

SUNDAYS AND SEASONS
PREACHING
YEAR A 2020

Sundays and Seasons: Preaching 2020, Year A

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Annual, seasonal, and weekly materials

Preaching Matthew in Year A: Mary Hinkle Shore

Preaching for the Season: Craig Mueller (Advent, Christmas, Time after Epiphany); Paul E. Hoffman (Lent, Three Days, Easter); Timothy J. Keyl (Summer, Autumn, November)

Prayer of the Day: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006)

Introduction to the Day, reading summaries: *Sundays and Seasons*

Art and design

Cover art: Christina Saj

Interior art: Gertrud Mueller Nelson

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.



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Lectionary Conversion Chart

Time after Pentecost, Year A, 2020

If today is it falls within this date range.	The "lectionary" number assigned to this date range in <i>Evangelical Lutheran Worship</i> is which is equivalent to "proper ____" in other printed lectionaries.	In 2019, this Sunday is the "____" Sunday after Pentecost."
Sunday, June 14	Sunday between June 12 & 18 (if after Holy Trinity)	Lectionary 11	6	2nd
Sunday, June 21	Sunday between June 19 & 25 (if after Holy Trinity)	Lectionary 12	7	3rd
Sunday, June 28	Sunday between June 26 & July 2	Lectionary 13	8	4th
Sunday, July 5	Sunday between July 3 & 9	Lectionary 14	9	5th
Sunday, July 12	Sunday between July 10 & 16	Lectionary 15	11	6th
Sunday, July 19	Sunday between July 17 & 23	Lectionary 16	11	7th
Sunday, July 26	Sunday between July 24 & 30	Lectionary 17	12	8th
Sunday, August 2	Sunday between July 31 & Aug 6	Lectionary 18	11	9th
Sunday, August 9	Sunday between Aug 7 & 13	Lectionary 19	14	10th
Sunday, August 16	Sunday between Aug 14 & 20	Lectionary 20	15	11th
Sunday, August 23	Sunday between Aug 21 & 27	Lectionary 21	16	12th
Sunday, August 30	Sunday between Aug 28 & Sept 3	Lectionary 22	17	13th
Sunday, September 6	Sunday between Sept 4 & 10	Lectionary 23	18	14th
Sunday, September 13	Sunday between Sept 11 & 17	Lectionary 24	19	15th
Sunday, September 20	Sunday between Sept 18 & 24	Lectionary 25	20	16th
Sunday, September 27	Sunday between Sept 25 & Oct 1	Lectionary 26	21	17th
Sunday, October 4	Sunday between Oct 2 & 8	Lectionary 27	22	18th
Sunday, October 11	Sunday between Oct 9 & 15	Lectionary 28	23	19th
Sunday, October 18	Sunday between Oct 16 & 22	Lectionary 29	24	20th
Sunday, October 25	Sunday between Oct 23 & 29	Lectionary 30	25	21st
Sunday, November 1	Sunday between Oct 30 & Nov 5	Lectionary 31	26	22nd
Sunday, November 8	Sunday between Nov 6 & 12	Lectionary 32	27	23rd
Sunday, November 15	Sunday between Nov 13 & 19	Lectionary 33	28	24th
Christ the King, Nov 22	Sunday between Nov 20 & 26	Lectionary 34	29	Last



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Preface

Welcome to the 2020 edition of *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*. Whether you are new to this resource or have been around since we began, we trust you will find real help here for your preaching task in year A of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Our approach to the lectionary readings focuses on the texts in relation to their original settings and to the lectionary day and current context. First we present a brief introduction to the day and to the texts. Print users will find the citations and brief thumbnails; online users can click to the complete texts. With these, we list the psalm response to the first reading, the gospel acclamation, and the prayer of the day—pieces that make up the propers for the day. The Readings in the Bible section reminds us of the circumstances in which these texts were written. The Readings on This Day connects the various readings to this particular day in the church year. Sometimes the connections will be strong, other times more tenuous. The next two sections continue the contributions of Gail Ramshaw: Images in the Readings and Connections with the Liturgy. Then we get to the heart of this resource, the two essays, From a Scholar and From a Preacher. The writers of the scholar essays provide insights into the three biblical texts for the day, focusing on what would be particularly helpful to you, the person preparing the day's sermon. Finally, in the From a Preacher essays, someone who shares with you the regular preaching task takes all that has been gathered together, the entirety of the worship, and the day in the civil calendar, and proposes some ways a compelling sermon might come out of it all. These essays are as individual as the pastors writing them.

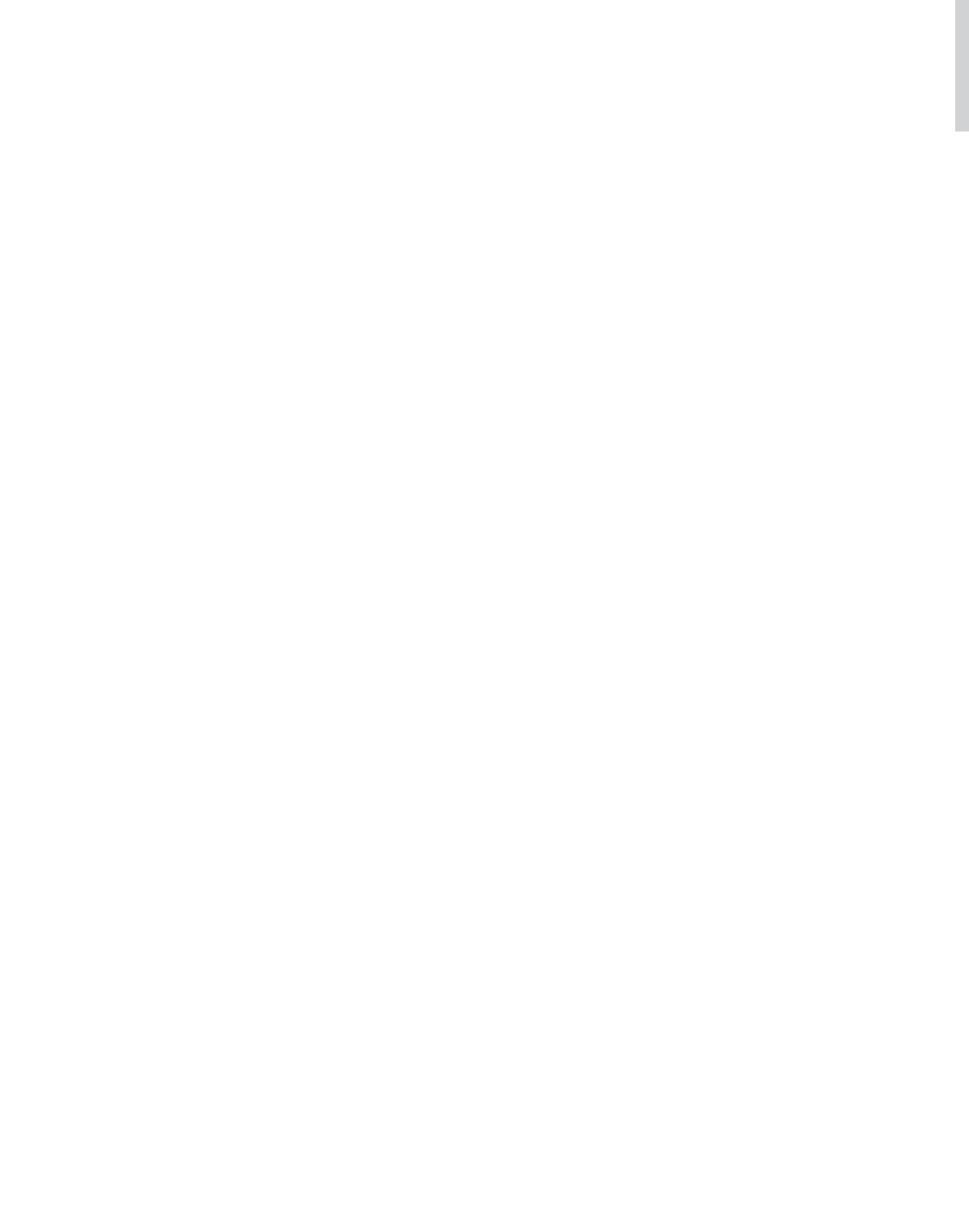
We don't expect that you will take exactly the approaches that are presented, but we hope you will find much to inspire your own creativity.

At its best, what sets *Preaching* apart from similar resources is the wholistic approach. The vision promoted in *The Use of the Means of Grace, Principles for Worship*, and, finally, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is that the sermon is not a discrete event but something woven into the whole of the day, arising from and commenting on all that precedes and follows: a part of the liturgy, an aspect of the church-year day, the communion meal, and all the readings. Of course, the particular assembly gathered on this day is taken into consideration because we are called to provide the living word of the gospel. What does this worshiping assembly need to hear on this day, in this place?

This resource is primarily produced by Lutherans with an eye toward Lutheran worship, so it refers to the primary worship book of the ELCA and the ELCIC, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Because it is built around the Revised Common Lectionary, shared by many denominations, it can also be useful to a broad swath of Protestant preachers.

Our thanks to you for making use of this resource as a tool for your vital preaching; to the many leaders who contributed to this volume; and to God, who calls and gathers the church and continues to send us out to bless others and the world.

Laurie J. Hanson
General editor





Preaching Matthew in Year A

Matthew holds together things we find easy to separate:

1. Story and speech
2. Israel and the nations
3. Grace and obedience
4. Heaven and earth

These moments of dynamic tension offer a way into the gospel as a whole.

Story and speech

Matthew was almost certainly written after Mark by an author who had a copy of the Gospel of Mark and copied both its content and form. To tell the story of Jesus' ministry, Matthew follows Mark's story line closely: Jesus is baptized by John and tempted by the devil in Judea, after which all of his ministry happens in and around Galilee until he travels to Jerusalem, where he encounters resistance from Jewish authorities and a death sentence from the Roman governor, Pilate. He is crucified and dies. After the sabbath, women arrive at the tomb intending to anoint his corpse, but they are told by a messenger that he is risen. This is Mark's story, which both Matthew and Luke follow and to which they both add additional material.

Most of the material that Matthew adds to Mark appears in five long speeches from Jesus. Five times, Matthew writes, "When Jesus had finished saying these things . . .," using identical Greek phrasing in each case. These five statements conclude the Sermon on the Mount at 7:28, a speech sending out the disciples at 11:1, a collection of parables at 13:53, a chapter on resolving conflict and practicing forgiveness at 19:1, and two chapters on the topic of faithful waiting for the unveiling of a new age at 26:1. Jack Dean Kingsbury points out that the rhetorical effect of these speeches is that "the implied reader, in hearing Jesus deliver his great speeches, is made to sense that he or she, along with the crowds or disciples in the story, is being directly addressed by him." The speeches give the story a "you are there" quality.

Israel and the nations

In the very first verse of Matthew we hear three titles for Jesus, each of which connects to his Jewish identity and to the hopes of Israel for a decisive demonstration of God's action on their behalf. Jesus is Messiah (or anointed one): in ancient Israel, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed as a sign of having

been chosen by God to lead God's people. Jesus is also "son of David," a title that associates him with a great king of Israel. "Son of David" is often the way people who seek healing in the gospel will address Jesus, which may be Matthew's way of highlighting that healing of the body and wholeness/peace/shalom within the body politic are related to each other. Finally, Jesus is "son of Abraham," a point that Matthew's genealogy will reinforce.

Beyond titles, this gospel tells the story of Jesus in a way that identifies him with Israel's history and its hopes. The baby is to be called Jesus, meaning "Yahweh saves," because "he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). His infancy reprises that of Moses: he is a baby under threat from a tyrant, narrowly escaping death and growing up to deliver his people. The wilderness is a place of temptation and provision for him, as it was for Israel. He reinterprets the law ("you have heard it said . . . but I say to you") and calls people to righteousness. Also, throughout the gospel, Matthew interprets the events he narrates as a fulfillment of Israel's scriptures. In Jesus, the words of scripture are coming true; they are coming to life.

Jesus is Israel's hope and the hope of the nations. As early as Matthew's genealogy for Jesus, and throughout the gospel as a whole, the nations (or Gentiles) are in view as people to whom and through whom God's blessing extends. The four women in the genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah") are all foreign to Israel. Listing these women by name points out that the God of Israel has always been working across the boundaries of Israel. In addition, non-Jewish people (the magi) are among the first to pay homage to Jesus. Stories borrowed from Mark of healing offered to Gentiles continue the theme that the ministry of Jesus extends beyond ethnic boundaries. Finally, the last words of the risen Jesus to his Jewish disciples are a commission to make disciples of *all* nations, thus further extending his teaching. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Grace and obedience

The word *hypocrite(s)* is used seventeen times in the New Testament: once in Mark, three times in Luke, and fourteen times in Matthew. Throughout Matthew's gospel, we read of the need for words and actions to be in sync. John urges those coming for baptism to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (3:8). Jesus

concludes the Sermon on the Mount by contrasting the wise who hear his words and act on them with the foolish who hear his words and do not act on them (cf. 7:24-29).

At times in the gospel, faithful practice is actually more important than any words spoken. In the parable of the two sons, Jesus wants to know which one did the will of his father (cf. 21:28-32). The parable of the sheep and the goats addresses the judgment of the nations. (“Nations” here presumably points to those who are outside Israel and outside the community to which the gospel is addressed.) In the parable, reward is based not on what people have said or intended, but simply on what they have done for “the least of these who are members of my family” (cf. 25:31-46). The commission Jesus gives to the disciples at the end of the gospel commands them to teach others to obey “everything that I have commanded” (28:20). Jesus is a teacher in Matthew, and he expects those who come after him to obey his teaching. One can almost hear James in the background, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22).

From this perspective, it is easy to see why Jesus is so often in conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus embodies faithfulness to God in word and deed; he calls others to the same faithfulness, and he gives the disciples a prayer that explicitly asks God to bring about the circumstances in which God’s will is done and God’s kingdom comes “on earth as it is in heaven” (cf. 6:9-13). The scribes are apparently uninterested in meeting one born “king of the Jews” even though they know from their command of scripture where to find him (cf. 2:1-12)! And the Pharisees “do not practice what they teach” (23:2-3). The problem is not that the scribes and Pharisees are moralistic while Jesus is calling people to freedom. The problem is that the scribes and Pharisees are hypocritical while Jesus is calling people to words and deeds that are aligned with God’s will.

The question for preachers is how to inspire this alignment of words and deeds. How may we call hearers to “justice and mercy and faith” (cf. 23:23) without lapsing into moralism? In other words, where is *grace* in the Gospel of Matthew, and how is it related to the obedience that constitutes discipleship?

Grace is in the appearance of “God with us” (cf. 1:23) and in the assurance of the angel in Joseph’s dream that the baby will “save his people from their sins” (1:21). Grace is in the statements of Jesus, borrowed from Mark 2:17 and 10:45, that he came “to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matt. 9:13) and “to give his life a ransom for many” (20:28). Grace flows through Jesus’ promise that in times of conflict within the community, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20).

Moralism asks, “What must I do (or think, or speak, or feel)?” The preacher working with a text in Matthew can avoid preaching moralism by asking, “Where is ‘God with us’ in this text?” “How is Jesus seeking and saving the lost *here*?” “How is this text related to God bringing about God’s will on earth as it

is in heaven?” Answers to questions like these invariably make God the subject of some verbs. Asking such questions will lead preachers to ways that God is empowering the very obedience to which God calls us.

Heaven and earth

In Mark, Jesus announces, “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). In Matthew, Jesus announces, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). Almost every time Matthew wants to speak of the reality Mark calls “the kingdom of God,” he changes the language to “kingdom of heaven.” Why? We think Matthew writes as a Jew who is concerned to keep the second (or in some numbering systems, the third) commandment, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:7). He wants to refer to the kingdom without needing to say “God” or the Holy One’s name.

For Matthew, then, the kingdom of heaven is not “the place you go to when you die,” but rather the time and place where God’s will is done perfectly. Matthew’s distinction between heaven and earth is spatial (the heavens in biblical texts are *above* the earth), yet this spatial distinction gets at the same reality that theologians point to with the temporal distinction of “now and not yet.” In the person and work of Jesus, the time (not yet) and place (heaven) where God’s will is lived in its fullness are breaking into this time (now) and place (earth).

Of course, heaven is not yet fully present, which begs the question of what to do in the meantime. Matthew’s answer is to pray for God’s kingdom and will to be fully present (cf. 6:9-13) and to live as if it were so. Part of the way Matthew tries to inspire faithful waiting is to warn readers away from infidelity with a picture of judgment that includes “outer darkness,” a phrase unique to Matthew, and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (cf. Psalm 112:10). The latter phrase appears only in Luke and Matthew, with Luke using it once and Matthew using it six times.

Why does Matthew feel it necessary to paint such a vivid picture of the horror of life apart from the divine presence? Often scholars speculate that as a result of their proclamation of Jesus, the evangelist and his first readers had been cast out of positions of importance or cast away from their community. Imagining that justice would eventually be served upon their enemies helped them endure present hardship. In this respect, Matthew’s proclamation of judgment is not that different from Mark’s words that “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31) or Luke’s report that Mary sang of the powerful being brought down, and the lowly lifted up (cf. 1:52).

Whether Matthew’s community is buoyed by the thought of someone else’s judgment, these texts serve at least one other function. Judgment texts warn readers away from disaster. While modern readers may question whether there is any place or time that is void of God’s love and light, it was clear to New

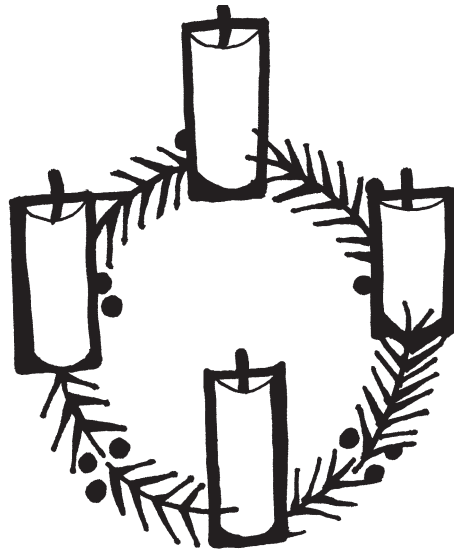
Testament writers that such a place/time existed and was to be avoided at all costs! Think of the horror with which you might watch a child about to wander out into traffic. No! Such a thing should never be! This is the feeling that references to “weeping and gnashing of teeth” mean to inspire.

Put in positive terms, readers are to identify with the “faithful and wise slave” (24:45) who spends the time between “now” and “not yet” providing for the other slaves, and who is at work when the master arrives. As the community hearing this

gospel embodies that faithfulness and wisdom, they will have avoided outer darkness in the future, *and* something equally important is happening in the present. They are letting their share of the divine light shine here and now. They are the city set on a hill that cannot be hid (cf. 5:14-16). Looking at them, others can see—even before it arrives in its fullness—that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Mary Hinkle Shore

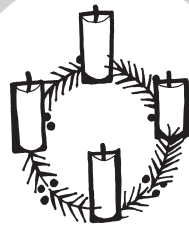
Advent



ADVENT

CHRISTMAS

TIME AFTER EPIPHANY



Preaching in Advent

Preachers love Advent. Preparations for Christmas often stir up a combination of anticipation, anxiety, and excitement. The fact that the days are becoming colder and darker in many places brings other connections. Yet, Advent is the season that most honestly names and acknowledges our human condition of longing, waiting, and restlessness. Advent is usually seen in relation to Christmas, and though it is the time of year when listeners face the most distractions due to the many things on their minds and hearts, preachers have the unique role of being spiritual guides, providing time and space for reflection on key spiritual themes.

The texts of Advent can easily lead us into two traps: one in the past and one in the future. The prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures can cause us to pretend that we are waiting for Jesus to be born as he was two thousand years ago. The apocalyptic texts on the first Sunday of Advent can propel us into a distant future, wondering if and when Christ will come again to bring justice and peace to our earth. Though in many ways we are still waiting for the Messiah to come (again), and we need a healthy eschatology that trusts in God's promised future, liturgical preachers invite us to wake up to Christ's presence among us here and now. The Sunday assembly is the place we learn to recognize the Lord's coming week after week, but from there we go to behold anew this Advent coming in the events of everyday life—whether in the news or in our personal circumstances; whether frightening, confusing, or mundane.

The first Sunday of Advent is a particularly opportune time to speak of mindfulness and living in the present, even as

the apocalyptic texts seem to name the end of the world at some time in the future. Year A is unique in that two of the passages (Matthew and Romans) speak of watching and waiting. In our age of instant gratification, the spiritual connections are many. Preachers might note the contemporary draw to yoga, meditation, and other spiritual practices that lead to an awareness of the present moment.

The human theme of longing resonates with all of us to some extent. We are always wishing we could delay aging, go back to a certain time in our lives and relive it, or live in an unrealistic ideal situation. In most cases, we fail to embrace fully the present and *what is*.

Images offer concrete ways to organize a preacher's reflection on Advent and daily life, and year A offers a plethora of riches: the peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11 on Advent 2); the desert rejoicing and blossoming (Isaiah 35 on Advent 3); a farmer waiting in patience for crops to grow (James 5 on Advent 3); Emmanuel as God-with-us, even in the humble story of an unwed mother (Matthew 1 on Advent 4).

Advent puts before us this great mystery: *we wait for what we already have*. Preachers serve as spiritual directors, in a sense, inviting hearers to behold anew Christ coming again and again, Sunday after Sunday, day after day, not only in word and meal, but in the sacramentality of everyday life. There are abundant images to help preachers proclaim a word that has deep resonance with what it means to be human.



December 1, 2019

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.

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.

Readings and Responses

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 worshiping community responds: "Let us walk in the 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, turbulent event that will bring about deep change to our normal, day-to-day lives. Therefore, he urges people to stay awake, be aware, and wait expectantly, because the Son of Man will come unannounced.

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 that 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.

The Readings on This Day

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.

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. In classical art Justice often 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 "mountaintop 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

As Advent begins, many of us look forward to specific things—whether joyful, somber, superficial, or profound. Our readings invite us to a potential alternative: to look forward to the arrival of God’s presence among us, as those awaiting the break of day.

The first reading, from Isaiah, is an oracle of peace “in days to come.” It appears nearly verbatim in Micah, with a different conclusion (4:1-5; cf. Isa. 2:5). Both likely borrow from an anonymous prophet. Here Jerusalem is the throne of God and the center of the world. Most important, the LORD’s reign yields enduring international peace. The portrait of weapons beaten into agricultural tools is profoundly attractive to our world today. Psalm 122 builds on related themes (tribes going up, judgment), encouraging prayer for Jerusalem’s peace (Heb. *shalom*)—a prayer with increasing relevance today.

The second reading speaks of Christ’s return: “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we [first] became believers” (Rom. 13:11b). Numerous references to time characterize this event as imminent. Paul uses night/darkness language to depict the present age and deeds associated with it, encouraging believers to “put on the armor of light” and to “live honorably as in the day” (13:12, 13). The closing imperative—“put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14a)—means a transformation of identity and lifestyle (cf. Gal. 2:20-21; 3:27; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-14). In time, the metaphor informed the baptismal practice of donning new clothes, symbolizing being clothed with Christ.

The gospel reading emphasizes the uncertain timeline of Jesus’ return, using examples from scripture and daily life. That “the Son” does not know the “day and hour” (Matt. 24:36) is potentially puzzling, but it differentiates Jesus from the omniscience of the Father (see also Mark 5:30-32). The phrase “Son of Man” is notoriously cryptic: in Jewish writings, it refers sometimes to a human being (Ezek. 2:1) and elsewhere to a heavenly deliverer (Dan. 7:13-14; cf. Mark 14:62; Matt. 26:64). In the gospels, Jesus regularly uses it to refer to himself. Among New Testament writings, the metaphor of a thief in the night is prevalent (1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). Like other examples in this passage (Noah’s contemporaries, two laborers, two women), it was a meaningful metaphor for the time frame of Jesus’ return.

Our readings ask “What are you looking forward to?” and invite us to include international peace and Jesus’ arrival among our core hopes.

Troy M. Troftgruben

From a Preacher

Mom was dying. We all knew it. She knew it. Every time I saw her I knew it might be the last time, so every moment was sacred. I hung on her every word. I paid attention when she spoke of the past, taking notes, asking questions. It was a bubble in time—too short. It woke me up.

Wake up. Tend the end.

Often in life we take everything for granted, as if time is suspended and things will never change. We are asleep, going through the motions. Then something happens that wakes us up. (The preacher might cue an alarm clock to go off at this moment.) We come awake, come alive, become aware of what is right before us. An awareness of death, mortality, the end of things in general helps us savor each moment as precious and see the sacredness of life. Live life with the end in mind.

And so Paul in the epistle text tells the Romans to wake up. Don’t walk through life in a fog. Don’t become complacent as you await Christ’s coming. Be alert, awake, alive!

So also Jesus, in the last of five great discourses in Matthew’s gospel, encourages his followers to wake up, even though God’s reign seems delayed. According to Isaiah, the reign of God will mean sight for those who are blind, hearing for those who are deaf, and walking for those who have difficulty moving around. Jerusalem will be the center of the world and the place of God’s throne. International peace means war won’t be studied and weapons won’t be needed.

Don’t give up hope in God’s vision for the world, even when all seems hopeless. The resurrection of Jesus is our sign that God will make all things new. Don’t become weary. Do you see the injustice in the world? Open your eyes. Do you see those who are hurting? Wake up. Don’t doze. Be like the persistent widow, demanding justice, which, according to Jesus in Matthew, is one of the weightier

matters of the law. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Be aware of what the Spirit is doing in your community and get involved. Wake up! As Howard Thurman says, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”¹

It is interesting that the first day of the new church year focuses on the end of time and the end of Matthew’s gospel. Could it be that to tend to the end of the world also makes us more aware of the sacred in life? Advent is like that. It points to the end to wake us up. Begin with the end in mind.

God’s reign is coming. When? No one knows, not even the angels or the Son. (If Jesus doesn’t know, it’s doubtful that preacher on TV does.) Apparently there were specific doomsday predictions in Matthew’s time as well.

We may not know the day or the hour, but that needn’t stop us from being ready. Wake up! Become spiritually alive. Don’t lose heart or grow weary. God’s reign is breaking in. Love God. Love your neighbor. Be a peacemaker. Hunger for justice.

Today’s gospel is a wake-up call. Indeed, this is your wake-up call. Jesus says, “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42).

Michael Rinehart

Making Connections

- In the confession, focus on sins of omission, things we have failed to do because we have become drowsy or ambivalent to the needs around us.
- Make an alarm clock go off, then ask children what the sound reminds them of. You may hear, “Wake up!” or “Time to go to school.” Some may groan at the thought of waking up. Ask them to describe what it’s like to be asleep, then what it’s like to be awake. Use their responses to consider what Jesus’ words in today’s gospel reading might mean for us. How might we be more aware of God’s presence among us, and of the needs of those around us? How might we wake up and respond?
- Pass out noisemakers to children and tell them to make some noise every time you say “wake up” in your sermon.
- Have the congregation sing “Lo! He comes with clouds descending” (ELW 435).
- Begin each petition of the intercessory prayers with “Wake up your people, O God.” In these prayers include many of the marks of the coming reign of God. Pray for peace, especially in Jerusalem. Pray for an end to all wars, that we may beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks.

1 Howard Thurman, in Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).



March 29, 2020

Fifth Sunday in Lent

In today's gospel Jesus reveals his power over death by raising Lazarus from the dead. The prophet Ezekiel prophesies God breathing new life into dry bones. To those in exile or living in the shadows of death, these stories proclaim God's promise of resurrection. In baptism we die with Christ that we might also be raised with him to new life. At the Easter Vigil we will welcome the newly baptized as we remember God's unfailing promise in our baptism.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ and serve you in righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Readings and Responses

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is a promise that Israel as a nation, though dead in exile, will live again in their land through God's life-giving spirit. Three times Israel is assured that through this vision they will know that "I am the LORD."

Response: Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

For Paul, Christian spirituality entails living in the reality of the Holy Spirit. The driving force behind our actions and values is not our sinful desire for self-satisfaction but the very Spirit by which God raised Jesus from the dead and will also raise us from the dead.

Gospel Acclamation: I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me will never die. (John 11:25, 26)

John 11:1-45

Jesus is moved to sorrow when his friend Lazarus falls ill and dies. Then, in a dramatic scene, he calls his friend out of the tomb and restores him to life.

The Readings in the Bible

John 11:1-45

In this last of the seven signs in the Gospel of John that demonstrate Jesus' divinity, Jesus first explained the sign and then performed it. As expected in John's gospel, the sign functions as a metaphor for the identity of Jesus. What happens to Lazarus is resuscitation, not the resurrection: Christ is the resurrection, and his power gives life to this world. In John's

narrative, it is the raising of Lazarus that incited the authorities to seek Jesus' execution.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel was a sixth-century BCE prophet living in Babylon during the exile. His prophecies, part of the Priestly tradition that is found throughout the Old Testament, proclaim that despite the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587, God will eventually restore Israel to even greater glory. Perhaps the most beloved passage of the book is this vision in chapter 37 of a restored Israel, returned from Babylon to their own land.

Romans 8:6-11

In the center of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul concluded his discussion of law and gospel by contrasting life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. For those in Christ, sin is already dead; the Spirit gives life. For Paul, the term *flesh* referred to the body as it is misused and controlled by the power of sin, and the term *Spirit* to the power of the risen Christ in the individual and community.

The Readings on This Day

The last of the great signs in the Gospel of John is the raising of Lazarus. The church sees in the narrative of the raising of Lazarus and in the vision of the dry bones metaphors for baptism and for the renewed life of faith that is the intention of Lent. The Vigil is coming soon.

John 11:1-45

The church has seen in this last great Johannine sign a picture of baptism: we too were dead, but the word of Christ has called us from death and restored us to life in the Spirit. Thus Lent is our annual emerging from the grave, our helping to unbind one another for vibrant life together.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Christians have seen also in Ezekiel's vision a picture of the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Both now and at the end we rise up in response to the word of the LORD. Through the power of the Spirit's breath, baptism begins our new life, a life that will never end.

Romans 8:6-11

In the last of our four Lenten readings from Romans, Paul uses the language of death and life to describe the radical nature of the effect of the indwelling of Christ's Spirit. We are now dead to sin, and the new life of Christ is already experienced here and now.

Images in the Readings

Many medieval churches housed burials and even contain glass-cased skeletons, but most contemporary churches avoid picturing those bones that are left after the flesh has rotted away. Our culture avoids dealing directly and honestly with death: many people are even replacing the verb "died" with the term "passed," as if with everyone going off to heaven, there really is no death. In contrast, this Sunday presents us with the images of the **grave**, the **stink** of bodily decomposition, and the pile of **bones**. Furthermore, Paul's use of the term **flesh** as a metaphor for the misused human life intensifies this Sunday's honesty about human mortality. These texts represent the

Bible's stark attention to the reality of death, both the "death" that is sin and the finality of death when our bodies die. For this Sunday, you might borrow a skeleton from a science classroom to hang prominently in the sanctuary. When we fully acknowledge the natural fact of death, we are ready to praise God's life as gift.

Connections with the Liturgy

In the words of the baptismal liturgy, "By water and the word God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ." Our creeds affirm not some immortality of the soul, but rather "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," "the life of the world to come." Christians trust that God enlivens not only this natural existence, but also a life other than and beyond this world, a new creation after this entire created universe has come to its end. Our life in Christ begins at baptism and extends, by the mystery of God, beyond time and space.

From a Scholar

As Easter approaches we move from allusions to God's power over death to an account of Jesus raising the dead. The gospel, however, lies not in Jesus' resuscitation of Lazarus, but in his proclamation to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11:25). Jesus' resurrection is not about mere bodily resuscitation (though as Christians we profess belief in a bodily resurrection); the power of Jesus' resurrection is greater than this. Instead Jesus teaches that, like Lazarus, all people must eventually face death, but because he is the resurrection, death is not the end.

Thomas is therefore right to declare that returning to Judea risks not only Jesus' life, but all of their lives (11:16). Although he is not immediately stoned on sight, Jesus' resuscitation of Lazarus frightens some of the authorities enough that it is directly linked with the plot to have him executed (11:53). In a real sense, then, Jesus both risks and ultimately sacrifices his life for the sake of Lazarus. Those present note how much Jesus loved Lazarus (11:36); indeed, this is the greatness of God's love for each of us.

When Jesus encounters Mary weeping, he is "disturbed in spirit" (11:33; cf. 11:38). This image of spirit carries across the three readings for this day. In Ezekiel, the word translated first as "breath" and later as "spirit" is the same (37:8-10, 14). Similarly, the Greek word translated as "Spirit" in both Romans and John can also mean "breath." In Ezekiel, flesh and sinews do not bring life to the dry bones; only God's spirit does that. It is this same Spirit that Paul tells the Romans dwells in them through the power of God who raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 8:11). Paul does not here spurn bodily existence, but recognizes that a life concerned only about the physical flesh—without attention to the divine breath within—is only a shell of a life.

Life is neither conferred by flesh nor confined by it—it is the power of God within us. For this reason, Jesus assures Martha that even decay of the fleshly body need not be the end for one who trusts in the life-giving power of God.

Amy Lindeman Allen

From a Preacher

We have reached the fifth Sunday in Lent, that desolate valley of bones where shadows lengthen and night falls. Many have grown weary of Christ's agony. The absent "alleluias" and looming cross cause them to clamor for a brighter hope.

There are certainly those who value Lent if for no other reason than that their lives are already Lent-saturated. They stare numbly at the dry bones and sense that God understands their plight; rather than "happy songs," God sings to them of new life arising from their misery, confusion, and sorrow.

The prayer of the day reminds us of sin and death—as if we could forget during these forty days! It begs, "Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ."

Ezekiel's dry bones drag us, if but for a time, into the forsaken valley. We stare into the boneyard, trembling, and are asked the LORD's overwhelming question, "Mortal, can these bones live?" (37:3).

We have faced this question countless times in the heartbreaking cemeteries of life. We have worried repeatedly whether these bones can live: Will the tears ever stop flowing? Will the devastating despair cease? Will Easter finally arrive?

Despair and anxiety are sometimes almost too much to bear in the deep of night. We are haunted by our failures, embarrassed by our cowardice, and crushed by our loved ones' deaths. We restlessly pace back and forth as others sleep, desperately uttering, like the psalmist, *I wait for you, O Lord; my soul waits; in your word is my hope.*

Liturgically, Lent is the night of rattling bones, sordid sin, and horrifying death. Amid this lingering Lenten gloom, the springtime Spirit surprisingly invites us to rise above our paltry schemes, pathetic failures, and saccharine songs to speak of a more excellent way—God's way, not ours—"Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD" (Ezek. 37:4). We are invited to look beyond our own hearts and minds and to hear the breathtaking words from heaven: "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people" (37:12).

The grim boneyard repeatedly tempts us, as Paul notes, “to set the mind on the flesh.” At those moments, Paul invites us “to set the mind on the Spirit,” which brings “life and peace” (Rom. 8:6).

There is another valley of bones on the fifth Sunday in Lent when the stink of death sours the air. Jesus receives the ghastly news that Lazarus is dying. Oddly, he does not come running straightaway. He notes later, “For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (John 11:15). When Jesus finally does arrive, Lazarus is dead and “a stone [is] lying against [the tomb]” (11:38). Then Jesus sets to work: “Take away the stone . . . Lazarus, come out! . . . Unbind him, and let him go” (11:39, 43, 44). Who doesn’t think of Jesus’ death and burial when hearing these words?

Yet again, there is the Lenten atmosphere, the realization that only the word of the Lord can wrest life from the jaws of death. Lazarus’s family and friends, and we too, can only wait at the tomb for Jesus.

We have all been to the valley of bones, to the tomb. What a gift to know that, by the grace of God, the stone will be rolled away, the bones will live, and we shall live forever. Oh, yes, and we shall sing “alleluia” again.

Wilbert “Wilk” Miller

Making Connections

- Children stand at the valley of bones with fears too deep for words. They dread the night, when monsters lurk beneath their beds. What story might we tell them before they pray, “Now I lay me down to sleep”? Of course, tell them of their baptisms when God trounced the great sea monsters and promised them life forever.
- How is the congregation feeling on the fifth Sunday in Lent? Quite a few congregations fear for their lives. As they watch one church after another close and barely a handful of people gather on Sunday morning in places dear to them, they remember loved ones’ baptisms, weddings, and funerals in these places. Tell them a story of hope when “breath came into [the bones], and they lived, and stood on their feet” (Ezek. 37:10).
- Reflect with worshipers how they proclaim in word and deed, through their daily lives, that dry bones will live.
- Reflect on how communities wait together when all they seem to experience is bone after bone. How do we practice waiting on the word of the Lord—together?