

All Are Welcome: Faith, Difference, and Justice

A Lenten Devotional

The Anti-Racism Team of the Western PA Annual Conference
of the United Methodist Church

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Each week, this devotional for the forty days of Lent will consider passages, mostly from the Hebrew Bible, that stress God's love for diversity. Each weekday the devotional reading will consider one particular aspect of that week's Scripture readings, concluding with a prayer. Our emphasis throughout will be not so much on the negative—that racism and exclusion are unacceptable (although of course they are!)—but on the positive: that God has created us in all our racial and cultural and sexual diversity, and that God loves and values us in and *for* our differences, not in spite of them.

On each Sunday, the Gospel for that day from the lectionary will be presented without comment. You are invited to meditate on these Gospel readings by observing the spiritual practice of *Lectio Divina*. This Christian discipline involves reading the Gospel slowly and carefully, attentive to what is said, and also striving with a Spirit-inspired imagination to be present within the narrative. A helpful guide to *Lectio Divina* by Dr. Martha Robbins, Director of the *Pneuma Institute* and Joan Marshall Associate Professor Emerita of Pastoral Care at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is presented below. The *Pneuma Institute* is an independent, ecumenical organization offering workshops, retreats, and services pertaining to spiritual growth and development, and spiritual leadership in today's world. For more information about the *Pneuma Institute* visit www.PneumaInstitute.com, and to obtain an order form for Dr. Robbins' Guided Meditations on Sacred Scripture, email her at mrobbins@pts.edu.

God bless you as you read, reflect, and pray through this season of repentance and preparation.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE – (LECTIO DIVINA)

Adapted by Martha Robbins, Th.D.

PREPARE

Choose a passage from Scripture: (Also good to read passage before going to bed.)

Recall that God is yearning to reveal God's Word to you; to surround you with Love as God is always present to you. Attitude of expectancy, willingness, openness.

Trust that God will speak in God's own way and time.

Prepare yourself for listening to God by breathing, centering, focusing.

Ask for the gift to know, love, serve God more fully as revealed to you in this Scripture.

READ (*Lectio*)

Read the passage slowly. Perhaps a verse at a time, aloud, or in rhythm with your breathing. Notice which words, phrases, verses catch your attention. Repeat words, phrases whenever you desire – especially those that draw your attention.

MEDITATE (*Meditatio*)

Reflect on what the Word may be revealing to you or how it may have something to say to you about who God is; what Christ may be saying to you; what it may illuminate about your relationship with God, family, others, your work/ministry, the poor, study, vocation. How does this Word (phrase, verse) addressed to you intersect your life?

Imagine yourself in the story (if a story passage) & let it unfold. What you are seeing, and hearing from the characters in this story? What is your response to what you see and hear? Allow yourself to interact with any of the characters in the Bible story. Let the Holy Spirit reveal the meanings of what you see, hear, say and its implications for your own life.

Linger wherever you feel drawn or moved, if a word or phrase touches you (e.g., you feel God's love, a sense of peace, joy, sorrow, confused or disturbed by what the words are saying to you). Don't hurry to move on. Let these words sink in, "chew on them" in order for them to become a part of you. Repeat them, take them to your heart.

PRAY (*Oratio*)

Let prayer arise out of you, thanking God, praising God, or sharing your sadness, confusion, questions, joys, or ask for God's help or forgiveness. Sometimes your prayer may be wordless – experiencing joy, gratitude, wonder, tears. Whatever is going on within you can be gathered up and directed toward God as the Spirit prays within you. Be honest with God; carry on a conversation as one friend to another. Offer yourself or those parts of yourself that were revealed to you to God; let God's word heal, consecrate, and transform you, "let this mind and heart be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

CONTEMPLATE (*Contemplatio*)

Let yourself be drawn into a deep peace, joy, love, silence! Let God's Spirit pray in you.

INCARNATE (*Incarnatio*)

Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance in ways to embody this Word in your daily life. What is God inviting you to do?

Week 1: The Book of Joel “Hope Isn’t Easy”

Ash Wednesday, March 1: Call to Repentance

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” (Joel 1:1-2, 12-17)

Here in the northern hemisphere, Lent always comes in winter, which feels appropriate. Lent seems a wintry season of the church year: dark, cold, grim, unforgiving. The liturgical color for Lent is purple—an appropriately dark and mournful shade. But we are likely to think of Lent even more in winter hues: the penitential black of clerical garb and of leafless winter branches; the gray of ashes, on hands and foreheads or on icy streets; the off-white of sackcloth and of trodden snow. The Old Testament reading for today fits that perception: “*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!*” (Joel 2:1-2).

Yet curiously, the word “Lent” has nothing to do with winter or darkness—or fasting or penitence, even. Etymologically, “Lent” derives from the Middle English *lenten* and the Old English *lencten*, and is related to the Old High German *lenzin*—all of which mean “Spring”! Lent is a *green* season—a time of growth. Lent provides the opportunity for us to dig down deeper in our tradition, to break up the fallow ground of our cold hearts so that the Water of Life may seep down into the center of who are. Lent is the time for the Spirit to prune away our dead branches so that we may bear fruit. Lent is a season of new life—a springtime for our souls! So too, for Joel, the point of the call to repentance is found in the possibility of new life that will follow: “*Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him*” (Joel 2:13-14). This Lent, may God’s Spirit awaken us to repentance, and so to new life.

Prayer: O God, we long for growth, yet we fear change. We long for your new life, yet fear what it will cost us. On this, your word does not reassure us! In fact, you assure us that we indeed *must* change, and that your new life will indeed cost us, as it cost you, everything. We pray for your Spirit to empower us, that this season of Lent would be springtime for our souls. Through Jesus our Christ, who “throughout these forty days for us didst fast and pray,” Amen. (Hymn by Claudia F. Hernaman)

Thursday, March 2: No Easy Reconciliation

“Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing” (Joel 2:12-13).

In her book *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, Jennifer Harvey proposes that a major obstacle to racial justice in the church is “the powerful hold that ‘reconciliation’ has on the white Christian imagination.”¹ Being reconciled to one another is certainly a worthy goal—but not if white Christians think that “reconciliation” means expecting Christians of color just to let bygones be bygones! As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” white Christians may prefer “a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”² Such easy “reconciliation,” as Harvey reminds us, ignores and trivializes “an unacknowledged history of brutal injustice, harm done, white hostility to and violence against communities of color—histories that are alive and well in the present.”³ White Christians need to ask, “without repentance and repair having come prior, why would we even assume interracial relations to be desirable or beneficial to Christians of color?”⁴

Joel understands that *true* repentance means far more than saying that we are sorry! He calls upon his community to demonstrate their whole-hearted desire to return to the LORD, and their deep sorrow at past wrong-doing, “with fasting, with weeping, with mourning.” This can be no superficial demonstration: “rend your *heart*,” the LORD demands, “and not your clothing.” If this Lent is indeed to be for us a season of new life, as Jesus desires, then we too cannot expect an easy resolution to America’s besetting sin of racism. May God grant us open hearts, listening ears, and the wisdom and courage to do the hard work of repentance and repair.

Prayer: Transforming God, we confess that we often do not see or hear one another clearly. Blinded by our own perceptions, deafened in our own echo chambers, we do not see or hear the oppression that grinds down our sisters and brothers. Grant us opened eyes and unstopped ears, we pray, that we may know our sin, for only then may we truly repent. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who invites outcasts to his table, for food and for healing, Amen.

Friday, March 3: Time for Lament

*“Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests;
wail, you ministers of the altar.
Come, pass the night in sackcloth,
you ministers of my God!
Grain offering and drink offering
are withheld from the house of your God.
Sanctify a fast,
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the LORD your God,
and cry out to the LORD” (Joel 1:13-14).*

In a sermon preached in the chapel of my seminary, a courageous student observed that our community was a very hard place to be if you were sad. People who were hurting or depressed were likely either to be ignored, or worse, to be *jollied*: to be told to cheer up and trust in Jesus—as though sorrow and pain were somehow a denial of faith. I fear that mine is not the only Christian community guilty of this offense. As Donald Gowan ruefully observes, “Christian worship tends to be all triumph, all good news (even the confession of sin is not a very awesome experience because we know the assurance of pardon is coming; it’s printed in the bulletin). And what does that say to those who, at the moment, know nothing of triumph?”⁵

True repentance leading to new life requires lament: not only our own authentic lament at the realization of our sin, but also our providing space for, and attending to, the laments of others. Walter Brueggemann writes that the loss of lament in worship means “the loss of *genuine covenant interaction* because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology.”⁶ No wonder Joel urges the priests, “*Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD” (Joel 1:14)*. By stifling lament, we shut off the genuine interaction that a living relationship with God presumes.

Prayer: Oh God, we confess that in our discomfort with lament, we have silenced the oppressed in our communities—and our personal struggles and fears as well. We have insisted that everyone in our services smile and be happy, and so have condemned our worship to insipid shallowness. Teach us how to lament, and to let others lament, so that we may rediscover the authentic covenant relationship into which you call us. Through Christ our Lord, who listened to the cries of others, and was not too proud to cry out on the cross, Amen.

Saturday, March 4: Hope for All People

*“Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28-29).*

The setting for much of this remarkable book of prophecy is a locust plague, which has decimated Judah. But, by today’s passage, that is over, and after the swarm has passed, when the locusts all are gone, reassurance is offered to the community, the “children of Zion” (Joel 2:23), who twice are promised, “my people shall never again be put to shame” (Joel 2:26, 27). But the people also learn that they are part of a larger community than they had known. In this passage—the most familiar passage from this book, quoted by Peter in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21)—the “children of Zion,” called “*my people*” by the LORD, include not just the adult men of the worshipping congregation, but women, children, the aged—even slaves.

Joel reminds us that we belong to a larger community than we had known. We may have forgotten that—I confess that often I have forgotten that. We succumb to the temptation to define our community too narrowly, as including only those like us, whether ethnically or ideologically or theologically. If this past election taught us anything, it is that we had not heard one another at all. In the days and weeks to come, we must learn to listen to one another—not necessarily to *agree*, but to listen, to learn, and to understand. We too hear today God’s promises of deliverance, of vindication, of freedom from shame. But we cannot experience these blessings separately and severally. They are not offered to us in that way. We will find them together—*all* of us—or we will not find them at all.

Prayer: O chain-breaking God, we long for freedom. But you have shown us in your Word and by your Spirit that if we would be free, we must work to free one another, for until we *all* are free, *none* of us is free. Teach us to draw the circle wide—to find ourselves a part of a larger community than we had known, embracing sisters and brothers we did not know we had, and extending to include all God’s world. In the name of Jesus, whom God sent to us out of love for all the world (John 3:16-17), Amen.

Sunday, March 5:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

*'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

*'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him (Matthew 4:1-11).

Week 2: Genesis 1:1—2:4a “Created in God’s Image”

Monday, March 6: Naming

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3).

Readers have long noticed—and rightly so!—that in Genesis 1, God creates by speaking. John’s Gospel begins with this insight (“In the beginning was the Word”), and goes on to identify Jesus as that creative word of God (“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” [John 1:14]). It is important for us to recognize, however, not only that God speaks the world into being, but also what God *says*. In Hebrew, God’s creation begins with two words: *Yehi ‘or*—“Let Light be.” God creates by *naming*: when God pronounces the name of a thing (Light, or Sky, or the Lights adorning the sky), the thing comes into being!

In part, this reminds us of the importance of naming in the ancient world. It is no accident that often in Scripture, with a new call comes a new identity: Abram becomes Abraham (Genesis 17:5), Sarai becomes Sarah (Genesis 17:15), Jacob becomes Israel (Genesis 32:28), Simon becomes Peter (Matthew 16:18); Saul becomes Paul (Acts 13:9). But it also affirms that who we are is God’s gift to us. God has pronounced our names from the beginning of creation. Today, let us remember and celebrate God’s gift of identity, and pray for the wisdom and insight to grant that gift to one another.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for making me who I am: for gifting me with my very identity. Forgive me when I fear and distrust those unlike me, forgetting that you have spoken their names as well—that they, too, have received their identity from you. Grant me wisdom to listen, and courage to value what you value, for you are truly “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34 KJV). Through Jesus the Christ, who called his disciples by name, Amen.

Tuesday, March 7: Multiplication by Division

“God separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4).

At the beginning of our Bible God creates, not only by speaking, but also by *separation*. As Claus Westermann observed, the first three days of creation all involve acts of separation: light from darkness (1:3-5); waters above from waters below (1:6-8); dry land from water (1:9-13).⁷ The Hebrew word used here, *hibdil*, is important in the vocabulary of Israel’s priesthood. One of the primary tasks of priests in ancient Israel was to teach their people to keep the holy separate from the common, the clean from the unclean (Leviticus 10:10).

Likely, Genesis 1:1—2:4a regards God and the world from that same priestly perspective. At issue is the goodness of each and every aspect of creation *on its own*, as a gift from God. Genesis 1:1—2:4a affirms God’s valuation of the world in and for itself. Again and again the text affirms, *“God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25)*, and when the work of creation is complete, *“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31)*. The goodness of creation does not depend on its utility for human beings: God calls the world good well before we show up! The creation is good because God *calls* it good, in all its diversity.

In our own context, however, we may miss the point. We may think that God baptizes our own divisions, and wants us to stay in our homogeneous boxes. So too, in the human community, God calls us to affirm the created goodness of other races and cultures. God calls us not to bland homogeneity, but to the celebration of our differences.

Prayer: O God, help me to see the world in your terms: as good in itself, rather than good if it is good for me. Help me to see my sisters and brothers, too, *as* sisters and brothers, rather than as means to my own ends. In the name of Christ Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45), Amen.

Wednesday, March 8: *Delight in Diversity*

“God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Although we are barely at the beginnings of space exploration, we have already learned far more than we could have imagined about our universe. Yet so far, every probe we have sent into outer space, whatever its target, has come back with one common, depressing fact: so far as we now know, at least in our corner of the cosmos, there is no life anywhere except on our own blue-green world. That is remarkable, because on *this* world, pretty much the opposite has proven true. Nearly everywhere we have looked on Earth, we have found life: in every environment, no matter how desolate and inhospitable, from our deepest oceans to our highest mountains, from our most frigid polar regions to our hottest thermal springs.

The priests of ancient Israel knew far less about our world, in scientific terms, than we do. Yet they too marveled at the diversity and complexity of life on earth, describing with wonder the many kinds of life, from plants to fish to birds; from domestic animals who share our lives to wild animals beyond our borders to the *remes*: the creepy-crawlies who seem to inhabit every nook and cranny of this world. A delightful, if unlikely, story is told of famous biologist J. B. S. Haldane. When asked what his studies had revealed to him about the Divine, he allegedly responded, “God has an inordinate fondness for beetles.”

The diversity and profusion of all life on this planet, beetles included, does indeed reveal something of God. For Genesis declares that God delights in this diversity, declaring continually of the world he calls into being, “It is good; it is good; it is *very* good.” Surely such a God delights in our human diversity, too.

Prayer: All things bright and beautiful,
 All creatures great and small;
 All things wise and wonderful,
 The Lord God made them all.

Gift us, O God we pray, with your delight in your creation. Teach us especially to delight in one another, and to learn from one another to praise you more fully and love you more deeply than our separate, single perspectives permit. In the name of Jesus our Christ, whose birth was celebrated by sages from strange and distant lands, Amen (Hymn by Cecil Frances Alexander).

Thursday, March 9: In God's Image—A Human Face

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”
(Genesis 1:26).

Volumes have been written on what it means that we are created in the image of God—some of it blasphemous and wrong-headed. So, for example, the white supremacist Church of the Creator claimed that only white people are created in God's image, while the other races are “mud people,” made from the dirt (a deliberate misreading of Genesis 2:7). Others insist that only *men* are created in God's image, not women (something tomorrow's devotional addresses directly).

But by saying that humans bear God's image, the priests were saying something about *God*, as well as about humanity. The gods of the nations surrounding Israel were embodiments of natural forces or powers: Baal *was* the thunderstorm, Asherah *was* motherhood, Ishtar *was* raw sensuality. But in Genesis 1:26, the priests of Israel say that God's likeness is seen in *humanity*: to understand what God is like, we are to look, not to raw elemental powers, but into the face of another human being. Our passage understands God in *personal* terms. The rest of the Bible, it could be said, pursues the question, “How can we be in relationship with God?” Right at the start of Scripture, we have a clue in our very humanity. Our own longing for relationship, for connection with one another, tells us something of God's love for us. As the Bible frankly and extraordinarily declares, “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Genesis 1:26 goes on to define what being created in the image of God means in greater detail: the image and likeness of God in human being is related to “having dominion” (Hebrew *radah*) over the rest of creation. Under God's divine lordship as the ruler of the cosmos, we concretely represent God's rule in this material world. Unfortunately, in the history of our faith, believers often have misunderstood governing the earth to mean *abusing* the earth: as if we are free to use the world, and even to use it up, as we see fit. But as we have seen, Genesis 1:1—2:4a affirms God's valuation of the world in and for itself. If we exercise our dominion properly, we too will recognize the wonder, beauty and inherent goodness of the world that God has made, and exercise our responsibility to be faithful stewards of God's earth.

Prayer: O Creator, in Jesus you have shown us a human face, full of compassion and love. May we search one another's faces for your face, and so learn to love you by loving one another. In the name of Jesus, who gives us your new commandment: “love one another” (John 13:34), Amen.

Friday, March 10: In God's Image—Male and Female

*“So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).*

The familiar, traditional reading of this passage, from the King James Version, is “Let us make *man*,” the NRSV instead reads, “Let us make *humanity*” (Gen 1:26). This is not “political correctness,” whatever that bugaboo of our times may mean: it is a matter of accurate translation. In Hebrew, the word for “man” is *ish*. But that is not the word used here. In Genesis 1:27, God creates *adam*, which means “humanity.” It is particularly important that we translate *adam* correctly here, because Genesis 1:27 goes on very plainly to state “*male and female* [God] created them”! Masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness, are both reflections of God-likeness in this verse. There is no hierarchy of the sexes here, no basis for regarding women as inferior to men.

Our traditions have not always been equal to this insight—yet here it is, at the very beginning of the Bible! Sexism is denied any legitimate place in God’s rightly ordered world. Further, to say that both maleness and femaleness represent “God-likeness” is also to say that *God* is neither male nor female—or more accurately, that masculinity and femininity alike reflect aspects of God. While the dominant images of God in the male-centered culture of ancient Israel were masculine, there are texts that depict God in feminine terms—for example, as midwife (Psalm 22:9-10) and as mother (Hosea 11:1-4). Further, one of the dominant features of Israel’s theology from early on, central to the foundational texts of Israel’s covenant with God, was the absolute refusal to make any image representing God (see Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:7-10), for no one image can adequately express the One whom Pulitzer Prize-winning African American novelist Alice Walker calls “That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving.”⁸ All of our language about God—including God as “King,” “Lord,” or even as “Father”—must be held lightly, because whatever image of God we have in our minds, God is not *that*! Inasmuch as our images of God open us up to become channels of God’s love and peace into the world, they serve their purpose. But if our images of God shut us off from one another, they also shut us off from God; they become, in that moment, idols that kill.

Prayer: God our Mother and Father, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, give us a hunger for you that will not be satisfied by the thin gruel of our own conceptions and imaginings. We long to know *you*, not to know about you, but we cannot know you if we close our hearts and minds and ears to half of your image in humanity. Open our eyes to your image manifest in women and men alike. Through Jesus, who made the Samaritan woman the first missionary (John 4:39-42), Amen.

Saturday, March 11: In God's Image—No Kinds of People

No text is given for today's devotional, because today we reflect, not on what Genesis 1:1—2:4a *says*, but on something that it *doesn't* say! Until the creation of human being, all living things in this account come in "kinds." On Day Three, when God invites the earth to "put forth vegetation" (Genesis 1:11), the earth produces "plants yielding seed *of every kind*, and trees *of every kind* bearing fruit with the seed in it" (Genesis 1:12). Similarly, on Day Five, God creates "every living creature that moves, *of every kind*, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird *of every kind*" (Gen 1:21). On Day Six, God again invites the earth, "bring forth living creatures *of every kind*: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth *of every kind*" (Gen 1:24).

When we arrive at the creation of humanity at the end of Day Six, however, nothing is said of there being any "kinds" of people.⁹ This is certainly not because the ancient Israelites were ignorant of other races and cultures: Palestine was a crossroads of ancient civilizations. The Israelites were fully aware of Africans and Asians, people of varying ethnicities, speaking a host of languages, coming from a variety of cultures. Yet Israel does not distinguish among these races and nations, as though some are more human than others. Certainly, this text does not identify the Israelites as human, and their neighbors as something less. Instead, as George Kelsey (African American theologian and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.) understood, there is just '*adam*: one single human family.'¹⁰

This is a remarkable confession, rejecting every form of racism and jingoistic nationalism. Again, as Scripture sadly but faithfully bears witness, Israel was not always faithful to this insight. But as we will see throughout these Lenten reflections, it is an insight that recurs again and again—and one that the church in our day must reclaim.

Prayer: Holy God, Genesis identifies no "kinds" of people, but we have been swift to make up that lack, hastening to identify all sorts of folk as outsiders, strangers, aliens, who are not welcome in our communities. Help us to see and repent of this sin, Abba. Teach us to love whom you love, as you love, for this is our prayer in the name of your son Jesus, who "came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11), Amen.

Sunday, March 12:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).

Week 3—Genesis 11:1-9 “The Tower of Babel—God Wills Diversity”

Monday, March 13: Unchecked Ambition?

“The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.’” (Genesis 11:5-6).

Traditional readings of the Tower of Babel story see it as a warning against unchecked ambition. The sin of Babel is the tower, with which they sought to reach the heavens on their own. It is to halt this prideful ambition that God curses them by confusing their languages, stopping the construction and forcing them to divide into language groups and scatter. But as Theodore Hiebert has observed,¹¹ that traditional reading misses the reason the text itself gives for their building: not so as to reach the heavens, but because *“otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4)*. Sure enough, when God decides to act, God says nothing about the tower, or pride—or indeed, about *punishment*. God acts because the people are about to succeed in their goal of remaining “one people” with “one language,” so that “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” Having circumvented God’s will in this, what else might they do?

This is neither a story condemning the sin of unchecked ambition, nor an account of divine punishment for that sin. It is about God stepping in to ensure difference and diversity, just as humans are about to succeed in enforcing sameness. Why does God do this? Perhaps because, as Argentinian Methodist theologian José Míguez Bonino wrote, *“God’s intention is a diverse humanity that can find its unity not in the domination of one city, one tower, or one language but in the ‘blessing for all the families of the earth’ (Genesis 12:3).”*¹² As we saw in the account of creation in Genesis 1:1—2:4a, God loves diversity.

Prayer: God of rainbows, sometimes we talk about being “color-blind,” as though color itself was the problem. We talk about being “post-racial,” as though race itself was the problem. By your Spirit empower us to see as you see, and to love our world as you do, in all its hues and cultures and languages. This is our prayer, in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Tuesday, March 14: Our Own Kind

“Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4).

In 1956, Rev. W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas—at that time the largest Baptist church in the world—was invited to address the General Assembly of the South Carolina legislature on the subject of racial segregation. In his cringingly self-revealing remarks, Criswell condemned “scantling good-for-nothing fellows who are trying to upset all the things that we love as good old Southern people and good old Southern Baptists. . . . Don’t force me by law, by statute, by Supreme Court decision. . . to cross over in those intimate things where I don’t want to go. . . Let me have my church. Let me have my school. Let me have my friends.”¹³

Rev. Criswell could just as well have spoken for the First Church of Babel. The denizens of that place built their city and their tower to ensure that they would stay together homogeneously: *“otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”* (Genesis 11:4). We sometimes refer to the confusion of the world’s languages and the scattering of humanity as the “curse of Babel”—but being “scattered abroad” was exactly what God intended for humanity! The *real* curse of Babel is staying where we are comfortable and unchallenged, in “my church,” “my school,” with “my friends.” Babel *itself*, in its safe, comfortable, stultifying sameness, is the curse.

Prayer: O God who comforts the troubled, we pray that you might also trouble the comfortable. Push us out into our growing edges. Show us the blessing brought to our communities by those who are not like us. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who reminds us still, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (John 10:16), Amen.

Wednesday, March 15: God Wills Diversity

“So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:8-9).

The people of Babel wanted to stay all together, and all the same. But God willed differently. The Babel story itself gives no indication of whether or not the people realized that their desires ran counter to God’s. But the old priestly traditions in Genesis state this plainly. The priestly accounts of creation and flood alike declare that humanity was to “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). As the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 concretely describes, this meant not only being geographically scattered, but ethnically and culturally diverse.

By staying together and squelching difference, the people of Babel—whether knowingly or not—were standing in the way of the diversity of expression that is God’s intent for human beings. So too our own attempts to impose homogeneity on our communities run counter to God’s will. Racial and cultural diversity is not a problem to be overcome. It is a gift of God, to be celebrated and embraced.

Prayer: Forgive us, O God, when in our longing for comfort and familiarity we stand in the way of your plan and purpose for us. Teach us to reach outside our safe enclaves and welcome all your children as our sisters and brothers. In the name of Jesus, whose reign embraces all, Amen.

Thursday, March 16: *The Lessons of Babel—Saved Together*

*“At that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call on the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.
From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
my suppliants, my scattered ones,
shall bring my offering.”* (Zephaniah 3:9-10).

Today, we are reading a passage from the book of Zephaniah that is based on the tower of Babel story. The connection may not be clear at first—after all, Zephaniah never mentions Babel. But the connection between the texts is apparent in Hebrew—expressed, appropriately enough, through word play!

Although this prophetic word deals with the restoration of Judah after the Babylonian exile, God’s promised restoration begins with *the nations*, not with Judah: *“Then I will change the speech of the peoples into pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord”* (Zeph 3:9). While in Zephaniah, the nations are given “a pure speech” (*saphah berurtah*), in Genesis God *confuses* their speech (again, *saphah*; see Gen 11:7), so that humanity, which had been united by *“one language and the same words”* (Gen 11:1), became scattered. Just as, through the confusion (Hebrew *balal*; Gen 11:7) of their speech the nations had been scattered (Hebrew *puts*; Gen 11:8), so through the purification (Hebrew *barar*; Zeph 3:9) of the nations’ speech God returns the exiles—those God calls “my scattered ones” (Hebrew *bath-putsay*; Zeph 3:10)—to their home. Israel’s peace is gained, not through the conquest or destruction of the nations, but through their purification and union in service to God.

Sadly, ethnocentrism—the belief that people like me are better than other people—is alive and well in modern America. Political scientists Marc Hetherington and Drew Engelhardt of Vanderbilt University asked whites how favorable to unfavorable they found blacks, Hispanics, Muslims, gays and lesbians, and transgender people, as compared to themselves. Overall, 23% of all white respondents rated these groups favorably, while 57% rated them unfavorably.¹⁴ May this Lent be a time for our own confession of and repentance from the sin of ethnocentrism. After all, if Zephaniah is right, our own healing can only come with the healing of the nations.

Prayer: O God, when we forget remind us that we need one another. In your will and wisdom, we are not saved separately, but together. Through Jesus our Christ, who said “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5), Amen.

Friday, March 17: *The Lessons of Babel—Unity in Diversity*

“Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power’” (Acts 2:7-11).

Another text based on the tower of Babel story is the account of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus’ followers were waiting together in Jerusalem as he had commanded them, praying in an upper room, when *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability”* (Acts 2:4). Boiling out of that room and into the streets, they met Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman world, who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. These visitors discovered, to their astonishment, that they could understand Jesus’ Galilean followers perfectly: *“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power”* (Acts 2:11). Please notice that this passage does not say that the people all started speaking the *same* language—that their cultural and ethnic distinctiveness was denied or undone. The Spirit does not return them to *“one language and the same words”* (Gen 11:1). Instead, each group hears God’s praise in its *own* language.

In Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” she relates her first encounter with her first college roommate, in America: “She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my ‘tribal music,’ and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. . . . My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.”¹⁵

We should not be surprised that the members of the Pentecost crowd all hear the Gospel in their own languages. The entire Bible models for us how to escape the danger of the single story. Scripture rarely gives us a single story about anything! At the beginning of our Bible, we find two different accounts of the creation of the world (the account we pursued last week, in Genesis 1:1—2:4a, and another in Genesis 2:4b-25). Our New Testament opens with four gospels, presenting four quite different accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Scripture itself calls for us to listen with open ears and open hearts for the truth told, not as a single story, but as a chorus of voices. Sometimes those voices are in harmony, sometimes they are in dissonance, but always they are lifted in praise to the God who remembers all our stories, the comedies and tragedies alike, and catches them up together in love, forgiveness, and grace.

Prayer: O God, you are bigger than all our imaginings. Your glory explodes every box in which we try to confine it. May we never be satisfied with a single story, but be ever eager to see you through the eyes of others, and hear your praise in their stories. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Saturday, March 18: Learning the Wrong Lesson—Diversity, not Apartheid

“Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech” (Genesis 11:7).

Jacqueline Lapsley recalls being with Theodore Hiebert at a conference of Reformed theologians and Bible scholars in South Africa. There, he advanced the reading of the tower of Babel story we have advocated in this week’s devotional readings: that this story demonstrates God’s love of cultural diversity. But when they heard this, South African scholars present were horrified! It seems that this very text, and a reading very like Hiebert’s, had been “one of the central biblical foundations for apartheid. On the pro-apartheid reading, Gen 11 teaches that God does not want different cultural and linguistic groups to live together.”¹⁶

Does this invalidate Hiebert’s reading of this passage? I don’t believe it does—although it certainly points up a problem with how we do biblical interpretation (also called “exegesis,” from Greek words meaning “draw out”)! Lapsley warns against readings of Scripture that “serve our own selfish interests,” or that fail to consider “God’s larger story.”¹⁷ In the end, she proposes, “Exegesis requires certain learned skills—how to attend to the historical, social, and literary facets of the text—but it also requires a disciplined imagination and something even more important—faith that God’s word has power to speak to and for us, and especially faith that it speaks to and for those who are far removed from the prosperity we enjoy.”¹⁸ Reading Scripture prayerfully, guided by God’s Spirit, with disciplined imaginations, we can make wise choices about how to apply the Bible to our own contexts. When we do this, we can readily see that affirming the God-given goodness of our differences leads, not to apartheid, but to learning to live together in love.

Prayer: God, when our reading of the Bible prompts us to turn inward rather than outward; to close doors rather than to open them; to shut ourselves off from others rather than opening ourselves up to them; give us the courage to say “no” to that reading, and the wisdom to look again, carefully and prayerfully. Through Christ Jesus—“the Word made flesh” (John 1:14), Amen.

Sunday, March 19

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken (John 2:13-22).

Week 4—Exodus 1—2: “Moses”

Monday, March 20: Pharaoh and Ethnic Cleansing

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them” (Exodus 1:8-14).

It is important for us to call this what it is. Pharaoh’s fears, and the Egyptians’ dread, were not in any way realistic. There was no indication that the Israelites had any intention to side with Egypt’s enemies in a conflict. The Israelites posed no threat: indeed, Joseph—an Israelite!—had recently been Egypt’s savior (see Genesis 41). But this Pharaoh has no memory: he “did not know Joseph.” His cruelty and oppression toward an ethnic minority in his kingdom responds to an imaginary crisis: this is racism, pure and simple.

As I write this devotional, Dylann Roof has just been found guilty of murder in the shooting deaths of nine people attending a Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. In his statement taken following this horrific crime, Mr. Roof said that he *had* to do this, in retaliation for black-on-white crime: another imaginary crisis, based on fake news from the internet rather than actual crime statistics.¹⁹ Sadly, the escalation of hate crimes following our recent election—the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 1,094 reports of harassment and intimidation between November 9 and December 12, “more than the group would usually see over a six-month period”²⁰—demonstrates that many others who “feel threatened” by African-Americans, by Latinos and Latinas, by Arabs and Muslims, now feel empowered to express these feelings openly by their words and actions. We must have the courage to call this too what it is: racism pure and simple. We must oppose it wherever we encounter it, and let ethnic and religious minorities know that the church is with them.

Prayer: O God, forgive us for the times when, for the sake of our own security or convenience, we let lies about our sisters and brothers stand without refutation. Give us the courage to bear witness to the truth—to *your* truth—in whatever place we find ourselves. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who told us that the truth would make us free (John 8:32), Amen.

Tuesday, March 21: Midwives to the Rescue!

“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ‘When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.’ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, ‘Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?’ The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.’ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exodus 1:15-21).

When harsh servitude does not succeed in reducing the Hebrew population, Pharaoh decides upon a slow genocide. He enlists Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, in his obscene plot, ordering them to kill every Hebrew boy at birth. The midwives at first agree—but then, they disobey Pharaoh’s command because they “feared God” (Exodus 1:17; the first mention of God in this book). Pharaoh of course realizes this—there are still lots of Hebrew boys toddling about, after all—and calls the midwives in to explain themselves.

What follows is a masterpiece of subversion. Playing on Pharaoh’s racist beliefs and fears, Shiphrah and Puah tell him a lie he will be likely to believe: the Hebrew women, they say, aren’t delicate and civilized like Egyptian women; they are strong and vigorous, like animals, and give birth before we can arrive! Their plan works. Pharaoh does not give up on his genocidal designs; ultimately, he will enlist his entire population, ordering all Egyptians to drown Hebrew baby boys (Exodus 1:22). But for a while at least, the courage and ingenuity of Shiphrah and Puah have saved their people. Israel continues to prosper, even in bondage, and as for Shiphrah and Puah, the NRSV reads, “because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exod 1:21). This, however, is far too weak a translation: the Hebrew says, literally, that God “made for them houses”—that is, he established them as clans. This passage claims that there were families in ancient Israel that traced their descent, not from a man, but from a *woman*: from Shiphrah or Puah.

Prayer: Thank you, Mother of us all, for strong and faithful women who have preserved your people through the ages: for Ruth and Esther, for Mary Magdalene and Priscilla, for Jarena Lee and Phoebe Palmer, for Marjorie Matthews and Leontine Kelly. Thank you for those we name in our hearts today, and for the many who go unnamed. Show us how we can stand alongside the women you are calling into ministry right now, holy God. Through Jesus the Christ, whose resurrection was witnessed by faithful women, Amen.

Wednesday, March 22: Moses' Ark

“Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him” (Exodus 2:1-4).

When I was a boy in Sunday School, a great joke was to ask someone, “How many animals did Moses take on the ark?” The answer, of course, is “None—that was *Noah* and the ark.” Yet, curiously, Moses *did* have an ark, and in the Hebrew a clear connection is made between Noah's and Moses' deliverance.

Moses was the child of a man and women of the priestly tribe of Levi (neither named here). His birth was a great risk, since, as we saw yesterday, Pharaoh had sentenced all Hebrew baby boys to death by drowning in the Nile. His parents hide him as long as they can, but when he is three months old, they surrender to the inevitable, and Moses' mother and sister take him to the river themselves. But instead of drowning the baby, they place him in a *tebat* (rendered in the NRSV as “basket”) and set him afloat—hoping against hope, perhaps, that someone will find him and raise him in safety.

The word *tebat* is a loanword from the Egyptian *tbt*, meaning “chest.” It appears in only two places in the Hebrew Bible: twice in Exodus 2 to describe the reed basket in which baby Moses was placed, and 26 times in Genesis 6—8 to describe the boxy structure Noah built. Both Moses' little *tebat* and Noah's enormous *tebat* are coated inside and out with pitch (Genesis 6:14; Exodus 2:3) in order to make them water-tight. When they read of Moses' ark, then, careful readers of Scripture recall God's deliverance of Noah, his family, and the world's creatures in their ark, and know that as grim as Moses' future seems at that moment to be, this baby, like Noah, will be saved through water. 1 Peter 3:19-22 also alludes to Noah's flood, with reference to the waters of baptism—we too have been saved through water! Our God, these texts all declare, is a God who *saves*.

Prayer:

“When the storm of life is raging,
Stand by me.
When the storm of life is raging,
Stand by me.
When the world is tossing me
Like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water,
Stand by me.”

Through Christ Jesus our Lord, who calmed the waves, Amen.
(Hymn by African American Gospel composer Charles Tindley).

Thursday, March 23: More “Nasty Women”

“The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. ‘This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,’ she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Yes.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed it” (Exodus 2:5-9).

When then-candidate Donald Trump referred to his opponent Hillary Clinton as a “nasty woman,” female activists across America took up that insult as a badge of honor, proud to be known as “nasty women”! Strong, confident “nasty women” play an extraordinary role in the story of Moses and in the story of Israel’s deliverance. From the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, to Moses’ here-unnamed mother and sister, to the daughter of Pharaoh and her handmaids, women act boldly to undo the hateful plans of Pharaoh.

After Moses’ mother places her son in his tiny ark, trusting him into the hands of God, Moses’ sister (later we learn that her name is Miriam) follows along on the shore, “to see what would happen to him” (Exodus 2:4). What she sees must have horrified her. In what is surely the worst possible outcome, the little basket floats into the Egyptian princess and her attendants, who are bathing in the Nile. Remember, Pharaoh himself had commanded that any Egyptian who finds a Hebrew baby boy is to drown the child in the Nile—and surely, if anyone can be expected to obey Pharaoh’s edicts, it is his own daughter! But instead, even though she *knows* that this child “must be one of the Hebrews,” she decides to keep him and raise him as her own—in defiance of her father. Miriam is then able to step up with an offer to find a Hebrew wet-nurse for the baby: Moses’ own mother. As a result, Moses grows up aware of his heritage.

Sometimes, the worst thing that could happen, happens. But the promise of the whole of Scripture is that God is with us and at work even then. This is why Paul is able to say, “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28)—not, please note, that all things *are* good, or that only good things happen to believers, but that whatever happens, God is at work in and with us to bring about God’s good will.

Prayer: Transforming God, when we are brought down to despair by the power of evil in our world, or by our own weakness and failings, or by the enormity of the task before us, remind us that we do not labor alone. You are at work, in the most unlikely places and through the most unlikely people, to bring in your kingdom. Help us to hope and trust in you, we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ your obedient son, who trusted you all the way to the cross and beyond, Amen

Friday, March 24: Trying to Force God's Hand

"One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, 'Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?' He answered, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'Surely the thing is known.' When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses" (Exodus 2:11-15).

Scripture and history are full of accounts of people acting to force God's hand—and it never ends well. The Israelites attempted to claim the land of promise too soon, and were driven back (Num 14:40-45); they presumptuously carried the ark into battle without consulting the LORD, and were defeated (1 Sam 4:1-10). In 1524, German peasants inspired by the preaching of Thomas Müntzer believed that they could bring in the kingdom of God by taking up arms against their lords—and 100,000 of them died.

Moses' murder of an Egyptian overseer may be an understandable response to cruel oppression, but it is not excusable. Surely if the cross teaches us anything, it is that God's way is *not* the way of violence. Jesus did not come to lead an armed rebellion, imposing his will upon the world by force. Instead, he told his followers, "*whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:43-45).

Prayer: O patient and compassionate God, help us to wait upon you, in patience and in confidence. But never let us turn that waiting into an excuse for inaction. Show us how to represent your kingdom in our world, without thinking that we can bring in your kingdom by our action, and without succumbing to despair when our efforts seem unfruitful. Through Jesus our Christ, who was rejected by those he came to save, Amen.

Saturday, March 25: Moses in Midian—Race and Identity

“But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, ‘How is it that you have come back so soon today?’ They said, ‘An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.’ He said to his daughters, ‘Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread.’ Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, ‘I have been an alien residing in a foreign land’” (Exodus 2:15-22).

Curiously, those most obsessed with defining race precisely are those who are persuaded of the superiority of their own race—and the inferiority of others. For example, our Constitution once defined the inferiority of African slaves with mathematical precision: when counting population for the purpose of determining Presidential electors, a slave counted as three-fifths of a person. Mississippi’s anti-miscegenation laws once defined a person as “African” if she or he had at least one-eighth African blood. By contrast, African American theologian Brian Bantum has argued that race is “a tragic illusion,” born of the Western need to assert superiority by setting up a false dichotomy of “white” against “black”—a lie exposed early on by mixed-race children, living “in between categories of colonizer and colonized, human and nonhuman, slave and free.”²¹

Moses’ story reveals what experience in our own multi-racial society is increasingly proving to be true: that Bantum is right. While Moses was born a Hebrew, he grew up as an Egyptian, the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter. No wonder, when Moses helps Reuel’s daughters water their flock, they report to their father, “An Egyptian (!) helped us.” Moses marries one of those young women, named Zipporah, and settles down to live among Reuel’s people, as a Midianite. But he knows he is not truly one of them, either, as the name he gives his son makes clear: Gershom, here understood to mean “name of a *ger*”—that is, a foreigner, or sojourner (see the devotions for week six). There was nothing wrong with Moses being Midianite, or Egyptian for that matter—and he could easily have been defined, and defined himself, as either. But his identification with the Hebrews oppressed in Egypt will not let him go—and neither will the LORD.

Prayer: Free us, God, from our obsession with telling others who they are. Remind us that you have spoken our names, from before creation, and give us grace to accept and affirm one another. In Jesus’ holy name, Amen.

Sunday, March 26

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:14-21).

Week 5— Exodus 3—4; 15:1-22: “Moses and Miriam”

Monday, March 27: Moses’ Call—Names

“When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ . . . But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations” (Exodus 3: 4-6, 13-15).

Volumes have been written about the revelation and meaning of the divine Name—and no wonder! There is wonder and mystery here that it would take lifetimes to explore. But at its simplest, most basic level, what is going on in this classic encounter? God calls Moses by name. Then, God tells Moses God’s own Name (in Hebrew, *YHWH*; since the Name is regarded as too holy to pronounce, pious Jews simply say “*Adonai*,” or “My Lord;” most English translators therefore render the Name as LORD in all capital letters). This very familiar exchange happens every time we meet someone new. We introduce ourselves. We exchange names, and with that exchange, a relationship can begin.

That God already knows Moses’ name is no surprise. It is God after all who is the source of our identities: of course such a God knows who Moses is—better than Moses knows himself! God has also been known to Israel before, as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” But the giving of God’s name sets that relationship on a personal, intimate footing. God desires a relationship with this people who are no people, these slaves in Egypt, and it is that relationship that *makes* them a people.

Prayer: Thank you, *Adonai*, for calling us each by name, and for giving your own to us. Thank you for showing us in Jesus who you are, and inviting us into relationship through him. In Jesus’ own holy name, Amen.

Tuesday, March 28: Moses' Call—God Sees

“Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’” (Exod 3:7-10).

The pilot announced over the intercom, “I have some good news and some bad news. First, the bad news: we are lost somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. We really don’t have any idea where we are. However, the good news is that we are making very good time. . .” We’ve all heard one or another version of a “good news/bad news” joke. In a way, that is the form that God’s call to Moses takes. First, the good news: God has not forgotten God’s promises to the ancestors, and does indeed intend to bring God’s people into a homeland. Further, God is not removed from the suffering of God’s people. God is aware of their oppression at the hands of the Egyptians, and God has a plan to deliver them.

But now comes the bad news: Moses learns, to his astonishment, that *he* is the plan: “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt”! That is the problem with prayer, brothers and sisters! When we ask for God to act in our world, we had better be ready to put hands and feet to our prayers, for God *will* put us to work. God’s certain, and terrifying, answer to our prayers concerning racism and violence in our culture will be to send us to address them. Our promise is, however, that God will be with us, as God was with Moses.

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you see the suffering in our world, and that you care, deeply. We know that you are calling us to address the crisis of our times—but we are afraid, Abba. Empower us to be used by you to answer our own prayers, in the name of your son Jesus, who prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want,” (Matt 26:39), Amen.

Wednesday, March 29: Moses' Call—Resistance

But Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else" (Exod 4:10-13).

A common element in biblical call stories is what Robert Gnuse calls "prophetic denial"—the rejection of a prophet's call, based on a sense of unworthiness or inability in the one called, or on anxiety about what the call implies.²² Jeremiah objects that he is too young (Jer. 1:6); Isaiah exclaims, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5); Jonah votes with his feet and heads for Tarshish (Jon 1:3). But Moses, in his persistent resistance to God's call, outdoes them all! First, he demands that God reveal God's name (Exod 3:13). Then, Moses asks for signs that will prove that he has come from God's presence (Exod 4:1-8). Then, he protests that he cannot speak eloquently, or perhaps even plainly (the Hebrew permits either reading; Exod 4:10). Finally, in blunt, transparent honesty, Moses blurts out, "O my Lord, please send someone else"! *I don't want to do this!* God does send Aaron, as Moses' spokesperson, but Moses is not excused—he too must go.

Doubtless we resonate with Moses' complaint. We would not have chosen to live in times that require us to stand up and stand out. We would have preferred a quiet, non-confrontational life. But we live in this time and place, not in some other, and by God's grace we must prove equal to the demands of our season. We would prefer that God send someone else. But God has sent us.

Prayer: "To serve the present age,
 my calling to fulfill,
O may it all my powers engage,
 to do my Master's will!"
In Jesus' name, Amen.
(Hymn by Charles Wesley)

Thursday, March 30: *The Prophet Miriam—God’s Deliverance*

“When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.’ Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea” (Exod 15:19-22).

Based on the archaic form of Hebrew found in Exodus 15:1-18, this poem is the oldest passage in Scripture, having been fixed in written form by the eleventh century BCE. This is important: we need to hear this song, not from the perspective of a strong and self-confident Israel, but of an Israel in its infancy—a people fragile and vulnerable, who had until very recently been *no* people, hanging on to survival by their fingernails. Otherwise, we may use the image of God as a warrior, sweeping away God’s enemies, to justify our own arrogant, bullying behavior. Jewish tradition did not read this passage as legitimating hatred toward those we regard as our enemies. According to the Talmud (the authoritative collection of the teachings of the rabbis), when the Israelites began to celebrate the defeat of the Egyptians, God asked, “How can you sing as the works of my hand are drowning in the sea?” (*b. Megillah* 10b).

Another point we may miss in this account of God’s deliverance is that the songleader is Moses’ sister, identified as “*the prophet* Miriam.” Miriam is not the only woman identified as a prophet in the Hebrew Bible: so are Deborah, who is also called a judge—that is, a leader in Israel in the days before kings (Judges 4:4), and Huldah, who confirms that the book of the law discovered in the temple in Josiah’s day is divine word (2 Kgs 22:14-20). A feminine form of the word “prophet” is used in the Hebrew for grammatical reasons, but it would be a mistake to translate the word as “prophetess,” implying that these women belonged to some sort of women’s auxiliary! Miriam was a *prophet*, just as Moses was; just as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah were. Like them, Miriam was a spokesperson of God, and the song that she led was, and is, a word from God. In our next two devotionals, we will chase this idea through other texts, in order to refute any nonsense about “political correctness” here. The Bible is clear on Miriam’s prophetic role. The question is, what will we do with this word?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your including us in your community. Forgive us for turning the good news of that inclusion into an excuse for excluding others. Help us to hear your good news with joy, whether it is proclaimed by a Miriam or by a Moses. Through Jesus, whose ministry was supported by women “who provided for [him] out of their resources” (Luke 8:3), Amen.

Friday, March 31: *The Prophet Miriam—Moses, Aaron and Miriam*

*“O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam”* (Micah 6:3-4).

Micah’s prophecy is set in the middle of the eighth century BCE, at about the same time that Amos and Hosea were prophesying in the north, and Isaiah son of Amoz was prophesying in Jerusalem (compare Micah 1:1 with Amos 1:1; Hosea 1:1; and Isa 1:1). Within the relative brief span of their prophetic ministries, Israel to the north would fall to Assyria, and Judah to the south would see its borders radically reduced, and be forced to submit to Assyrian rule. Micah addresses a people in despair, who despite their injustice and immorality cling desperately to the superstition that since they are God’s people, nothing really bad can happen to them: “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us” (Micah 3:11).

In Micah 6:1-8, the LORD announces a lawsuit against the people for violating God’s covenant. To show that God has been faithful despite their faithlessness, the LORD rehearses the story of the Exodus out of Egypt—led, this passage declares, not by Moses alone, but by “Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” These three siblings had been used by God to deliver God’s people in ancient times. But it may be that they are also remembered as examples of the life of faithfulness God desires, to which Micah’s own generation is called:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

May we too, empowered by God’s Spirit, model ourselves on Moses’ passion for justice, on Aaron’s steadfast loyalty (a better translation of the Hebrew *khesed* than the NRSV’s “kindness”), and on Miriam’s humble, self-effacing walk with God.

Prayer: O Jesus, you alone embody all righteousness. Yet you call us to be your disciples, and follow in your way. Show us how we may do justice in our own context. Break open our hard hearts, and enable us to love as you love, in lives of true commitment. Keep us humble, Abba, and help us to desire always to walk with you. In the name of Jesus, who says to all his disciples, “Follow me” (Matt 4:19), Amen.

Saturday, April 1: The Prophet Miriam—“Snow-white” Miriam

“While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); and they said, ‘Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?’ And the LORD heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, ‘Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.’ So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. And he said, ‘Hear my words:

*When there are prophets among you,
I the LORD make myself known to them in visions;
I speak to them in dreams.*

*Not so with my servant Moses;
he is entrusted with all my house.*

*With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles;
and he beholds the form of the LORD.*

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’

And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.

When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. Then Aaron said to Moses, ‘Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother’s womb.’ And Moses cried to the LORD, ‘O God, please heal her.’ But the LORD said to Moses, ‘If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.’ So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again. After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran” (Num 12:1-16).

This odd, ancient story communicates in particular two important lessons. First, while recognizing the roles of Aaron and Miriam, this passage affirms the uniqueness of Moses. Aaron the priest and Miriam the prophet both ask with some reason, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” The answer, of course, is yes: Aaron and Miriam—that is, priesthood and prophecy—are legitimate means of communion with God. But Moses is both priest *and* prophet, and something more besides: “With him I speak face to face. . . and he beholds the form of the LORD.”

Second, this old story absolutely refutes any notion of “racial purity.” The occasion for this confrontation between Moses on the one hand and his brother and sister on the other is Moses’ marriage to a non-Israelite woman. According to Exodus 2:21-22 (see last Saturday’s devotional), Moses’ wife Zipporah was Midianite, but in today’s passage, the wife of Moses is said to be Cushite. Cush could refer to northern Arabia (and so perhaps to Midian by another name), but usually designates what we call Ethiopia, in northern Africa. In either case, the point is that Moses did not marry an Israelite (although, as we will see, one dramatic element of this story is heightened and clarified if Cush is understood as Ethiopia).

Many biblical texts condemn intermarriage with foreigners: for example, Deuteronomy 7:3-4, where the LORD says of the Canaanites, “Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods.” Ezra ordered a wholesale divorce of all foreign wives (Ezra 10:3-14); Nehemiah, dealing with intermarriage more leniently in his day, took no action against existing marriages but forbade the practice in the future (Neh 13:23-28). The purpose of these regulations was never to preserve racial purity, however, but rather to maintain right worship, as Deuteronomy 7:4 makes clear. Therefore, in other passages, intermarriage is *not* condemned. Deuteronomy 21:10-14 describes the practice of marrying foreign women taken in wartime, insisting that such war brides be treated with respect. The four women in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus are *all* foreign women who married into the people Israel: the Canaanite Tamar, Judah’s daughter-in-law (Gen 38; Matt 1:3); Rahab of Jericho (Josh 2:1-12; 6:17; Matt 1:5); Ruth, the Moabite widow who married Boaz, becoming King David’s great-grandmother (Ruth 4:18-22; Matt 1:5-6); and Bathsheba, “the wife of Uriah” the Hittite (2 Sam 11—12; Matt 1:6).

While Aaron and Miriam object to Moses’ foreign-born wife, God does not! Indeed, because Miriam the prophet spoke against her brother, God struck her with leprosy; her skin became “as white as snow.” If Moses’ Cushite wife *did* come from Ethiopia, this punishment is curiously appropriate: it is as though God had said, “Since you are so concerned about light skin, we will see just how white we can make you!” Although Moses intercedes for her, snow-white Miriam must stay outside the camp for seven days, until her leprosy is gone, and with it her uncleanness. The point is surely clear: “racial purity” is of no concern to God.

Prayer: O God, help us to see our sisters and brothers of other nations and races *as* sisters and brothers, and to affirm the full humanity of all people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, descendant of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, Amen.

Sunday, April 2

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him (John 11:1-45).

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Week 6--“Who is ‘the Sojourner’?”

Monday, April 3: A “Stained-Glass” Word

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans” (Exod 22:21-24).

In this passage, we know of course who the widow and the orphan are. We can understand why a special command might be needed to ensure their just treatment: in the clan-based economy of ancient Israel, a woman without a husband to ensure her access to property, or a child without a parent’s protection, could well fall through the cracks. However, who is the *ger* (“resident alien” in the NRSV)? The old King James often uses “sojourner” for *ger* and related terms. At one time, “sojourner” meant something in our culture—consider the nineteenth-century heroine, escaped slave, abolitionist, freedom fighter, and feminist who called herself Sojourner Truth. But in our day, “sojourner” is used in hymns, prayers, or Bible readings, but never found outside our sanctuaries, making it difficult to say *what* it means. It has become a “stained-glass” word.

To find the best contemporary translation for *ger*, it may help to consider how this word is used in our Old Testament. The *ger* is a person of foreign birth, living within the borders of Israel but without land or legal status. That is why the *ger* is so often listed together with the widow and the orphan: like widows and orphans, the *gerim* are vulnerable: they have no one to look out for their rights. This is why a special command is needed to ensure their just treatment, and why generosity to the *ger* is a consistent biblical principle.

So, who is the *ger* in our own time and context? The NRSV “resident alien” is accurate, but bookish and stodgy; far more vigorous, and no less accurate, is the Common English Bible rendering “immigrant”—particularly if we include those sometimes vilified as “*illegal* immigrants,” and those we call “refugees.” As the political rhetoric of the recent campaign has made tragically apparent, these “sojourners” are perhaps more vulnerable and at risk now than ever before—making these passages of Scripture more relevant than ever before. As today’s passage demonstrates, the ultimate guarantor of rights for the *ger* in Scripture is the LORD, who assures us, “If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword”—which should, to say the least, give us pause.

Prayer: Vilifying the outsider has always been far too easy for us, O God. Open our eyes and hearts and hands to the “sojourners” in our midst, we pray, through Jesus Christ, who said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40), Amen.

Tuesday, April 4: Love Your Neighbor

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. . . . When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:18, 33-34).

Jesus’ teaching on the Greatest Commandment is found in Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; and Luke 10:25-28. These accounts differ on small points: in all three, however, the whole of God’s law hangs on two essential prescriptions: love for God, and love for neighbor. Jesus’ first commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” His second commandment comes from today’s passage in Leviticus: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Some interpreters have proposed that this was an in-house commandment: “your neighbor” means “your fellow Israelite.” But Leviticus 19:33-34 demonstrates that this is far too narrow a reading. Here, love is commanded toward “the alien who resides with you” (the Hebrew term, as in yesterday’s passage, is *ger*) in the same language used in 19:18 for the neighbor: “you shall love the alien as yourself.” In fact this passage says, the *ger* “shall be to you as a citizen among you.”

We may not like this commandment—particularly if we are persuaded that immigrants and refugees pose a threat to us either economically, by taking our jobs and resources, or more fundamentally, through crime or terrorism. We could perhaps say that these words of Scripture address the community of faith, not the nation, and that national policy needs to be mindful of the security of our borders. But for the church and for the individual Christian, there is no passing this particular buck. We cannot even use the tired “Old Testament laws don’t apply to us” excuse, because Jesus has made eminently clear that this particular law *does* apply to us—second only to the command to love God. Certainly, unemployment, crime, and terrorism are real concerns (although we may legitimately ask if there is any evidence connecting those concerns to immigrants or refugees). But whether we like it or not, if we want to be followers of the Christ, we are *commanded* to love our neighbors—including immigrants and refugees—as we love ourselves.

Prayer: “Thou who art over us,
 Thou who art one of us,
 Thou who *art*:
 Give me a pure heart, that I may see thee;
 a humble heart, that I may hear thee;
 a heart of love, that I may serve thee;
 a heart of faith, that I may abide in thee.”

 In Jesus’ name, Amen.
(Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, 1964)

Wednesday, April 5: Remember!

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:18-19).

Deuteronomy continually calls upon the people Israel to remember who they are, and who God is. Indeed, those two calls are inextricably intertwined: Israel is the people who were *made* a people by the LORD who delivered them from bondage. In other words, Israel has direct and personal knowledge of what it means to say that God “is not partial,” because *had* God shown partiality for the wisest, the strongest, the most prosperous, the *best*, God would never have chosen this rag-tag band of slaves and outlaws as God’s own! Likewise, Israel knows personally that the LORD “loves the strangers [Hebrew *ger*], providing them with food and clothing,” because, as God reminds them, “you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Indeed, in each of the passages regarding the *ger* we have examined so far God has given Israel this reminder (see Exod 22:21; Lev 19:34). This gives added punch to the commands to love one’s neighbor—including the *ger*—as oneself; knowing that they have themselves been immigrants and refugees, by loving the *gerim*, the people of Israel *are* loving themselves.

With the exception of our Native American brothers and sisters, all of us are here because our ancestors came here from somewhere else. Some, like the famous Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock, came fleeing religious persecution. Some, like my Scottish-Irish forebears, came because of hardship and political oppression at home. Some of us came here in chains. As Americans, a nation of immigrants, it behooves us, too, to remember who we are. Those of us who claim the name Christian need also to remember *whose* we are, and what it means to be the people of the God “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.”

Prayer: O Jesus, your prayer for us was “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Thank you for making us your own people. Forgive us for the exclusion and disunity that have instead prevented the world from seeing you in us. Heal us, we pray, through Jesus our Christ, Amen.

Thursday, April 6: The Sin of Sodom—Angels Unawares

“The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said’” (Gen 18:1-5).

There is no specific word in biblical Hebrew for hospitality. But in Greek, the word is *philoxenia*—that is, love for the stranger! This word appears twice in the New Testament. In Romans 12:13, Paul commands his audience, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Hebrews 13:2 deliberately alludes to the story of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18—19: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” I hear this passage in my head in the KJV: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Abraham did not know that the LORD was present in these three passers-by. He went out of his way to serve them because Abraham saw such hospitality as his calling and responsibility. In his sermon on Romans 12:13, the great early Christian preacher St. John Chrysostom (347-407 CE) praised Abraham and Lot as examples of radical hospitality:

Thus did Lot, thus Abraham. For he spent the whole day upon it, waiting for this goodly prey, and when he saw it, leaped upon it, and ran to meet them, and worshipped upon the ground, and said, “My Lord, if now I have found favor in Thy sight, pass not away from Thy servant.” [Gen 18:3] Not as we do, if we happen to see a stranger or a poor man, knitting our brows, and not deigning even to speak to them. And if after thousands of entreaties we are softened, and bid the servant give them a trifle, we think we have quite done our duty. But he did not so, but assumed the fashion of a suppliant and a servant, though he did not know who he was going to take under his roof. . . . as did Abraham also, whom beside his largeness and ready mind it is just especially to admire, on this ground, that when he had no knowledge who they were that had come, yet he so acted. Do not thou then be curious either: since for Christ thou dost receive him. And if thou art always so scrupulous, many a time wilt thou pass by a man of esteem, and lose thy reward from him. . . . Do not then busy thyself with men’s lives and doings. For this is the very extreme of niggardliness, for one loaf to be exact about a man’s entire life. For if this person be a murderer, if a robber, or what not, does he therefore seem to thee not to deserve a loaf and a few pence? And yet thy Master causeth even the sun to rise upon him! And dost thou judge him unworthy of food even for a day? (*Homilies on Romans* 21).

Surely, this is a vital word for our own time! May we, like Abraham, seek our own “goodly prey” in the places where God has put us, not being curious as to whether the one we seek to serve is “worthy” in our own eyes, “since for Christ thou dost receive him.”

Prayer: Grant, O God, that our churches would indeed be known for “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” But do not let us sit inside and wait for folk to come in! Send us out, we pray to show your radical hospitality in our world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Friday, April 7: The Sin of Sodom—The Cry

“Then the LORD said, ‘How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.’” (Gen 18:20-21).

The destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-28) is often regarded as proof of God’s anger against homosexuals. In the Bible, however, Sodom does not appear to be understood in this way. “Sodom” is mentioned in 47 verses; most commonly (in 21 verses) it is used as an example of total destruction brought by divine wrath, with nothing specifically said about the *reason* for Sodom’s destruction (for example, Deut 29:23; Matt 11:24; Luke 10:12). But Ezekiel 16:49-50 is quite specific: “This is the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were proud, had plenty to eat, and enjoyed peace and prosperity; but she didn’t help the poor and the needy. They became haughty and did detestable things in front of me, and I turned away from them as soon as I saw it.”

The LORD’s word to Abraham concerning Sodom and Gomorrah in today’s passage supports Ezekiel’s charge. The Hebrew word rendered “outcry” is *za’aqah* (sometimes spelled *tsa’aqah*). It is typically used for the cry of the oppressed for help: indeed, in the CEB, this word is translated “cries of injustice.” For example, in Exodus 22:21-24, our devotional passage for Monday, the LORD says of the *ger*, the widow, and the orphan, “I will surely heed their cry [Hebrew *tsa’aqah*].”

The lesson of the Sodom story is not that God is moved to uncontrollable anger at the thought of men having sex with other men. God’s anger is poured out on the inhospitable: on those who respond to the stranger and the needy, not with compassion, but with contempt—even violence and abuse. That is why Sodom was destroyed.

Prayer: O God, give us ears to hear, and hearts to repent of our own inhospitality. We pray in the name of Jesus, who freely gave his hospitality to all, even sinners, Amen.

Saturday, April 8: *The Sin of Sodom—Inhospitability*

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door (Genesis 19:1-11).

In Genesis 19, the messengers from God come to Sodom as *gerim*—as “sojourners,” outsiders, strangers. Sodom, however, is not kind to strangers. When the messengers tell Lot that they intend to sleep in the town square, he is horrified—he begs them not to do so, but to come into his house, and under his protection, instead (Gen 19:2-3). Lot knows all too well what happens to strangers found in Sodom after dark. Sure enough, once the strangers *are* discovered, a lynch mob assembles outside of Lot’s home. What the mob wants to do to the strangers has nothing to do with anyone’s idea of consensual, sexual intimacy. This is about mob violence: rape and humiliation. That homosexuality is *not* the issue is made clear by Lot’s terrible attempted bargain: to save the lives of his guests, he offers to send out his daughters (Gen 19:7-8)! But Lot’s defense of the strangers only serves to remind the mob that, although he has lived in Sodom among them for years, Lot is a foreigner himself: “This fellow came here as an alien [Hebrew *lagur*, related to the noun *ger*; KJV “to sojourn”], and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them” (Gen 19:9).

Remember the shameful photographs of Iraqi P.O.W.s, stripped naked and forced into humiliating poses, from the American prison at Abu Ghraib? They tragically demonstrate that the way of the men of Sodom, the way of the lynch mob, is with us still. The Sodom story, like Abu Ghraib, it is about the humiliation and dehumanization of the stranger. The contrast between the abuse visited on strangers by the people of Sodom and the hospitality shown to strangers by Abraham and by Lot surely make the point: God calls us to treat the *ger*—the immigrant, the refugee—with kindness. God’s judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah demonstrates that this is a command, not an option.

Prayer: Tomorrow, O Christ, Holy Week begins. We remember how you were rejected by the people of your city, condemned, stripped, humiliated, tortured, and killed. Forgive us, we pray, our complicity in the violence of our own times, if only through our silence. Help us to stand, as you stood, with the “sojourner.” In your own holy name, Amen.

Palm Sunday, April 9

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey,

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee" (Matthew 21:1-11).

Week 7: Holy Week “The Way of the Servant”

Introduction to this week’s readings:

Four of the Old Testament readings for Holy Week are poems from Isaiah 40—55: a portion of this prophetic book commonly called Second Isaiah, set in the Babylonian exile. These four passages, Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; and 52:13—53:12, all deal with the Servant of the LORD, a mysterious figure whose mission involves not only the deliverance of Israel, but also the transformation of the world. Christian readers have long seen the Servant of the LORD as foreshadowing Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor 15:3; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 2:22-25), an understanding that may well go back to Jesus himself. But this does not mean that the prophet’s words had no meaning for his own time or people—or that they do not address us as well.

The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber suggested that the Servant Songs do not describe one particular person, but rather set forth the *way* of the Servant, a new understanding of Israel’s past and future particularly as revealed through suffering. The Servant’s way is “the work born out of affliction,” culminating in “the liberation of the subject peoples, laid upon the servant, the divine order of the expiated world of the nations, which the purified servant as its ‘light’ has to bring in, the covenant of the people of the human beings with God, the human center of which is the servant.”²³ The way of the Servant is the path of redemptive suffering; the way of selfless, sacrificial love (Heb 9:12) which led Jesus inexorably to the cross. But the way of the Servant is not Jesus’ path alone. Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35). This week, we will consider how we, too, are called to walk in the way of the servant of the LORD.

Monday, April 10: The Way of Humility

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them (Isaiah 42:1-9).*

Sometimes in this first Song, the Servant seems like a king. After all, God calls the Servant “my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (42:1). The Servant brings forth justice (42:1, 3-4), a kingly task in the Hebrew Bible (see Pss 72:1; 99:4; Isa 9:7; Jer 22:15; 23:5; 33:15; Ezek 45:9). Indeed, the Servant “will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1), and “the coastlands wait for his teaching” (42:4); he is not only “a covenant to the people” (presumably, Israel), but also “a light to the nations” (42:6). The image is not merely regal, but *imperial*; the Servant is the ruler of the world.

Yet, on the other hand, the Servant’s task is accomplished quietly, without kingly pomp: “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street” (42:2). Royal power operates by force, or the threat of force. Yet the Servant acts so gently and quietly that “a bruised reed he

will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench” (42:3). In our harsh and violent world, the way of gentleness and humility may seem doomed to failure. Yet it is the world’s Creator (42:5) who guarantees that the Servant’s mission, “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (42:7), will be accomplished. True peace and authentic transformation cannot be imposed by force. They come as astonishing gifts of God’s grace, made real in our midst by God’s Servant.

Prayer: We confess, O God, that sometimes we want to make a splash! We long to make a difference in our world, a difference that we can see. Remind us that you aim, not to make a splash, but to remake the world—and us too. That is slow, quiet, careful work, Abba. Grant us the humility to fit ourselves to that task. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:6-7), Amen.

Tuesday, April 11: The Way of Obedience

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God."
And now the LORD says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." (Isaiah 49:1-7)*

In the second Servant Song, the Servant of the LORD declares, "The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me" (49:1). This sounds very like God's words to the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). A revelatory, prophetic role is also shown by the power of the Servant's words: the LORD "made my mouth like a sharp sword" (Isa 49:2; in Rev 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21, the word of the risen Christ is expressed in this same way).

Yet, having made the Servant's mouth "like a sharp sword," the LORD hid him away "in

the shadow of [God's] hand" (49:2). Though the LORD had fashioned him "like a polished arrow," the Servant found himself hidden in God's quiver (49:2), so that the Servant cries, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (49:4). So too Jesus would cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46//Mk 15:34; cf. Ps 22:1). Not only is the Servant's destiny hidden from the world, it is even hidden from the Servant himself!

The way of the Servant is *hard*—as it must be. How, otherwise, could the Servant truly stand with the abandoned, forgotten, God-forsaken ones? But God declares that the Servant will transform the world: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6). Although we cannot see to its end, the way of the Servant leads through sorrow into joy, through darkness into light, through death into life. May the words of abolitionist Theodore Parker, quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, speak for us as well: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."²⁴

Prayer: Help us, O God, to follow you faithfully, even though the end of our road is not visible to us. Help us to trust you, and to follow you obediently, knowing that you do see our way clear. Through Jesus our Christ who set his face toward Jerusalem, Amen.

Wednesday, April 12: *The Way of Discipleship*

*“The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty? (Isaiah 50:4-9a).*

Translators struggle with the first verse of this Song: is the Servant given the “tongue of a teacher” (NRSV), a “skilled tongue” (JPSV), an “instructed tongue” (NIV), or perhaps the “tongue of the learned” (KJV)? Yet, when the same word, *limmudim*, appears later in the verse, it causes little controversy: “Morning by morning he wakens — wakens my ear to listen as *those who are taught* (Isa 50:4; emphasis mine). That, I propose, should also be the translation the first time this word appears: the Servant is given “the tongue of *those who are taught*”: that is, the tongue of a disciple. Confirmation comes from the purpose of this gift: “that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (50:4). Surely, a word of comfort comes most effectively from a fellow disciple, who shares my sorrow, feels my pain, and offers solace as a fellow sufferer.

In this Song, the Servant does not claim authority over others. Indeed, the Servant identifies with the outcast and humiliated, to the point of sharing their humiliation and suffering:

*I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting (50:6).*

The Servant's suffering is not accidental, but purposeful. The Servant suffers deliberately, in solidarity with others, so that the vindication of the Servant becomes their vindication, too.

Unfortunately, today's lectionary reading ends in the middle of verse 9, leaving the unfortunate implication that trust in God removes all our difficulties. The Servant relies upon the LORD, but that does not make his path clear, or easy. Instead, the Servant

*walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the LORD
and relies upon his God (Isa 50:10).*

Certainly, in this week, no Christian reader can consider this passage without remembering how Jesus bared *his* back to the smiters, and offered *his* cheek "to those who pulled out the beard" (50:6). What might it mean for us to follow him as his disciples on the way of the Servant, to surrender authority and privilege, and stand with the suffering and oppressed?

Prayer: Jesus, in just a few days we will rejoice in the celebration of Easter. But don't let us hurry to the empty tomb too quickly. Help us stay with the cross awhile, and ask how we may follow you, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame" (Hebrews 12:2). In your own holy name, Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 13: The Passover

“The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (Exod 12:1-14)

All four Gospels connect Jesus’ last week on earth with Passover. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus’ last supper with his followers is a Passover meal (Matt 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13). In John’s Gospel, Jesus is crucified on “the day of Preparation,” when the Passover lamb was slain (John 19:14). *Pesach* (the Jewish term for Passover) recalls the Exodus from Egypt; however, this meal is more than a memorial of Israel’s deliverance. As Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim understood,²⁵ *Pesach* reenacts and reaffirms Israel’s root experience: the deliverance from bondage at the Red Sea that made them a people.

So too, when we Christians break the bread and share the cup, we reenact and reaffirm our root experience in Christ: it is as though we are there, with Jesus, at his final meal. We not only remember his death, we *experience* it—and the resurrection life that follows. Jesus’ last meal with his followers becomes a foretaste of the messianic banquet in the new age, to which we are also invited. But, as Jesus grimly warns, “I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:11-12). As we saw in our first week, in Joel 2:28-29, the body of Christ is larger than the small circle of those like us. Moreover, the table is Christ’s, not ours; we should be leery of presuming to bar from it those whom Jesus invites. May the Lord’s Supper truly be for us the *Lord’s* Supper, and not ours, where we can meet sisters and brothers we did not know that we had!

Prayer: “Eternal God, in the sharing of a meal
your son established a new covenant for all people,
and in the washing of feet
he showed us the dignity of service.
Grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit
these signs of our life in faith
may speak again to our hearts,
feed our spirits, and refresh our bodies.” In Jesus’ name, Amen.
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Common Texts).

Good Friday, April 14: The Way of Suffering

*See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.*

*Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors (Isa 52:13—53:12).*

With the fourth Servant Song, we come to the end of Second Isaiah's exploration of the way of the Servant. Now, we can at last see what the prophet has been up to in these Songs, as he pulls his many themes together into this final poetic masterpiece. The hiddenness of the Servant's destiny is a consistent theme of the Songs, but the hidden work of the Servant is most powerfully expressed in this final Servant Song, where the nations look on the Servant in bewilderment: "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (53:2). But the major theme of this fourth and final Song is the Servant's suffering:

He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account (53:3).

Christian readers have long seen the Servant of the LORD as Jesus. In Acts 8:32-35, when the Ethiopian eunuch asks if the prophet in Isaiah 53 speaks "about himself or about someone else," Philip wastes no time in sharing with him "the good news about Jesus." In 1 Peter 2:22-25, that writer alludes freely to the fourth Song, declaring of Jesus "*He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*"

Certainly, no Christian reader can consider today's passage without remembering Jesus' passion. But even the writer of 1 Peter, who sees Jesus' cross in Isaiah 53, does not therefore think that we are relieved of the responsibility for walking in this way ourselves. Indeed, he writes, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). The apostle Paul as well understood this: indeed he could say, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:19). In Wednesday's prayer, we remembered that the writer of Hebrews calls Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame" (Heb 12:2). What might it mean for us to follow such a pioneer—to, in the words of the old Gospel hymn, "go with him, with him, all the way"?

Prayer: O Jesus, we do indeed want to go with you—but we are afraid of where your path leads. Remind us, as you reminded your first disciples, that your way of service is a way of *life*, not of death. O God, give us the courage to stand where you stand, alongside the oppressed, and to take up our cross, that we might inherit Christ’s eternal, invincible life. In the name of the Crucified, Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 15: In Between

*I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul,
'therefore I will hope in him'' (Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24) .*

This reading from Lamentations is an odd passage, beginning in despair (“he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light”), yet ending in hope (“ ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’”). As such, it is perfectly appropriate for Holy Saturday, this odd, in-between day in the church calendar bridging the sorrow of Good Friday and the rejoicing of Easter Sunday. Early Christians wondered what Jesus was doing on this day between death and resurrection. 1 Peter 3:18-20 declares, “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were saved through water.”

The idea that after his death Jesus proclaimed the Gospel to souls in the underworld led in turn to the tradition of the harrowing of Hell: the notion that the risen Christ triumphantly descended to the underworld to deliver the righteous who had died before his coming into

heaven. By around the eighth century, this confession was incorporated into the Apostles Creed; most Christians today recite the phrase “He descended into hell” or “He descended to the dead” as part of the Creed (although many United Methodists follow the Church of England in *not* doing so). Whatever we may think of this confession, it recognizes that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection transform all space and time, bringing salvation not only to those of us who live on this side of Easter, but to all the generations who lived before.

Prayer: Jesus, we know this place well: this Holy Saturday zone of ambiguity and unresolved tension. Many of our people feel trapped in just such a place of uncertainty. Help us to see your victorious life bringing possibility even into these shadow lands, and give us hope that we will be delivered into your marvelous light. This is our prayer in your own glorious name, Amen.

April 16: Easter Sunday

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28:1-10).

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