1-5

The visionary message presented in this reading focuses on a future day when God establishes a universal reign of peace. Divine decisions will make war obsolete, and the worshipping community responds: "Let us walk in that light of that Lord now!"

*Response:* Psalm 122

### Romans 13:11-14

Paul compares the advent of Christ to the coming of dawn. We live our lives today in light of Christ's coming in the future.

*Gospel Acclamation:* Alleluia. Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. Alleluia. (Ps. 85:7)

### Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus describes his second coming as a sudden, unexpected event that will bring salvation or judgment upon people caught up in the usual affairs of daily life. He urges people to be alert and expectant.

## Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, and enlighten our walk in the way of your salvation, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

## This Day and Its Readings

Although the historical record is sketchy, it appears that our Advent arose out of a season of fasting to prepare for baptisms at Epiphany. By the sixth century an eschatological emphasis was present. Our Advent comprises the four Sundays before Christmas. Each year the first Sunday contains the theme of readiness for divine judgment, the second Sunday the ministry of John the Baptist, the third Sunday the Baptist's call to a

repentant life, and only on the fourth Sunday a narrative concerning the birth of Jesus. God comes, in the past in the history of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus, in the present in the word and sacrament of each Sunday, and in the future at the end of all things. The lectionary appoints readings to fit this pattern, and its tone stands in stark contrast to our society's weeks of preparation for Christmas.

### Matthew 24:36-44

Advent begins the liturgical year, and in this year A, the gospel readings from Matthew complement the festival gospels taken from John. At this beginning we contemplate the end: the arrival of the divine judge means the end of the earth as we know it. In Advent we are called to ready our lives to receive our disorienting God. The arrival of God, like a flood, always surprises us.

### Isaiah 2:1-5

In Advent the church both anticipates and celebrates the presence of God in Jesus Christ, who is himself, like Jerusalem in the oracle, the locus of divine justice and peace for the world.

### Romans 13:11-14

At the start of Advent the church hears Paul's wake-up call, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. In the darkness of winter, we awake to the light of Christ. God is like the coming dawn.

## The Readings in the Bible

### Matthew 24:36-44

The Gospel of Matthew was written probably in the mid-80s as an elaboration of Mark's gospel. In Matthew 24, a chapter shortly before the beginning of the Matthean passion, Jesus alerts his hearers to the coming of the Son of Man, who will arrive unexpectedly to judge the earth. The Son of Man is a title given to an eschatological figure who had been part of Jewish expectation for several centuries, who would vindicate the righteous and punish evildoers. Matthew joins others in the early Christian movement by applying this language to Jesus.

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

During the eighth century before Christ, a time of considerable social disruption for the peoples of Israel and Judah, Isaiah's oracle described a vision of Mount Zion—a mythic name for Jerusalem—becoming a locus of God's justice and peace for the whole world.

**Romans 13:11-14**

In about 56 CE Paul, believing the end of the world was at hand, wrote to the church in Rome, urging the believers to wake up and to live in the light of Christ.

**Images in the Readings**

The apocalyptic imagery of **the end of the world**, like the flood sweeping all things away, echoes from the Old Testament into the preaching of Jesus, and continues in contemporary disaster movies and terrorist activity. For Christians, fear about the end always comes to rest in trust in the presence of God. When all is over, at our end, is God.

Today's readings expand and challenge our society's welcome of God arriving as only baby Jesus, for God comes as **judge** and calls us into a life of justice for all, evoking in us both anticipation and fear. Often in classical art, Justice is a towering robed woman who judges right from wrong.

Often in the Bible God meets with humankind on a **mountain**. In our language a "mountain-top experience" is one so overwhelming that it changes one's future. Sinai, Horeb, Jerusalem, the mount of Jesus' sermon, the Mount of Transfiguration, the Mount of Olives, Golgotha, Zion: all are superimposed on our church buildings, for the Christian mountain is wherever we receive the word and sacraments.

In English, the phrase "**swords into plowshares**" indicates the hope for world peace, a hope for which Christians pray to God.

**Connections with the Liturgy**

The Apostles' Creed anticipates the coming of the judge: I believe in Jesus Christ, who "will come to judge the living and the dead."

## From a Scholar

We are not so much moving toward the future, as the future is rushing in a transforming way toward us. Isaiah's picture of the future depicts God as the one settling all international disputes, making war unnecessary and in fact obsolete. God draws all peoples to Jerusalem as if by a divine magnet, and there they learn God's ways and God's paths, and they will not study war any more. Instead, they will transform their swords into stoves and washing machines and their spears into laptops and mopeds, the twenty-first-century equivalent of plowshares and pruning hooks. With the violence in our streets and terrorism dominating our headlines, we may find this vision hard to believe, even hard to imagine. But the final verse in the first reading expresses a fit liturgical commitment: People of God, let us at least anticipate this onrushing future by starting to walk in God's light. Breaking the chain of violence in our homes, schools, and congregations can be the dawning light of God's promised future.

As Psalm 122 reminds us, peace is not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of everything that is good and God-pleasing. So Paul in the second reading, from Romans, urges us to wake up, since God's eschatological peace (salvation) is measurably closer than when we first came to the faith. If God's daylight is really coming, as we hope and insist in Advent, we will want to conduct ourselves as if everyone, including God, could see us. People living in darkness, on the other hand, continue to have a lifestyle of excess and division.

This gospel reading from Matthew 24 scared the daylights out of me as a child. People doing normal things like grinding flour would be confronted by Christ's onrushing future. While we all know that home break-ins can occur, we all are surprised and devastated when they happen. But what if the impasse of violence Isaiah presupposes and that we often accept as inevitable were to meet its match in the transforming power of God's future? Would we not want to be ready, as God's witnesses, to start transforming the obscenity of weapons into the utility of useful things we need every day? The timing of God's coming should not terrify us, but encourage us.

*Ralph W. Klein*

## From a Preacher

It's the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Twenty-seven shopping days remain until Christmas. It's all we can do to anticipate the approaching holidays, let alone the hard-to-imagine coming of the Son of Man. We're smack dab in the middle of long shopping lists and even longer to-do lists. Our calendars are full. Our lives are overwhelming. How to get everything ready in time for Christmas celebrations? How to ensure our families don't destroy each other in the process?

Or maybe there is nothing to do. Our days of doing are over. We feel lonely and worthless. This time of year reminds us that we're not in control. No matter what we do, or don't do, ultimately we can't guarantee anything. We can't control the weather; we can't control our families; we can't even seem to control our own swirling emotions. Then we come to worship and are confronted by a gospel reading that offers up just one more thing over which we have absolutely no control—the coming of the Son of Man.

Perhaps you've seen the cartoon that depicts two dinosaurs perched on top of a mountain that is rapidly being swallowed up by floodwater. As Noah's ark passes them by, one dinosaur says to the other, "Oh, crap! Was that *today*?" The cartoon implies that the dinosaurs knew when to get on the ark but simply, fatally, forgot.

Matthew, in his remembering of the days of Noah, doesn't have anything to say about dinosaurs. But he does have something to say about human beings. They didn't just forget to mark the flood on their calendars; they knew nothing of it until the flood came and swept them all away. So too, says Matthew's Jesus, will be the coming of the Son of Man. Not only are we not in control of his coming, but we have absolutely no idea when it will be.

I empathize with Ralph Klein when he writes that this gospel reading scared the daylights out of him as a child. When I hear this reading it immediately takes me to a series of novels that detail the trials and tribulations of those "left behind." There are those in my own family who believe these novels are the greatest evangelism tools ever created. I beg to differ. Fear may be an effective motivator, but implying that one must believe or else seems antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One will be taken and one will be left. The passage doesn't even make clear which camp we should hope to be in. Are those that are taken the saved ones? Or are the saved ones those that are left? What is clear is that with the Son of Man's coming comes also divine judgment. And as much as we resist the idea of judgment, we know we need it.

The holiday season does not, as we would hope, bring an end to the violence in our world or the heartache in our families. Tragic headlines persist. Abusive behavior continues. Grief grabs hold and won't let go. If anything, our approaching celebration of Christmas magnifies our pain and discontent. Life is supposed to look like a Hallmark commercial, but it doesn't. It's too easy to turn to "reveling and drunkenness" as a coping mechanism. How do we heed Paul's admonition to "put on the armor of light" when it's buried in the back of the closet? Perhaps these weeks leading up to Christmas are actually the perfect time to consider the end of the world as we know it.

God knows we need an end to injustice, oppression, violence, and war. God knows we need something more than we could ever buy, or produce, or achieve on our own. We need God to come, rushing into our lives with a tide of judgment, flooding, war, sin, and death, so that we might see that life is to be found only through trusting God's mercy. We need God's judgment—showing how deeply we misplace our trust and driving us to take a lesson in beating swords into plowshares. We need God's judgment—rifling through our wardrobe and holding up our rags of anxiety, hopelessness, and despair, so that we might cast them aside and let ourselves be clothed in Christ's light.

Even now we can "anticipate this onrushing future by starting to walk in God's light." Even now we can gather for worship and hear God's promises. Even now we can return to the font and remember that we have been sealed with the cross of Christ forever. Even now we can share in the meal Jesus gave us and be strengthened through that meal to be the body of Christ. We leave the table emboldened by God's mercy and forgiveness, encouraged, not terrified, by the prospect of God's coming. The one who will come to judge the living and the dead is the one who has already claimed us as God's own beloved children.

*Stacey Nalean-Carlson*

## **Making Connections**

- Drawing on the imagery of light in both the first and second readings, use "Christ, Be Our Light" (ELW 715) as a recurring theme throughout the worship service. Sing stanza 1 as part of the Advent wreath lighting, stanza 2 prior to the first reading, stanza 3 as the elements are brought forward for communion, and stanza 5 as the congregation is sent out in peace to serve the Lord.
- Set the alarm on your phone to go off during worship. Invite children to help you find your phone. (It's hidden somewhere in the worship space; they will find it if they keep their eyes and ears open.) Is everyone awake now? Jesus tells us to "keep awake." Does that mean we need to stay up all night every night? No! (Parents, breathe a sigh of relief.) But we are invited to keep our eyes and ears open as we wait for Christ to show up. We'll see and hear what God is already doing to bring joy, hope, and peace.
- Consider distributing ELCA Good Gifts catalogs today. Order at <http://www.elca.org/Resources/ELCA-Good-Gifts>. These gifts make a difference and are a way for us to anticipate God's onrushing future.



## April 23, 2017

### Second Sunday of Easter

In today's gospel the risen Christ appears to the disciples and offers them the gift of peace. Even amid doubts and questions, we experience the resurrection in our Sunday gathering around word and meal, and in our everyday lives. Throughout the coming Sundays of Easter the first two readings will be from the Acts of the Apostles and First Peter. Even as the early Christians proclaimed the resurrection, we rejoice in the new birth and living hope we receive in baptism.

## Readings and Responses for the Day

### Acts 2:14a, 22-32

After the Holy Spirit came to the apostles on Pentecost, Peter preaches the gospel to the gathered crowd. He tells them that Jesus, who obediently went to his death according to God's plan, was raised from the dead by God. Finally, he appeals to scripture, quoting Psalm 16:8-11, to show that Jesus is the Messiah: though crucified, the risen Jesus is now enthroned.

*Response:* Psalm 16

### 1 Peter 1:3-9

This epistle was written to encourage Christians experiencing hardships and suffering because of their faith in Christ. The letter opens by blessing God for the living hope we have through Christ's resurrection even in the midst of difficult circumstances and surroundings.

*Gospel Acclamation:* Alleluia. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Alleluia. (John 20:29)

### John 20:19-31

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples, offering them a benediction, a commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But one of their number is missing, and his unbelief prompts another visit from the Lord.

## Prayer of the Day

Almighty and eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we, who have not seen, have faith in you and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

## This Day and Its Readings

The church keeps Easter for eight Sundays. Early Christians referred to Sunday as the eighth day, as if the normal week of seven is miraculously completed in an extraordinary eighth day. The fifty days culminates at Pentecost. Each Sunday

individually and communally, we meet the risen Christ in word and sacrament.

### John 20:19-31

The church continues the pattern alluded to in John's gospel, of assembling on the first day of the week to receive the Spirit of the cross and resurrection and to exchange the peace of Christ. As we expect of John, the narrative in chapter 20 testifies to the identity of Christ as Lord and God. For Christians, to touch Christ is to touch God, and we do this in the flesh of our neighbor's hand at the peace and with the bread of Christ in our palm at communion.

### Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Throughout the Sundays of the fifty days of Easter, passages from Acts proclaim the meaning of the resurrection. Although many contemporary Christians do not share Luke's hermeneutic, we build this Sunday upon this early Christian proclamation of God's raising Jesus from the place of the dead to be the power of the church emerging throughout the world. Each Sunday we are witnesses of the resurrection.

### 1 Peter 1:3-9

In year A the second readings throughout the Easter season read semicontinuously through the letter of 1 Peter, which can be seen as an early example of postbaptismal catechesis. What does it mean to be baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ? This passage readies us to hear the narrative concerning Thomas and John's words about those who have seen the risen Christ and those who have not, all of whom are called to "an indescribably and glorious joy."

## The Readings in the Bible

### John 20:19-31

In this the first of two conclusions to the Gospel of John, the Spirit handed over at the death of Christ (John 19:30) is distributed to the disciples. The narrative indicates that by the time of the writing of the gospel Christians were regularly assembling on the first day of the week. The chapter moves the Easter



proclamation from the disciples, through the unbelievers, to those who encounter this gospel. The evangelist claimed that the gospel book, proclaimed at the Sunday assembly, manifests Jesus as Christ, the Son of God, who gives life in his name.

### **Acts 2:14a, 22-32**

Peter's sermon on Pentecost established the homiletical pattern common throughout Acts: a correction to the hearers; an explanation of the current situation; a summary of the meaning of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection; and the call to repentance and baptism. According to Luke's biblical hermeneutic, David wrote Psalm 16, and it prophesied Christ's resurrection. Psalm 16 speaks of Sheol ("to the grave" in *ELW*), understood by Semitic people as where the dead resided. Acts renders this as Hades, the Greco-Roman name for the place of the dead. Neither is what medieval Christians meant by hell, a place of eternal punishment.

### **1 Peter 1:3-9**

Purported to be the work of Peter, a witness to the resurrection, the letter called 1 Peter, probably written several decades after Peter's martyrdom and addressed generally to Gentiles in the Christian churches, describes the new birth of Christians through baptism and the community that gives hope during times of persecution. The letter speaks of the radical difference between the values of the society and of the baptized life; it is as if Christians are aliens in a foreign land. The opening summary calls the believers to strength of faith.

## **Images in the Readings**

Usually depictions of the crucified Christ include the marks on his **hands and side**. Our archeological knowledge that

for crucifixions nails were driven through the wrist ought not negate the symbolism of the palm, which is central to a person's hand. Neither need we get fascinated by the accounts of the stigmata, for we all carry the mark of the crucified and risen Christ on our palm each time we receive the body of Christ at communion. In John 19:34, blood and water flow from the wound in Jesus' side, and church tradition has seen in this detail not an erroneous description of human anatomy but rather the proclamation that baptism and eucharist flow from the death of Christ.

Each year on the second Sunday of Easter we meet **doubting Thomas**. He is all of us, and we doubters are glad to share with all other doubters the peace of the risen Christ.

That Christ is **king** is an image behind the reading from Acts: King David testifies to this power; Jesus is now on David's throne; Christ is the anointed one, the Messiah.

God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in baptism we have been given a new birth, to live as children of this heavenly father. The imagery continues: only children receive the full inheritance.

## **Connections with the Liturgy**

Each Sunday Christians exchange with one another the peace of the risen Christ. In some assemblies, the peace has become a kind of seventh-inning stretch during which everyone chats with everyone else about the week's news. However, the liturgical intention of this greeting is that we are enacting John 20, receiving from one another the peace that Christ gave to the disciples. We fill the room with the life of the Holy Spirit, breathing to one another the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.

## From a Scholar

A challenge for the preacher on this Sunday is not to succumb to the pressure to “top that!” Another challenge is succumbing to the temptation of *not* trying to “top that!” That is to say, while Easter 2 is not Easter Sunday, it still is Easter. As much as we lean into Easter Sunday as the pinnacle of the church’s celebrative worship services, I have wondered if the pinnacle of the pulpit and its relationship to discipleship and pastoral care is Easter 2 with its potential to model what it means to accompany one another when they “come down from the mountaintop.”

Many congregations will encounter a different preacher on Easter 2, since it is often the Sunday when interns, guest preachers, and retired pastors preach in order to give the lead or solo pastor a much-deserved rest from the business of Holy Week. And yet, even before the first word of the sermon is said, having the Easter Sunday preacher preach on Easter 2 proclaims: “Jesus is still here. You’re here. And so am I.” This Sunday’s texts are all about continued presence, stick-to-it-iveness, commissioning, and proclamation—even after the rest of the world has moved on.

It’s the day after, or the week after big events such as weddings, graduations, and, yes, Easter, that people ask, “Now what do we live for? What do we focus on now that the sublime experience is over and we return to the daily grind?” With that state of mind in mind, the preacher has some options. One valid option is to keep the party going. In this case, your proclamation might mirror Peter’s unapologetic echoes of Easter Sunday and reannounce: God raised up Jesus of Nazareth. God freed Jesus from death. It is impossible for God to be held in death’s power! Easter 2 is faithfully an extension of the Easter Sunday celebration.

Another option is to focus on Jesus’ resurrection appearance that occurs behind locked doors. While the temptation would be to focus on the fear of the disciples, the key is to focus on Jesus’ capacity and willingness to join the disciples behind the locked doors. Yes, it is helpful to acknowledge the scene Jesus encounters. But beyond quickly fleshing out that Jesus’ first resurrection appearance meets a fearful bunch who have either (or both) locked others out and locked themselves in, focus more on Jesus’ action of meeting us where we are, even if (and especially) when we lock ourselves behind closed doors. Jesus knows concreteness is needed in these situations; thus, he offers a word of peace, presence, and community. Notice that a week later the disciples still meet behind closed doors. Even so, this time they are not locked (baby steps). The Incarnate One comes to dinner . . . again. Amen! There is a connection between this option and the epistle: “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials . . .” (1 Peter 1:6a).

Another option would be to focus on the new life that Jesus breathes into us as Easter people. Not only is there a commissioning in this story, but the commissioning is accompanied by the peace of Christ.

The people might be asking, “Now what?” And you, Easter preacher, have so much to tell. Stand up yet again, yes, a week later after all has settled, and proclaim with all you’ve got on this Easter Sunday.

*Shauna Hannan*

## From a Preacher

There is a wonderful tradition in some churches of inviting worshipers to bring fresh flowers on Easter Sunday so they can place them on the cross that was used for Good Friday services. At my church, the black shroud is removed so people can place their fresh-cut offerings in the tree. This is one of my favorite traditions, watching this symbol of death take on color, beauty, and life.

As much as I love that gorgeous tree on Easter Sunday, those of us responsible for worship leadership or who serve on the altar guild know too well that those flowers fade, and the last thing we want is for anyone to see what happens to them between Easter Sunday and Easter 2. Someone, undoubtedly, is given the task of getting rid of the evidence. There is hardly anything more depressing than the wilting, decaying blooms that once conveyed so much hope.

In the gospel story, Thomas reminds us that Jesus has something to offer those of us who are quick to get rid of the evidence, who fear what might happen if anyone sees the decay of the world creeping in on the colorful blooms. Rather than hide them, it may just be our call to preach about them.

I once heard David Bartlett advise a group of preachers that often the line between faith and doubt runs right through the middle of the sanctuary, and sometimes it runs right down the middle of the preacher. Isn't that the truth? Don't you sometimes think it is your job to sustain the joy even when you aren't sure you can or want to? The truth is, there are many in our congregations who feel that way. And that is why this Sunday is not just for Thomas but for all of us.

The couple headed for divorce, the new widow, the cancer patient, the woman who deals with chronic pain, and the man who suffers from mental illness all need to know that it is not up to them to create a kind of Easter with which they cannot seem to be in touch. It is not for them to manufacture joy or to pretend the flowers are still in full bloom when they are not. Instead, here is a chance to say, "Jesus came and stood among them, and Jesus comes and stands among us."

We seem to forget, rather quickly, that the stone was rolled away *for us*; it is not our job to do the heavy lifting. It was not for Thomas to rejoice with the other disciples when his faith or his circumstances or his grief would not allow it. Jesus came and stood with him anyway.

Shauna Hannan encourages that on Easter 2 the preacher can stand up and yet again, "proclaim with all you've got," and how can we possibly do that? Whether we believe or doubt, whether for us the flowers are in bloom or they have faded, Jesus comes to us and stands us up. Alleluia!

*Tracey Breashears Schultz*

## Making Connections

- For a time with children, begin by lamenting that Easter is over. Speak about the full house you had in worship last Sunday and the special events you enjoyed together, and then remind one another that while that one Sunday is over, Easter is meant to last fifty days. Close by thanking God that Easter is just beginning.
- For a time with children, or as a sermon illustration for another day, think together about a relay race and how a baton is passed from one person to the next to move the race along. Talk about how Jesus came and passed peace on to the disciples, who then passed it to others, and eventually someone passed it to us. Talk about the sharing of the peace as a time to pass on that baton once again.
- Pass out Alleluia signs as people come in for worship. (Perhaps these could be made by the children during Sunday school or by an intergenerational group during the week.) Encourage people to listen for the word and to hold up their signs as they sing and say Alleluia. This is a hopeful reminder that Easter is not over but is still here for celebrating.
- If the bread of Christ in our palm at communion is meant to allow worshipers to touch his presence, actual bread would do that better than a wafer ever could. If it is not your congregation's practice to use real bread for communion, consider conveying the risen life of Christ by using a risen loaf for these days of Easter.