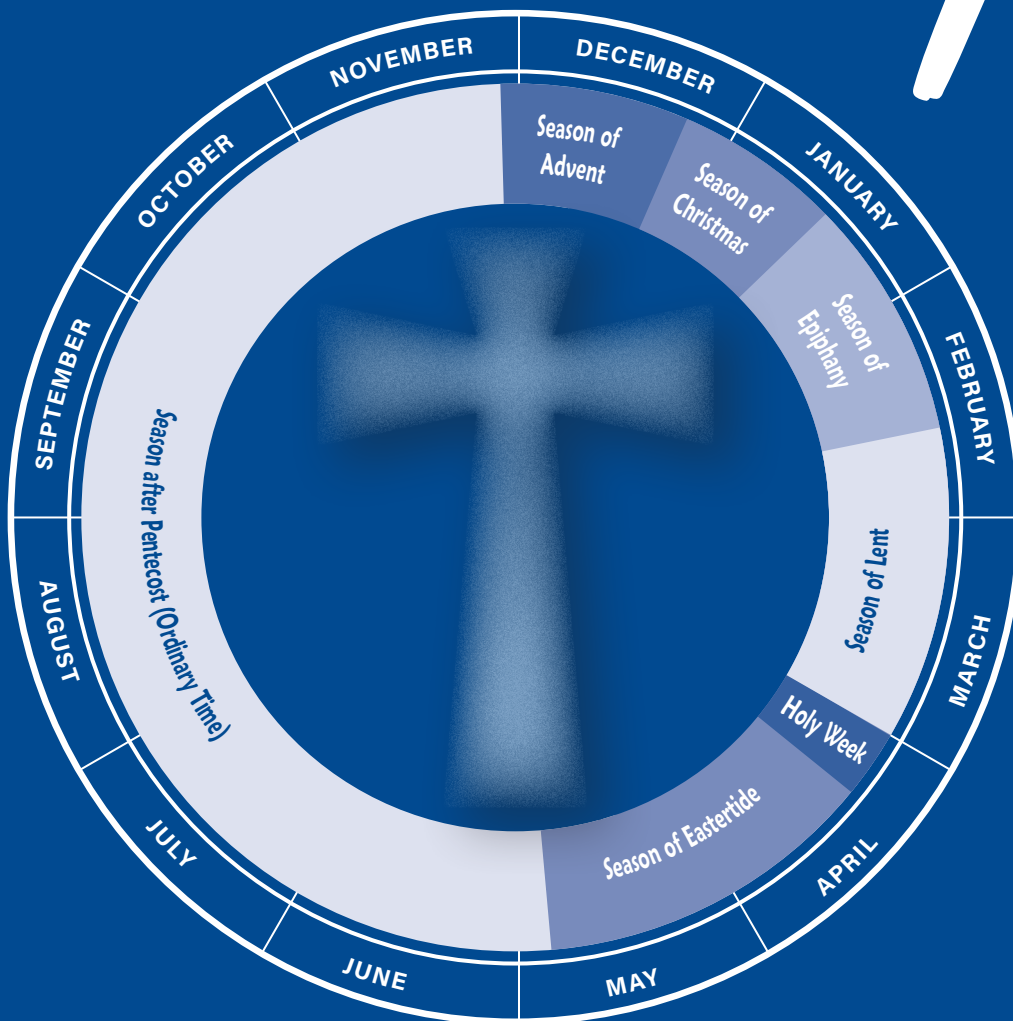


WORD & *worship*



Preaching Resources and Liturgical Material

Based on the
Revised Common Lectionary: Year B
Advent 2026 to Pentecost 2027

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WORD AND WORSHIP

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Editorial Committee: Anna-Marie Brink
Charmaine Stoffberg
Eleanor Steenberg
Mias van Jaarsveld
Pete Grassow

Content Editor: Peter Grassow
Proofreading: Mias van Jaarsveld

Layout: Anna-Marie Brink

Cover Design: Anna-Marie Brink

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About This Book

Pete Grassow

This is the seventeenth edition of *Word and Worship*. Sermon material and liturgical suggestions are offered for every Sunday from Advent Sunday (29 November 2026) until the 26th Sunday after Pentecost ('Reign of Christ', 21 November 2027). The material is based on the readings from the internationally recognised Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) for the Year B cycle. In this cycle of RCL the gospel lections are drawn primarily from the Gospel of Mark. Because Mark is the shortest of the Gospels it is heavily supplemented with selections from the Gospel of John, particularly in "Ordinary Time".

Word and Worship does not provide sermons for preachers. Instead, we aim to offer material that can spark a preacher's imagination for their reading, thinking, praying and writing. Our hope is that the material offered can prompt thought in directions not considered before. Writers of sermon material (*Word and Life*) have been asked to offer liturgical suggestions that come to mind in their engagement with the RCL readings for the day. However, fuller Basic Liturgies are offered for each of the seasons of the year and also for the significant feast days such as Christmas, Epiphany, the Presentation of Christ, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil, Easter Day, Pentecost, All Saints and Reign of Christ (aka Christ the King). The application of the readings and the participation of the congregation will depend on the situation, needs and choices of each local church community.

Principles that inform this publication

- It is an ecumenical endeavour that seeks to develop liturgical and sermon resources for use in the Church in Southern Africa.
- The use of the Revised Common Lectionary provides a framework that can challenge us as preachers to move beyond our denominational or personal knowledge and read texts that we often avoid.

In addition to these foundational principles there is a vital ecumenical dimension to the publication.

- Helpful bonds could be fostered between congregations within a local community as they discover each other reading the same Scripture readings Sunday by Sunday.
- It could serve as a tool that promotes co-operation and fellowship among ministers from different denominations and traditions, who could meet from time to time to discuss the common texts and share ideas.
- It provides opportunities for ministers and leaders in local church communities to build support systems to sustain and encourage ecumenical co-operation in following Jesus together.

Seasonal Introductions and Basic Liturgies

The material for each of the liturgical seasons of the Church Year starts with a brief introduction to the season, a general survey of the listed texts, followed by a basic liturgy for the season. The intention is to provide an overview of the season to facilitate holistic planning and a vital sense of continuity as the season progresses.

Using the preaching material – 'Word and Life'

The material as presented is deliberately not written as complete sermons. The range of situations faced by individual congregations and communities is such that sermons need to be prepared by those who address the life-situation of a particular congregation. This volume of *Word and Worship* provides themes that could be developed for the congregation. There are also ideas offering practical direction for addressing the pastoral needs of the community.

Comment and exegesis are offered for each of the four readings for the day:

1. from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and
2. the complementary Psalm,
3. the reading from the New Testament other than the Gospel, and
4. the Gospel reading.

The comments offered will help the sermon writer to discern what is of key importance in the readings. A useful rule of thumb is that the readings from the Old Testament dominate during Advent, the Gospel readings from Christmas to Pentecost as the story of Jesus is told, and other New Testament readings during the post-Pentecost period.

Additional series in the Season after Pentecost

During the Season after Pentecost the RCL texts also provide scope for preachers to offer sermon series based on successive readings from particular books. Continuity of this kind could encourage worshippers both to follow a series on Sundays and perhaps continue the exploration in weekly study groups. It is left to preachers to note these sequential readings and to respond as they see fit.

Using the Liturgical material

The liturgical material is presented in three forms that are interdependent and complementary:

- *Full liturgies* are presented for the major feasts of the Church Year.
- *Basic liturgies* are presented for Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, and the Sundays after Pentecost.

- *Brief liturgical* suggestions are offered (as a sub-section in the 'Word and Life' material) for Sundays in the year that are not major feasts. These are ideas and material suggested by the writer's engagement with the readings for the day.

Feedback and a call for volunteer writers

We welcome responses and suggestions from users that could help make the material more accessible and helpful to those seeking to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus in Southern Africa today.

Please send your comments and suggestions to info@clf.co.za

The writers contributing to this volume come from a wide range of church traditions in Southern Africa. Most of our writers actively lead worship and preach week by week in local congregations. The different settings within which they work, and worship ensures that *Word and Worship* provides a resource that reflects a wide diversity of situations within which we are called to proclaim the good news for this generation.

On a personal note: I am grateful to the friends, colleagues and fellow writers who allowed themselves to be persuaded to write for this edition. They have freely offered their time and pastoral expertise in putting down their prayerful reflections. For this I thank you all.

Rev Dr Pete Grassow
Editor

Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary and Year B

Lectionaries across the centuries

A lectionary has been described as ‘a book containing the extracts (“pericopes”) from Scripture appointed to be read at public worship’.¹ The linking of particular extracts to specific days in the Christian Year had its origins as far back as the 4th Century. At first the beginning (*incipit*) and ending (*explicit*) of each pericope was noted in the margin of the church Bible, and a ‘capitulary’, or table of *incipits* and *explicit*s, was drawn up for reference purposes. In the course of time lectionaries were compiled with the actual text of the appointed pericopes incorporated in full.

The concept of the lectionary is thought to go back to the Jewish faith tradition, which also had designated readings from the Hebrew Bible for the important feasts, while pericopes chosen on the principle of *lectio continua* were specified for ordinary Sabbaths. To this the early Church added readings from the gospels and the apostolic writings. This was initially only for the major feast days and other special observances. For ordinary Sundays the principle of *lectio continua* was used, a book being selected at local discretion and read aloud in successive pericopes until completed.

Early lectionaries included several readings, from both Old and New Testaments, interspersed with psalms. Later the use of three readings (OT, epistle or other apostolic writing, and gospel) was widely standardised. A further development saw the readings being reduced to two: epistle and gospel. This became the standard shape of denominational eucharistic lectionaries. In the modern era such lectionaries have met with dissatisfaction because of the minimal use of the Old Testament writings, the haphazard selections for Sundays on which there is no major feast, the non-use of many significant parts of Scripture, and the lack of inter-connection between the pericopes on any given occasion.

This led to the compilation of lectionaries based on principles such as two- or three- or even four-year cycles, the inclusion of an Old Testament reading as additional, or alternative, to the epistle, more *lectio continua* in ‘ordinary time’, and the designation of one lesson, usually the gospel, as the controlling lesson for the day, with other accompanying readings.

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)

Released in 1992, RCL is the fruit of long consultation and collaboration by a wide spectrum of Churches in the USA and Canada. Since then, it has been adopted in many other countries around the world. It offers readings for each Sunday: a passage typically from the Old Testament or the Acts of the Apostles, a complimentary passage from one of the Psalms, a reading from either the Epistles, Acts or Revelation, and a passage from one of the four Gospels. It is cast in three cycles, each spanning one Christian year. The gospel readings in the first year (Year A) are mostly

from the Gospel of Matthew, those in the second year (Year B) from Mark, and in the third year (Year C) from Luke. In each year some portions of John’s Gospel are read throughout Eastertide and are also used for other liturgical seasons including Advent, Christmastide and Lent where appropriate.

Year A begins on the first Sunday of Advent in 2025, 2028, 2031, etc.

Year B begins on the first Sunday of Advent in 2026, 2029, 2032, etc.

Year C begins on the first Sunday of Advent in 2027, 2030, 2033, etc.

The major principle behind RCL is that week by week worshippers should be able to hear the characteristic voice of each featured writer rather than hearing readings that have been selected according to a theme. In any given year the writer of one of the first three gospels will be heard from beginning to end. Likewise, the rest of the New Testament is heard, in some cases, virtually in total, in others in large part. Because Mark’s gospel is shorter than the other Synoptics, more of John is included in Year B.

Year B

The readings for this year, beginning with Advent 2026, are based on RCL Year B – Mark’s Gospel with John.

The Sundays of Advent and Epiphany tell of the coming of Christ and his ministry. The first readings have been chosen to illuminate the gospel and come from throughout the Old Testament. The second readings include selections drawn mainly from the two Letters to the Corinthians. From Ash Wednesday to Pentecost readings from John and Luke are added to those from Mark. During Lent the first readings, chosen to illuminate the gospel, include important narratives of faith. During the Easter season the first readings are from Acts and tell how the resurrection of Jesus generated vibrant faith in believers. The second readings during this season are a semi-continuous selection from 1 John.

During the Sundays after Pentecost the gospel readings move steadily through Mark’s gospel – with readings also from John chapter 6 over five Sundays. One set of Old Testament lessons, with accompanying Psalms, is a series of semi-continuous readings that focus on the Davidic covenant and Wisdom literature. The other set is drawn from throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the readings having a close relationship with the gospel of the day. Here the second readings are semi-continuous selections from 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James and Hebrews. Eschatological themes and the reign of Christ feature on the final Sundays after Pentecost.

Why use a Lectionary?

It offers the Christian community a rich resource for worship and preaching by helping worshippers to gain a broad view of the major passages and themes in Scripture. When used by whole denominations – and even across the ecumenical family of churches – it offers a sense of God’s family gathering around a common set of Scripture passages.

Faithful observance of the Christian Year offers both preacher and people the benefit of ordered doctrinal instruction. This can encourage the preacher to grapple with themes that might otherwise be avoided. With all its different emphases, the Christian Year and the lectionary enable coverage of the wide spectrum of Christian teaching.

The use of the lectionary adds value in terms of long-range planning. Use of the lectionary enables advance planning as we allow our minds to work slowly over the themes and passages for the coming weeks or months. Such long-term brooding over texts often leads to unexpected and fruitful insights and ideas for preaching.

Preachers and people can share in praying over and discussing the readings for the coming Sunday or season. Many churches publish the readings for the next Sunday in the weekly bulletin. Clergy from different local churches could agree to work and pray together as they share resources and insights while preparing for their preaching.

Please Note: The Revised Common Lectionary might best be described as “helpful but not sufficient.” Occasions will arise when special circumstances or specific needs will prompt a departure from the Lectionary for a given Sunday. A sermon series on a special theme or biblical book can be a very useful way of meeting an identified need in the congregation. For this reason, please see the lectionary as a helpful tool, rather than a constricting fence.

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The Revised Common Lectionary Texts

Introduction

The Revised Common Lectionary provides one set of four passages or readings for each Sunday and major Feast Day of that specific liturgical year. The sequence begins with Advent Sunday and runs through to the feast of the Reign of Christ (aka Christ the King). However, during the long season after Pentecost two sets of readings are provided - see *RCL Readings after Pentecost* below.

Versification

The numbering of the selected verses in the RCL table of readings follows the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. Where other versions of the Bible are used in a local worship setting small adjustments may be required.

The readings from Advent to Pentecost

During the Seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Eastertide, RCL provides four texts for each occasion:

- a First Reading drawn from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)
- a complimentary Psalm
- a Second Reading from the New Testament, and
- a Gospel Reading.

The Psalm is not intended as another reading as such but to serve as a means for congregational response and meditation on the first reading. But it is also possible to use the psalm, or part thereof, as a call to worship at the outset of the service or perhaps reworked as a litany for participation by the congregation.

Where a choice of First Readings is provided, especially on the Sundays after Pentecost, the matching psalm or canticle should be used with the First Reading chosen.

Relationship of Gospel and First Reading

From the First Sunday of Advent to Trinity Sunday of each year, the First Reading is closely related to the Gospel reading for the day. The exegetical notes provided in this book draw attention to such connections and associations.

The RCL Readings after Pentecost

During the season after Pentecost, the RCL provides two alternatives for the First Reading, each with its related Psalm. *The first set* is usually part of a series of semicontinuous readings from the Hebrew Bible, offering a preacher opportunity over several Sundays to work through passages from the Pentateuch, the historical books, a particular prophet, or one of the wisdom books, etc. This enables a congregation to become familiar with the ways in which God's relationship with the people under the Sinai Covenant was lived out in practice or, in many cases, not lived out as God intended.

In the *second set* the alternate First Readings are *thematically* connected to the Gospel reading for the day.

RCL refers to these sets of Readings as the *Semi-Continuous Track* and the *Related Track*. They have been offered since 1992 following an extensive, worldwide evaluation of the Lectionary. Thus, the subsequent provision of *semi-continuous* readings for the First Reading and the alternative set of *related* First Readings. It should be noted that the psalms for the Sundays are always related to the specific first reading, which means that I provided a second psalm. But note that the two psalms are not interchangeable.

It should be noted that the links between the Old Testament and New Testament readings in RCL are not necessarily typological but more varied and subtle. The choice is to preach on any of the passages, sometimes even referring to them all as they are woven into the sermon. The choice may be to preach on only one of the readings; the others, as they are read during worship, will speak for themselves.

For all the Sundays between Pentecost and Advent, churches and denominations may determine which of the two patterns of readings best serves their needs. Some denominations will accept one or both patterns for all their congregations; others may choose to let local liturgy planners determine which set is preferable. The *Revised Common Lectionary* does not favour one set over the other but takes the view that the two patterns should not be mixed. It is desirable that a complete set of readings is followed for the whole season without jumping from track to track. Users should note that *Word and Worship* provides notes (exegesis, interpretation, etc) based on both sets of readings.

Preaching the Gospel of Mark

Marius J. Nel

The aim of this brief introduction to the Gospel of Mark is to discuss a few of the key factors that need to be taken into consideration when preaching from it.

The First Gospel

The Gospel according to Mark is the oldest canonical Gospel and an important source for the other Synoptic Gospels, with Matthew and Luke both adopting its content and structure. Several key theological ideas that are introduced by Mark, such as Jesus being the fulfilment of the Old Testament, and the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God, have been further developed by the other Synoptic Gospels. *Preachers must therefore pay close attention to how a particular theme is presented by Mark and guard against reading the Matthean and Lukan developments into Mark. While preachers can comment on how the other Synoptic Gospels developed Mark's theological insights further, it is important to remain faithful to how Mark presents a theme or event when preaching on a passage from his Gospel.*

Authorship and Origin

As with the interpretation of all documents it is crucial for interpreters to understand the context in which the Gospel of Mark originated. It is, however, not an easy task to determine when, where and by whom it was written since the oldest extant manuscripts of Mark are all anonymous. The phrase 'the Gospel according to Mark', that provides the title for all contemporary translations, was only added in the second century AD to distinguish Mark from the other Gospels when they were first used in conjunction with each other.

The Gospel of Mark itself provides no explicit information about its author but has traditionally been linked to the apostle Peter with Eusebius, who quotes Papias of Hierapolis (c. 140 AD) in his *Historia Ecclesiastica III* 39:15, claiming that its author was Peter's interpreter. This association of Mark with Peter has resulted in his identification as the John Mark mentioned in 1 Peter 5:13; Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:37–39; Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10 and 2 Timothy 4:11. John Mark was an early companion of Paul and Peter who had unrivalled access to the apostolic witnesses. This possible association, along with the themes and style of the Gospel, has made it an essential text in understanding the life and teachings of Jesus. It is, however, not clear-cut that all the New Testament references to Mark are necessarily to the same person, as Mark was a common name in the Greco-Roman world. It is noteworthy that neither the Gospel, nor the New Testament, presents Mark as an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus. He is instead presented as an interpreter of the earliest proclamation about Jesus.

The Gospel itself was most likely written in the period between the death of Peter in 64 AD in Rome and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. If Mark 13:14 (which warns believers that they will have to flee to the

mountains) does refer to the Jewish war, it probably refers to its outbreak in 66 AD. The Gospel's place of origin is uncertain, although the traditional claim that it was written in Rome is certainly possible. The Gospel of Mark was thus written in the period when the risk arose that the memory of the companions of Jesus would be lost because they were either dying or being compromised due to their advancing age. With the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the surviving Jews there was a real danger that the life of Jesus would be forgotten. We are thus in debt to the author of Mark who, by writing his Gospel, preserved the words and deeds of Jesus.

The Narrative of Mark

In preaching the Gospel of Mark it is important to take its genre into consideration. Its genre indicates that it belongs in the broad category of ancient biographies, since it focuses on the words and deeds of a single protagonist, Jesus of Galilee. Until Mark wrote his Gospel all Christian texts had been letters. Mark is the oldest extant narrative about the life of Jesus. His biography of Jesus did not only shape that of the other Evangelists but also shaped the imagination of believers over the past 2000 years.

Mark refers to his narrative of Jesus as 'the gospel' (1:1) to indicate that the entire life of Jesus is good news. Thus he does not use the term gospel as Paul does to refer to the confession about the implications of Jesus' death. *The decision to combine Jesus' words and deeds in a biography, instead of creating a separate document for his sayings or a history of his life (as seen in Chronicles and Kings in the Old Testament) without his teachings, is crucial for preaching from these texts. Preachers should remember to emphasize both the words and deeds of Jesus as presented in Mark's narrative. Neither should be prioritized over the other, as the biographical genre of Mark underscores their equal importance in understanding Jesus.*

In Mark, Jesus, as the protagonist, is constantly in conflict with various antagonists. Jesus clashes with demons (1:12–13, 21–27), Jewish and Roman authorities (2:1–3:6; 12:13–44; 15:2–15), his own family (3:20–21, 30–35), and even his disciples (8:14–21). Another significant characteristic of Mark is the secrecy around Jesus' identity, which is withheld from various characters in the narrative until after his resurrection. This 'Messianic secret' is a key theme of the Gospel. According to William Wrede it is used by Mark to explain why Jesus was only recognized as the Messiah by his followers after his resurrection. For Wrede this element of secrecy was created by Mark, thus indicating that the Gospel of Mark is not a mere historical account. It is instead a theological testimony about Jesus' life. It is, however, notable that Jesus' command to remain silent is repeatedly ignored by those he healed (1:40–45; 7:31–37). The identity of Jesus as the Son of God is also revealed at his baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7) by his Father, while demons (1:25; 3:11–12; 5:7), Peter (8:27–29), and Jesus himself (14:61–62) reveal

it at times before it is ultimately proclaimed by a Roman centurion after his death (15:39). In the light of this, it would be wrong to argue that the identity of Jesus is completely suppressed in Mark. It is more appropriate to say that the true identity of Jesus can only be understood after his death. *Preachers must therefore focus on both the powerful deeds of Jesus and his suffering when preaching about Jesus.*

In terms of structure it is important to remember that Mark's Gospel was originally intended to be read aloud to an audience that could not read. *Therefore the emphasis should be placed by preachers on the broad flow of the narrative rather than on precise divisions.* The Gospel consists of a prologue and three main parts, which divide Jesus' ministry geographically into his ministry in Galilee, his journey to Jerusalem, and the events in the city. *Preachers should consider using a map of Israel when they preach a series on Mark, so indicating in which phase of Jesus' ministry a particular passage fits and whether it occurred in Galilee or Jerusalem.*

The first main part of Mark (1:16 – 8:26) consists of three smaller parts with a similar literary structure. Each begins with a story about the disciples (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–13) and ends with a reference to their disbelief or lack of understanding (3:1–6; 6:1–6; 8:10–21). These stories are followed by a summary (3:7–12; 6:6) or a story that serves as a summary (8:22–26). The first part of Mark deals primarily with Jesus' early ministry, in which he performs various miracles and teaches the people.

The second main part of Mark (8:27 – 10:52) is characterized by the three announcements of Jesus' coming suffering (8:31; 9:31; 10:33), each followed by the disciples' lack of understanding of Jesus' words (8:32–38; 9:32–10:31; 10:34–45). The three announcements emphasize that the path of Jesus as the Messiah is a path of suffering that would lead through death to resurrection.

The final part of the Gospel (11:1 – 16:8) takes place in Jerusalem and is divided into three shorter sections. The first section deals with the conflict over Jesus' teaching around the temple, the second with discussions about the future, and the third with the Last Supper, the arrest and trial of Jesus, and his crucifixion and burial. The focus of Mark is clearly on Jesus' last week of ministry, with Mark 11–16 providing a day-by-day account of Jesus' last week, and Mark 15 a three-hour account of his last day. In Jerusalem, Jesus' position regarding the temple and the Jewish leaders becomes a central issue. The accusation that Jesus claimed he could destroy and rebuild the temple in three days becomes the basis of the false charges against him before the Sanhedrin. The tearing of the veil after his death symbolizes the end of the temple system and the inauguration of a new covenant between God and humanity through Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, the temple is no longer seen as the exclusive space where God is present. Jesus not only comes to cleanse the temple but also to replace it, since it no longer bears fruit.

Mark's Unique Style and Approach

Mark's storytelling techniques make his narrative memorable for his audience. *Preachers should thus consider remaining as close as possible to the rhetorical structure and style of Mark by pointing out the techniques he uses to communicate with his audience.* Mark, for example, often intertwines different storylines with each other. He intertwines the conflict between Jesus and his family (3:21 and again 3:31–35) with the scribes from Jerusalem (3:22–30). The cursing of the fig tree (11:12–14; 11:20–25) is intertwined with Jesus' demonstration against the temple (11:11; 11:15–19; 11:27–33) as well as the interrogations of Jesus and Peter (14:53 – 15:1). These intertwined storylines increase the tension in the story, create contrasts, and serve as interpretive frameworks. Mark also loves to repeat stories and themes so that his audience can remember them. This is evident in how the miracle of walking on water (4:35–4) is mirrored by a second miracle in 6:45–52, and how the healings in 5:21–42 correspond to those in 7:31–37. The multiplication of the loaves in 6:34–44 is repeated in 8:1–10, and the saying about bread in 6:52 corresponds to that in 8:14–21. Along with the appearance of these doublets, Mark is also fond of sets of three. He has three parables about seeds (4:3–32), three opinions about John the Baptist (6:14–15), three about Jesus (8:27–28), three predictions of Jesus' death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), three attempts by the disciples to stay awake in Gethsemane (14:32–42), while Peter denies Jesus three times (14:66–72).

The Gospel of Mark is unique among the Synoptic Gospels in several respects. Firstly, it contains very few parables, with only two being mentioned in chapters 4 and 12. This contrasts with the other two Synoptic Gospels that contain many parables. Despite the lack of parables Mark depicts Jesus as a teacher of great authority. He, however, does not usually disclose the content of Jesus' teachings in detail. While Mark uses the Old Testament as the background and foundation for Jesus' ministry, he is not as explicit as Matthew with his fulfilment of prophecy citations. The second unique aspect of Mark is that it makes no mention of Jesus' birth. Mark's focus is instead on the death of Jesus. A third unique feature is that while Mark concludes with the announcement of Jesus' resurrection, there is no appearance of the resurrected Jesus, and the women who received the news about the resurrection are too afraid to share it with anyone. The Early Church felt that Mark's ending with a conjunction (for), and on the pessimistic note of the frightened women, meant that its original ending was probably lost. As a result, Matthew and Luke were used to reconstruct the ending of Mark that is found in most contemporary translations.

Jesus the Galilean

Mark clearly emphasizes the importance of Galilee in Jesus' ministry. Jesus is portrayed as a Galilean, and his successful ministry primarily takes place in Galilee before he eventually travels to Jerusalem where he is rejected and killed. The emphasis on Galilee is significant, as it highlights the differences and conflicts between Galilee and Judea, the two regions that were once united under David and Solomon but were separated under Rehoboam. Galilee had a less established Jewish identity than Judea due to its mixed population, proximity to pagan and Hellenistic cities, isolation from Judea by Samaria, and separate political control under Herod Antipas. Located north of Judea, it was a region with more natural resources and better agricultural land, resulting in its inhabitants being wealthier than those in Judea. The residents of Judea viewed those from Galilee as being less sophisticated than themselves. Galilee was seen as more rural and receptive to Hellenistic influences, and there is evidence that a specific Aramaic dialect was spoken in Galilee, which was mocked by the Jews in Judea. Additionally, the opinion in Judea was that the inhabitants of Galilee were not as devout in the practice of their faith. Despite the negative view of Galilee, it is in Galilee, according to Mark 14:26 and 16:7, where the gospel of Jesus began. This surprising origin supports the emphasis of Mark that the ministry of Jesus was not restricted to Israel. Jesus' conversation with the Syrophenician woman (7:24–30), his statements that the temple should be a house of prayer for all nations (11:17) and that the Gospel should be preached to all nations (13:10; 14:9), and the exclamation of the Roman officer that Jesus is the Son of God (15:39), are all evidence of this. While Galilee and Judea had their differences, they were ultimately both integral parts of the Gospel story, with Galilee playing a crucial role in the beginnings of the Gospel and Judea at its conclusion.

Theological Themes

In preaching a series on Mark there are a number of recurring theological themes in this Gospel that preachers could expand on, and then refer to when they re-occur in other passages.

Despite not being a prominent theme throughout the Gospel, the concept of *the kingdom of God* is undoubtedly important for Mark. Jesus' ministry is announced as the coming of the kingdom of God at the beginning of the Gospel, and the theme is referred to fifteen times throughout the rest of the text. While Mark has not written a systematic theological treatise, his understanding of the kingdom of God, who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him is woven into the fabric of his story. For Mark, the kingdom of God comes in a surprising way like the seed that grows unseen and can easily be overlooked like a mustard seed. It upends natural expectations (10:13–27), requires new alliances (9:47), and asks believers to look at the world in a new way (12:34; 15:43). Where it currently comes in secret (or rather breaks through), it will one day come in power (9:1). The kingdom is both present and future: it has already come (1:15), but it is also depicted as coming near. Mark portrays Jesus' ministry as the present inauguration of God's kingdom through his exorcisms, healings, interactions with sinners,

feeding miracles, and calling of disciples (1:15). The future dimension of the kingdom is highlighted in passages such as 10:23–25, 14:25, 15:43, and 14:3–20, where the coming of the kingdom is portrayed as near. Jesus speaks of some who would still be alive at the coming of the kingdom (9:1), likely referring to his death and resurrection as the new beginning of the kingdom in a different way (in power). However, the ultimate fulfilment of the kingdom is reserved for the future. *It is important when preaching on passages that refer to the kingdom of God to indicate if it emphasises the present or future dimension of the kingdom, and to remind the hearers of the other temporal dimension of the kingdom's fulfilment.*

In Mark, Jesus' ministry raises questions about his identity and purpose, and even his disciples struggle to understand who he truly is. Mark's use of titles for Jesus is important in understanding his presentation of Jesus. Jesus is first identified as *the Christ* in 1:1, which refers to Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah in 8:29 based on his words and actions, which is supported by the transfiguration and Jesus' entry to Jerusalem on a donkey. For Mark, Jesus' identity as the Messiah must however ultimately be understood in the light of his suffering. This is made clear by the first announcement of his impending suffering following Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah in 8:31, which did not match Peter's expectation of the Messiah. While Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah is a pivotal moment in the narrative, he at this stage of the narrative did not fully comprehend the paradoxical nature of Jesus' identity as the suffering servant who will be exalted. Jesus' identity as *the Son of God* is also emphasized in the Gospel of Mark. It is spelled out in 1:1 and confessed by the Roman officer in 15:39. It is also emphasized at Jesus' baptism and the transfiguration but had to remain a secret until his resurrection (9:9). The demons recognize Jesus as the Son of God and as the Most High God, but Jesus forbids them from speaking about him. When asked by the high priest if he is the son of the Blessed One, Jesus however answers affirmatively. Similarly, the Roman officer confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. The term *Son of Man* is the most common reference to Jesus in Mark and is used exclusively by Jesus to refer to himself. This term appears to have Messianic connotations, as it is used to describe Jesus' authority to forgive sins, act on the Sabbath, and judge at the end of time. It is also used in connection with Jesus' suffering and death as the Messiah, and Mark 10:45 explicitly states that the Son of Man came to die. Therefore, it seems that Jesus' use of the term is not simply an idiomatic expression of 'I', but a way to identify himself as the expected Messiah. *Mark's full Christology emerges from the narrative of Jesus' life and teachings and is not limited to isolated sayings or titles. Preachers must therefore incorporate Mark's complex understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and as the one who come to replace the temple and inaugurate God's kingdom.*

Discipleship is another important concept in the Gospel of Mark. There are in Mark three groups of disciples, including the Twelve, who were chosen by Jesus to be his inner circle of followers. Throughout the Gospel, the disciples struggle to understand Jesus' teachings and actions, and their lack of understanding is a recurring theme. Despite their failures, the disciples are sometimes positive examples of those

who left everything to follow Jesus and participate in his ministry. However, they are often negative examples of fear, lack of faith, selfish ambition, and spiritual failure. Discipleship in Mark requires sacrifice and commitment to follow Jesus as a true disciple. *Mark's portrayal of the disciples presents an opportunity for preachers to indicate that they, like contemporary followers of Jesus, were not perfect. Their discipleship was instead an expression of the grace of God and an opportunity to continuously grow in their understanding of who Jesus is.*

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Planning the Christian Year

Introduction

The Christian Year is different from the calendar year. It begins with Advent, which is somewhere at the end of November or the beginning of December, and runs through to Christ the King Sunday in the following November.

Christians observe a Christian Year comprising four distinct blocks:

1. A period of nine Sundays before Christmas, in which the movement from creation to incarnation reveals the on-going divine purpose and promise at key points in the historical revelation. During this period readings from the Hebrew scriptures are, naturally, of particular interest. In recent times this 'block' has been limited to the four Sundays of the Advent Season.
2. The period from Christmas to Easter, which includes the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. During this period there is a movement away from Christmas and a movement towards Easter. This period has a unity and progression which is very much rooted in the historical life and ministry of Jesus.
3. The period from Easter to Pentecost covers the events of the Resurrection, the new resurrection-life of the followers of Jesus, and it also includes the Ascension.
4. The period between Pentecost and Advent, variously designated as the 'Sundays after Trinity', 'Ordinary Time', or the 'Sundays after Pentecost'. As Pentecost itself witnesses to the launching of the Church on her world-wide mission, the Sundays after Pentecost unpack the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early church. Here those who follow the way of Jesus are observed in a 'between the times' history, anticipating the return of the Lord.

Another way to delineate the seasons of the Church Year is to think in terms of three major sections:

1 The Incarnation Cycle

This includes the Seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.

2 The Redemption Cycle

This includes the Seasons of Lent, Holy Week and the Triduum, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost.

3 Ordinary Time

This embraces the Sundays after Pentecost until the Feast of the Reign of Christ (or Christ the King) on the Sunday before Advent Sunday, which then marks the beginning of the next cycle of the Church Year. Jerome Berriman, of *Godly Play*, calls this "The Great Green Growing Season", noting that the Church typically uses the colour green, symbolizing life, growth, and hope. Some denominations define a short period at the end of Ordinary Time known as Kingdomtide or *Season of End Times*. This period can range anywhere from just the three Sundays prior to Christ the King to a period of 13 or 14 weeks. Others observe this time between All Saints and Advent Sunday.

Planning the Preaching Programme

1 Advent to Pentecost

For the first half of the year, Advent to Pentecost, the discussions and plans will not be difficult, as the lessons from year to year will be covering a familiar pattern, with a movement towards and from Christmas, followed by a movement towards and from Easter. The concern should be to present the seasons in the year ahead in a way that is fresh, has clear focus, and yet manages the transitions from season to season.

2 The long Season after Pentecost

Planning the long Season after Pentecost to the Feast of the Reign of Christ is more difficult and requires more work. *Word and Worship* seeks to support this process by suggesting the development of sermon series that are based on the semi-continuous readings contained in RCL. In any one year, it might be helpful to have a series on some gospel passages, another series from the Hebrew Bible, and a third from the letters or other books of the New Testament.

3 Additional Seasons

In recent years different groups have developed Seasons of Prayer for Church Unity, Compassion, Creation, Stewardship and so on. These usually provide selected texts, background material and liturgical suggestions. In this volume of *Word and Worship* no additional seasons are being provided. It is left to individual ministers and preachers to consider devising such themselves.

4 Special Sundays

Other special Sundays that could be marked during the year are, for instance, Sea Sunday in July, Prisoners of Conscience Sunday, Refugee Sunday, Environmental Sunday, and several others linked to world-wide concerns in our common life such as HIV/AIDS, etc. Bible Sunday has been moved from the traditional Second Sunday in Advent and is now, appropriately, linked with Reformation Sunday at the end of October.

Introduction to the Incarnation Cycle

Introduction

The Incarnation Cycle includes the Seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. These familiar Seasons of the Church year lead from one to the next and therefore may be regarded as constituent parts of a larger whole.

Locating the Seasons

The final Sunday of the season after Pentecost is the celebration of 'The Reign of Christ' (or 'Christ the King'). This feast day celebrates the promise that the One who was crucified and rose from the grave will come again in glory. Or, as Luke writes in Acts 1:11, 'This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (NRSV). There is thus a clear connection between this promise on the final Sunday of one church year and the sense of hope with which we begin the new church year on Advent Sunday.

Advent

The Incarnation Cycle starts with the Season of Advent. Preachers should be aware of the link between the final Sunday of the previous year and the Advent Hope of the Lord's return. Without it the entire season can easily be limited to being simply a time of preparation for the Nativity. Our understanding of its focus would then be restricted to the Feast of Christmas that follows it.

The wider location of Advent within the Incarnation Cycle allows us, on the first two Sundays, to focus on the Hope of Advent that anticipates the final coming of the Lord that lies well beyond the immediate Feast of Christmas. It also looks back to the role of the prophets who, through the ages, pointed towards that final consummation.

Naturally the third and fourth Sundays focus on the world's need of a Saviour who is born to share our human condition. There is also a focus on the parts played by John the Baptist as the forerunner, and on Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Joseph and Mary.

Christmas

This season takes us directly into the celebration of the Nativity on 24/25 December. The world will have observed Christmas Day in different ways. Please note that while most of the Christian world celebrate Christmas Day on 25 December, for many of the world's 200 million Orthodox Christians, the birth of Jesus Christ is marked on 7 January. This is because they follow the Julian calendar, unlike Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations which follow the Gregorian calendar.

Epiphany

The Feast of Epiphany is celebrated on 6 January, the twelfth day of Christmas. In the northern hemisphere, a week after the celebration of the new calendar year, people will have returned to their normal pattern of life, albeit in mid-winter. In the southern hemisphere it is the height of the midsummer holiday season, with many people away from their homes. Consequently, it can easily happen that a major Christian observance is downplayed or overlooked. An option we have is to move the celebration to a Sunday, preferably the Sunday before the Epiphany (January 2nd), which this year is the first Sunday of the New Year. This ensures that on the first Sunday after the Epiphany the Baptism of Christ is appropriately emphasised and celebrated.

The Epiphany season has two underlying themes: (1) the welcoming of the outsiders, the strangers, to the new thing that God is doing. Here the visitors from the East come to the fore in their search for the one born to be King; (2) an emphasis on baptism as marking the inclusion of the believer in the new understanding of faith. Here the focus is naturally on the baptism of Jesus.

Where it is not possible to move the celebration of the Epiphany to the Sunday before the Feast of Epiphany, it is important that the baptismal theme is not lost sight of in our eagerness to focus on the Magi who arrive to replace the shepherds in the crib scene.

In this volume we list the Sundays after the 6 January Feast of Epiphany as 'Sundays *after* Epiphany', until Transfiguration Sunday is reached on the eve of Lent.

Introduction to the Season of Advent – 2026

For most Churches in the Western tradition Advent marks the beginning of the Christian Year. The Advent season developed as a period of preparation for the celebration of Christ's nativity, the word being derived from the Latin *adventus*, meaning 'coming' or 'arrival'. Advent begins with Advent Sunday on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. Advent ends on Christmas Eve (24 December).

On the one hand Advent points back to the Christ who came as the Child born at Bethlehem. This is a source of joy and gladness for the believer in celebrating the gift of a Saviour for the world. But there is more to Advent than merely looking back to an event that took place 2000 years ago. There is also opportunity to be reminded of the Lord's anticipated Second Coming at the end of time. Therefore,

Christmas also anticipates the return of the Lord at the end of the age; and Christmas reminds us of the presence of Jesus in our lives today. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, the Lord continually interacts with us in the events and experiences of our daily lives. In this sense then, Advent has three tenses. The Lord is the Christ of past, present and future. For this reason, we have the liturgical response: "*Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*".

The Advent Season is therefore characterised by a spirit of longing, expectation, anticipation and preparation. This provides the basis for Kingdom ethics and holy living on the part of those who now live 'between the times'. We are called to be faithful stewards of all that God entrusts to his people. We are a people commissioned to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart' and 'to love your neighbour as yourself'.

The Flow of the Texts

This tabulation provides a brief outline of the readings for the Season and is offered as an aid in planning the Season as a whole.

Week & date	Texts	Themes
Advent 1 29 Nov 2026	Isaiah 64:1–9	A cry that God may again reveal his power to his enemies
	Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19	The Psalmist's prayer for God's merciful restoration of the stricken nation
	1 Corinthians 1:3–9	Paul rejoices over what God has done among the Corinthian believers
	Mark 13:24–37	Anticipation of the coming of the Son of Man
Advent 2 6 Dec 2026	Isaiah 40:1–11	The prophet conveys God's word of comfort and hope for his people
	Psalms 85:1–2, 8–13	Prayer for the promised peace and for the nation's welfare
	2 Peter 3:8–15a	Be watchful, for the Day of the Lord comes as a thief
	Mark 1:1–8	John the Baptist and his prophetic message
Advent 3 13 Dec 2026	Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11	A message of deliverance for God's suffering people
	Psalms 126	The Psalmist prays for the full deliverance of the nation
	1 Thess. 5:16–24	God's merciful delay offers opportunity for all to repent
	John 1:6–8, 19–28	John is sent to tell of the light that was coming into the world
Advent 4 20 Dec 2026	2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16	David will not build the temple but is promised descendants and a dynasty
	Psalms 89:1–4, 19–26	A hymn in praise of God's constant love
	Romans 16:25–27	Praise to God who enables us to stand firm in faith
	Luke 1:26–38	Gabriel visits Mary to deliver an astonishing message

Three of the first readings are from Isaiah and the last from 2 Samuel. The appointed Psalms provide associated themes. The Epistle readings call for faith, watchfulness, patience and repentance in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. The Gospel readings continue these themes in preparation for the Lord's advent as they tell of the message of John the forerunner in the wilderness. On Advent 4 the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son who will be called the Son of the Most High God.

Thus, the joyful celebration of Advent's great promise goes hand in hand with the sober notes of holiness, accountability and readiness. In the light of these twin themes, Advent is a time of preparation marked by prayers of humble devotion, commitment and submission, and prayers for deliverance, peace and righteousness.

Here in the southern hemisphere, it is summer and holiday time. As the academic year ends people look forward to new developments in their lives. As the calendar year draws to a close there are many memories of loved ones not with us this Christmas. From early October the commercial world has been promoting a festive ('holiday') season with advertising that encourages spending and indulgence. At the same time there are many of our fellow citizens for whom this kind of Christmas is beyond their means and out of reach. This presents pastoral concerns for the people of God in our awareness of those around us who need support and socio-economic relief. What do the advent themes of hope and deliverance mean for us all?

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Basic Liturgy for the Season of Advent – 2026

The long season of Sundays after Pentecost is followed by the beginning of a new Christian Year with Advent. This is always a period of four Sundays immediately leading up to Christmas.

Advent is both a season of preparation for Christmas and a season that anticipates the second coming of Christ at the end of the age. It strikes the notes of expectation, hope and anticipation. We are reminded that we live in the tension of the ‘already but not yet’ of our faith. Our salvation has been made possible by the coming of Jesus as the Christ, his life, death and resurrection. However, we live in the time (or between the times) before our salvation is fully experienced or consummated. We live in a time of expectation and waiting.

In common with Lent, the liturgical colour for Advent has traditionally been purple, but a number of churches around the world have opted instead for the colour blue in recognition of the role of Mary the mother of Jesus in the incarnation narrative.

Advent can be reflected in the Alpha and Omega symbol, candles and the Advent wreath. The latter is the best-known symbol of Advent. It was developed in the northern hemisphere where Christmas is celebrated during winter.

Some southern hemisphere churches have tried to achieve the same effect can be achieved in the South by using the Southern Cross. The five stars of the cross can be used in the same way as the five candles of the wreath but using the successively lit candles in the same pattern as the stars in the night sky.

The Advent Season has two distinct parts, the first reminding us of the expectation that Christ will come in glory in the final consummation. Then, on the third and fourth Sundays, the emphasis is on the fulfilment of the prophecies, in preparation for the celebration of the Nativity.

This is a time when service clubs and civic organisations present Carol Services in the community, many of which raise funds for deserving local charitable causes. Churches should not compete but rather support these initiatives as much as possible.

Advent worship should ideally reflect an appropriate simplicity that contrasts with the elaborate and costly holiday festivities of the world around us at this time.

It should be noted that the Feast of St. Andrew (30 November) and World AIDS Day (1 December) usually occur early in Advent.

A Basic Liturgy for the Season

Gathering the people of God

Call to Worship from Jeremiah 33:14–15

The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel
and the house of Judah.

I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David;
and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Amen! Come to us Lord Jesus.

(Other possible verses are Psalm 25:4–5, Luke 1:76–78, Luke 3:16–18, etc)

The Lighting of the Advent Wreath could be placed early in the service, effectively drawing the congregation into a shared visual focus and reflection. There are several sets of appropriate words available that can be used to accompany the candle-lighting on each of the Sundays. This feature of Advent worship can be replicated elsewhere, for example in the home, with children setting out the candles, which are then lit in the context of simple prayers recited by the family.

The candles progressively lit over the four Sundays are usually associated with some of the key emphases of the Advent season, such as Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.

Note: in some traditions the third Sunday in Advent is called ‘Gaudete’, meaning ‘Rejoice’, reflecting the lessons set within an early lectionary, inclusive of a passage from Philippians 4 on this Sunday. The reading starts with ‘Rejoice’. For that reason, the theme of Joy is customarily set for the third Sunday in Advent.

On Christmas Day all four Advent candles are re-lit, leaving the white candle in the centre to be lit after the following is said: **Amen. Glory to God in the Highest.**

Leader: As we light the candles of our Advent wreath, we remember the preparations that God our Father made for the coming of his Son into the world. Today we celebrate the birth of our Saviour so many years ago, and light this candle as we rejoice together that we are called to reflect his light in the world.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Lord God, you are our beginning and our end,
you command time to run its course:

help us to contain our impatience,
direct us to find you in our waiting,
and help us to find hope in your Word.

Amen

The reading of the lessons could be assigned to a family within the congregation. Care should be taken that the reading is clear, audible and delivered at measured pace.

The sermon follows the reading from the Gospel.

Responding to the Proclaimed Word

Families could also lead the intercessions on the Sundays of Advent. These could take the form of a carefully prepared litany with short biddings and a simple congregational response.

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing the Peace

The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you.

The Great Thanksgiving

This is the heart of the Eucharist or Communion service. Use the form that is familiar in your particular denomination.

Sending out the People of God

Benediction*

Christ the Son of Righteousness

shine upon *you/us*

and prepare *your/our* hearts and souls

to meet him when he comes in glory;

and the blessing of God,

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

be *yours/ours*, now and always.

Amen

Dismissal*

The day of the Lord is surely coming.

Be faithful in worship,

unwavering in hope,

fervent in the work of God's kingdom

and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

(*from *Holy Communion for Advent* in *Methodist Worship*, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 1999.)

Word and Life for the 1st Sunday in Advent – 29 November 2026

Carol Walsh

Texts

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Introduction

Advent - the time of waiting and preparation - like pregnancy, is a time of anticipation and hopefulness as one waits for the new life that is to come. At the same time pregnancy is also tinged with fear (*what if...?*) and in ancient times the process of birth was a dangerous one, which is something we tend to forget in the world of modern medicine. That said, birthing continues to be a painful process and as we enter this Advent season, we can be reminded by the analogy of birthing that not everything in Advent is easy or pleasant.

Hearing the Word

The four passages of the Lectionary collectively introduce us to the personhood of the Divine and simultaneously remind us to keep our focus on what is truly important and on what we should be paying attention to.

Isaiah 64:1-9

This is a call for divine intervention. The prophet reminds us of what people recognised as the signifiers of what marks God's presence: In v1&2 God comes from the high places and is manifest through fire. We are also reminded that this is the God unlike any other, One who comes to the people who are prepared to wait. (v1-5) And we are made aware of the human response to God - which has been disobedience (v5b-7). But we are ultimately God's own, creatures of the Creator and once again the cry goes out for divine intervention. We do not wish to be abandoned.

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

God's personal relationship with the nation is referenced (V1-2a). This is an acknowledgement exactly who God is, and is also a description of the nature of the relationship that exists between Creator and creation. We note the desire to be reconnected to God, as well as an awareness that there is anger because of human actions. God is once again asked to restore favour to the people but interestingly there is an awareness of one who God will appoint whose presence alone will facilitate a better relationship (v17&18). This concludes with a final plea to God to ultimately save and restore.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

The letter begins with the acknowledgement of the relationship between God and Jesus (v3). Who we are and what grace and gifts we possess are sourced from God's presence with us (v5). The writer affirms the abundance that exists through God and the steadfastness that remains because of the commitment to Jesus.

Mark 13:24-37

This is an apocalyptic passage giving warning and guidance as to what to look out for to understand what is happening. The first examples are large and expansive and undeniable (v24). There is also the reminder that as when a fig tree starts to bud it is a sign of what is to come (v28). A bud is subtle, but the whole world is about to change – summer is forecast. Yet it is the middle of such enormous change the word of God remains. While it is not for us to know with certitude, it is important for us to pay attention and watch for what God is doing (v33-36). It is in fact an injunction from God.

Interpreting the Word

The Isaiah passage is part of what is known as Third Isaiah. The collection was pieced together over a long history of the people where the oracles were remembered retold and their significance realised. Chapter 64 is part of the work that is sometimes considered an interpretation of the teachings of Second Isaiah for the post exilic community. This then can be seen as signalling who God is and what our relationship is to be to a 'new' community.

The Psalm follows this theme of reestablishing who we are to be in relationship to the God we worship and what kind of relationship it is. The naming of Joseph, Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh tell the original listener how significant they are to God. Joseph and Benjamin were Jacob's sons from his favourite wife Rachel, while Ephraim and Manasseh were Joseph's sons. Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh were the principal tribes of the Northern Kingdom. There seems to be longing for the past – a restoration of the united kingdom under David, a kind of utopian dream.

Corinth was a significant port city creating wealth and opportunity to those who lived there and those who travelled there. It became known as a city of excess and gained something of a reputation for debauchery. This greeting then to the early church was both an affirmation and an encouragement to them to live. The reminder is that the source of their grace was from God and because of their commitment to Jesus.

The Marcan passage in apocalyptic fashion pulls together the notion of attentiveness to the person and things of God. It is an unusual passage within Mark, a longer discourse from Jesus within this gospel, and it seems to be suggested that this was not a message intended for everyone (v 3). The imagery is traditional for recognising the end of times, but what is clearly asserted here is that such accurate knowledge is privileged to God alone. That however does not negate the fact that we should be attentive to the duty of waiting with expectancy and attention. The reference also to the budding fig tree is also interesting in that fig trees were a slow growing plant, and their productiveness were seen as a token of peace and the divine favour. The failure or destruction of these were viewed as a national calamity, therefore conversely their abundant growth was to be viewed with joy and hopefulness.

Preaching the Word

Given that this is the first Sunday in Advent and consequently the first Sunday in the Christian liturgical year, a natural theme is designed around new beginnings. While the passages have a sense of memory about them rather than vision, they are an expression of longing to connect with the God who is above all. This is a God and who has been with them in their history. Following this theme also allows us to review nostalgia as a place of hopefulness from which to draw hope for the future.

We also are faced with the possibility of speaking about patience as a necessary part of faith. All the passages in some way reference patience and the importance of waiting on God. Advent, being so associated with pregnancy and birth is the perfect reminder that not all things happen when we demand. God's time is not our time, but like pregnancy and birth our calls to God have started a process that will find its fulfilment at the appropriate time. Our job is to live patiently with assurance.

Living the Word

It is often the dream to start fresh; it was the dream of South Africans in 1994. The future, however, is always tinged by the past. Within the South African context, we find ourselves some 30 years later still living with the deficits of pre democracy. The scriptures acknowledge those aspects of the past impacting the future but concentrate not on the deficit but rather on what worked. In the 1990's and early 2000's there was the introduction of an interesting model in terms of working with community development. Rather than looking at what communities needed (ie what they were lacking) there should be an assessment of what they had – Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). The perspective was an exciting and successful one for many communities. Today's world is littered with things that still need to be addressed, but we often fall back into a deficit mind set which continues to hold in stasis a world we do not desire. The question to be asked is whether we are willing to play to our strengths. Many church communities bemoan that the numbers of young people are declining, yet miss the opportunity to offer a vibrant and life-giving ministry to the elderly in the community. Is a change in our perspective the solution to our problems?

Prayer

Lord of life, we look to you for our future.
You have held us in our past and forgiven our faults
Your love for us is undeniable.
And so, we will wait, and so we will trust
And so, we will see that the fig tree will bloom for we will
tend to that garden
where peace and justice have been planted
And your people will rejoice at all you have offered
Life eternal, life abundant, life well lived.
Amen

Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday of Advent – 6 December 2026

Ian Booth

Texts

Isaiah 40:1–11
Psalm 85:1–2; 8–13
2 Peter 3:8–15a
Mark 1:1–8

Introduction

The Second Sunday in Advent focusses on the Word of God in the Old Testament, the highlight of which is the apparent re-emergence of prophecy as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. The re-emergence is personified in a preacher who looked like a prophet of old in the way he dressed and sounded like a prophet of old in the urgency of his message of repentance. It is tempting to make this person the focus of the sermon this week – but he is actually the focus for the Third Sunday in Advent, when we look at John the Baptist as the Forerunner of the Christ. For this week, the focus is on how he enables the Word of God in the Old Testament to come to life in the New.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 40:1–11

Isaiah reassures the suffering and discouraged Judean refugees in Babylonian exile that God will save them. Words of comfort, tenderness and relief are spoken to bring hope to the people. The people are to prepare the way for the Lord. John Hamlin notes that the timing of this passage related to the New Year celebration in Babylon in which a ceremonial road is prepared for the procession of Marduk and the other gods of Babylon. The Babylonians believed that Marduk decided the fate of his nation for the coming year at the time of the New Year celebration. Here we have God deciding the fate of the exiled people of God and needing a way prepared for the Lord. The way is in the wilderness, which is possibly a symbolic reference to a world where social order is broken down. Mountains and hills are brought down, and valleys filled. While this sounds like a complex civil engineering project, there is space to see the political and social symbolism of bringing down the pride and selfish prejudice of people and institutions of society who need the shaking of the mountain of their security to change their attitudes. Likewise, the raising up of valleys is symbolic reference to bringing people out of hopelessness and despair, which often feels like a valley of deep shadow. At the heart of this passage is the assurance that “the Word of the Lord stands forever”. In the uncertainty of a rapidly changing world, where much must be questioned, perhaps this is can be the word for the people today as well.

Psalms 85:1–2; 8–13

The Psalm is filled with promise in a time of waiting and uncertainty, as it carries reminders of what God has done and therefore can be expected to do again. The emphasis is on corporate and national sin. Ancient traditions and scholarly consensus invite us to think of this psalm as being sung in response to the return from Babylonian exile, when land is restored, national forgiveness experienced, and hope is raised in expectation of God’s next move. But the impact is not limited to that time or space as each generation brings their own sense of corporate sin and experience of forgiveness. Verse 8 turns to a plea for peace to be spoken to the people, for peace is the fruit of forgiveness. Those who are faithful and believe the promises of God will experience God living in their midst and are assured that righteousness is preparing a way for the steps of God: an incarnational moment on our journey through Advent. (Diane Jacobson)

2 Peter 3:8–15a

The writer is addressing the growing impatience of people who were anticipating the imminent “Day of the Lord”, which traditionally included the Second Coming of Jesus and the final judgement. The act of waiting – such as standing in line to get an ID or passport, stuck in traffic with no way out, or waiting for a medical test result – is often associated with annoyance and impatience. Waiting almost feels counter cultural. Yet the Christian life is characterised by waiting. Paul Tillich describes it this way in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*: “Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny. And every time is a time of waiting, waiting for the breaking in of eternity. All time runs forward. All time, both history and in personal life, is expectation. Time itself is waiting, waiting not for another time, but for that which is eternal.” The author of 2 Peter is inviting the reader to rethink their relationship with time, and to accept that the promises of God do not happen on our timeline. When the time is right, God acts. (ref: Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero)

Mark 1:1–8

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not provide any narrative regarding the birth or lineage of Jesus. Instead, he launches into his account of “The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. He is anxious to establish that Jesus is the Messiah for whom the people of God were patiently waiting. The prevailing belief was that the Messiah would be heralded by a prophet, so Mark quotes the prophecy, then casts John the Baptist in that role of the prophet. His description of John’s appearance is intentionally similar to that of the appearance of Elijah because it was thought that Elijah would be the prophet to herald the Messiah. The intention of Mark is to establish the pedigree of Jesus in the minds of his readers: Jesus is the one who has been long awaited. The baptism of Jesus follows, and so Mark inserts the presence of God into

the story at this early stage. The words of the voice from heaven are strikingly similar to words from Psalm 2, which is about the coronation of one of the kings of the people of God. As the king was anointed, he was assumed to be God's representative on earth (Messiah or Christ means the Anointed One). Mark is here telling his readers that Jesus is God's new representative on earth, the Messiah (or Anointed One). Mark's plan was to link Jesus with the past, by means of his quotation of our Old Testament, which gives both John and Jesus a place in the history of the people. Jesus' baptism is really the beginning of the story Mark wants to tell. Jesus has arrived on the scene and heaven confirms him as the Messiah. We are now in the present, having established the links with the past. What about the future? Mark himself is part of the future, as he is writing this account some 35–40 years after the death of Jesus, basing his work on what he has been told by others. In verse 15, beyond our passage, he summarises the New Testament: "The time has come, the kingdom of God is upon you, repent and believe the Gospel." And the message of Jesus will continue to go into the future. (Eric Johns and David Major)

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 40:1–11

This text is probably composed in the year 541 BC. The king of Babylon was Nabonidus of Haran, who worshipped the moon god, Nannar-Sin and differed from the priests of Marduk, who held that Marduk was the chief god of Babylon. During a ten-year period of difference, there was no New Year ceremony, the purpose of which was to ask Marduk and the other gods to give rain, fertility, prosperity and peace. Without the king, there could be no ceremony. In 542 BC Nabonidus returned to Babylon and the first New Years ceremony in ten years was held in 541 BC. But this failed to restore order and prosperity and, according to an inscription, by 539 BC the people were fighting each other "like dogs". The Judean exiles in Babylon were seriously affected by the chaos and suffering as foreigners without rights or privileges. The New Year Festival in 541 BC provided a suitable time for the prophet to present the idea of God's struggle for a new world, as the end of Babylon seemed near. Therefore, much of the imagery and words in this passage mirror the imagery and words of the New Year Festival. The prophet seems to be saying that the true leader at New Year 541 BC was not Marduk, but God. The outline of the text is as follows: Vss 1&2: God's decision to save the people of God; Vss 3–5: The people of God must prepare the way; Vss 6–8: the Word of God is the solid reality behind all change; Vss 9&10: The people of God must proclaim the good news.

Psalm 85:1–2; 8–11

The Psalm begins with a solo voice praising God for showing mercy in forgiving the sins of the people. Then a priest or prophet asks leave to listen for God's answer to the prayer of the nation, confident that the saints will be assured of peace (*shalom* = complete spiritual and physical well-being) and salvation, plus God's glory in their midst. The answer from God is that salvation is like the joyous meeting of old friends long separated "love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other". (Lawrence E Toombs p286)

2 Peter 3:8–15a

The Second Letter of Peter is concerned with vital issues for the Christian church. Faith and life, doctrine and deportment are of great importance. It is widely accepted that unlike the First Letter the author of this letter is not Peter. The earliest date for this letter is thought to be AD 125. The idea of the second coming of Jesus was deeply embedded in the life of the early church, although the sense of an immediate return is probably overstated and was not a big issue for the rank and file of the church. This would seem to be the case when the author suggests that the return will be "like a thief". The writer, however, seems to be convinced that the hope of the return of Christ is necessary for the assurance of moral stability. Patience is regarded as salvation in action, as the delay provides opportunity for response. There seems to have been some deliberate distortion of Paul's writings to promote moral laxity and free license, and this is what prompts the reference to Paul's letters as part of the body of Scriptures, which for us would be the Old Testament. (Claude Holmes Thompson pp 931 & 933)

Mark 1:1–8

The author of Mark, like the other Gospel writers, sets out to provide Good News about Jesus. In the period between the crucifixion of Jesus sometime between AD 29–33 and the writing of this Gospel in around AD 65 the followers of Jesus continued his practice of speaking directly to crowds of people, which was the quickest way of spreading news. Jesus left no written teaching, and writing was a slow way to spread news, and they felt the news to be urgent. However, growing persecution of Christians, lent urgency to the importance of setting down the gospel in writing and distributing it around the churches ensured that it was preserved. One of the author of Mark's key sources was what we call the Old Testament, then the Scriptures of the Jews, because both Jews and Christians believed that in it God had foretold, through the prophets, what God had planned for the world. The Jews and Christians differed in their expectation of what the Messiah would do and be, and so the Jews still awaited the Messiah who would be a national hero, rebuild the empire of King David, and rid the Kingdom of the Romans, while the Christians claim that the Messiah had already lived, that he had been a man of peace, and that he had suffered for the good of all humankind. Jesus was that Messiah, and the Christians used the Old Testament prophecies to back up their claims. (Eric Johns and David Major)

Preaching the Word

It is important to remember that the theme for the Second Sunday of Advent is “The Word of God in the Old Testament”, and there is ample material to be drawn from the Scripture passages set for this Sunday linking the Word of God in the Old Testament to the life, work and teaching of Jesus and the growth of the early Church. As referenced by the passage in 2 Peter, there was the beginning of a collection of Christian writings, the letters of Paul, but the main body of Scripture they had available to them was what we call the Old Testament. The Word of God in the Old Testament then became the Living Word in Jesus, and through the anointing of the Holy Spirit that Living Word was carried on in the people who chose to follow God in the way of Jesus.

Living the Word

A saying attributed to St Francis of Assisi is “Preach the Gospel whenever you can. Use words if necessary”. That should be the underpinning statement of this sermon. The early church emulated the ways and words of Jesus, and the modern church should do the same. We are reminded today of the importance of the whole Word of God in the Old and New Testaments – and we should remind our congregations that God did not stop speaking when the last word of the Scriptures was written. God is still speaking, and God still depends on human beings to communicate the Word of God to the world, in word and deed. The important thing is to be faithful to what we know about the words and works of Jesus, and not to be sidetracked into paying lip service to Jesus while following the ways of power and greed in the world. Jesus did not ask us to worship him, but to follow him. We follow Jesus by living the Word of God.

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Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday of Advent – 13 December 2026

James Gribble

Texts

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11
Psalm 126 OR Luke 1:47–55
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
John 1:6–8, 19–28

Introduction

Today's readings take us to the joys, hopes and disappointments for Israel of the immediate post-exilic period, then to the Magnificat in Luke's Gospel, to Paul's pertinent exhortations about living the Christian life, and finally to the evangelist John's introduction to the person and role of John the Baptist.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Isaiah chapters 60–62 anticipate the future post-exilic glory of Jerusalem. Nations will flock to a restored Zion, rebuilt by its former destroyers, where the once forsaken will become a delight and where the Lord will be an everlasting light.

1–3: the prophet introduces himself as one who has been anointed to proclaim good tidings. His description is coloured by the earlier imagery of the Suffering Servant (see 42:1–4, 52:13–53:12, 49:1–6, 50:4–11). Jesus would later identify himself with this speaker when quoting these words in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18ff). There they may be read as a manifesto of his understanding of his role: to bring good news to the meek (the poor, the distressed, the humble), to bind up (heal) the broken-hearted, to liberate the captives, to proclaim the acceptable (favourable) year of the Lord, to declare vengeance on the oppressors of the people (and, perhaps, also on sinners among the people).

The language comes with striking contrasts: a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and the mantle of praise instead of a faint (failing, flickering) spirit.

Oaks of righteousness (v3) or 'terebinths of integrity': terebinths were spreading trees occurring frequently in warm, dry and hilly places in Palestine. Evergreen, and regarded as planted by Yahweh for his glory, they were emblematic of the lives of the righteous.

4–11: Israel's destiny is to be a kingdom of priests, and to participate in the process of rebuilding. From early on Israel was called to be a nation and kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Now this glorious destiny was to be fulfilled.

'You shall succeed to their glory' (v6): the positions reversed now, with long-suffering Israel to occupy the place of glory and dignity formerly occupied by other nations, no longer subject to robbery and iniquity at their hands.

Psalms 126

This short Psalm is one of a group of so-called Psalms of Ascents (120–134), thought to have been sung by pilgrims as they journeyed up to Jerusalem for the great festivals. They contain themes of faith, trust, hope, deliverance, the joy of returning to God's dwelling-place, and encouragement for a spiritual journey from exile or distress towards holiness and worship.

The Psalm opens with a joyful expression of thanksgiving for past help. The exile has ended. 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream, our mouth was filled with laughter ...' (vv1–2). It is also a prayer for the completion of the restoration of Jerusalem. But the rebuilding and restoration process proved disappointing. There were many difficulties, including the depressed state of the leaderless builders and the opposition of active enemies. It was over a century in process and completed only during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Verses 4–6 tell what such restoration involved (note more striking contrasts): flowing watercourses in what had been a parched desert, joy instead of tears, seeds for sowing in place of weeping, homecoming with shouts of joy, carrying abundant sheaves of corn – an indication of renewed fertility and reward for labour. The Psalmist is confident of the outcome.

C.S. Rodd notes that this Psalm is very similar in thought and structure to Psalm 85. Like Psalm 85 it has been interpreted in three different ways: as a prayer of the community of returned exiles, as a cultic liturgy, and as a prophecy of the future golden age. Some believe that it had a connection with the autumn festival in Jerusalem.

Verses 2b reflects Yahweh's choice of Israel to be his own people, to whom he gave his salvation. While the biblical revelation includes this note of election, yet the special favour to Israel is intended for the benefit of all people, so that they too might sing, 'The Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced.' That is what Israel's life and example was intended to facilitate. They were meant to be a light for the nations (see Isaiah 49:6 and elsewhere).

Luke 1:47–55

Known as the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise has been described as a revolutionary document, for it contains 'dynamite'. It has become one of the great hymns of the Church. It is part of an emphasis on praise in this Gospel, which also includes the Zechariah's Benedictus (1:68–79) and the angels' song (2:13–14), while shepherds (2:15), Anna (2:38) and Simeon (2:28–32) join in the chorus.

There is a debate whether the Magnificat should in fact be ascribed to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, as some authorities have in v46 '... and Elizabeth said ...' After all it was Elizabeth's 'reproach' of childlessness that was taken away. The song is similar to Hannah's, also a once-childless wife (see 1 Samuel 2:1–10).

The singer (whether Mary or Elizabeth) sings of her own exaltation from lowliness to a new greatness as typifying the new order opening for the whole people of God through the coming of this Infant. The perceived animus against the rich, proud, powerful and well-fed comes across as a perspective shared by Luke, who records how very ordinary people welcomed the new-born Jesus, people who longed for the redress of social inequalities as well as the redemption of Israel.

The 'poor' had virtually become a technical term for the faithful adherents of the Law, trusting God alone for their ultimate deliverance and justification. Jesus took up this hope for the reversal of human fortunes, turning away from its narrow limitations of nationalism and self-righteousness to point to a more profound revolution than the Jews had bargained for. Luke brings this to the fore in his record of the ministry of Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

The Christian community in Thessalonica, Macedonia, consisted mainly of Gentiles, and it seems that it was necessary for Paul to address some specific issues in his correspondence with them. Their difficulties with ideas and doctrines foreign to Greek thinking – such as the hotly-anticipated Second Coming – called for specific attention (thus vs 1–15). Misconceptions around what was to be a very-imminent Second Coming had some members living in idleness (see II Thess 3:6–15), refusing to work, and being busybodies rather than productive members of the faith community. There was also a need to place the new converts on a firmer moral foundation, so that they might be blameless in holiness before God at the appearance of Christ at the Last Judgement. They also needed encouragement to bear persecutions and their troubles without wavering.

Note the call to rejoicing in verse 16: 'Rejoice always'. Here is the connecting thread with the other readings for the day. The Thessalonians are enjoying what the prophets longed for and what John so confidently pointed to. 'Joy is the gift of the unquenchable Spirit of God, offered in Christ, whose job it is to keep Christians connected at all times to the life of God, offered in Christ. It is the same bubbling spring of excitement found in John the Baptist and in Isaiah ...'. (Jane Williams)

This pericope contains some very practical exhortations for conduct in daily living. Barclay calls it a 'chain of jewels of good advice', set out succinctly here. 'Pray without ceasing' means an ongoing awareness of God's presence, a constant relationship and running conversation with God during daily life and work. He calls for rejoicing, praying and giving thanks **in** all circumstances, even suffering. There was a need to test and discern proposed courses of action, taking care not to quench the Spirit or despise genuine prophetic utterance. The ultimate complete sanctification promised by God serves as a theological anchor: 'the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this' (v24).

One commentator points out that in the original Greek of this passage the 'p' or 'π' sound, either in the first or second words of each injunction, is an assonance that ties this string of directions together aurally, thus leaving a distinctive, memorable impression on the hearer.

John 1:6–8, 19–28

6–8: John is introduced as 'a man sent from God ... as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him'. But, it is emphasised, he was not the light; he merely came to bear witness to the light. John came for testimony (v7) to the light. The Greek word for testimony can be transliterated as martyr, a role for John that would have been very evident by the time this Gospel was written.

19–28 records John's testimony in his answers to the deputation of priests and Levites sent by the Jews. 'Who are you?' is their repeated question. 'Give us an answer!' Note his repeated 'I am not ... the Messiah ... nor Elijah ... nor the prophet ...'. (The scriptural record led the Jews to believe that the advent of the Messiah would be preceded by the coming of a prophetic figure such as Elijah.) But positively he states, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord", as the prophet Isaiah said (see Isa 40:3). His role was that of a forerunner, preparing the way for something future, for the coming of another greater than himself.

When challenged about his right to baptise, he declared his rite to be only a purification preparatory to the manifestation of one greater than himself, for whom he felt unworthy to perform even the most menial service. There can be no greater contrast between the ministries of John and Jesus. 'The one is mere cleansing from past contamination with the possibility of a new beginning, the latter is a positive energy of righteousness, a consuming flame of purity.' (William Temple)

One commentator remarks on how John's repeated denials contrast with the voice of the One to whom, in this Gospel, is attributed the striking series of very definite 'I am' statements.

It is remarkable that the deputation of priests and Levites, who would probably mostly be Sadducees, was sent 'from the Pharisees'. It was an unusual collaboration by disagreeing parties known to hold radically opposing views. Thus here, already, the note of opposition to Jesus, and rejection of him, begins to emerge and unites unlikely bedfellows. 'The Jews' (*Ioudaioi*) is a recurring phrase in this Gospel, appearing some 70 times, usually in the context of some opposition to Jesus.

The interest on the part of the priestly class would arise from of their assumed role as custodians of orthodoxy, and perhaps, too, because the Baptist's father, Zechariah, was one of their number.

This encounter took place at 'Bethany across the Jordan' (v28), presumably the site of John's ministry. Some manuscripts have 'Bethabara'. Clearly the place is not be confused with the Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters lived and where Jesus was a frequent welcome guest.

Preaching the Word

The excitement and the promise occasioned by the end of the exile also had an unexpected downside. A depressed and largely leaderless community in a ruined city, active opposition and white anting by enemies of the restoration project, and very slow progress. It is often thus in life: things are not always simply a matter of beer-and-skittles. How might we persevere today in the face of similar discouragements facing us individually and communally?

When Jesus had read the words from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18ff) he sat down (as an authoritative teacher) and declared, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. It was a statement of his understanding of what he was to be doing henceforth. A sermon on the theme could helpfully explore the role of contemporary followers of Jesus in modelling these priorities in witness and service. How can, and should, the modern disciple live out this plan of action in today's world?

The words of the Magnificat envisage a threefold revolution: (1) moral, involving the death of human pride ('the proud scattered in the plans of their hearts'); (2) social, 'the powerful brought down and the lowly lifted up'; (3) economic, a call to share, 'the hungry satisfied and the rich sent empty away'. Perhaps there is a call here for a courageous development of this theme in the face of current conditions in our world, our country and our community.

Living the Word

This white-hot anticipation of the imminent return of Jesus evident within the early Christian community (as at Thessalonica) is no longer a universal characteristic of the Christian Church today. While some may refer to apocalyptic signs in the conflicts of the Middle-East, most live fearing the ultimate destruction of our planet because of global-warming or a human-initiated atomic war. Paul's practical guidelines set out in the final section of 1 Thessalonians 5 remain valuable wisdom for faithful daily living in today's world.

We should also learn from John the Baptiser. In his self-deprecating way and spartan lifestyle he did not set out to draw attention to himself (unlike modern televangelists and glossy hot-shot preachers) but emphasised his role simply as that of a forrunner pointing to, and preparing the way for, the Christ to come.

We, preachers and people alike, must look to our own lifestyles, our values and declared outlook, as we seek to bear witness to the Lord and the Gospel in our world.

Liturgical suggestion

A Litany for the Anointed One

- Leader:** When the anointed One comes, what shall we see?
- People:** **The broken-hearted being consoled and captives going free.**
- All:** **Open our eyes, that we may see the presence of the Lord!**
- L:** When the Anointed One comes, what shall we hear?
- P:** **The afflicted being lifted up, and mourners made glad.**
- A:** **Open our ears, that we may hear the presence of the Lord!**
- L:** When the Anointed One comes, what shall we feel?
- P:** **The oppressed being delivered and prisoners released.**
- A:** **Open our hearts, that we may feel the presence of the Lord!**
- L:** When the Anointed One comes, what shall we say?
- P:** **The just are being vindicated and prophets made welcome.**
- A:** **Open our mouths, that we may shout the presence of the Lord!**

(Everett Tilson & Phyllis Cole in *Litanies and Other Prayers*)

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday of Advent – 20 December 2026

James Gribble

Texts

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:47-55 OR Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Introduction

David's concern to provide a more permanent home for the ark of God raises the greater issue of what God wants for this man of his choice and his dynasty, a theme touched on also in Psalm 89. The alternate reading for the Psalm is the Magnificat, which we commented on last Sunday. The three verses at the end of the Letter to the Romans are significant for the Doxology articulated by Paul as he reflects on Jesus Christ, who is '*the revelation of God's mystery kept secret for endless ages*', but now so clear that it is to be broadcast everywhere so that all may be brought to the obedience of faith. The Gospel reading for the day recounts the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel and her baffled but trusting response. The words addressed to David by the prophet Nathan, about God's intentions for him and his dynasty, sound like an annunciation of another kind.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

This chapter, thought to be of composite origin, contains some ancient traditions. The temple that was built by Solomon became the pride and joy of Israel. Later ages, in idealising David, asked why he had not built the temple. In this reading David is laudably concerned that, whereas he lived in a palace of cedar, the ark of God was housed in little more than a tent. At first the prophet Nathan shared his outlook and encouraged him - but he had a rethink when God spoke to him during the night. Now he opposes the idea. Another tradition records David's confession to his son Solomon that, because he was 'a man of blood', he was not allowed to undertake this project (see 1 Chronicles 22:6ff). David charges his son to build a house for the Lord.

The prophetic message to David is that the Lord has been content all along with a portable tent (tabernacle) to house the ark and thus serve as the visible emblem of his presence among his people. He has never asked for a house of cedar. Instead, God's priority has been his choice of David to be a prince over his people, and the secure establishment of his throne. God wants his chosen servant to enjoy a settled reign and his people to enjoy peace in their own place. 'The Lord will make for you a house' – see vv 11 & 16. Some read into this evidence of 'a tenacious memory of the origins of Yahwism in the desert, so that houses of stone and cedar were inappropriate for a God who "tents" among his people' (John Bright).

The tent had uplifting associations, but a temple would be an innovation, a breach of tradition. While aesthetically splendid, its associations were heathen and perhaps spiritually disastrous. Solomon's temple, while built to the glory of God, was constructed with the help of heathen workmen and on the model of heathen temples. It became a snare to the Hebrews. Signs of protest against the idea of temple from later prophetic voices can be seen in passages such as Jeremiah 7, Ezekiel 8-9, Mark 13:1ff.

Luke 1:47-55

See the notes on this passage provided in *Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 13 December 2026*.

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

At first glance the portions of this Psalm resonate loudly with the reading from 2 Samuel 7. Verses 1-4 echo God's stated desire, in God's steadfast love, to establish David's throne for all generations, and to settle his descendants for ever.

Verses 19-26 record what was spoken in a vision to David, God's faithful one. God had 'found' him, 'anointed' him, and God's hand would always be with him, and God's arm strengthen him to overcome his enemies. This section is like a hymn proclaiming the greatness of Yahweh. Verse 26 paints a picture of a continuing intimate relationship between God and David and his successors.

But to be aware only of the specific lectionary selections from this Psalm is to miss the larger context. In verses 38ff the mood changes from praise to lament. The promise seems to have failed, the king defeated and humiliated before his enemies. The covenant pledge, meant to be eternal, has been broken. This section appears to relate to the Exile experience, reflecting the psalmist's battle of scepticism and faith. It is thought that the Psalm could refer to historical events such as the death of King Josiah (2 Kings 23:29-30), or the exile and imprisonment of Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:8-17). On the other hand, it could also have been a liturgy used in the temple to accompany a ritual humiliation of the king.

CS Rodd observes that this Psalm has been traditionally associated with Christmas Day. 'The covenant promise to David did not fail, even though the monarchy came to an end and Israel became a subject people. It was fulfilled in Jesus, who, like the king, was a suffering Messiah ... his sufferings not only preceded God's act of vindication but were an essential element in the office of Messiah as he understood it (see Mark 8:27-31)'.

Romans 16:25-27

There is some question whether this concluding Doxology is in fact from Paul's hand. The contents seem to be a contrived, repetitive combination of phrases occurring at the beginning of the letter, such as 'stablish you' (1:11), 'my gospel' (2:16)

and 'obedience of faith (1:5). Furthermore, other phrases used in this mosaic are characteristic of the Pastoral Epistles and not a convincing imitation of Paul's style. Clouding the issue further is the fact that these lines are situated in different places in some mss: some after 14:23 and others after 15:33. Also, the benediction found in some mss at v24 is omitted in others.

The appearance of a doxology here is contrary to Paul's usual practice, for he generally concludes his letters with a benediction. The doxology might have been provided by some later hand to round off an epistle that appeared to lack a suitable ending.

Yet positively speaking, the 'theme is that the divine plan of salvation as it was attested by the prophetic scriptures was, in its full scope, a secret until the coming of Christ. It was then revealed, and became the subject-matter of the Gospel, or preaching about Jesus Christ. It thus became known to the Gentiles, who believed and obeyed the Gospel. In virtue of the Gospel, therefore, God can strengthen the Roman Christians to overcome all temptations and opposition; and, for all this, Paul praises the only wise God. All this however is expressed very obscurely.' (C.H. Dodd)

The doxology, having prepared the reader for an ascription of glory to God the Father, ends by ascribing glory to Christ for ever and ever. C.K. Barrett comments: 'The defective construction may serve to remind the reader that glory should be ascribed at once to God the Father, the Creator (1:20), in whose unfathomable wisdom and mercy the work of salvation was planned, and to Jesus Christ his Son, through and in whom redemption was effected.'

Luke 1:26-38

In the account of the Anunciation to Mary the angel Gabriel, last heard of in Daniel 8:16, re-appears as God's messenger. Mary, a resident of Nazareth in Galilee, is described as 'a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph'. Luke's interest in the birth narrative of Jesus centres very much on Mary, while in Matthew (1:18-25) the story is told from Joseph's point of view. The words of the angel in verses 32-33 recall the predictions about David and his reign in 2 Samuel 7:13-16 and its echo in Psalm 89. In time the angel's greeting, 'Hail ...', became the Ave Maria of the Latin translations.

The account in Luke is regarded by many as grounds for the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Yet this doctrine is not articulated as part of the primitive Christian message in the letters of Paul or in the early chapters of Acts. Neither is there any suggestion of it in Mark or in the common tradition of Matthew and Luke. and it has no place in the birth and infancy record in Luke 2:1-52. There it is passingly implied in the editorial parenthesis ('as was supposed') in Luke's version of the genealogy of Jesus (3:23).

The significance of the Virgin Birth in early Christian thought was theological. It declared what had been the faith of the Church from the outset, that God had entered human life in Jesus Christ for our salvation. It is believed that Luke wrote his Gospel for a church that was being disturbed by heretical teachers (see Acts 20:28-30). The denial of Christ's humanity was one of the earliest deviations. With others,

then, Luke's contribution is the assertion that Christ was truly human as well as truly God. He was conceived by a human mother – a virgin in accordance with Old Testament prophecy as the Church read it in the *Septuagint* text of Isaiah 7:14 – who was overshadowed by the power of the Most High (vv 32, 35), this reference a reverent evasion of using the name of God.

Vv 36-37: Mary is given a sign to authenticate the angel's message, that Cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age shows that with God nothing is impossible.

The concept of the divine fatherhood was familiar in the Old Testament. Israel had been declared to be God's first-born son (see Exodus 4:22, Hosea 11:1, Jeremiah 31:20). And as the nation's life, character, and destiny were summed up in its ruler, the Davidic king was the embodiment of this sonship – see 2 Samuel 7:14. With the end of the monarchy, Israel had been waiting for its restoration under the Anointed of the Lord, the Messiah. In a special sense he would be called the Son of the Most High. Jesus took this inherited notion and remodelled it, speaking of God as 'my Father' and of himself as 'the Son'. 'What Luke is here concerned to tell us is that Jesus entered upon this status of sonship at his birth by a new creative act of that same Holy Spirit which at the beginning had brooded over the waters of chaos.' (Caird, p 53) God's promise regarding the house of David was being fulfilled after all.

Preaching the Word

Consider a sermon dealing with the question of the Virgin Birth, so important in the faith-outlook of many Christians, and to others of more peripheral interest. Is it a vital element in Christian belief? It presents many difficulties in an age of widespread unbelief. Would we be the poorer without it? Today's reading, Luke 1:26-38, appears to be the only scriptural warrant in support of this doctrine and then not convincingly so. The further claim made by some that Mary was perpetually a Virgin is difficult to come to terms with, especially when taking into account the further family apparently born to Joseph and Mary, the brothers and sisters of Jesus (see Mark 3:21, 31-35)

The tent/temple discussion raises important questions for a Christian community that devotes so much time, energy and resources to erecting fine edifices. Would a tent have been less of a fetish than a temple? The idolising of physical places of worship can become a hindrance to, and diversion from, true faith-commitment. Who/what is the Church in essence? Do consecrated bricks and mortar, more splendid services, vestments and ceremonies, necessarily contribute to an increase of true religion? Perhaps a tent is better than a temple as a symbol of the Christian Church, the pilgrim people of God, who here have no abiding city (Hebrews 13:14).

What was it about Mary that made her the chosen vessel for the accomplishment of God's purpose? And what was it in David that made him God's choice rather than another from the array of older brothers who Jesse paraded before Samuel? On the one hand an obscure village maiden, and on the other a humble shepherd boy. What did God see in them, and what may we learn from this?

Living the Word

We desire to honour God by the way we live and by means of our worship. We want to show our gratitude for what God has done, and we seek to promise our obedience for the future. But how? David wanted to offer something from the fullness of his heart. The house he now dwelt in represented safety, security, and the fulfilment of a deep need. He assumed that God would like something like that too. Williams asks, ‘Was he trying to domesticate God?’ Did he think that it would enable him to know where God was and what he was about? It is easy to get it wrong. Our surest guide is the word of the prophet: ‘... and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you God?’ (see Micah 6:6-8)

What God wants is quite different. It is not our job to make God a home but rather, ‘his job and his joy is to make this world a home for us’. This work began at our creation and continued when calling his people away from Egypt to a new community. It is completed when God comes and makes a home with us. This is what the angel was saying to bewildered Mary. In short, it was to announce that God is coming to make the world God’s home, and so to make it our home too. Everything we long for – love, security, peace, fulfilment, joy – are to be found in God, our only real home.

As Advent moves to Christmas, and we ponder anew the mystery of incarnation, God is preparing to come to our place, what we call ‘home’ and are never quite content with. ‘He will make it, and us, his home, so that we can come to our true home at last’.

Liturgical suggestion

A Prayer of Confession (to be said by all)

Loving God,
you have searched us and known us,
our blindness, our frailties,
our fears and our selfishness.
In sorrow we confess
that we have sinned against you
and disobeyed your command to love.
Forgive us, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
who became like us
that we might become like him.

(Source: *Holy Communion for Christmas and Epiphany*,
from *The Methodist Worship Book*)

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Introduction to the Season of Christmas – 2026

Introduction

The annual celebration of Christmas sees congregations developing appropriate patterns for worship that suit their contexts. Thus, different services may take place on particular days during the season, often using the same annual readings, hymns, carols and songs. The pattern could include:

- A service of readings and carols modelled on the traditional *Nine Lessons and Carols for Christmastide*
- A crib-building service on Christmas eve
- A midnight service on Christmas Eve
- Family services on Christmas Day
- Services on the Sundays after Christmas before the Feast of Epiphany.

The annual repetition of an established and cherished pattern can lead to a comfortable assumption that the only appropriate way to celebrate the feast of Christmas is what the congregation has always done. Recognising that the world around us is constantly in flux, it may be helpful to assemble a small representative group from the congregation or parish to reflect on appropriate ways to reach out in witness and worship in serving the local community during this season.

Meaningful services of worship can be supplemented with carol singing in the community, and at homes for the aged and hospitals. Christmas meals, and flowers from the church to sick people can also open space for moments of worshipful presence in the community.

The Unique Character of the Season

The sharp focus during the months immediately before Christmas is mostly on shopping for gifts, planning travel to family gatherings, arranging menus for family meals, and taking care of the many other details that go hand in hand with what the commercial world has usually called the ‘Festive season’ and now, increasingly in a secularised world, the ‘Holiday season’.

The reality may be quite different for many people around us and perhaps more in line with what the Holy Family experienced long ago. Travel then was a hazardous, time-consuming and uncomfortable undertaking. Joseph and Mary were obliged to undertake their unwelcome journey to Bethlehem in the cold of winter. On arrival they were in desperate need of a safe and private place where she could give birth to the Child. Not long afterwards they were a refugee family, fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod’s cruel decree, before returning when it was safe to do so to their home in Nazareth.

Thus, some pertinent questions for a local congregation to face might be:

- Who will go hungry on Christmas Day in our area?
- Who will go hungry in the weeks that follow?
- Who will be alone during the Festive Season?
- How do we welcome the visitors who come to worship with us especially those who are ill at ease and unfamiliar with what happens ‘in church’?
- How do we respond to the refugees who live near us or the homeless on our doorstep?

These are some of the uncomfortable questions that arise, and call for answers, if we are to be true to our understanding of the Nativity of the Lord and the call to offer worship that honours him.

Liturgy for Christmas Eve – 24 December 2026

James Nicolson

Texts

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11–14
Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)

Introduction

This service is the bridge between Advent and Christmas. The liturgy for Christmas Eve is full of the tension of the ‘now and not yet’. It begins with the waiting. When will the moment of birth arrive? Will we be alert enough to embrace it? We had better stay awake! And then here it is! The light of Christ has come into the world!

Gathering in God’s name

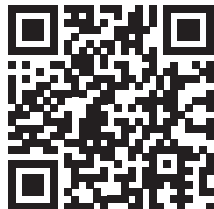
Call to Worship

On this holiest of nights,
we come, joining the shepherds
who are stunned by wonder.

On this most silent night,
we come, our hopes and dreams
joining those of Mary and Joseph.

On this night of carols and candlelight,
we come, our glad songs joining
with the choirs of angels over us.

~ written by Rev. Thom Shuman,
Lectionary Liturgies. Posted on
LiturgyLink. <http://www.liturgylink.net/>



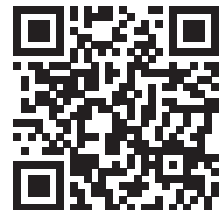
<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2016/12/a-call-to-worship-for-christmas-eve.html> (Accessed 27/02/2026)



An alternative Call to Worship or a prayer of anticipation

We count it in mere hours now.
Soon the first pains of labour will be felt.
Soon the Light will shine in the darkness,
soon the baby will be born.
Soon God will once again break into our lives,
coming in a way that is expected yet unusual,
challenging our expectations
and calling us to see life differently.
God of birth, God of light,
in this time of song and prayer and silence,
reawaken in us the awe of Christmas.
As we hear again the story of a young woman and surprising
visitors,
remind us that we are called to respond to you in unexpected
ways.
And when we leave this place,
may we be willing to sing praises
for a young woman who said YES
and the birth that we prepare to celebrate.
We pray in the name of the child
who even now is starting to push from the womb,
who would later teach his friends to pray saying
Our Father ...

~ posted by Rev Gord on his
blog, *Worship Offerings*. <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>



<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/12/call-to-worship-opening-prayer.html> (Accessed 27/02/2026)



The Liturgy for Advent and Christmas below contains an act of penitence.

Prayer for Illumination

O Lord, as your light shone so brightly in your birth among us, shine now upon this Word that we may see your glory.

Amen

In joy and thanksgiving at Christ's birth,
Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

We pray for all faithful people,
For all welcome messengers of good news,

Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

For the nations and their rulers,
For the corporations and their executives,
For anyone with power over the lives of others,
Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

For those who defend the helpless,
For those who strive for justice,
For those who work to find a way to peace,
For all the world, and all who live in it,

Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

For anyone suffering, sick, alone, afraid, or in any kind of
trouble.

We pray especially for ... *[name those you want to
remember today]*.

Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

For our own community, for friends, neighbors, and family,
near and far.

We pray especially for ... *[name those you want to
remember today]*.

Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

For those who have died.
We pray especially for ... *[name those you want to
remember today]*.

Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

We offer thanksgiving for Mary's firstborn Son –
good news of great joy.

Let us sing to the Lord a new song,

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
Before the eyes of all the nations you sent your Son,
the exact imprint of love itself, to be our salvation.
With the shepherds in the fields,
let us go now to Bethlehem,
there to find Christ in our hearts, and in the world.

~ written by Margaret D. McGee for
the Christmas Eve service at St. Paul's
Episcopal Church in Port Townsend,
Washington. Posted on In the
Courtyard. www.inthecourtyard.com



<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/11/prayers-of-people-christmas-eve.html> (Accessed
27/02/2026)



Sharing of the Peace

May the peace on earth announced by the angels be among
us now.

The peace of the Lord be with you

A Liturgy for Advent and Christmas (*including an* Invitation
to Communion, and A Sending post communion prayer and
a Benediction)

We Gather for Worship

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light – a
light that will shine on all who live in the land where death
casts its shadow ... For a child is born to us, a son is given
to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These
will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:2 & 6)

God of Surprising Generosity and Unexpected Grace,
We have come to witness a miracle;
to prepare our hearts for a new invasion of Your Light;
And in this sacred moment we ask for Your gentle Presence
to captivate and challenge us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

We Express Our Praise and Confession

We celebrate You and praise You,
God of new beginnings and surprising opportunities
We appreciate You and thank You,
God of unquenchable life and irrepressible grace,
We love You and embrace You,
God of unfailing compassion and constant companionship,
Forgive us, O Lord,
Forgive us, O Christ,
Forgive us, O Spirit,

Silent Confession

The Lord's Prayer may be said.

We come to the Lord's Table

We thank and praise You, O God
for You are not distant and uninvolved in our lives and our
world
But, You have come to us, humbly and gently, challengingly
and irresistibly.

Silent Reflection

So, we remember Jesus' birth and life,
His suffering and victory.
On the night before His crucifixion,
Jesus shared His last meal with His friends.
He took the loaf of bread and blessed it,
then breaking it, He offered it to them saying:
After the meal, He took the cup of wine and blessed it,
then He offered it to them saying:
So, we eat and we drink and we remember.

God of Grace,
Come to us again in this meal,
and as we share this bread and wine,
may we share in Christ's body and blood.
May we offer ourselves to you again,
and may we become one with Christ
and with each other – a single, unified body.

We give thanks

We thank You, Lord God,
We thank You, O Christ,
We thank You, O Spirit,
In Jesus' Name. Amen

We Offer our Gifts and Ourselves to God

In this moment of worship we embrace Your presence again,
O God,
In this moment of prayer
We proclaim again Your purpose for the world, O Saviour
In this moment of giving
We hear Your call again, O Lord
Use us – all that we have and all that we are
to touch the world with the Christmas message:

<https://sacredise.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Liturgy-for-Advent-and-Christmas.pdf> (Accessed 27/02/2026)



Isaiah 9:6 For a child has been born for us, a son given for us,
authority rest upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful
Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace.
(NRSV)

Music

This is the season for singing and enjoying Christmas carols.

Word and Life for Christmas Eve – 24 December 2026

James Nicolson

Texts

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11–14
Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Introduction

Christmas Eve forms a wonderful bridge between the waiting of Advent and the glad tidings of a God who is called Immanuel (God with us). The Christmas Eve service firstly seems to make time stand still and then crosses into a glorious moment: The Christ Child is born. It is a service full of expectation, promise, hiddenness, mystery, miracle and warmth.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 9:2–7

The text finds itself among texts that speak of the house of David's fall at the hands of invaders. The Northern Kingdom was being attacked by the Assyrians. Judah was feeling under threat. In the crisis the prophet says, God has judged them, but the end purpose is restoration.

The first verse of this chapter reflects a movement in the prophet's words from judgement to promise. Verse two picks this up: in their darkness, a great light! God is then addressed directly: God's action is the source of their praise and joy. This is the joy of harvest or of sharing the plunder. The oppression is over; the yoke is broken. The Day of Midian reminds them of Gideon's victory against all odds (Judges 7). God restored the House of David through the birth of a child (a King). This child will:

1. Have the required authority
2. Be a wonderful counsellor: He will have integrity and wisdom.
3. Be a Mighty God: the power to bring real change.
4. Be an Everlasting Father: Eternally caring and watching over all.
5. Be the Prince of Peace: able to bring real and lasting peace.

An assurance is given that all this will be accomplished through God's righteousness and justice.

Psalm 96

This Psalm is best understood in the context of the annual celebration of the Kingship of Yahweh at the autumnal festival (an annual festival of enthronement of the Lord). This would have occurred at the opening of a new year. The psalm depicts a dramatic unfolding of an act of worship fit for this occasion. The initiating call is to sing a new song of praise (it is a new year!) at the coming of the just King. All the peoples of the earth are encouraged to join in. The praise is a response to the glorious acts of Yahweh. Other gods pale in comparison to the God of Israel. Israel is encouraged to pledge obedience to the Lord. The sacrificial offering would have occurred in the inner courts of the temple. *Holy splendour* could be God's splendour or the splendour of the enthronement celebration itself. In verse 10 the enthronement is announced: "The Lord is King." The King comes to judge in righteousness and truth. Only this King can judge fairly and his justice will prevail. So let everything rejoice and exult.

Titus 2:11–14

In this letter Titus is given instruction for his calling to be a minister of the Gospel of Christ. The text affirms the appearance of God's grace in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. This grace is the unstoppable river of life and mercy that flows from God to us. It brings salvation to all. This salvation is wholeness and healing, a renewed Christlike shape of life, and the text emphasises to *all!* This gift of grace and salvation turns our lives around: Here from worldly passions and unholiness to lives that reflect the Spirit of Christ (self-control, upright, godly: see Galatians 5:22–24). We are now God's own people producing a harvest of good deeds. The blessed hope of the manifestation (literally, 'epiphany') of God's glory refers to the second coming of Christ. This will reveal all things. Here Jesus Christ is referred to as God (a rare naming in the New Testament). He willingly emptied himself even to death (see Philippians 2:5–8) to redeem us. *Redeem us* is language that refers to the price paid to redeem a slave. We must be careful of taking such language too literally. There is no need to work out who the price was paid to. This redemption refers primarily to the breaking of our chains and our freedom to live in newness of life as God's people. It reminds us of the Exodus.

Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

The gospel passage tells of God being birthed into our world in a moving and dramatic way. Luke sketches the historical context of this birth. A seemingly small and insignificant birth amid empire and the mechanisms of empire and control: emperors, governors and a counting of the population.

The census is taking place and Joseph, being a descendant of David would have been required to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem (meaning, 'house of bread') as this was the ancestral home of David's lineage. Mary and Joseph travelled together, and Mary was expecting the child, Jesus. In the context of a census the town would be filled to overflowing and there 'is no place in the Inn', so the holy family are wanderers with no secure, comfortable place for the child's birth. It seems that all that was left for them was to share a shelter with animals, which the manger (a feeding trough for animals) suggests. They follow the custom of the time of wrapping the baby in bands of cloth. Jesus, referred to as firstborn suggests that other children were born to Mary and Joseph in later years.

Some have taken the fact that the shepherds 'were living in the fields' to indicate a specific time of year but this is not so. Shepherds moved about looking for the best pasture in what could be dry and arid conditions. They were nomads, but when finding pasture, could camp for a while. For this they might carry tents but would often sleep under the open sky. We romanticise these shepherds, but they were community outcasts. Their nomadic lifestyle made people suspicious of their trustworthiness and integrity. The fact that they were excluded from the expected religious requirements (they could not leave the flocks unattended) led to them being despised. They were not even allowed to be witnesses in court. But here they are under the open sky, a place of revelation (Psalm 19, 23) where an angel (the Greek *angelos* means messenger) of God appears. It is an awesome moment, and the shepherds are filled with fear. In the birth stories fear is the most common response to God's revelation (Zechariah in Luke 1:12 and Mary in Luke 1:29). But, in the face of our fear is the Gospel, meaning: "Good News". What is this "Good News"? Here we see this "Good News" in a wandering, homeless couple giving birth to a child who is identified by three important titles: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. The title "Lord" is the same word used to translate God's holy name from the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint. This Saviour, Messiah and Lord is the one born for each one, a personal Saviour (to you...vs 11). The hosts of heaven break out into what is known as the "gloria in excelsis" (highest glory). This is to offer God the highest praise. The shepherds rush to Bethlehem, urging one another to "go and see", and find it just as they have been told. All who hear their story are amazed. Mary treasures all this in her heart. The shepherds return to their fields and sheep, offering God "highest glory". What should our response be to this 'Good News'? We go and see and are transformed into lives of highest glory!

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 9:2-7

God's judgement, it seems, is always with restoration in mind. This restoration always originates in God's gracious action. Even if the enemy seems powerful, restoration will be achieved by the hand of God. Their mourning will be transformed into praise and joy. This restoration will be achieved in a surprising way, through a child. God seems to work through the powerless. In spite of this, the child will be able to achieve real transformation, and this is reflected in the titles the child is given. The powerless in the hands of God can do it! The prophet gives a powerful reassurance to those crushed by the oppressor: righteousness and justice will be achieved. Praise and joy will result. In dark times God will act, so trust in God.

Psalms 96

In this psalm we are encouraged to trust in our King and God and in the actions of this King and God. We find our hope in our orientation towards this King. We are called to praise this King; our praise directs us to this King who is the only one able to bring us true justice. This King is the hope of all the world, not just Israel. This King will perform glorious acts. We must lay ourselves down in submission before this King.

Titus 2:11-14

We may begin by asking, "Why does the Christ come to us?" For our healing and wholeness, our salvation. This salvation is unstoppable and reaches all. This salvation turns our lives around: from unholiness and worldly passions to a life that reflects the Spirit of God. This gift of salvation will be brought to a head (find completion?) in the second coming of Christ.

Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

Luke sketches the context: Empire, big and powerful. Yet in the hiddenness something is unfolding. Not among the big and powerful, it is a humble story. A child is born. As we hear this story, we need to let it speak to us as a whole. As we do this, God's chosen orientation towards humanity becomes clear. God reaches into our real world, with its real issues, in love. It is a story from below. All of creation is involved in this drama. God's reaching into the lives of those who are outcast, those who are wanderers, those who are homeless, those who are fearful. To them is brought the announcement of 'Good News'. This "Good News" will bring about transformation, finding expression in, and giving God the 'highest glory'.

Preaching the Word

The passages of scripture all carry a common thread: God's actions in a dark world bringing light and salvation to all.

Isaiah: In times of oppression, threat and mourning God offers restoration. This restoration come on God's terms, through the upside-down Kingdom of God values, in surprising ways. It comes through the powerless, yet in God's hands effecting real and lasting restoration. Our mourning and grief will be transformed into joy and praise.

The Psalm: It is interesting that this psalm depicts an act of worship. It could be used as an example of what true worship achieves. On the occasion of Christmas Eve, we gather to worship the Christ Child (our King). We trust in God's actions, pledging obedience to God's actions, including all the world in our worship, we see the holy splendour of the birth scene, we share in a joint announcement: The Lord is King! (At the birth of the Christ Child). God's judgement is so that righteousness and truth can prevail. Joy and praise will overflow as a result of this King born to us.

Titus: As we look at the good news of Christmas Eve the Titus passage could find its place as an answer to, "Why did God come to us?" We may begin by asking, "Why does the Christ come to us?" For our healing and wholeness, our salvation. This salvation is unstoppable and reaches all. This salvation turns our lives around: from unholiness and worldly passions to a life that reflects the Spirit of God. This gift of salvation will be brought to a head (find completion?) in the second coming of Christ.

Luke reveals the looming threat of oppressive Empire. But God is acting. This is what God is doing today. God reaches into our real world with its real issues. He touches the outcast, the refugee, the homeless, the fearful. God's coming into our lives and world is always "Good News". God's coming to us is not merited by our condition, actions or achievements. It is an act demonstrating God's love and care for us, an unconditional love (grace). Our lives are characterised by foolishness, disobedience and deception. Yet God's love and kindness act on our behalf and in our best interests. It is generous beyond measure. In this loving action of God lies our hope. A hope that will transform us to make our lives express 'highest glory'. We could also pick up the theme to living lives of "go and see".

Living the Word

In our preaching we may identify the dark spaces of our lives both as individuals and community. Mourning, pain, the oppression of empire, the outcast, refugees, the homeless, etc. All these situations find expression in our scriptures. Then we can proceed to describes how these scriptures speak hope into our situations. There is an abundance of material in our texts that brings to us an overflow of hope. We need to offer ourselves into this hope that hope brings and reflect Christ life in our own.

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Liturgy for Christmas Day – 25 December 2026

Bruce Theron

Texts

Isaiah 62:6–12

Psalm 97

Titus 3:4–7

Luke 2:(1–7), 8–20

Introduction

The *Word and Worship* project has always advocated the formula where the context interprets the text. As a result, we embrace our state of flux. World order changes as does our society change. Local ecclesiastical and congregational order is subject to change. This must be evident in both liturgy and sermon preparation, to show a well prayed and thought through time of worship. Advent and Christmas are the gateway to the ensuing liturgical year, and so should set both the tone to a robust and theological engagement of the new year.

Despite Advent and Christmas being a time of festivity, it also remembers lost loved ones at the close of the year. It is also important to juxtapose the commercial ‘Boney M’ musical kitsch-time in the Malls with the deeper reasoning behind the season. This offers a rare opportunity to address an itinerant or occasional, Christian audience who generally attend church at Christmas and Easter. Christmas thus gives reason to pause, to reflect and celebrate the mystery of the incarnation.

Gathering in God’s name

The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad.

Let the distant shores rejoice.

Clouds and thick darkness surround him.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Fire goes before him.

And consumes his foes on every side.

His lightning lights up the world.

The earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,

Before the Lord of all the earth.

The heavens proclaim his righteousness,

And all peoples see his glory.

All who worship images are put to shame,

Those who boast in idols – worship him, all you gods!

Zion hears and rejoices and the villages of Judah are glad

Because of your judgements, Lord.

For you, the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth.

You are exalted far above all gods.

Let those who love the Lord hate evil,

**For he guards the lives of his faithful ones
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.**

Light shines on the righteous,

And joy on the upright in heart.

Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous,

And praise his holy name.

Based on Ps. 97.

Act of Penitence

Today we celebrate that Jesus, our Lord

Came to earth as a human, just like us but without sin.

He came so that we who sin may be freed from sin.

With the peace that comes from knowing Jesus came,

Let us confess our sins and be forgiven.

Time of silent confession may follow.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,

That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Why is he called God’s “only begotten Son”

When we also are God’s children?

Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God.

We, however. Are adopted children of God –

Adopted by grace through Christ.

Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 33.

Prayer for Illumination

Make us to know your ways, O Lord,

Teach us your paths.

Lead us in your truth and teach us,

For you are the God of our salvation

For you wait all day long.

Amen

Responding to the Word of God

God has spoken to us.

Thank you, God, for your word.

Celebrating at the table

O God, in the sending of your Son, Jesus,
To be born of Mary, your word became flesh,
And we have seen a new and radiant vision of your glory.
His name is above every name,
The Prince of Peace and Saviour of all.
In him we have been brought out of darkness
Into your marvellous light.

Sharing of the Peace

Invitation to Communion

Holy Communion to be celebrated according to
denominational or local tradition.

Sending

Go now into the world,
Carrying Christmas with you into everyday life.
Open the inn within you and make room for the gift of
gifts,
Even our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

Benediction

The joy of angels, the eagerness of the shepherds
The perseverance of Magi, the obedience of Joseph and
Mary
And the peace of the Christ child be yours this Christmas.
And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be upon you and remain with you always.
Amen

Word and Life for Christmas Day – 25 December 2026

Bruce Theron

Texts

Isaiah 62:6–12

Psalm 97

Titus 3:4–7

Luke 2:(1–7), 8–20

Introduction

From an early age, Christmas has always been a paradox in my mind. It always coincided with school holidays and industry coming to a standstill. I remember it as a happy time of family gathering, food and fellowship and the obligatory exchange of presents. Also, as an extended family gathering in my grandfather's church manse, with my grandfather being the minister.

I have a recollection of the annual Christmas play being staged by various organizations in the various congregations I grew up in. The joy of the birth with the ever-present magi and shepherds was palpable. Yet the portrayal of Joseph and Mary slogging through the streets, looking for accommodation, with her in her last trimester, was disconcerting. This, while the hymn, “no room at the inn ...” reverberated under full bellow of the 100-year-old organ being pumped for air.

While the atmosphere in the mission station of Kruisfontein (district of Humansdorp in the Eastern Cape) was electric during these Christmas plays, the narrative left the clear understanding that the stable at the bottom of the garden was the only place and space available for the betrothed couple, for the birth of their son, Jesus. This was a disconcerting picture of rejection, and of not being welcome. It was a real rejection, no less. Mary and Joseph after all had returned to their place of birth, Bethlehem. Why won't there be space for their homecoming? It is against this introduction that this following sermon outline unfolds.

Hearing the Word (Exegetical)

Isaiah 62

The first 4 lines of the pericope is spoken by the Lord, who will appoint people who watch on the walls. These may have been celestial beings, but most likely they are prophets. Then the prophet speaks. These will not rest until the Lord has established Jerusalem. In a small way this conveys the role that mortals play in building the holy city.

There is also something existential and eschatological taking place. Those who have passed through and settled must prepare the way, “build up the highway, remove the stones (and other impediments).” All of this is necessary to prepare the way for the Saviour to come, and the city will then no longer be deserted.

Psalm 97

The psalm starts with a statement of intent. “The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad.” This reign is further established by the thick dark clouds that surround the Lord. And righteousness and justice become the foundation of the throne of the Lord. Fire goes before and all foes are consumed. The second part of the psalm contrasts those who worship idols who are put to shame, while the faithful in Zion are heard and are glad. The psalm concludes with a call to “love the Lord and to hate evil.”

Titus

The operative words and key phrase in Titus is, “having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs.” Grace as in unmerited favour. Nothing we have done or ever could do can win over God's favour. Before that we lived as foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved persons, and hating one another. “Until the kindness and love of the God our Saviour appeared.” It is that what saved and redeemed us. All these sayings is a necessary precursor to preparing us for the events of the impending birth.

Luke

The decree for the census was initiated by the most powerful person at the time, Caesar Augustus, emperor of Rome. The city that conjured up images of wealth, power and authority. It was in a non-descript corner of that Roman Empire that a baby was born. The Interpreter's Bible characterises Joseph and Mary as being so poor that when they came into town no one took any notice of their arrival and no one helped them to find a place to stay. The only shelter they could get was a stable.

Interpreting the Word

The Old Testament prophecies abound with promises of a Saviour to be born. The eschatological Saviour of the world. One such is Micah 5:2, “But for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small amongst the clans of Judah, out of you will come a ruler...”

The inn would be a guestroom. And the manger would be a stall. Luke 22:11 refers to Jesus sending his disciples to ask for the guestroom to prepare for the Passover. No doubt Bethlehem was bursting at the seams with everybody coming home for the census.

Preaching the Word

Tom Wright says if you try and point out something to a dog, the dog will often look at your finger instead of the pointed to object. He says people make that mistake when they read about Jesus' birth. It is not the elaborate 'crib' but the most famous animal feeding trough ever. I want to posit that unlike most of the material arguing for no room at the inn, with Mary and Joseph being from Bethlehem, they found place for the birth.

So often, we read and interpret the bible from our own subjective perspective. I want to suggest we read and understand the bible communally and collectively. That is because the church as *ekklesia*, a gathering, helps us as we unwrap the prejudice and bias of the past and peel away the myths that have attached themselves in the past.

While growing up, it disturbed me to hear about the birth of Jesus and there being no place in the inn. Mary and Joseph going from place to place and there being no space and place. As if the birth of Jesus was left to chance. I have discovered that Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine.

There is much in Luke that helps us understand the events around the birth of Jesus, the Christ. v.7 "no room at the inn." The Inn is central to our understanding of the story. We must redefine our understanding of 'inn' and 'home'. Picture a one roomed structure, with a raised terrace for family living, with the lower level a dugout, reserved for domestic livestock. Mention is made of the "manger" which is in evidence in both the OT and the NT and is still very much in use today. And NOT a manger as in a distant shed in the bottom of the garden far removed from the home. This would infer a small holding. Instead, it is right there, in the house.

Luke 2:7 "*Wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no place in the inn.*" The Greek word for a commercial hotel or tavern would be *pandocheion*. I know that colloquially in South Africa we refer to a house as "pondok" (*ons sinspeel op ons huis as ons se, welkom in my pondok!*), but do not confuse this with "inn" in Luke 2:7, which is *kataluma* (κατάλυμα). While traditionally translated as "inn" scholars note that *kataluma* more accurately refers to a «guest room» or «lodging place» in a private home. Every home would have one room, an open space. But for guests there would be a special room upstairs – *kataluma*!

Why could they not lay the baby there? Why not a special honour? The text begins to answer the question. The guest room is full, simply because everyone went to their town to register – Luke 2:3. Bethlehem was bursting at the seams. Other families have been accommodated and cannot be kicked out.

"*She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room*" (Luke 2:7). The child is therefore laid in a crib on the floor at the lower end of the living room where the child will be safe and warm. Remember, this is Joseph returning to his home village and he gets accommodation and is welcomed and not as wrongly interpreted, that they had been turned away, there being

"no place at the inn." His wife's relatives will not be able to say, "why did you go that dingy, dirty smelly stable in the backyard away from the house? Come and stay with us!" But there is no objection and Jesus is welcomed by the ordinary people.

No doubt we read this and other narratives through our own modern lenses. We picture Mary and Joseph slogging through the dirt roads of Bethlehem and being repeatedly turned away by the B&B's, hotels and motels and every available home. Maybe we even picture a double or multi-storied structure. It is not that people did not want to take them in, what with having to accommodate a woman who has passed her final trimester, and whose water is about to break and that in an already full house? No way!

Our Christmas story also includes the shepherds. In those days, shepherds were considered unclean. This may sound peculiar since Psalm 23 famously portrays a good shepherd as a symbol of God. Rabbinic teachings classified shepherd as ritually unclean. For example, *The Babylonian Talmud (Bava Kamma 94b)* groups shepherds with tax collectors and customs officials as people who were notoriously dishonest, often letting their sheep graze on other people's land (i.e., stealing), making their repentance difficult.

To complicate matters their work necessitated being around dead animals – both in killing predators and dealing with dead sheep – as well as assisting with animal births, making them frequently ceremonially unclean. The profession made it difficult to keep strict ritual washing laws and, because of their constant, nomadic, and lonely work, they could not adhere to regular temple prayer times or wear tefillin (phylacteries).

And so we discover that the first people to hear the message of the birth are the shepherds, who are at the bottom end of the social scale. "*When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them,*" The shepherd were the first messengers of the gospel!

Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine. There is purpose in and behind the birth of Jesus. In that little town of Bethlehem. Immanuel, God with us.

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Liturgy for the 1st Sunday after Christmas – 27 December 2026

James Nicolson

Texts

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3
Psalm 148
Galatians 4:4–7
Luke 2:22–40

Gathering in God's Name

Call to Worship

Wonder of wonders! Christ is born!

The Child of God has come to dwell with us.

The Word is made flesh.

The Divine is with us, and among us.

Earth is blessed.

All life is holy.

We worship in awe, in joy, and in love. Alleluia!

Act of Penitence and Forgiveness

Light of God, calling all Creation into being, awaken us to new life this holy day.

By your creating light, renew all Creation with the glory of your grace.

Light of Christ, born among us, illumine our hearts.

By your life-giving light, create us anew in your image.

Light of the Spirit, rising in our hearts, chase away all darkness.

By your ever-present light, make us one with you, that with your angels we may sing your good news to all the world.

Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Loving God, your Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory. Bring your Word to life in us now, as we hear and reflect on your scriptures. O Come, Emmanuel, and be born in us. Amen.

Amen

Responding to the Word of God

Christmas Blessing

May the coming of Christ
deepen your wonder
and widen your gratitude.

May the helpless child
bring forth your tenderness
and strengthen your love.

May the gentle mother
give you courage to embrace the holy
and find the divine in yourself.

May the child who shares our death
bring light into your darkness,
and hope to your weariness.

May the holy family in the stable
open your heart to the poor,
the homeless, the refugee.

May the child sought by soldiers
embolden you to cry out
and empower you to resist injustice.

May the angels who sing above you
awaken your heart
and surround you with beauty.

May the One Who Comes
remind you of your beloved-ness
and fill you with kindness and mercy,
and give you joy.

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

May we, like Simeon, embrace the peace of the Christ.
Peace be with you

And also with you

Invitation to Communion

God is with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to God.

Let us give thanks to the Holy One, our God.

It is good and beautiful to give God our praise.

Creator God, we bless you in peace,
for according to your word our eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the world and for glory to your people
Israel.

For your Word is made flesh, your love embodied among us.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
**so you have caused righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.**

In the fulness of time you sent a Son, born of a woman,
so that we might receive adoption as your children.

Therefore with all Creation we sing your praise:

[*Sanctus, spoken or sung:*]

**Holy, holy, holy One, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God.

Hosanna in the highest.

[*or alternate version*]

Blessed are all who come in your name,
and blessed is Jesus, your Christ, born of a woman,
**who brings your love to our side,
in whom we hold your presence in our arms.**
In him your promises are fulfilled
In his love is the healing of the world.
Source of the dying and rising of many,
he was a sign that was opposed.
He was crucified and yet you raised him from the dead.

(*The Blessing and Covenant*)

As long as we break this bread and share this cup
we remember his death and resurrection, until he comes
again.

**Therefore, remembering these your mighty acts in Jesus
Christ,
we offer ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice,
in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of our faith:**

[*Memorial Acclamation, spoken or sung:*]

**Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come
again.**

— or —

**Dying, Christ destroyed our death. Rising, Christ
restores our life.**

Christ will come again in glory.

[*or alternative*]

Pour out your Holy Spirit on these gifts of bread and cup,
that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ.

Sending

**Pour out your Spirit on us,
that we may be for the world the Body of Christ,
a crown of beauty in the hand of the Holy One,
and a royal diadem in the hand of God.**

As a child Christ evokes our love;
so in his life and teaching he calls forth our love.
**Send us now in love, in service to this child,
and to all the children of the world,
in the name of Christ and the power of your Holy Spirit.**

[*Spoken or sung*].

Amen

Music

This is still the Christmas season. Enjoy singing Christmas
Carols.

All the prayers above (except *Sharing of the Peace*) by Steve
Garnaas-Holmes and accessed on the 14/02/2026 at:

Alternative prayers can be found at this
link.

[https://unfoldinglight.
net/2023/04/01/1st-sunday-after-
christmas/](https://unfoldinglight.net/2023/04/01/1st-sunday-after-christmas/)



Word and Life for the 1st Sunday after Christmas – 27 December 2026

James Nicolson

Texts

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

Introduction

We must remember that we are still very much in the Christmas season. The twelve days of Christmas are an invitation to live into this season of wonder more deeply. I think the texts set for today will help us do this.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

This passage from Isaiah finds itself in a section of Isaiah that points to a glorious future for the Hebrew people and a restored Jerusalem. The Hebrew people have been in exile in Babylon, but by God's hand all will be made new. Israel will be vindicated and their light will shine for the world. The opening verses emphasise that this restorative work is God's work. The robes of vengeance and fury will be replaced by the robe of righteousness. The bridal imagery confirms Zion's restored status: this imagery speaks of beauty, joy and union of Israel and God. This new work happens as surely as a garden brings forth new shoots. Praise of God is a fitting response. The text continues to affirm the prophet's need to speak out. He cannot keep silent in the midst of what God is doing. The New Name by which Jerusalem/Zion will be called is an indication of the level of change that Jerusalem will undergo (verses 4–5 give us an indication of this new name: *My Delight Is in Her*.) The passage ends with royal imagery: Israel will be a beautiful crown, a royal diadem and fit for God's purposes.

Psalm 148

This psalm is part of the Doxology that concludes the book of psalms. These Psalms (141–150) are known as the *hallelujah psalms*. *Praise the Lord* repeats itself again and again in these psalms. These psalms seek to orientate Israel (and us) toward the God who watches over us and carries us in God's love and care. Love, adoration, praise and thanksgiving are reoccurring themes.

Psalm 148 falls into two parts: Verses 1 – 6 look up to the heavens, calling all that is above into praise. Verses 7 – 14 look to the earth, calling all of earth into praise. Both Heaven and earth praise in response to God's sovereign greatness and goodness that has created all things (celestial and earthly), who has 'fixed their bounds' and continues to command them. All people of the earth whether rulers or commoners (old and young) are together called to exalt in the one above all heaven and earth. It appears that the author of this psalm is aware of the Priestly story of creation

by God's Word and God's continuing role of sustaining and ordering creation. (The *horn* that is referred to in verse fourteen refers to strength, and here to Israel and Israel's role in God's unfolding plan.)

Galatians 4:4–7

Paul has been speaking about sons who, until they receive their inheritance, have trustees and guardians watching over them. This he says has been the function of the Law. The law has had a temporary function until 'the fullness of time'. The Law could not convey the fullness of God's grace. We need to move from Law to Grace (see Galatians 2:21). Under the Law we were slaves but now we are free. Paul seems to suggest in this letter that this applies to both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews have been slaves under the Law, the Gentiles have been slaves to 'elemental powers' (Galatians 4:3). Gentiles also had trustees and guardians watching over them. Now we all receive adoption as children. This through the one born under the Law to redeem those under the Law. Again, the language of freedom from slavery: 'redeemed'. This is a living way of grace. Now the Spirit fills our hearts (our beings) and we cannot but cry out an intimate name for God expressing the living relationship of child to father. Abba is a daring name for God: the Aramaic for Father, the name used by children for their fathers in everyday yet intimate speech.

The language of slavery to freedom as expressed in this passage suggests the background of the Exodus. The Exodus as a journey from slavery to freedom. Moses is the one sent to redeem. The action of God demonstrates that Israel is the first-born son (due for the inheritance). On this Exodus journey the Law is given and a new name for God is revealed *Yahweh*. Now a new act of redemption, a pouring out of the Spirit (also 40 days after Passover), a new name given, 'Abba'.

Luke 2:22–40

Mary and Joseph are depicted as following the traditions (Law) of the time. The time of purification would have been 40 days after birth. During these forty days the mother was isolated from ceremonies and socialising. These were days of purification, and they gave time for the recovery of the body. After this time a sin offering was prescribed. This was normally an offering of a ram but for the poor, two doves or pigeons could be offered. Thus, Mary and Joseph are shown to be among the poor. You can read about all these requirements of the Law in Leviticus 12. It is interesting to note that the occasion for purification is turned into an opportunity to reveal who Jesus is, and thus the occasion is rightly termed 'the presentation in the temple'. This moment would have recalled the presentation of Samuel in the Temple.

Simeon is described as righteous and devout, one who was looking forward to and waiting for the consolation of Israel and the coming peace that the Messiah would bring. There was an understanding that at the coming of the Messiah the Spirit of God would once again be active as in times gone by. So, the Spirit of God is particularly active in the birth narratives and Simeon has the Holy Spirit ‘resting on him’ and ‘revealing to him’ the events that unfold. Again, he is guided by the Spirit to the temple and to the meeting with the Christ child. Simeon’s prayer (known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for Now Dismiss). Simeon was now prepared to die, for he has seen the hope of Israel. The prayer has echoes of the prophet Isaiah. Perhaps the most striking thing about this prayer is its emphasis on the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles: ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles – glory to your people Israel’. Christ is for all persons. This theme carries through to Acts. Of course, the parents are amazed at what is said of their child (and so are we!). Simeon’s blessing points to something deeper: this child will cause a great falling and rising in Israel, inner thoughts will be revealed and judged, and then, a sword that will pierce the heart, an indication of the Christ’s suffering.

Then Anna. She is in the line of prophets (women could not be priests, but could be prophets). Her name recalls Samuel’s mother (meaning *grace*). She has the wisdom of the ages and is an example of devotion. She connects with the temple scene and declares that this child is the one that all were looking for, for the redemption of Jerusalem. Redemption refers to the Exodus journey from slavery to freedom. The concluding verse of the passage parallels Luke’s description of John the Baptist (Luke 1:80). Everything is happening as required by the Law.

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah tells us that restoration is God’s work. Things will change and it will be a thing of beauty. It is inevitable (the prophet must speak). The change will be deep and thorough and equip us for God’s purposes. The Psalm seeks to orientate us towards God through our praise. Why do we praise God? The psalmist suggests several reasons: because God watches over us, God carries us in love and care, God has created all of heaven and all of earth. God commands, sustains and directs all of creation. God is the one who gives us strength. During this Christmas season, Galatians and its ‘fullness of time’ carries a special significance: Christ is born! We may ask why this Christ is born to us? To redeem us from slavery to the Law or ‘elemental powers’. To set us free into a new living way: adopted as children, Spirit filled and crying out “Abba”. As children we now receive our inheritance. Luke shows Mary and Joseph following the commands of scripture and tradition very closely. They are living out their lives and the life of Jesus in the context of an unfolding story. There are those also waiting within the context of this story (they are righteous and devout) who recognise the Christ child as the fulfilment of that salvation story. This story includes all within its reach.

Preaching the Word

On this Sunday it is important to tell the story of the presentation in the temple. We are still in the Christmas season, and the birth story continues. And now we have the confirmation of who this Christ child is. God is at work, continuing the story of salvation and it will include all people.

Some subthemes in this story may be:

1. This is God’s work, an act of grace.
2. God’s salvation will be thorough and include all things – all people and all of creation.
3. Our praise orientates us towards God’s salvation.
4. Through Christ we too become children of God. God’s Spirit within us (the same Spirit active in the birth accounts) and we share in the word he would have used to his own parent, ‘Abba’.
5. We must learn to wait and to be ready to recognise and receive the Christ child.

Living the Word

We can celebrate that we are living within a story that brings meaning and purpose to our lives. As Christ enters the story, so he makes it possible for us to enter the story. He enables us to be children of God. This is a good reason for living lives of praise. This story is not only for us. It embraces all people and all of creation. What a reason for celebration. Our world, all of creation, is not without hope, this story is for the consolation not only of Israel but of the world. Can we live lives that wait in eager expectation for the next sign of God’s coming Kingdom to be revealed and can we embrace that moment in the offering up of our lives?

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Introduction to the Season of Epiphany – 2027

The Feast of the Epiphany is the oldest of the Christian festivals and originally the most important. Its origin is the celebration of the incarnation of Christ in the Eastern Church. It points to the epiphany, or *theophany*, the manifestation / the revelation of God to the world in Jesus Christ. The word ‘*epiphany*’ derives from the Greek word ἐπιφάνεια meaning ‘shining forth’ or ‘manifestation’ or ‘revelation’. The Christian use of the word points to the many ways in which Jesus was revealed to the world through signs, miracles and proclamations.

In the East, from the early days of Christianity, Epiphany has been observed on 6 January. This date may have been the original date of the winter solstice in the East or it might have marked a pagan festival of the birth of a god. If the latter, it would be another example of the Christianising of an existing festival. Available evidence suggests that the Eastern Epiphany on 6 January originally celebrated both the birth of Jesus in all its aspects (including the visit of the Magi) and his baptism. Subsequently there was a separation of the incarnation and the baptism in liturgical celebration, with all aspects of the former (including the visit of the Magi) being celebrated on 25 December, so leaving the feast of the Epiphany as a commemoration of the baptism of Jesus.

Still later the Church in the West acquired a feast of the Epiphany on 6 January but without the Eastern commemoration of the baptism. Christmas Day has come to overshadow 6 January in the Western Church, with Christmas being a united feast embracing all elements of the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, including the visit of the Magi. Only in recent times have liturgical revisions in the West built the theme of the baptism of Jesus into Epiphany-tide celebrations in the choice of Gospel lections for the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

The date of 6 January will obviously most often fall on a weekday; thus the Feast of the Epiphany may be observed on the preceding Sunday. The feast day is followed by a liturgical season that lasts until the beginning of Lent and reaches its climax on the final Sunday of the season with a possible focus on the Transfiguration of our Lord. The Epiphany Season may encompass between four and nine Sundays, depending on the date of Easter.

During the 2027 Epiphany Season the Church commemorates the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12), and the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–11). Most liturgical Churches emphasize the visit of the Magi on 6 January or the preceding Sunday, and mark the baptism of Christ on the first Sunday of the Epiphany Season.

The scriptural passage Matthew 2:1–12 is read at the Feast of Epiphany in each of the three RCL years. It tells the story of the mysterious visitors from the East, an account that is unique to this Gospel.

In Year B of the RCL the Gospel readings for the Epiphany Season are drawn principally from Mark, with one reading each from Luke and John. During the six Sundays of the season in 2024 the readings come from Mark chapter 1. These successive readings could be the basis for a preaching series on Mark’s opening chapter. The final Sunday of the season (Epiphany 5) could also be observed as Transfiguration Sunday, when the gospel reading is from Mark 9:2–9. Luke 2:22–40 records the presentation of the child in the temple. The Johannine reading (1:43–51) tells of a chain reaction of calls to follow Jesus. A development is discernible in this sequence of readings: it is as if the first glimmerings of a new dawn gradually become a spreading illumination whose glow encompasses a widening circle of people.

The Flow of the Texts

The following table with its outline of the readings for this short season is offered as an aid in planning the Epiphany Season as a whole. Note the alternatives for Epiphany 6: the last before Lent, or Transfiguration Sunday.

Week & date	Texts	Content / Theme
Epiphany 3 Jan 2027	Isaiah 60:1–6	The future glory of Jerusalem will attract the nations.
	Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14	A prayer for the King and his righteous rule.
	Ephesians 3:1–12	Paul tells of his calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles.
	Matthew 2:1–12	The Magi arrive, seeking the one born to be King.
Epiphany 1 Baptism of Christ 10 Jan 2027	Genesis 1:1–5	Bringing forth light is the opening act of Creation.
	Psalms 29	The voice of the Lord is heard above the storms and earthquakes.
	Acts 19:1–7	At Ephesus Paul baptises believers in the name of the Lord Jesus.
	Mark 1:4–11	At the Jordan Jesus is baptised by John.

Week & date	Texts	Content / Theme
Epiphany 2 17 Jan 2027	1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20)	Eli discerns that the Lord has been speaking to the child Samuel.
	Psalms 139:1–6, 13–18	Reverence before the omniscient and omnipresent God.
	1 Corinthians 6:12–20	Our bodies are to be used to bring glory to God.
	John 1:43–51	A chain reaction of calls to follow Jesus.
Epiphany 3 24 Jan 2027	Jonah 3:1–5, 10	At Nineveh a reluctant prophet proclaims God's word.
	Psalms 62:5–12	The Psalmist's confidence in God's unfailing protection.
	1 Corinthians 7:29–31	The shortness of time calls for freedom from distractions.
	Mark 1:14–20	Jesus begins his work in Galilee by calling four fishermen.
Epiphany 4 31 Jan 2027	Deuteronomy 18:15–20	Moses tells the people of God's promise of a prophet.
	Psalms 111	A Psalm illustrating the Lord's loving care of his people.
	1 Corinthians 8:1–13	Free in Christ but caring for the sensitivities of others around us.
	Mark 1:21–28	At Capernaum Jesus heals a man possessed by an evil spirit.
Feast of the Presentation 2 Feb 2027	Malachi 3:1–4	A messenger to come will prepare the way for the Lord's coming.
	Psalms 84	The pilgrim relishes the prospect of being in God's house.
	Hebrews 2:14–18	Jesus shared our human nature in order to set us free.
	Luke 2:22–40	Jesus is presented in the temple as required by the Law.
	Psalms 147:1–11, 20	In praise of God the Almighty.
	1 Corinthians 9:16–23	Paul's apostolic strategy in preaching the Gospel.
	Mark 1:29–39	As Jesus heals many people he is widely sought after.
	Psalms 30	The Psalmist offers thanksgiving for recovery from illness.
	1 Corinthians 9:24–27	Athletes can teach us about discipline and persevering in faith.
	Mark 1:40–45	Jesus breaks taboos when healing a man with a skin-disease.
Epiphany 5 07 Feb 2027 <i>Transfiguration</i>	2 Kings 2:1–12	Elijah is taken up into heaven, leaving his cloak for Elisha.
	Psalms 50:1–6	False worship is condemned and true obedience commended.
	2 Corinthians 4:3–6	The gospel of the glory of Christ is the light shining in the world.
	Mark 9:2–9	Jesus on the mountain is transfigured before Peter, James & John.

On the Feast of Epiphany, Matthew 2:1–12 tells how Magi following a star travelled from the East in search of the child they believed was to be born ‘king of the Jews’. This invites a whole new understanding of God’s vision. The implication is that this child will attract seekers from well beyond the traditional Jewish boundaries. There is a welcome for all people into the love of God.

The last Sunday of Epiphany is the final Sunday before Lent. We are told how Jesus was seen by some of his disciples in a glorious blaze of light pointing to his greater identity and his significant place in the unfolding purpose of God for the salvation of the world. Here, too, is heard the voice from heaven affirming Jesus: *‘This is my own dear Son; listen to him!’* (v 7). Thus, at both the beginning and the end of the Epiphany Season we read how Jesus was affirmed by the voice from heaven. All the world is called to listen to him.

The Feast of the Presentation marks the fortieth day since the birth of Jesus, when Joseph and Mary take him to the Temple in Jerusalem to observe the Law’s requirements both for their own purification and for their first-born son’s presentation as belonging to God.

During this season the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures focus on various voices, while passages from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians feature prominently in the selections from the Epistles.

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Basic Liturgy for the Season of Epiphany

Introduction to the Season of Epiphany

The Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated on 6 January and will most often occur on a weekday. Thus, it could be observed on the previous Sunday, 3 January 2027 rather than on the first Sunday after Epiphany (January 10) when the baptism of Christ is the focus. Users of this book should consult the *Introduction to the Season of Epiphany* for more detail regarding this season.

Liturgical Features for the Season

The Liturgical colour for Epiphany

The options for the Season are white and green.

If a *Season* of Epiphany is observed, it would extend from the Feast of Epiphany to the Feast of the Presentation on 2 February. To mark this approach, the liturgical colour would remain white throughout the period. After The Feast of the Presentation the liturgical colour would be green until the final Sunday before Ash Wednesday (10 February in 2027), which is Transfiguration Sunday (7 February 2027), when the liturgical colour is white.

The Feasts and Special Days during the Season

- The Feast of Epiphany (Wednesday 6 January 2027), for which a liturgy as well as preaching material is provided.
- The Baptism of Christ (10 January 2027) is the first Sunday after the Epiphany and is dealt with in the same way as other Sundays of the year, with provision of some liturgical suggestions in the *Word and Life* pages.
- The Presentation in the Temple (2 February 2027) for which liturgical and preaching material is provided, as for all major Feast Days of the year.
- Transfiguration Sunday (7 February 2027), which is also Epiphany 5 and the Last Sunday before Lent. Provision is made for both emphases in this volume.

Decorations

The Christmas crib, or nativity scene, is traditionally left in churches until Candlemas, which falls on February 2nd. In this approach it makes sense to process the Magi to the Crib on 6 January, or the Sunday on which the Epiphany is celebrated. It might be appropriate to remove the shepherds at that time as the two groups were probably not there together.

It would then make sense to process all the remaining figures out of the church at the end of the service on 2 February or the Sunday on which the Presentation is celebrated.

Symbols of the Season

In some traditions candles continue to provide symbolism as they have done throughout the Christmas Season. But this, too, is inherited from the northern hemisphere, where it would still be dark through February. In the southern hemisphere we continue to enjoy long, warm days. The Feast of the Presentation is also referred to as Candlemas, which might be a reminder of the words of Simeon set for that day in the lectionary, ‘... my eyes have seen your salvation, ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel’ (Luke 2:30–32).

A Basic Liturgy for the Season

Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 60:1-2)

Arise, shine; for your light has come,

and the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.

For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;

but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light,

and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Prayer of Invocation

Eternal God,

by the shining of a star, you guided the Magi to behold your Son, our Lord; show us your heavenly light, and give us grace to follow until we find him, and, finding him, to rejoice. As they presented precious gifts, may we now bring him the offering of a loving heart, an adoring spirit, and an obedient will, to his honour, and for your glory.

Amen

Invitation to Confession

The grace of God has dawned upon the world through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

He comes to be the Light to the nations, and to save people from their sins.

With confidence in the grace of Christ, let us confess our sins.

God of all mercy, we confess that we have sinned against you, we have opposed your will in our lives.

We have refused to see your image in each other.

We have denied that this is your world and not ours. We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. Forgive, restore and strengthen us through our Saviour Jesus Christ, that we may abide in your love and serve only your will and purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If desired a familiar form of Confession may be used instead.

your denomination.

Assurance of Pardon

The true light that gives light to everyone has come into the world. To all who receive him, he gives power to become children of God. This is Christ's gracious word:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for illumination

God of light and life, open our eyes and our ears, that we may not only hear your Word proclaimed today but also faithfully live by it in your world every day. This we ask through Christ our Lord, the Light of the world.

Amen.

The readings for the day.

The sermon.

The intercessions.

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing the Peace (from Ephesians 2:17)

[Christ] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near.

The peace of the Lord be with you always. **Peace be with you.**

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving: Use the familiar form for

Benediction/Dismissal

May the Lord fill *your/our* lives with his light and joy and peace; and the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, remain with *you/us* always.

Amen.

Music

"As with gladness men of old"

"Brightest and best of the sons of the morning"

"Hail to the Lord's anointed"

"O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness"

"The race that long in darkness pined"

"Christ, whose glory fills the skies"

"Christ is the world's true light Hills of the north, rejoice"

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Liturgy for the Sunday before Epiphany – 3 January 2027

James Gribble

Texts

Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12
Matthew 2:1–12

Introduction

The Feast of the Epiphany occurs annually on 6 January. This is also the date for the celebration of the Nativity in the Eastern Church. As this will be a Wednesday in 2027, the Epiphany readings can also be read on the preceding Sunday, 3 January, as proposed here.

Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, as its true Light. The story of the star-led Magi, who travelled from distant lands to pay homage to the King they believed was being born, is an early indication in the New Testament of the significance of Jesus the Christ for the world beyond the narrow confines of Israel and Judaism.

Gathering in God's Name

A call to worship

Raise your heads, open your eyes, all lands,
For the star of the Lord has burst through the night!

We shall lift up our eyes to follow its path;
we shall take up our staffs to embark on our journey.

Arise, shine, for your light has come:
The glory of heaven has risen upon us.

We shall see and be radiant, we shall thrill and rejoice:
For this star shall dance over the cradle of God!

Source: E Tilson & P Cole, *Litanies and Other Prayers for the Common Lectionary Year B*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990

A Prayer of Adoration

Eternal God, yours is the greatness,
the power, the majesty, the splendour and the glory;
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.
We worship and adore you; we bless and praise your holy name.
Throughout the ages you have revealed glimpses of your glory –
the glory that was fully manifest in Jesus Christ our Lord.
He is your eternal Word, the source of light and life.
That light shines on in the darkness,
and darkness has never been able to quench it.
The Word became flesh and lived among us;
we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.
Eternal; God, revealed to us in Jesus,
we worship and adore you; we bless and praise your holy name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Source: N Dixon, *Companion to the Lectionary Vol 3, A New Collection of Prayers*, Epworth Press 1983

Proclaiming

A Prayer for Illumination

Lord Jesus, Light of the world,
speak to us as we listen,
and prompt our reflections on the words as read;
that in your light may we see light,
in your truth find wisdom,
and so discern your will for our lives.
Amen

The lections for the day are read.

A sermon is preached.

Responding

A prayer at the Offertory

Loving God, generous Giver of all good things,
visitors from afar knelt before Jesus your Son, offering
precious gifts fit for a King;
here we offer the gifts of ourselves,
the fruit of our labour,
and these tokens of our love for you
May they be blessed and multiplied,
become treasures in your hand,
and wisely used in the work of the Gospel through this
church;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Prayers of Intercession relevant to the congregation's needs and outlook may be offered, perhaps providing opportunity for response by the congregation by the use of a versicle and response such as:

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer.

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing the Peace

Christ came and proclaimed good news for all,
peace to those who were far off
and peace to those who were near.

The peace of the incarnate Lord be with you,

And also with you.

(Members may pass the peace to one another with a handshake or hug or other familiar sign.)

If the Eucharist / Holy Communion is to be celebrated, the great Prayer of Thanksgiving should follow as per the tradition of the congregation.

Sending

Eternal God, you have called us,
people of all races and nations,
to be one body of Christ's people,
sharing in the boundless riches of Christ.
We go now in the name of Christ,
to live and to work to his praise and glory.

Benediction

May the love of the Father enfold you,
the wisdom of the Son enlighten you,
the fire of the Spirit inflame you;
and may the blessing of the triune God rest upon us,
now and evermore.

Go in peace, and the Lord be with you always,

Amen

Suggested hymns/songs suitable for the occasion:

(for use at chosen points during the service)

"Christ is the world's true Light" – *(George Wallace Briggs)*

"Hail to the Lord's anointed" – *(James Montgomery)*

"As with gladness men of old" – *(William Chatterton Dix)*

"O splendour of God's glory bright" – *(Ambrose; transl. John Chandler)*

"Christ, whose glory fills the skies" – *(Charles Wesley)*

"Brightest and best of the sons of the morning" –
(Reginald Heber)

"Immortal, invisible, God only wise" – *(W. Chalmers Smith)*

"I sing the almighty power of God" – *(Isaac Watts)*

"We've a story to tell the nations" – *(H. Ernest Nicol)*

"Jesus shall reign, where'er the sun" – *(Isaac Watts)*

"Shine, Jesus, Shine" – *(Graham Kendrick)*

Word and Life for the Feast of Epiphany – 3 January 2027

James Gribble

Texts

Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–2, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12
Matthew 2:1–12

Introduction

The Feast of the Epiphany is the oldest of the Christian festivals. It had its origin in the Eastern celebration of the incarnation of Christ. Its basic concern is the epiphany, or theophany, the manifestation, the revelation, of God to the world in Jesus Christ. The word epiphany derives from the Greek ἐπιφάνεια, meaning shining forth, manifestation, or revelation. The Christian use of the word in referring to the Epiphany of our Lord points to the many ways in which Jesus was revealed to the world as Christ, as God incarnate and as King of kings. This revelation has come through signs, miracles and proclamation.

Today Matthew 2:1–12 is prominent, telling of the Magi who came from a distant land, following a significant star that they had seen in the heavens, seeking the king that they believed was being born.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 60:1–6

Isaiah chapters 56–66, constituting the third of the discernible major divisions of this important Old Testament book, are sometimes referred to as Trito-Isaiah. It is believed that this section was composed after the return from the Babylonian exile. Chapters 60–62 sketch a picture of the future glory of Jerusalem.

In vv 1–9 the voice of the Lord is heard speaking of the nations flocking to a restored Zion. Jerusalem is called to ‘rise’ and ‘shine’ in the reflected light of God’s glory. It suggests an image of a city gleaming in the light of the morning and attracting the attention of the rest of the world that is still in darkness. They are called to leave that darkness and come to Zion’s light. In v 2 darkness covers the earth and ‘thick darkness the peoples’, connoting a cloud over peoples separated from Judah’s God and needing to turn to Zion’s light.

Verses 4–9 anticipate the scattered children of Israel coming home to their own people. This idealised picture presents certain difficulties. Many exiles did not return, choosing to remain in Babylon, as did others who had scattered elsewhere. Those who did return were insignificant in the eyes of the world powers of the time and at the mercy of Persian bureaucracy. What is more, there were tensions between the returnees and those who had remained in Jerusalem all along. Being effectively leaderless, the new society in Jerusalem was fragile. It was urgently necessary for Jerusalem to ‘rise and shine’ if it was to fulfil God’s purposes.

Here it is anticipated here those returning would bring with them an abundance of riches by means of sea-borne commerce and great land caravans of innumerable camels. Imagine traffic jams of laden camels! They would come from different directions. Ephah (see Genesis 25:4) was a Midianite tribe famous for their numbers of camels. Sheba was in the southern part of Arabia, while Kedar and Nebaioth, the names of sons of Ishmael, were pastoral tribes in the north of Arabia. The latter were the ancestors of the Nabateans who formed a powerful kingdom in the second century BCE. So, no wonder, the call to Jerusalem was to arise and shine! The reference in v 6 to ‘gold and frankincense’ as part of the largesse provides a further link with today’s Gospel reading about the visitors from the East and the gifts they brought to Jesus.

Psalm 72:1–2, 10–14

It is thought that this Psalm may have been sung at the accession of the young King Solomon (‘a king’s son’, v 1). It is a prayer for the king’s righteous and prosperous reign and that God’s justice would be granted to him as a guiding principle. World-wide dominion (‘from the River to the ends of the earth’), national prosperity and perpetual fame are expected for him as an ideal monarch enjoying an ideal world-wide rule that embraced the desert tribes (v 9), kings from Spain (Tarshish), islands in the Mediterranean, southern Arabia, and the coastlands of the Arabian Sea (Sheba and Seba – perhaps Yemen and the African region of Nubia). The River may be a reference to the Euphrates or perhaps to the cosmic sea that was thought to provide the life of the holy city (see Psalm 46:4).

The repeated reference to the ‘poor’, as in v 2, suggests that the psalmist saw himself as one of the poor of the nation.

The specific justice enjoined on the king is that he gives special protection to those in danger of being oppressed and downtrodden. The care of the poor was a particular feature of Old Testament righteousness. The implication is that the welfare of the nation depends on the morality practised within it. For the people to prosper requires government by right principles. The king as ruler and representative of the people has a decisive part to play in the welfare of the people. It calls for his character to be upright and his rule to be one of righteousness. ‘It is an intangible spiritual power which makes a nation great ... the quest for false ends together with a lowered regard for moral values breeds that instability which issues in anti-social behaviour and a purposelessness ... The government’s lead is of vital importance. (Rodd, p 135)

Ephesians 3:1–12

Writing from prison, Paul tells of his prayers for the Ephesian Christians. They had heard, through what he had written before (see 2:11–22 – not a previous letter) of the special commission of God that had been given to him together

with unique insight into the deepest truths ('mystery'). What he had written would enable them to perceive his understanding of this mystery of Christ. In time past no one (see 1 Corinthians 2:7–8) suspected the truth now revealed to God's apostles and prophets, which is that Gentile people are on the same footing as Jews in the purposes of God. They are equal partners in the great inheritance and members of the same body, sharers in a common destiny in Christ. This was the secret he had been commissioned to proclaim. Further, the very existence of the Christian community demonstrated to all reasonable people the rich wisdom of God in his longstanding purpose in Christ. In fact, it was for this that Paul had been imprisoned, because of the opposition from some who regarded this inclusion of Gentiles unacceptable to their way of thinking.

The 'mystery' is the gospel understood as revealing the universality of God's purpose, the union of Jew and Gentile. This is spelled out in vv 6 and 9 (see also Colossians 1:27, 1 Corinthians 2:6–10.) Essentially it is about the summing up of all things in Christ. In Isaiah 60:1–6 Jerusalem was bidden to 'arise and shine' so that those living in the darkness of ignorance without God could be drawn to his life-giving light. Here, in his words to the Ephesians, Paul confidently underlines this purpose of God, now especially clarified through the Christ-mystery.

Matthew 2:1–12

This account associated with the birth of Jesus in unique to Matthew's Gospel. The Evangelist supplies us with the place and date of the birth of Jesus: in Bethlehem (David's town) and in the time of Herod (who reigned from 37 to 4 BCE). It was specifically 'Bethlehem of Judea', for there was another Bethlehem in the territory of Zebulun (see Joshua 19:15). Herod is depicted as a second Pharaoh in his unbelief and hardheartedness.

The visitors from the East are called *magoi* by Matthew. This was a technical term used for a Persian priest versed in magic and astrology. The word *magus* occurs only once more in the NT at Acts 13:6ff. Elymus here was clearly a magician. Did Matthew intend the word to be understood in this sense? Their worshipping Jesus with materials commonly used by magicians could be interpreted as a declaration that they would no longer indulge in such practices. It was part of the 'different way home' that they took.

Of note here is that worship of Jesus is a feature of Matthew's Gospel, unlike that of Mark.

It was widely believed in the world of that time that the appearance of a significant star signified the coming of a king (see Numbers 24:17). The Parsees were a group in the Indian sub-continent, and descendants of Persian refugees, who believed that the coming of a great hero was heralded by the appearance of a striking star. The planet Jupiter apparently crossed the paths of Venus and Saturn in 7 BCE. Is this what Matthew is alluding to? Whatever it was, 'some heavenly brilliance spoke to them of the entry of a king into the world' (Barclay, p18).

vl6: Herod, still suspicious about the talk of a king, and angry that he had been outwitted by the visitors, orders the destruction of all male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under. This suggests that the star had appeared two years earlier.

This important account raises the question whether the Jews in their exile had influenced Babylonian and Persian thought. (Certainly, it is believed that the Jews were themselves influenced by what they learned from their captors.) There was evidence at the time that people of the East were anticipating the coming of a world deliverer, who would appear in the West and introduce a golden era of world peace. The Greek historian Herodotus believed that the magi were originally from a Median tribe who were part of the Persian empire. A deputation from Parthia (an ancient area that today is part of Iran) came in 66 AD to pay homage to the Roman emperor Nero as Mithras incarnate. Interestingly, they also returned home by a different route.

V5: the prophecy quoted from Micah 5:2 appears to be combined here with words from 2 Samuel 5:2.

Preaching the Word

The background to the Isaiah reading is the radical change in the fortunes of the Hebrew people following the decision of the Persian emperor to allow the exiles to return home. Whatever else they may have been feeling, here was an amazing indication that God remained at work in the world, even using a foreign (Gentile) emperor as the instrument of his purpose. For God doesn't work only through people of the faith we subscribe to. Our responsibility in ministry and service is to discern where God is at work dispelling the darkness of the world, and to align our energies and efforts with what he is doing. The metaphor of light is striking. Jerusalem is bidden to rise and shine in the reflected light of God's glory, like a city gleaming in the morning light. Similarly, we are to 'arise and shine', for light has come, especially in the advent of Jesus the Christ! The church of God is to reflect this light.

The prayer for the king in Psalm 72 tells that the welfare of the nation depends very much on the lead given from 'the top'. It depends on the morality practised within it, especially by people in authority and people of integrity. The earlier quotation from commentator Cyril Rodd in these notes is germane. How about a sermon relating this to our contemporary world and especially to the situation in South Africa? 'Virtue makes a nation great, by sin whole races are disgraced.' (Proverbs 14:34, Jerusalem Bible)

Ephesians 3 tells how Paul's perspectives were radically changed by what he calls 'the mystery made known to [him] by revelation'. This was his perception of 'the mystery of Christ, that the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel'. This contributed in no small measure to his becoming supremely an apostle to the Gentile world. Henceforth he acted on his conviction that God's purpose was a universal one excluding no-one.

The colourful story of the visit by the Magi to Jesus offers several directions for preaching. Having paid homage to the infant King, ‘they left for their own country by another road’. It is ever thus: a deep encounter with Christ is life-changing, so that we cannot return to old ways once taken. It was a strategic move: the record says that they had been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. Perhaps, too, they had seen through the insincerity of the wily and deceitful monarch.

T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Journey of the Magi* suggests that they had been changed by their experience. Looking back years later this is how one of their number recalls their experience:

‘... All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again ...
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods ...’

Living the Word

An ancient tradition has it that they were three kings, hence the familiar carol ‘We three Kings of Orient are’. And they are given names such as: Melchior, a Persian scholar or king, often depicted as an old man with a beard; Caspar, a king of India or Ethiopia; and Balthasar, a young Arabian or Ethiopian king. The gifts they offered were gold (Melchior) as a symbol of kingship; frankincense (Caspar) representing divinity or priesthood; and myrrh (Balthasar) indicating mortality, death. Ask your congregation to ponder what ‘gifts fit for a king’ they could offer Jesus the Christ in this day and age.

The abiding value of this unique story is that the birth of this Child has the power to draw all people, Gentiles as well as Jews. What, then, of the many boundaries we like to draw between people?

More, it tells that those are deservedly called wise who can see great possibilities in small beginnings. And it tells that human life reaches a high point in the adoration of the One who amply deserves our homage and our choicest gifts. A bumper sticker I remember seeing had it simply that ‘Wise men seek him still’.

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Word and Life for the 1st Sunday of Epiphany – 10 January 2027

The Baptism of Jesus

James Harris

Texts

Genesis 1:1–5
Acts 19:1–7
Psalm 29
Mark 1:4–11

Introduction

The first Sunday after Epiphany is always the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus. But why? This is a legitimate question. Let me propose a rather idiosyncratic answer: Baptism is the first step into the visible church, it is the first sacramental rite exercised in the life of a child, it is a picture of an initial cleansing, and it is a metaphor for the continuing revelation of God in Christ to individuals, to the church, and to the world. In other words, it is a sign of “firsts” with God making the first move to embrace, cleanse, and continue to wash us in love, grace, and renewal.

This Feast of Baptism falls within Epiphany. Since this is the season of “revelation” or “appearing” we note that a number of truths are revealed, or appear, to us in the baptismal event as recorded – especially in the Gospel narratives (yes, plural since Mark is very brief it is helpful to at least read the other Gospels on the topic), as well as the complementary texts.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Mark 1:4–11

Mark’s record of Jesus’ baptism is typically brief, and almost dismissive. He simply tells readers what happened with no expansion. The difference between Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts is stark: Mark’s brief statement over against Matthew’s effulgent portrait. Yet Mark is clear: the core idea is front and centre, Jesus was baptised by John, the dove is present, and the heavenly voice affirms the Son. Then the dove descends eagle-like thrusting Jesus into the wilderness to suffer temptations. It is as if the great call to those who became disciples was more important, and thus baptism and temptations were a necessary precursor, that’s all, full stop.

Obviously our passage offers much more than the basics. There is a necessity in our day to explicate the meaning of “repentance” because both John and Jesus called people to repent. Hence repentance is not merely the Baptist’s emphasis, it is our Lord’s as well. Repentance is stopping, realising something is wrong, then turning from unrighteousness to doing and believing what is right and pleasing to God. It is turning from self to God in Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation. So, we see immediately that repentance is not simply a one-off-act. It is an ongoing evaluation of life and relationship with our Saviour in eschewing selfishness and narcissism, as well as embracing God’s good grace and gifts of faith, love, hope, and Holy Spirit power.

Whatever else one might say about this text, God’s verbal affirmation of Jesus is a wonderful and evocative piece of prose. Jesus at this stage had not exercised his redemptive ministry yet God declares pleasure in him. Thus, God’s blessing and honour has nothing essentially to do with Jesus’ actions but more with his relationship as “Son”. What a lesson for all of us: our status as “children of the Most High” has nothing to do with what we have done or not done. It has to do with our relationship: we are “in Christ” accepted on his merit not our own. Sheer grace and love. As Paul says in Ephesians 2: “we were dead in trespass and sin” but God, through Christ brought us to himself.

Genesis 1:1–5

In keeping with the beginning of the Sundays of the year, the start of our Lord’s public ministry, and the entry into the community of faith, worship, devotion, and service through baptism, the Lectionary readings return to the story of the ordering of creation out of initial formlessness, or even chaos. This is simply using the Genesis record as illustrative support for the concept of “beginning” something new. Whatever ultimate interpretation we put on this passage, we cannot escape the reality that once the decision was made in the eternal realm to change this dark state of nature, the Spirit of God is recorded as moving in developmental patterns to bring light, structure, distinction, and order. The point of this record, above all else, is that God is active from the beginning of time and has revealed the divine self and purposes through word and actions both in the created realities as well as through the narratives of Holy Scripture encapsulated in the Hebrew and Christian Writings. Whatever else may be the intention of this section of Genesis, the objective today is simply and solely to highlight God’s active involvement in both nature and human life.

Psalms 29

You cannot read this Psalm without noticing the blend of voice of God (Word) and acts of God (Power). The setting initially is a nature or creation scene yet the narrative progresses into relational and worshipful engagement, culminating in the unified shout of “glory” as the sovereign power and experiential reality of the presence of the living God dawns on the community of the faithful.

There are several translations commentators offer for the initial announcement or call to praise: “Ascribe”, “Give”, “Praise”. My preference is “ascribe” because it offers a depth the others don’t suggest. Thus, for our Psalmist, his focus is one of awe at the presence of God who is absolutely sovereign over all things: nature, history, and humanity. And, ultimately, the Psalmist claims that the power of God is exercised to “bless his people with strength and peace” (vs11).

Why a blessing for these two characteristics? Commentators suggest the Psalmist has used a well-known pagan paean to Nature's divinity, especially portrayed in "thunder". The interpretation is offered that the Psalmist over-rides such an idea by showing how YHWH is the God and Creator of nature, including the power of thunder and storm. Yet stories abound as to how nature's power has affected humans for good and ill. Two illustrations might help put this in perspective. Martin Luther, the progenitor of the Protestant Reformation and Lutheranism, as a young man was caught in a storm of such ferocity that in his terror called to God for salvation (1505). He weathered the storm by God's providence and entered a monastery to fulfil his fear-promised pledge. A similar story is told of John Newton, an English slaver, almost two hundred and fifty years after Luther. Newton was on the high seas after plundering Africa's west coast for slaves, when a storm hit the ship off the coast of Ireland (1748). He too cried out in fear, pleading to God for mercy. He eventually became an Anglican clergyman. Was this superstition in both cases? Or was it a mixture of unregenerate anxiety in time of adversity together with the power of God Spirit using through nature's storms to awaken spiritual reality in these two men? I'll leave the answers to these questions up to you.

The point cannot be emphasised too strongly, however: Nature is not divine; it is inanimate, it is a created entity, and, as such, comes under the providential ordering of the Creator. God thus uses creation for whatsoever purpose required, without violating nature's essential character.

The Psalm highlights the power of God's voice to produce; and here the poetry must be noted. The glorious voice of God breaks cedar trees, rends cedar trees, flattens forests, makes mountains and stars skip like calves and oxen, causes desert whirlwinds, and even splits the lightning. At such all bow and cry "glory", recognising the enthroned Lord of All present in some mysterious yet concrete fashion. Those with spiritual insight or knowledge perceive than within the storms of nature God speaks and acts for the benefit of "his people".

Acts 19:1-7

Paul meets up with some disciples in Ephesus. They are baptised with John's baptism of repentance yet have never heard of the Holy Spirit (vs 2). So, whose "disciples" were they? Certainly, they were John's followers, otherwise why endure the baptism of repentance. We are aware also of Apollos in Acts 18 being John's disciple. Were they godly Gentiles attracted to the high morality of Judaism and its emphasis on the living and true God, the One over nature, and the One to whom reconciliation is possible through the divinely appointed sacrificial system, whereby an innocent pays through lifeblood for the guilty, thus atoning for sin and alienation? Can it said that only once these disciples were baptised in the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name, they now became the true disciples of the Messiah? Is speaking in tongues mandatory to become a disciple and receive the Spirit? Was this experience unique for these Ephesian followers? Perhaps, here, there are more questions than helpful exposition. These are questions that in some contexts are still contested and debated.

After this initial hiatus or hiccup Paul settles down for a two-year stint (vs 10) of teaching having spent three months in the synagogue trying to persuade fellow Jews (and godly Gentiles?) of the Kingdom's reality. Even though verses 8 to 10 are not part of our text, they constitute a valuable element to understanding the first seven verses. That lesson is that baptism is a beginning, and it needs time and energy and faithful study of the Word to establish the church in any particular setting. Notice that Paul began with 12 disciples (as did Jesus) and after the two years (albeit every day) "all of Asia, both Jews and Gentiles, heard the Word of the Lord". Certainly, they too would be shouting "glory" (see Psalm 29 again).

Preaching the Word

The preacher has a wealth of possibilities for sermons and teaching texts. The most obvious theme is our Lord's baptism, its rationale, the Heavenly affirmation, it being a precursor to the temptations, and its importance. Then the clear connection with parishioners' own baptism – its significance and its daily objective in focusing our minds and hearts on belonging to God, to the saviour, and to the church.

When preaching from the **Acts 19** passage I think we need caution so as to avoid the pitfall of teaching a "second, third, or more baptism or blessing". After fifty years and more in the ministry I have found that some strange ideas creep into the practices of congregations – usually due to the idiosyncrasies of the pastors or leading lay people. Congregational members are not always astute or informed enough to raise caution or to call a halt to what sadly can become heresy.

Psalm 29 is a wonderful passage to preach from. The wonder of God as creator, the power and reality of God speaking revelation and renewal, the place of nature and the value of general revelation (contra K. Barth and pro E. Brunner, perhaps). The value of using Psalm 29 is the opportunity to highlight the utter difference between creation and the Creator. But more, the opportunity to stress the actual intervention in word and acts by God, through the Son (remember that nothing created was created outside of the Son's involvement, John 1), in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, yes, the Trinity is active in all areas of life and history.

The **Genesis** passage needs to be recognised as a declaration of the creative activity of God. It gives no timeline. It makes a statement. It does not inform on methodology. Perhaps the best suggestion I can make is preach from both Ps 29 and Gen 1. Show how they are associated and how the link with the theme of Christ's baptism. It seems an ideal opportunity to show the revelatory associations wherein Jesus is there at the beginning of time, creation, and in the redemptive process and its association with baptism and church membership. Equally, one can highlight the wonder (glory) of nature/creation as gift from God for both sheer enjoyment of aesthetic beauty as well as the revelation of God in the created order. Nature cannot redeem humanity, but it can draw us to consider the Creator through the beauty and diversity and wonder of the natural world.

In all these possibilities the preacher does need to keep in mind not simply a benign Creator but an interventionist Redeemer who is unwilling to let alienated humanity bumble along claiming to be master and commander of our own soul. Our alienation has deadened humans to spiritual realities. The Spirit comes in mysterious ways to arrest us and enliven us so we are empowered to repent and believe, trust, and be faithful to the God of love and grace in Jesus.

Living the Word

Ethical suggestions and/or life-skills emerging from these texts are myriad. Thus, themes like humility, patience, sensitivity, reflection, and devotion will be helpful. An interrogation of the texts to discern the actual messages will be necessary to encourage righteous action. This in turn will point to Biblical righteousness as expected regardless of situation or outcome. These texts in one way or another call us to hold to truth because ultimately Jesus is the embodiment of truth. True confession of sin (to God alone) will occur together with the reception of absolution and forgiveness through the merits of Jesus alone. These narratives suggest a sense of the wonder and joy in the gift of life as one of God's great gifts, with the experiential reality of the presence of God in Jesus enveloped by the Holy Spirit as the greatest of all human experiences this side of heaven. Whatever else one may preach on or advocate as a Christian message, it must ultimately be this: Christ in us, the hope of glory.

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Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany – 17 January 2027

Peter S Grassow

Texts

1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20)
Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18
1 Corinthians 6:12–20
John 1:43–51

Introduction

Epiphany celebrates the revelation that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed One. While this is initiated by the revelation to the Three Wise Men, today focuses on the revelation of the truth about Jesus to disciples who then choose to follow him, as illustrated in two stories and a prayer. This second Sunday of Epiphany also comes as people have recovered from the joy and wonder of Christmas, the hopeful wishes of New Year, and now are having to settle into the post-Christmas/New year “blues”. This Sunday is an opportunity to remind people of faith of the invitation of God to follow faithfully.

Hearing the Word (Exegetical)

1 Samuel 3:1–10

Eli, a descendant of Aaron the High Priest, was High Priest when the ark was in Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:3,9). He also became a Judge of Israel following the death of Samson, holding this office for forty years. He failed to reign in his two sons Hophni and Phinehas from their egregious behaviour while they were invested with leadership of the worship of the people of God. He was warned of the damage his sons were doing (1 Samuel 2:27), but unable to stop them. It is this that led to the call of God on the life of Samuel. This sets up the succession of Samuel as High Priest as the one who was called by God. While this passage begins with the acknowledgement that “the boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli”, the Chapter ends with the commentary that Samuel had moved on and “all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD” (vs 20).

Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18

This Psalm combines praise of, appeal to, and trust in the God who knows all and who holds all of life. The psalmist does not seek out God, for it is God comes to the psalmist. The psalm proclaims a relationship with God who is known and personally addressed. Walter Brueggemann describes this relationship by saying, “The Psalms are prayers addressed to a known, named, identifiable You. This is the most stunning and decisive factor in the prayers of the Psalter.”

At the same time God relationship with humanity is profoundly personal. God knows the individual, cares about me, seeks me out, formed me in my mother’s womb, knows my heart and soul, knows my innermost parts. This is, however, written in a culture that has no concept of the

private possession of God and so this prayer is always to the God of the Nation – this is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the God who chooses Israel and me.

1 Corinthians 6:12–20

Paul initiated the church in Ephesus on his first missionary trip (Acts 18:19). He then returned on his third missionary journey (A.D. 54–56) and spent between two and three years teaching in the city (Acts 19:8–10). The silversmiths who sold images of Artemis caused an uproar (Acts 19:26–41) because they saw Paul’s teaching undermining their business. Paul then left for Macedonia where he wrote 1 Corinthians. It is unsurprising therefore that Paul would address the fertility cult associated with Artemis, insisting that “your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit”, and as such should not be used with a prostitute to assist in the fertility of crops or herds. Paul insists that the followers of Jesus should honour God with their bodies.

John 1:43–51

We are told that Jesus begins collecting disciples at Bethsaida. While there is some difficulty today deciding where this town is, the point made by John is that this teacher went to Galilee to find students. And then we are introduced to the disciples of Jesus: Andrew, Peter, Philip Nathaniel. But notice the problem with this list: John’s Gospel disagrees with the Synoptic Gospels. The Synoptics tell us of Jesus calling his disciples: Peter, Andrew, James and John. It would seem that John makes up his own list. Peter and Andrew have left John the Baptist and joined Jesus as disciples. Philip, of Greek origin is next (Greek: Φίλιππος, *Philippos*). We come back to him in Chapter 12 when we read of some Gentiles wanting to meet Jesus. John’s Gospel tells us that they were Greek, and they seek out the Greek member of the disciples – who is Philip! He looks up his friend Nathaniel. “Nathaniel” means gift of God: נֶתַן *Netan’el* meaning “God has given”. This disciple is only seen with the name Nathaniel in the Gospel of John. In the Gospels of Matthew Mark and Luke, he is mentioned under the name of Bartholomew.

Interpreting the Word

These are Scripture passages that speak to God’s intentional call on the lives of people.

Samuel is selected to be God’s servant as a baby, something that is again affirmed in his call as a child in the service of Eli. This is then affirmed in the commentary at the end of the chapter. The Psalmist testifies to being called by God in the womb, something that becomes a living call experienced each day in the depths of a person’s lived experience. St Paul writes of the call to be a holy temple inhabited by the Spirit of God.

All three readings come together in the call of Jesus on the lives of Philip and Nathaniel:

Philip is key to John's story of Jesus. We come back to him in Chapter 12 when we read of some Gentiles wanting to meet Jesus. John's Gospel tells us that they were Greek, and they seek out the Greek member of the disciples – who is Philip! Greek: Φίλιππος, *Philippos*. At this point we hear Jesus giving thanks because Gentiles are also hearing the Gospel. So, in the selection of the disciples, the Gospel of John makes the point that the disciples of the rabbi include a foreigner!

Nathaniel comes from of Cana in Galilee (John 21:2). Cana is familiar because John's Gospel goes on to tell of two miracles Jesus did in Cana: Jesus turns water into wine (John 2:1–11) and Jesus heals the son of a royal official (John 4:46–54). Here are two stories that have been used in Christian theology to illustrate the human face of Jesus. But the curiosity for me is the link these stories have with Nathanael. I feel like it was Nathanael who invited Jesus to the wedding, and it was because of Nathanael that the royal official approached Jesus. Here was one who became a gift of God to his community – and perhaps he is selected by the author of John's Gospel because he is the example of a true disciple.

Preaching the Word

The Psalm set for this week's lectionary is chosen to link the Old Testament Reading with the Gospel. The reminder that God has searched and known the psalm writer is used to reflect on God's calling of Samuel and to point toward Jesus' calling of Nathaniel. In each of the readings the witness is to an experience of a God who comes to us where we are and calls us to follow. The writing of Paul then offers a way of grounding these Biblical stories in our common spiritual experience of being inhabited like a holy temple by the Spirit of God "who is in you, whom you have received from God".

This week's preaching provides an opportunity to explore the call of God on each of our lives. The God who called Samuel, who called the Psalmist, who called Philip and Nathaniel, and who called the Ephesian church, is the God who continues to call us to live holy lives. The shape of this calling can reach across a variety of different people: young people can identify with Samuel being called as a boy; people of different cultures can identify with Philip, the Greek-speaking disciple in a Jewish world; and the story of Nathaniel can speak to one who has roots in a community being useful to God.

Living the Word

The readings come at a time of national despondence. We have given up on seeing a "new South Africa" and instead are surviving on a diet of cynicism and quiet desperation. The time is ripe for people to hear the call of God again. Like Samuel, we should hear God challenging the old men (and women) to abandon the pursuit of self-interested activities and teach their children the ways of God's justice and righteousness. Like the Ephesians, we could hear God's

invitation to become receptacles of holiness and goodness for the good of the nation. And Like Philip and Nathaniel we can discover significance in our lives through following the rabbi from Nazareth. This call is not dependent on having good political leadership, or a plan for water delivery, or sending the military to deal with the gangs of the Western Cape, or even a thriving economy. In fact, the call of God comes at moments of hopelessness and despair. We are called to bring light into the darkness – so do not be afraid of the dark.

Liturgical suggestions

The colour for the season of Epiphany is green.

Today's prayers can include a commitment to serving God: Psalm 51:10–13 is useful for framing a prayer appropriate to the theme of the day:

- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you. (NRSV)

Songs that might be useful are:

"Have thine own way Lord" Adelaide A. Pollard and music composed by George C. Stebbins.

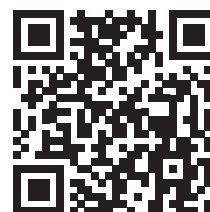
"Master Speak Thy Servant Heareth" Frances Ridley Havergal

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Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday of Epiphany – 24 January 2027

Lynette Petersen

Texts

Jonah 3:1–5,10
Psalm 62:5–12
1 Corinthians 7:29–31
Mark 1:14–20

Introduction

In preparation for this 3rd Sunday in Epiphany, we are offered another picture of the “*epiphaneia*”, appearance or manifestation of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world. In verses 1–13 of Mark chapter 1, the revelation is made to Jesus that he indeed is the Messiah, the Son of God. Those present at Jesus’ baptism have attested to it and now the purpose of his coming, after his temptation by Satan, is affirmed. Jesus Christ has come to proclaim good news and to call others to believe the good news. Early in this new calendar year, we are encouraged to be mindful of our “calling” and God’s purpose for our lives. Each of the other readings for this Sunday also have an underlying theme of “calling” and the need for repentance.

Hearing the Word

Jonah 3:1–5,10

The story of Jonah is a familiar one. God’s call is disregarded and in the first few verses of the opening chapter we find a disobedient prophet fleeing in the opposite direction. He is identified on the ship as the one who has displeased the gods and at his instruction, his fellow sailors throw him overboard. After being swallowed by a large fish he prays for mercy, and he is spewed out onto dry land. Now in today’s portion, it is only at God’s second call that Jonah almost begrudgingly responds. This story together with the other scriptures for this Sunday make for the “calling” developing theme.

The book of Jonah is placed among the Minor Prophets. Some commentators prefer to call it more of a history than a prophecy and that Jonah was himself the penman of this book, revealing his own faults. He prophesied during the time of the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC). We first read of him in 2 Kings 14:25. During this period of Israel’s history, Jonah was probably part of a group of Minor Prophets who wrote and preached about the worldwide significance of God’s work as they looked forward to the future spiritual kingdom. God would use Israel’s moral and spiritual decline to prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming. (Life Application Study Bible NIV p631 and p 1560)).

Psalm 62:5–12

David the psalmist, declares that his soul can find rest in God because his hope comes from God alone. God is his source of salvation bringing him strength and salvation. Honour depends on God and so God can “call” people to always trust God. Both the upper crust of society and the lowborn are the same. Both breathe and they are nothing. The Psalmist advises us not to trust in ill-gotten gain from corruption, or to take pride in riches. That will be to misplace our confidence. Placing our confidence elsewhere, will fail. God has spoken assuring us of God’s strength and love. Each person will be rewarded according to what each one has done.

1 Corinthians 7:29–31

After a lengthy discourse on of the pros and cons of marriage and/or remaining single, Paul declares that the time is short and that all should live in undivided attention to being devoted to the Lord. Whether they choose to marry or remain single is optional, as long as they are devoted to the Lord. Paul was not wishing here to give pastoral advice on appropriate behaviour for those married or single, or commercial advice on those who are trading, because he believes that the return of the Lord is immanent. All other things pale into insignificance. Paul is against time-wasting. After all, he’s very conscious of time’s brevity. In verse 29 he insists, “the time [*kairos*]* is short [*synestalmenos*].” What’s more, the apostle adds in verse 31, “this world [*kosmou toutou*] in its present form [*schema*] is passing away [*paragei*].” His call is to be alert and ready for the return of Christ for the appointed time has grown short.

Mark 1:14–20

Mark dates the time of Jesus’ proclamation of the “good news” and his calling of his first disciples to the completion of John the Baptist’s ministry. He launches rather abruptly into Jesus’ ministry with no record of the nativity placing the timing of Jesus’ affirmation in baptism shortly before John’s incarceration. We note in this gospel Mark’s use of what seems to be his favourite word “immediately”, from the Greek *euthus* in 1:10. Then there is the struggle with Satan, his accuser in the wilderness (1:12–13). This indicates that the cosmic battle has been set up and will continue throughout this gospel. This battle will appear hidden as it “has come near” (1:15) and is immediately present in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The battle against the forces of evil has begun. The two parts of Jesus’ calling of his first disciples is connected by Jesus proclaiming the reign of God and the insistence of an urgent call to repent. The kingdom Jesus speaks about involves an urgent, complete turnaround in the way his disciples will think and act. This Kingdom Jesus declares has already come. Because of this, Jesus encounters two fishermen as he walks beside the Sea of Galilee. The brothers Simon and Andrew are called to leave their father’s fishing business of casting their nets

into the sea and to follow Him at once. Jesus will change their occupation to “fishing” for people instead. Without hesitation they leave their nets immediately and follow. A little further on, Jesus encounters James and his brother John, Zebedee’s sons. Jesus calls them too. They also leave their father and his hired men and follow Jesus.

Interpreting the Word

The Lectionary readings are well suited to the idea of “calling” and new beginnings and the acceptance of mercy and grace offered by God.

Sadly, too often the story of Jonah is seen as a story for children best told in Sunday School. It is in fact more especially a story for adults witnessing to God’s concern for *all people* including those whom Israel at that time saw as their bitter enemies. This book still speaks to the prevailing attitudes of the modern-day state of Israel, and the war in the Middle East. It also speaks into our country, with the daily headlines of communities filled with violence against the most vulnerable, the abuse of women and the too often daily brutal murders and accounts of corruption becoming endemic. This speaks to the need for Christians to reach others with the gospel in a way which exhibits God’s loving compassion and grace. Where we might be tempted to want vengeance, and desire God’s judgement, we are faced with today’s reading recounting God’s call, even to us as sinful people and reluctant witnesses. Jonah is called a second time by God to preach against the wickedness of Nineveh. His repentance and God’s willingness to forgive and forget, resonates with Jesus’ Gospel call to repent and believe the good news of God and to be “fishers of people”. God’s using us despite our failures, is the best evidence of God being at peace with us. Jonah faithfully delivers His message, and Nineveh experiences the wonder of God’s grace. Matthew refers to the repentance of Nineveh when the religious leaders ask Jesus for a miracle (Matt 12:41). Jesus tells them that one greater than Jonah has come. God’s Spirit at work amongst God’s people convinces us of that.

The core message from the Gospel is that God is bringing to fruition the promises concerning the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist’s work is done and now God is calling others to speak the good news. This imperative includes the calling in every generation to disciples to make other disciples. The calling for repentance and accepting of Christ’s offer of forgiveness is the mission of Christ’s followers to share that God’s Spirit can transform lives and move all who would respond in God’s direction.

In the Psalm 62 reading we are called to trust God and that working for God has eternal value. Wealth, pride, position and power so valued by too many in our South African society add nothing to our value in God’s eyes, but the faithful work we do for God in our calling as witnesses will be rewarded.

In the epistle reading from Corinthians, Paul urges the believers to make the most of their time before Christ returns. This means that there is an urgency to heed God’s call to share the Good News with others.

Preaching the Word

The preacher for this Sunday would need to be aware of the challenges faced by the congregation at this time. These may include concerns for physical and financial security, the provision of the basic necessities of adequate food, water and housing. Local and national issues may require careful consideration especially as families get back to a new year of work and study. The matter of seizing the time and starting well would link up well with the good news of the gospel. God’s call in Christ always results in the timely difference made in the lives of others. New opportunities to do better are available in learning to follow Christ in practical ways. Having reflected on the failures of the past year and seeking God’s forgiveness (repentance) may help to make the Good News not only timely, but reassuringly available, decisive and personally reassuring. Time should not be wasted. God’s grace may be shared with confident trust in God. Caring for the vulnerable and taking decisive action in the church’s mission may help to make God’s good news visible. We are called to live today with our eye on the truth of Christ’s return even while there will always be moments of judgement in our lives for what we have done and left undone. In summary for this Sunday, the preacher may wish to challenge the congregation to:

- Consider what it means to answer Christ’s call to follow Him in personal witness, both personally, and in the context of a church outreach programme such as the “Alpha” course.
- Learn more about how to deal with our human desires to take revenge on those who hurt us by understanding and accepting God’s infinite means of love and grace.
- Reflect on their use of time to promote the cause of Christ’s Kingdom.
- Reflect on how the “Good news” of the Kingdom of God is timely, available, decisive and assuring.
- Consider the Biblical signs of the “close of the age”

Living the Word

The scriptures, especially from Mark’s gospel today, may challenge those who have come to worship to listen again more carefully for the call of God. What specifically would be the message of God’s Spirit to individuals, families or the church leadership as we attempt to reach out with the Good News?

Would there be an urgency in God’s call to meet a particular need or raise an urgent matter facing a community which is part of the individual’s or church’s outreach mission area?

Are there any specific areas of repentance called for or confession needing to be made and forgiveness offered? How are we called to offer grace to those who have hurt us especially when we are tempted to “take revenge” by maligning others by our words and in our actions.

How ready are we for Christ’s return? How can we better use our time to prepare and reflect on our relationship with Christ?

Liturgical Suggestions

A possible *Call to Worship* based on Ps 62:5–12.

(Adapted from a liturgy written by Bertram Swartz: *Word and Worship* 2018 edition)

Holy God we come together
In the silence of Your constant and reliable presence.
**We come to be still in the silence of this sacred place,
To learn who You are for us, dear God.**

Sacred Presence, we come together in the silence;
For you, Holy God are our rock of refuge and our shelter.
**We come to renew our trust and to pour out our hearts
to you.
To worship you, our Lord and God.**

Unshakeable God, all power and unfailing love is Yours.
**We wait in silence to hear your call.
You are our hope, our peace and our joy –
For all the changing times of our lives.
Amen.**

Some appropriate songs/hymns to consider for this Sunday may be:

“Jesus calls us or the tumult”

“All to Jesus I surrender”

“O let the Son of God enfold you”

“Who will save our land and people?”

“And can it be that I should gain”

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday After Epiphany – 31 January 2027

Neil Vels

Texts

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Mark 1:21–28

Introduction

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany this year and brings to completion our time reflecting on the divine glory of Jesus testified to: in his baptism, with the words reminding us that Jesus is God's beloved Son (Mk 1:11); with the testimony of Nataniel that Jesus is the Son of God (Jn 1:49); and Jesus' own proclamation that God's kingdom is near even as he begins to call his first disciples to him (Mk 1:15). Today we see how Jesus carries this authority of God in both word and action.

Hearing the Word

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

The core of Deuteronomy reflects a seventh century BCE understanding of Mosaic teaching under the threat of Assyria, Egypt and Babylon with possible additions and editing of this tradition under the Deuteronomistic writers while in Exile in Babylon. This led to high hopes for a reformed Jewish people under Josiah. However, those hopes were soon dashed with his death in battle with the Egyptians as he sought to be allied with the Babylonians.

The passage set for today, purportedly the words of Moses as the Hebrews were about to enter the promised land, describes part of the way they were to live there. It specifically engages with the work of prophets whom God has raised up to be his mouthpiece:

- One who is like them
- One who will speak God's commands
- One who must be listened to with the same authority as God.

The instruction "you must listen to him" reappears next Sunday as we remember the transfiguration and the reappearance of Moses to Jesus and the disciples.

Psalm 111

Psalm 111 is probably part of a relatively late arrangement of Jewish worship, and as such reveals very little about the original context of the Psalms. We do know that is a hymn of God's power, celebrating the wonders of a God who is at work and is gracious and compassionate.

The words do not refer merely to what has happened in the past, but to what God continues to do now in the life of the Psalmist who writes them, and in the community which recites them.

However, if we are to continue to be recipients of the blessings of this God it is important for God's people to be faithful and fearful.

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Paul writes to the Corinthians not to engage with conflict in the community. He begins (1:10ff) by recognising deep divisions, reminds them that all together build the kingdom of God (ch. 12) and that the way of Jesus is the way of love (ch. 13ff).

The way of love undergirds this teaching as Paul seeks to engage both Greeks and Jews here regarding the issue of food sacrificed to idols – should they eat it, should they not? His answer is simple: what matters is whether your actions reflect your love for others in your community. His argument is, however, far deeper. He engages with the Jewish understanding of who God is and that the one God is not reflected in the many gods that the pagans may worship in the temples (the source of the meat in the markets). So firstly, eating food offered to idols has nothing to do with God. We're encouraged to think about who God is and what that means.

However, recognising that an offering to idols is okay to eat doesn't necessarily make it so, and the reason is love. There are other Christians who previously worshipped in those temples, surrounded by food, pagan worship and prostitutes, who would be unable to separate the meat from their previous pagan worship experience. These new Christians would struggle, as would Jews who may not be able to separate eating meat offered to idols from the Law which forbade it. As people who follow Jesus, even it's okay to eat meat offered to idols, refraining is a practical act of love towards one's brothers and sisters. It is worth reading NT Wright's comments on this passage (Wright: 97–105) and perhaps reflecting on Paul's own theological journey.

Mark 1:21–28

Jesus has been baptised, tested, has called his first disciples, and now begins his public ministry proclaiming the authority of the Kingdom of God as he teaches in a way that amazes the onlookers.

There is a marked difference in how Jesus proclaims the presence of God compared to the teachers of the law. There's an urgency in Mark's telling (vv18, 20, 21, 23 & 29, "at once / immediately") and an authority that is not just verbal but practical. Follow now, be healed now!

The authority which Jesus has is recognised both by the observers and the spiritual world. It is the unclean spirit who describes Jesus as "the Holy One of God". We can infer a perceived authority given by God (Mk 6:15), as for to the prophets written about in Deuteronomy. The kingdom which Jesus proclaimed is near in word and deed. The result of this is that news about Jesus spreads over the whole region and crowds begin to gather seeking help for destructive forces that surround them (Wright: 12).

Interpreting the Word

The common theme of our set passages is that of hearing the voice of God.

Deuteronomy invites us to consider those who presume to speak on God's behalf and the veracity of their message. At a time of great national threat, it had become crucial for the hearers of the text to understand what God is saying. Colloquially, is it fake news? Indeed, it is so critically important that the words of God are heard and understood clearly that the one spreading fake news did so on pain of death.

The psalm invites the participant into an act of remembrance of what God has done. If we are to determine whether something is fake news or not, let's remember! Let's remember who God is and what God looks like. As a community that remembers God's characteristics, we'll be less likely to mistake the false voices for true. The psalm is an invitation for the community together to remember the righteousness, grace and compassion of God.

A questionable passage, especially in the light of ongoing warfare in the Middle East, that may need further interrogation is v6 of the psalm in which the author celebrates a god who gives them the lands of other nations.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians speaks of an ethos of love which supersedes the law, written to engage the question "what does God say to us in this situation?". In light of our Old Testament passage we could couch his words in the terms of true or false prophets. While the law may or may not allow the eating of food offered to idols, this is not how Paul approaches the problem and may be helpful for us in sifting what God wants from the many voices that surround us.

The false prophet may be able to say – with authority – that it's okay to eat the meat, and it may be true (or vice versa). But a deeper truth is the importance of ensuring one's brother or sister's well-being is honoured, rather claiming an authority for the benefit of oneself.

The distinction between true and false prophets is revealed in the gospel passage for today where we find the authority of Jesus contrasted with the teachers of the law. Not only did he engage with and cast out the unclean spirit in the man, he did so on the Sabbath, something which is not recognised now, but later (2:23–3:6). For Jesus the priority is the immediate proclamation of the presence of the kingdom of God through healing those who have been living in bondage. The healing is immediate and makes Jesus a news sensation.

As we engage these texts for today and we remember that Epiphany is about the revelation of God's presence in Jesus, we are reminded that God's presence has always been proclaimed, indeed, the author of Deuteronomy demands that the hearer must **listen** to the words spoken by those raised up to speak on God's behalf and warns against false prophets; the psalmist bids us **remember**, Paul reminds us that central to the word of the prophets is the notion that the highest form of obedience to God is choosing to act in ways that express **love** for sisters and brothers.

Jesus, the full expression of God among us, who has told his hearers (v15) and now demonstrates that the Kingdom of God is near as he teaches with authority, takes the role of the true prophet and offers healing to the possessed man. The true prophet engages with and casts out the destructive forces which possess the helpless. This is what Paul says to his readers in Corinth: Engage with each other in love, rather than getting bound up in legalities.

As a mouthpiece of God today, the church has a responsibility to engage the forces of darkness; to use its words and authority to protect the weak and speak out against oppression, injustice and war. To offer a voice that rejects individual consumption for the sake of just community. The two New Testament passages are particularly suited to those themes as we ask what the "meat from idols" issues are in our society today, and as we think about the demons that continue to possess and affect especially the most vulnerable.

Preaching the Word

Set in the context of the last Sunday of Epiphany we need to ask ourselves what our set readings are telling us about the presence of God in our world in the difficulties that we face today.

Characteristic of world now is the proliferation of fake news, artificial intelligence (AI) generated content and community on social media which often amplifies that which is untrue and has become the voice of the false prophets. It is ever more difficult to discern what is good, what is bad, and which of the many religious voices speaks truth.

Yet into this the church is charged to speak the truth upon pain of death!

As we engage the topic an important contextual challenge is being able to recognise and be critical of fake news. Fake news that constantly floods the feeds of our social media regarding armed conflicts, elections and other matters of international concern. We hear that much of this is "AI slop" sponsored by those who have a strategic concern to create worry and fear, perhaps of the enemy, be that another country or political party, or to promote a particular doctrinal view.

But fake news isn't something new! We live in a capitalistic world driven by commercial advertising that tells us we are only good enough if we wear a particular perfume, drive a particular car, or meet whatever is thought of us "acceptable" in today's world? Not true of course! And then the fake news of gossip which has been around since long before AI!

Fake news, ancient or modern damages people. People are held under bondage by what they wear, what people say about them, and what they believe about world events and even God. Powerful forces possess us and leave us captured.

In the midst of the fake news which surrounds us, do we consume or abstain – and how do we do this? And what difference does it make in our lives?

The word of the true prophet that is to be spoken of with authority is a word that challenges the forces that keep us in bondage and frees the oppressed! Does our consumption allow us to speak a liberty word, or are we also captured by fake news?

As a gathering Christian community are we able to separate the fake news from the truths that we know about God (and should be remembering in our gatherings), or do we still allow ourselves to get caught up in the fears and consumerism of the marketplace?

In a world torn by war, a world in which we still see battles in the same part of the world and many others; battles in our own countries regarding immigrants and foreigners and the clash of cultures and values; the challenges caused by climate change and worsening economic systems what do the truths of God, which we remember, God to those who suffer the most as a result of fake news?

As a church do we hold within us the voice of God, or the voice of AI generated slop? Can we speak into the mess which surrounds us with a voice of authority?

Living the Word

As we leave our places of worship where we (should) have heard the word of God proclaimed clearly and with authority and truth, how do we engage with that in our day to day lives?

Can we evaluate the news feed on our social media: is this true, is this loving, is this godly? Or does it seek to create division, violence and war?

In our own lives? Are we quick to repeat that which is sensationalist? Do we like to “stir”? Are we reactive to what others say to us?

Or are we the people who can be depended upon to deescalate, to challenge and to speak words of hope and healing in our communities? Words that offer life and safety rather than additional anxiety.

Can we respond from a place of love, rather than righteousness?

Liturgical Suggestions

Gathering based on Psalm 111

We gather to tell of the works of God!

**The works of the Lord are glorious and majestic,
delightful and righteous!**

We gather to tell of the wonders of God

God is gracious and compassionate, God provides and gives.

We gather to tell of the righteousness of God

God is faithful, just and trustworthy.

We gather to tell of the redemption of God

God who speaks truth, wisdom and understanding in a confusing world.

Hallelujah! Let us gather to tell and remember who God is

That we may speak God’s truth to a world which often forgets.

Prayer before Sermon

Lord, surrounded by fake news of the marketplace we gather to hear your truth.

Help us to discern your words of freedom for us and others.

In the myriad of false voices

Help us to remember your truth

To know the authority of your voice

And cast out that which draws us away from your love.

Amen.

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Liturgy for the Feast of Presentation – 2 February 2027

James Harris

Texts

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalm 84
Hebrews 2:14–18
Luke 2:22–40

Introduction

This festival takes place within the framework of the season of Epiphany, the season of light and revelation of grace through the Incarnation. Luke's narrative draws our attention to Jesus being presented to Almighty God, the ever present One, in the Temple, fulfilling the Jewish rite of purification. And hence these two ideas should play a significant role during the ministry of Word and Sacrament in today's worship. I suggest a simple liturgy which can be adapted by or included in any number of existing liturgical structures.

First, some music suggestions (the hymns are suggestive, not mandatory):

For the **introit or processional** hymn, you could use a lovely remodelling of Psalm 84 into three verses and set to the tune Londonderry Air. (Few hymnals have this setting). You could use the hymn instead of reciting the Psalm together.

For the **Gradual** – preparing to hear God's Word read and preached, you may want to consider "Light of the world".

When, or if, you take up an **offering** think of "Fill thou my life, O Lord my God."

During **Communion** "King of my life, I crown Thee now" is a rich devotional song and ideal to sensitise worshippers' minds to the drama of the Eucharist.

The **Recessional** or closing song could be "I am trusting Thee Lord Jesus, only thee." However, you may want to make the closure more missional then "We have a Gospel to proclaim" would be ideal.

Here then is a basic and simple liturgical structure. Adapt or replace as you see fit.

Because this Feast celebrates Jesus being "light", you might want to use some **candles**. If your tradition rarely, or if at all, uses candles, this could be an occasion to try something new. My suggestion is that you have three candles and three worshippers. This collective symbol reflects the Trinitarian nature of worship even as we highlight the Incarnation. Ask an older person, someone in their mid-life, and a child to carry the candles. They precede the preacher or liturgist for the day, walking to the front during the processional hymn. Place the candles on the Altar or Communion Table or on a small table in front, visible for all to see. The leader of worship can explain the symbolism as part of the introduction.

If your congregation has a **penitential** aspect to worship – usually conducted quite near the beginning of worship, you may want to consider moving this to the Response section which comes after the reading of Holy Scripture and the proclamation of the Word for the day. Again, this is simply a suggestion since the texts for the day lend themselves to a broad sweep of responses, one of which should be humility and sorrow over sin and waywardness. From repentance, confession, and absolution comes **thanksgiving** and **intercessory** prayers.

I have deliberately not offered specific prayers for use. Each tradition has its own collection, and of course many ministers prefer to use prayers they have created. But please do prepare mentally and spiritually for these appeals to God, for you are speaking on behalf of the whole congregation. Perhaps even write the prayers out as a preparatory process. You don't have to read them verbatim if that's not your practice. However, most of the old "collects" are fine examples of concise, evocative, and well-worded prayers. Learn from them, if nothing else!

As the service draws to a close, the liturgist may want to adapt Simeon's humble declaration of "**dismissal**" from Luke 2:29–33, reading something like

"Lord, dismiss us with the blessing of your peace;

For through your Word we have beheld your salvation,

The light and revelation of our Saviour Christ

To Israel, and to all those with whom you continue to
make covenant.

Receive our thanks and praise.

AMEN"

Word and Life for the Feast of the Presentation – 2 February 2027

James Harris

Texts

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalm 84
Hebrews 2:14–18
Luke 2:22–40

Introduction

As suggested in the Liturgical notes for this Feast of Presentation, the Gospel narrative must be the preacher's guide. Obviously, the supportive texts have a role in enhancing the preacher's emphasis or subject direction,

Central to the Feast is the Jewish background to Jesus's family and their actions. Little in this Gospel passage makes much sense outside of the family's journey to Jerusalem and the Temple unless the reader understands the historical and religious setting of the Torah's instruction concerning purification and the attendant symbolism.

Equally it would be helpful if the preacher knows something of the history of the Christian usage of this Festival. For instance, the Presentation is also called "Candlemas" and "The Purification of Mary". The first due to candles being symbolic of Jesus being the Light of the World. The second being a narrative of thanksgiving, cleansing, devotion, and atonement which, in turn, are rooted in passages like Leviticus 12 and Exodus 13.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

I repeat: the gospel story must guide and inform our study and its exposition.

Luke 2:22–40

As we begin to read, we are drawn immediately to Leviticus 12 and Exodus 13 which are fused in the Lukan narrative. Therein we read of the purification rites and their attendant sacrificial actions. This is not a "blood-thirsty" activity of a primitive culture, but is rather a forceful reminder of the preciousness of life. Blood is spilt in the birth of a child; life is in the blood; life/blood is given in sacrifice: the guiltless for the guilty; and hence gratitude with thanksgiving for such gifts. There is a sense in which these guidelines for purification suggest that God is always willing to bless and gift life to those who are humble in recognising the gracious generosity of God. This then is connected to the story of the Exodus whereby the redemptive work of God is illustrated by the birth of a first-born. God is under no obligation to creation or creature, yet divine grace extends again and again. In this particular case, given that the family was poor, they offered doves or pigeons. Grace covers all.

Now, onto the scene appear Simeon and Anna. Both are described as godly people; she by her prayers, devotional life, and dedication; he by his sensitivity to the Spirit of God, his fervent lifestyle, and his longing for the fulfilment of the promises of God. By taking the child in his arms, Simeon symbolises the embrace of wonder and the realisation that salvation is embodied in the person of Jesus. Equally Anna sees in the child the fulfilment of covenant promises – setting Jerusalem free.

It is important to note here the expression of Jesus being the "glory of Israel" and "the light to the Gentiles". We are reminded that Jesus is both the Messiah and Saviour – parallel realities bringing Jew and Gentile together in Jesus and thus eventually drawing the whole body of Christ together.

Further, there is also the often-overlooked components of Simeon's expression of praise and thanksgiving: "the destruction and salvation of many", that there will be those who "speak against him", and even Mary will have "her heart broken". In other words, there is the recognition that Good News can become bad news to some because there are destructive elements at work. This is a foretaste of Jesus becoming a divider of families, friendships, nations, and ideas. Never let this aspect of truth be submerged in the glory and wonder of the grace and love and power of God in the world.

Malachi 3:1–4

We must note the context of the passage under review. Malachi 2:17 introduces the text, and it is not very favourable: "*You have wearied the Lord.*" How? By distorting God's Word concerning right and wrong, truth and error, as well as questioning the justice of God. Yet, notwithstanding such disdain, God reiterates the promise of a messenger proclaiming the redemption which will judge and renew. It seems that Malachi fuses the Messenger and the Messiah. Perhaps it was this "sudden" arrival of God's Messenger/Messiah that generated such joy in the minds of Simeon and Anna. It certainly does seem as if Simeon had Malachi in mind when he declared the judgement and renewal of God's people. Malachi is uncompromising: God's messenger will refine and cleanse and purify. Such a scrubbing will enable God's people to relearn meaningful worship and heartfelt offerings. Then the Lord will again receive and accept the sacrificial thanksgivings because people act appropriately with humility and holiness.

Psalm 84

This continues the overall theme of the lections for today: the wonder of God present in the house of God and God's being among the people of God. However, the context of the Psalm suggests the sheer delight of being in the house of God, being near the sanctuary, alert to the very presence of the Holy One. Again, note how Simeon's utterance of praise is in keeping with this idea. Sparrows and swallows have nests – provided by God, nature, and instinct; thus, the believer rejoices in being in the Temple, the house of God, to dwell there with all the attendant blessings which accrue therein. Those blessings include the awareness of God's keeping, and protection, and provision in every area of life. It is a life of trust in the faithfulness of God who keeps covenant. Since God is a living God, even in times of drought – both physical and metaphorical, the believer can have confidence in the faithfulness of this God. Whatever transpires in life, God can be trusted, for the record of God's trustworthiness is sure and full, both in the history of God's people and in their own lived experience. Again, one senses the cadences of this Psalm in the narrative about Simeon and his paean of praise when holding the Christ child in the Temple and realising that in him is the salvation of the world – Israel's glory and light to Gentiles.

One more point here: verse 10 says that a day in the house of God is better than a thousand elsewhere, or as the next verse states, in the tents of the wicked. Here is a critical perspective which has a timelessness, declaring that brevity in God's presence is preferable to longevity with the godless, however such godlessness be expressed: crude and carousing, middle-class respectability, or living a more sophisticated up-market lifestyle. This is costly, for believers inhabit all areas of social class, and thus it demands a constant evaluation of the world we live in, and an assessment as to whether our life and lifestyle honours God or diminishes God's reality.

Hebrews 2:14–18

When viewed in light of the Gospel narrative, this passage from Hebrews seems out of kilter with the other passages under review. However, thematically there is an association: that of our Lord overcoming death, the fear thereof, and the reconciliatory work through his suffering, temptations, expiatory (propitiatory) death, and ultimate resurrection (which is not mentioned here but is obvious elsewhere and everywhere).

The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that one of Jesus' key objectives is to not just overcome death but to ameliorate the fear that death generates, that is the bondage that holds humanity in thrall. Many pastors, priests, or ministers of congregations know from pastoral experience how members say they do not fear death but are in anguish over *how* they will die. My take on this is that there is a “fudge” in this expression. Fear of death and its “how” are flip sides of the same coin. Perhaps not in every case, but certainly in many. Our Lord himself sweated blood in anticipation of crucifixion, as well as the burden of taking the world's sin upon himself.

But the wonder of this passage is that Jesus, through his suffering and experience of every human temptation, becomes an able high priest who understands the struggles, temptations, and adversities of humanity. He enters into our sufferings, shows mercy, then faithfully intercedes and sustains us in our struggles – whatever they may be, by being remarkably present with us by his Holy Spirit.

Preaching the Word

By now readers will realise the extent of preaching possibilities from the overall theme and the different texts under review. In my own ministry I found that preaching on the characters of Simeon, Anna, the Parents, and on Jesus, to be very helpful for the congregations. One can take an individual or embrace all four sets. Either way it will be profitable. Malachi and Psalm 84 give opportunity to show how the NT takes the OT and utilises it for Christological orientation. Obviously, one must seek to set the OT text in its' own historical setting and then apply it to the NT and our Lord's unique fulfilment. Certainly, Malachi can be most helpful in reminding hearers that even the Church can drop into the doldrums of nominalism, to the detriment of the Good News. This Good News always highlights the real presence of our Saviour dynamically found in Proclamation of the Word, in solemn Holy Eucharistic celebration, and in pastoral engagement with compassion and justice at its heart. Psalm 84 can be used to express the joy and wonder of public worship which is centred on seeking the presence of God by the Holy Spirit. Our Lord's reconciliatory work will thus be front and centre of these acts of worship. In line with this, taking the Hebrews passage will enable the preacher to highlight the priestly ministry of our Lord. It is really encouraging to help people understand that Jesus was tempted in all areas as we are. Jesus really does understand our struggles. And if we are willing, Jesus can so presence himself to us that we find a remarkable strength to resist the devil and sustain faithfulness and holiness. Where we fail (and sadly we do), we acknowledge our own fault and plead for renewed grace and power to walk faithfully afresh.

Living the Word

As with preaching ideas, there are equally myriad suggestions for ethical applications from these texts. Certainly, one theme here is to consider the faithful and glad obedience of the Gospel characters. Mary and Joseph fulfilling the Law on behalf of Jesus. Jesus made no decision or had a role in the decision to be circumcised – or not; he could make no observation on the sacrifices made for himself or his mother. As he grew older, he respected the Law of Moses and fulfilled it himself, never challenging or disputing the ancient practices. I think this is instructive for folk who, as an example, are berated by the more ahistorical churches as to practices like infant baptism. If Jesus accepted what was “done” to him in accordance with the Torah, is this not a helpful example for those struggling with their situations? Obviously there needs to be theological guidance at every junction so that it is not so much blind acceptance but thought-out reflection on truth.

Another fertile suggestion is rooted in Psalm 84 which emphasises the value and simple joy of worship. Worship is wonder in the mystical presence of God in all God's diversity and revelation. My own faith expression happens to be somewhat cerebral, but I have had enough mystical surprises to be appreciative of that blend of mind and emotion. There is an amazing power in the sense of God's presence which comes through music, song, quiet, word, or testimony. It is profitable to sense the very presence of God in worship. All else fades in the mystery and wonder of such a presence which humbles yet uplifts, which brings low yet creates awe. It's difficult to really express such experiential wonder. That's the nature of true worship.

A final suggestion taken from Malachi is hope. The prophet, disturbed by Israel's disdain for their God and their tradition, senses that if there are repentance and renewed faith, a new hope in the fulfilment of covenant promises will become a reality. The old message will be renewed by a new messenger, and hope will be revived. That hope is always the hope of God's presence and the attendant power to produce new life and holiness. Old ways which fell into nominalism and thoughtless practice are revived with dynamic theological reflection. Old ways are not taken up simply because they are old but because they have timeless value and meaning. Truth emerges into practice – the renewal of well-worn and proven rites and liturgies. In turn these practices become embedded in life revealing the power of God's presence in daily life.

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday of Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday – 7 February 2027

James Harris

Texts

2 Kings 2:1-12
2 Corinthians 4: 3-6
Psalm 50:1-6
Mark 9:2-9

Introduction

In this year's edition of Word and Worship, the Feast falls on the last Sunday after Epiphany (sometimes named the Fifth Sunday of the Year). Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Church prefer August 6th. Those who are not Anglicans may find the process of calculating the dates for the various Feasts as confusing as do some of us Anglicans. We commiserate. The usual answer is that dates are set from the date of Easter each year - which falls on different dates due to the cycles of the seasons. My own sense is that Transfiguration fits better into the Epiphany cycle because it is a "revelatory" narrative. For Peter, James, and John – and for subsequent readers, seeing Jesus changed ("metamorphe" in Matthew and Mark but "heteros" – altered, in Luke) and in conversation with Elijah and Moses, was indeed an amazing revelation. Seeing Elijah and Moses would have revealed something of the reality of resurrection or physical life after death. Hearing the voice of affirmation and instruction confirming Jesus as the "Son" or "sent one" would certainly have confirmed the validity of the promises and the veracity of the One who made them.

Hearing and Interpreting the Texts

Mark 9: 2-9

Because this Feast is taken from the New Testament Gospel narrative, we should begin here at with some exegetical and hermeneutical suggestions. If you have read the corresponding passages in Matthew and Luke, you will note the difference in time: six days in Matthew and Mark over against eight days in Luke. Most commentators suggest this is simply two ways of speaking of "a week later". The significant element here is that this revelatory experience happen after the declaration of Peter in Caesarea Philippi as to the Jesus being "son of the living God". It is as it were Jesus' way of affirming Peter and the others as the validity of this declaration. But more, it confirms the revelatory character of the declaration, just as Jesus stated to Peter: "flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but it came from my Father".

No sooner were the quartet on the high mountain than Jesus' garments were changed, but note that Luke says, "his face was altered" (literally "became different"). All accounts state that Jesus "glowed", suggesting that our Lord was in the presence of the glory of God and that glory was returned to him in the moment. These three disciples were privileged

to not only observe the reality of the resurrection through the two ancient prophets but also honoured by experiencing the uniqueness of the glory of God.

It may not startle our imaginations to read that Peter, so typical of his energetic nature, blurting out that it was good to be in this situation so let's make tents. The narratives all indicate that he was so afraid that he didn't know what to say, yet what he did say was incomprehensible if not nonsensical. So like us all at times: trying to make sense but making no sense, even making things worse. What a lesson: don't judge too quickly when folk are making no sense, because stuff is going on which we cannot fathom.

Then, to the rescue comes the gracious Father. Clouds descend, glory disappears, and all the disciples hear is a voice demanding them to listen to Jesus. No doubt the disciples were alert to the similarity of this voice and its declaration to that which they heard at Jesus' baptism. The specific addition, the call to listen to Jesus was not in contradistinction to Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, but rather that Jesus is the objective of those records and fulfils them. Jesus does not abrogate the Torah or the Prophets: he is the fulfilment of their promises and verifier of their legitimacy, veracity, and ongoing value.

Our Gospel text ends with the disciples seeing Jesus alone with themselves. I suggest this indicates that the disciples became aware that Jesus was the key to life for them and that his presence was worth more and more significant than anything else.

Looking ahead just briefly, after instructing the disciples not to say anything of their experience on the mountain, the narrative does indicate that Elijah had returned in the form of John the Baptist (see Mt 17:13). The point being that the prophecy about Elijah heralding in the Messiah was indeed fulfilled, albeit somewhat differently to the literalistic expectations of folk at that time.

2 Kings 2:1-12

This tells the powerfully imaginative story of Elijah's wonderful capture into the heaven. The two metaphors that are used in conjunction with each other are often confused, but when closely assessed reveal significant differences. There is the chariot and horses of fire, which we are told separated the two men, and then a whirlwind which caught Elijah up ushering him into the heavens. I think Honeycutt makes a valid point in distinguishing the role of the two metaphors. Both pictures denote aspects of God at work: separating then embracing, distinct but connected.

The passage under review suggests a process in the appointment and anointing of Elisha as Elijah's successor. There is the request for Elisha to wait; there is the refusal; there is the intervention of the body corporate of the prophets

who reminded Elisha that Elijah would be taken; there is Elisha's call to "hold your peace" (as an aside, I wonder if the Afrikaans' "hou jou bek" is not a somewhat contextual, if not crude, but humorous retort.). Again and again Elisha refuses to leave his master: loyalty is a meaningful virtue.

Elijah gets to the point that once he realises the nearness of his actual translation, he asks his younger friend what is his desire. Elisha models a depth of spirituality that has been passed down the ages: a double share of your spirit – a double portion of your blessing. This is reminiscent of the inheritance blessing on the first born son (Deut 21). This blessing will be given only and when Elisha is alert and aware of the time and moment Elijah is taken up. Thus alertness is added to loyalty as significant virtues.

What is interesting here is that Elisha could not miss the unique capture of his master. This is due to the fiery horse-led chariot coming between him and Elijah, then the whirlwind spiriting the master away up to heaven.

Surely this story was in the mind of the apostolic trio and then the Synoptic recorders when they put the Gospel narratives together? Here again we see the value of the Hebrew Bible's stories informing and illuminating the New Testament narratives revealing their link to Jesus the Messiah.

Psalm 50: 1-6

This is an introduction to a longer piece which highlights the worship of God. Worship, in turn, must be acceptable to the Lord himself, not simply human thinking about and acting out worship but is, in reality, anything goes. And this raises an interesting question, so relevant for the twenty-first century: what does the Bible say, if anything and clear, about worship? What is included, what is excluded, what are the patterns, if any?

Psalm 50 suggests, I would argue, that whatever else is included in worship, God must be acknowledged as "Lord Most High". This in turn indicates that God is not our "chum, pal, buddy" or the like. God is beyond human conception and understanding. What we know of God has been revealed in Scripture. It is fascinating that in John 4, during his conversation on God and worship with the woman from Samaria, Jesus makes it clear that "salvation comes from the Jews; we Jews know who we worship; you Samaritans do not." If this was true then, surely it is equally true today, if not more so, given the levels of Biblical ignorance evident in so many. Our Lord, Jesus, is spoken of as the "exact replica of God", or as many theologians have paraphrased Scripture: Jesus is God incarnate and manifest in human form (and obviously there are many Scripture texts which can be used to substantiate this declaration). This Psalm reminds us that worship is an act of awe, and an awareness of the transcendence of God. Yet in mercy, love, and grace God makes the divine immanent in and through Jesus, who manifests himself in our feeble acts of worship through the Holy Spirit. Thus we should consciously, actively, and prayerfully ask the Spirit of God to guide our worship. This has been done historically by the searching of Scripture and the analysis of existing worship patterns and liturgies. Worship leaders draw the best of hymns, liturgies, and worship patterns from the past. They contextualise them, paying attention to their

emphases, learning and practicing such patterns for the benefit of their contemporary congregations, yet without compromising truth nor degenerating into some worldly-wise entertainment.

2 Corinthians 4: 13-16

At first glance it is reasonable to ask what association this passage from Paul has with the Feast of Transfiguration. Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to focus on the resurrection which transfers believers into the presence of our Lord. The Feast of the Transfiguration is an illustration of being in the very presence of the Saviour, a taste of which Peter, James, and John experienced (Peter, you remember reflects on this in his second letter).

Paul makes a remarkable statement in this reflection. He claims to speak out of, or in light of, belief or faith. This "speaking" is the proclamation of God's grace in raising Jesus from death. Given that God raised Jesus, Paul continues, proves that God will also take believers up into his presence. The fifteenth chapter of Paul's earlier letter to Corinth is a sustained apologetic for the truth and power of the resurrection. This belief, or hope, as it is sometimes called, ameliorates discouragement. It is the hope of resurrection that puts human physical decay through suffering into perspective. Nothing can detract from eternal glory – another way of speaking of God's presence, into which we will be translated in time to come. The Transfiguration will become a reality for us too. What a feast it will be.

Preaching the Texts

Ford and Taylor offer some very helpful devotional material for preaching on the Transfiguration. The Dictionaries are full of wonderful insights as to the various textual, critical, and theological issues involved. Please read the material carefully. It will reward you abundantly. Equally, do not neglect the straightforward reading of the text and the other Biblical references. Such careful study will also reward accordingly.

This is a passage which requires careful evaluation for there is really only one theme: the Transfiguration of Jesus which tells of the affirmation and instruction to listen to our Lord. The associations linked to it are helpful even informative, but beware of allegorising or buying into some critics' viewpoints. The context, substantiated validly I think, by 2 Peter 1: 16-18, is clearly historical. Interrogate the text carefully seeking to draw out relevant and helpful theological perspectives for the contemporary church and for the believer's life and guidance.

The other passages for the day offer a variety of possibilities for sermons. The Corinthian text brings you back to resurrection and the wonder of entering the presence of the Father and the Saviour. The Old Testament narratives keep us mindful of the ancient stories wherein God's presence is real and powerful in the outworking of the divine purposes through Israel for the benefit of all nations.

Living the Texts

The practical application of our texts is less of ethics than of recognising the wonder of God's presence in real life. Obviously there can and will be life-changing experiences in and through the reflection on God's presence, and on God's power at work in our lives and in the world.

Earlier I mentioned that loyalty (Elisha staying with Elijah) is a virtue. I suggested alertness as virtuous also (Elisha watching carefully for Elijah's translation). May I call your attention to my comments on worship? There are obvious ethical and practical matters to think through with respect to the act of worship: its pattern, the music, the theology of our songs, the need to be faithful to the text in our preaching, the necessity of not being manipulative – we really do have to be conscious/alert/aware of this.

Above all, this Feast of the Transfiguration offers us both as preachers and for devotional purposes, opportunities to ponder with awe and gratitude on the goodness and presence of our God, who in grace calls us and gives us life in all its fullness.

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Introduction to the Redemption Cycle

Introduction

The Redemption Cycle includes the Season of Lent, Holy Week and the Triduum, as well as the Easter Season which ends with the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. The specific character of each of these periods is dealt with individually, but always in their relation to one another through the fourteen weeks of the cycle.

The End of the Season of Epiphany

The Epiphany Season ends with Transfiguration Sunday. A voice affirms Jesus where he is with the three disciples on the mountain.

Lent

Ash Wednesday is the start of the Redemption Cycle, which includes Lent, Holy Week, the Triduum, the Sundays of Easter and the Feast Days of Ascension and Pentecost.

Calculating Easter (if you don't have Google!): Easter is celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon on or after 21 March. The beginning of Lent is on 14 February in 2027. It should be noted that the five Sundays in Lent are described as Sundays *in* Lent, not Sundays *of* Lent. In this season, too, every Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection, while the weekdays of Lent give time for reflection, prayer, almsgiving and penitence. The difficulty that arises for the Church in planning the Sunday services in Lent is how to appropriately engage worshippers in the Lenten disciplines while at the same time maintaining the celebration of Christ's Resurrection. The Basic Liturgy for Lent sets out some possibilities for acts of penitence in the season's Sunday services in ways that do not overwhelm the celebratory character of the services.

Holy Week

Palm Sunday at the start of Holy Week introduces a change of liturgical colour. We use red for Palm Sunday, with the option of red or purple for the three following days. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in Holy Week follow the same lessons for the Eucharist in all three of the years of RCL. However, there is also an option to read the Passion narratives in the place of the gospel passages.

The Triduum

In the Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Moravian and Methodist traditions, the Paschal Triduum straddles the two liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter. Easter Saturday is the last day of Lent and the Vigil that ushers in Easter Sunday is the beginning of Eastertide.

The Triduum is a single service in three distinct parts and takes place over the course of three days. It begins with a greeting at the start of the Maundy Thursday service, which then ends without a dismissal. The Good Friday service should begin without a greeting but continue in the mood of the ending of the Maundy Thursday service, and then also in turn end without dismissal. The Easter Vigil of Holy Saturday starts with the Service of Light, which has no greeting before the lighting of the fire, but ends with the glorious dismissal:

Go in peace to serve the Lord! Alleluia! Alleluia!

In the Name of Christ! Amen! Alleluia! Alleluia!

This makes it imperative that the single service is carefully planned to convey a sense of a seamless whole, even as it expresses three different moods and uses very different elements to convey the full celebration.

Easter

Easter is not a single day, but a Season of fifty days – seven times seven days plus one. The services after the Easter Vigil on the First Sunday of Easter are of the First Sunday **of** Easter, with different options for the readings. However, it is possible to include some reminders of the elements of the Vigil in processing with the Paschal Candle rather than a cross and including the renewal of Baptismal Promises.

The season starts with retracing some of the encounters between Jesus and his followers. The Sundays that follow focus on the continuing ministry of Jesus, the risen and victorious Lord.

The Feast of the Ascension, forty days after the Resurrection, is an important part of the Easter Season. It marks the departure of Jesus in his post-Resurrection form after instructing the disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit.

The ten-day period between the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost is observed as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity throughout the world. With Ascension Day no longer observed as a public holiday in South Africa, the Feast of the Ascension is often shifted to the Sunday following. In RCL a section of John 17 is read on this Sunday in each of the three years of the cycle, in this way emphasising the prayer of Jesus for the disciples and those who would come to believe through their witness: '*... that they all may 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 NRSV)

The Redemption Cycle ends fifty days after Easter Sunday with the celebration of Pentecost.

Introduction to the Season of Lent – 2027

Introduction

The English word Lent means *spring* and is related to the word ‘long’, the connection perhaps being the sense of the lengthening of the days in the (northern hemisphere) spring. However, this does not express the full significance of this six-week period of spiritual discipline before Easter as conveyed by the 40 days of the Greek *tessaracoste* or the Latin *quadragesima*.

The observance of a Lenten period of 40 days is first mentioned in the Canons of Nicaea (AD 325) and may have had its origin in a prescribed fast for candidates for baptism. Lent is generally observed by Christians as a time of penance in abstaining from festivities, particular foodstuffs or drink, by practising generosity, and by paying attention to personal religious devotional practice. The characteristic liturgical colour for the season is purple.

The Character of Lent

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40-day period of Lent that leads to the celebration of Easter. This is a period of prayer and fasting.

Our prayers should not be restricted to matters of individual piety alone but should also embrace the needs of the community and the world in which we live.

The idea of 40 days of Lenten fasting resonates with the 40-day fasts of Moses, Elijah and especially Jesus. Fasting requires that we do without something, which can act as a spiritual alarm clock to remind us to pray. This denial should cost us something, thus heightening the reminder to pray instead (so doing without broccoli might not be real fasting!) Fasting also challenges us to identify with those who do not have enough food, and to put aside material resources for the benefit of others rather than ourselves.

An important distinction should be recognised between the weekdays of Lent and the Sundays in Lent. The weekdays are time for self-examination and are usually accompanied by study, fasting, soul-searching, acts of penitence and sustained spiritual discipline. They are intended as time for reflection on the life and example of Jesus, his journey to the Cross, his suffering and his death and resurrection.

The Sundays in Lent continue to be celebrations of the Resurrection as is true of every Sunday in the year. It is for this reason that they are not included in the days *of* Lent.

The pastoral impact of the season

For many Christians Lent is an important time in the Church Year, calling for deep personal reflection and self-examination. It is also an opportunity for the public sharing of faith in the wider community. Our self-examination and other disciplines must not degenerate into a self-absorption that leads to withdrawal from those among whom we are called to live our faith. The Ash Wednesday gospel teaches that alms-giving is a vital part of our Lenten discipline but also warns against doing it ‘to be seen by others’.

Basic Liturgy for the Season of Lent

The Feast and Special Days during the Season

The Annunciation to Mary the mother of Jesus is celebrated in some traditions on 25 March. If this is observed on that date, the liturgical colour would be white.

This publication links Palm Sunday with Holy Week which will be discussed in that section of the Church Year.

Decorations

The Liturgical colour for Lent is purple.

During Lent, decorations in the church are traditionally kept to a minimum. In most churches floral arrangements are not provided at all. A variation of this is to provide a dried arrangement to emphasise the starkness of the season.

In some traditions ornate crosses are veiled during Lent, but it might be more effective to replace them with simple wooden crosses without any decorations. This could be extended to removing gold and silver candlesticks as well, replacing them with plain wooden ones.

If these steps are taken, the reappearance of the best silver and candlesticks and decorated crosses at Easter will capture the essence of the new season opening.

Symbols of the Season

The cross and crown of thorns are symbols which could be shown on the frontals throughout Lent.

It might be helpful to erect a rough wooden cross within the church or church grounds where people could pray throughout the day. It might help to provide a table on which people could place tea-light candles if there is not a stand already available.

A Basic Liturgy for the Season

Gathering

While Lent is a penitential season in character, the Sundays in Lent should nevertheless also clearly be celebrations of the Resurrection of our Lord. Liturgy for these Sundays should therefore hold these two emphases in creative tension.

Call to Worship & Approach

Give thanks to the Lord, all God's people:

We are the people of God; made by God, loved by God, and continually being formed by God to reflect the glory of God.

Let us draw near to worship and adore the One who offers us abundant life.

With all our hearts, souls, minds and strength we worship you, O God of goodness and grace. We offer our lives in gratitude, love and devotion.

The Penitential Rite could follow here

Dear people of God, Lent is a season of self-examination and repentance, of prayer, fasting, self-denial, almsgiving, and of reading and reflecting on God's Word. As we gather for worship today, we present ourselves before God to acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.

The weekdays of Lent provide us with an opportunity for self-examination and repentance, for prayer, fasting, self-denial, almsgiving and reading and reflecting on God's holy word.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 9:8–9)

Let us confess our sins to almighty God.

Hear the first commandment of God: 'I am the Lord your God: you shall have no other gods but me.'

We recognise our failure to love you with our whole heart, and mind and strength, our indifference to your call on our lives, our unwillingness to forgive others as we have been forgiven.

A pause for silent reflection

We confess to you, O Lord,

we humbly seek your forgiveness.

Hear the second commandment of God:

You shall make an idol of anything and worship it. We have put our trust in ourselves and our possessions, we have neglected prayer and worship, we have not shared the faith you have given us.

A pause for silent reflection

We confess to you, O Lord,

we humbly seek your forgiveness.

The same pattern of Commandment – Confession – Silent Reflection, and versicle and response is then followed for the subsequent commandments.

The full set of commandments could also be heard in this way during the Ash Wednesday service.

While all the commandments could be so heard and responded to on each of the five Sundays in Lent, another approach could be to limit the focus to two commandments on each of the five Sundays, so allowing more time for silent reflection on the individual commandments.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus said:

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

(Matthew 11:28-30) Receive the good news of the gospel:

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Amen

Greeting

The Lord be with you **And also with you.**

Let us worship God in Spirit and in truth

Praise God! We are reconciled, redeemed, renewed.

A hymn or song of praise can be sung here. It is traditional in Lent to omit the Gloria in Excelsis which will burst into use again at the Easter Vigil.

Gathering Prayers can follow, including the Collect for Purity which is prayed together:

Almighty God to whom all hearts are open all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The Collect for the Day, which takes its theme from the texts for the day and the Season, is prayed to conclude the Gathering Rite.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

The disciples said, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life.’ Open our minds this day that we may hear your words to us. Give us the courage to live that word in obedience to your will; for we pray in your name.

Amen

The readings for the day

The Sermon

Responding to the Proclaimed Word

An Affirmation of Faith

The strong link between Easter and baptism, and the development of Lent as a period of preparation for baptism, would seem to indicate that the use of the Baptismal Creed is appropriate for the Sundays in Lent.

I believe and trust in God the Father who made the world.

I believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ who redeemed humankind.

I believe and trust in his Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God. I believe and trust in one God Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

Celebrating at the Table

Sharing the Peace

Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Peace be with you.

When Communion is celebrated during Lent, it should be a reflective and simple part of the service.

For the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving use the form that is familiar in your tradition.

After Communion this prayer may be said by all:

Gracious God, we thank you that you have nourished us with the bread of life and with the cup of salvation. May we who have received this sacrament be strengthened in your service; we who have sung your praises live to your glory; and we who have known the greatness of your love see you face to face in your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Sending out the People of God

A key sentence from the text used for the sermon should be used here, to be left in the minds of the congregation as they leave.

Thanksgiving for worship

God of all times and places, in Jesus Christ, lifted up in glory on the cross, you opened for us the path to eternal life. Keep us focused on our Lenten disciplines that we might safely come to Easter assured of your love for us and equipped for service as we follow your road to Calvary and beyond.

Amen

Blessing and Dismissal

To God’s gracious mercy and protection, we commit you.

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace, both now and for evermore.

Go in peace, to serve the Lord who walked the way of the cross.

And rose again to reveal new life for all.

Amen

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Liturgy for Ash Wednesday – 10 February 2027

Abiaaza Kibirige

Texts

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 OR Isaiah 58:1–12
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Introduction

Ash Wednesday ushers the Church into the Lenten season when the baptised are called to renewal and restoration through prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

The Ash Wednesday service therefore requires thorough preparation, as it offers worshippers an opportunity to meditate on Jesus' journey to the cross to redeem the world.

Since the Sundays of Lent are not counted among the Lenten days, it falls to those leading the worship to ensure that the Sunday celebrations do not overshadow the solemnity of the season.

Most congregations are accustomed to praise and worship choruses. However, during Lent it would do well to have services that give the worshippers space and time for personal self-introspection, and to seek reconciliation with God and ultimately with their neighbour. Praise and worship is not only when we are on our knees or on our feet and clapping, but involves every word we say and action we perform. Worshipping God encompasses following Jesus' call to 'worship God in Spirit and in truth' (John 4:23–24). Lent kick-starts the pilgrimage of returning to God.

Gathering in God's name

The service may begin with the recitation of Psalm 6 being led by three different voices speaking verses 1–3, 5–7 and 8–10. After each stanza the congregation could respond with verse 4: **'Return, O Lord, and rescue me. Save me because of your unfailing love.'** (NLT)

Call to Worship

Leader: Hear the Ten Commandments (to be read out, with a pause being observed at the end of each).

People: **Lord, incline our hearts to obey your laws.**

Act of Repentance (from Night Prayer, page 8)

Christ Jesus, you were sent to heal the contrite:
Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

You came to call sinners:

Lord have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You plead for us at the right hand of the Father:

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

Absolution

God is ready to forgive;
let us forgive one another and also ourselves.

Silence

May the Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
have mercy on us, forgive us our sins,
and bring us to everlasting life.

Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer of Illumination before the reading of Scripture

Heavenly Father, inspire us as we listen to your Word

and help us to learn to please you in all we think, say and do;
through Jesus Christ the risen Lord.

Amen

The lessons for the day may follow here.

The psalm's refrain after each verse is:

Have mercy on me, O God. (Ps 51:1)

The blessing of ashes and imposition thereof may follow either after the sermon or after the Eucharist.

Responding to the Word of God

Prayers may be led by different people, as follows:

- *Thanksgiving for God's provision of life's needs, especially the availability of hospitals, clinics, schools, shops etc. and all who serve in them.*
- *Prayers for the world and its diverse needs, that every area may be adequately supplied with God's mercy.*
- *Prayers for the community, the sick and the bereaved (where possible names may be mentioned), the unemployed and other areas that affect the local community.*
- *Prayer for renewal and restoration for all people during this season of Lent.*

Celebrating at the Table

This should be done in a meaningful way with the full knowledge that Christ is present in our midst.

Sharing of the Peace

Take care to do this in an orderly way that reveres God.

Invitation to Communion

If there are any health issues for worshippers, please observe them appropriately. If necessary spiritual Communion may be administered.

Sending into the World

God's mercy has descended on us.
Let us live this out in our communities
to his glory and honour.

Amen

Benediction

Use a format that is familiar in your tradition.

Music

*Hymns and choruses selected should be such as may assist
reflection and introspection.*

Word and Life for Ash Wednesday – 10 February 2027

Abiaaza Kibirige

Texts

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 OR Isaiah 58:1–12
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Introduction

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent and the Wednesday of the seventh week before Easter. The day derives its name from the ceremonial imposition of ashes on the foreheads of worshippers in the liturgy of the day. This rite goes back to at least the tenth century. The fact that all participate in it is one of the signs that Lent was no longer only for those doing formal penance prior to readmission to communion at Easter, but that it had become a general period of penitential devotion observed by all the faithful.

The readings from Joel and the Gospel are calls to repentance, turning away from sin, and returning to God through prayer and fasting, and by treating one another with honour.

Hearing the Word

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

Joel's 'Day of the Lord' was a warning to the people of the impending danger of God's judgement that would usher in God's rule of righteousness. In chapter 1 this judgement is described as an actual calamity. In today's reading the prophet speaks of a visitation of destructive locusts and 'darkness and gloom', earthquake and storm, altogether a very apocalyptic colouring (v. 2). So the prophet exhorts the people of Judah to repentance, for it is still not too late to avert calamity. The Lord says to them, 'Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.' (v. 12) Time was running out and it was urgent that the people should heed God's warning.

Psalms 51:1–17

This psalm is a profound expression of guilt, sorrow and repentance on the part of the psalmist. It is thought to be David's cry when he had realised the enormity of his sin with Bathsheba, whose husband Uriah's death on the battlefield he had contrived in an effort to hide his wrongdoing (see 2 Samuel 11 & 12).

The psalmist was aware of God's mercy and his willingness to give it to those in need, and so he pleaded, 'Have mercy on me...wash me clean ... for I recognise my rebellion ... (Psalm 51:1–3).

The worshipper's unhappiness was so deep that he felt it in his bones and sought forgiveness, '... let the bones that you have broken rejoice' (v. 8). In verse 10 he pleads for a total overhaul of the heart, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me.' He realised that life without God wasn't worth living and thus in v. 11 he begged God,

'Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.'

Verse 17 points to the ethos of Lent: 'The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.'

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

Paul, speaking as 'an ambassador for Christ' (v. 20) makes his very urgent appeal to the Corinthian Christians on Christ's behalf, exhorting them to 'be reconciled' to God! The sinless Christ was made man so that we might know the righteousness of God. Therefore God's grace, as shown in the life and death of Jesus, should not be received in vain. The note of urgency is insistent, 'See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!' (6:2).

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

True religion must be seen in benevolence, devotion and worship, self-discipline and self-examination, in self-possession and calmness of spirit. In this chapter 6 of his Gospel Matthew records Jesus' sharp criticism of the outward forms with which some religious people of his day expressed their piety. The righteousness that is called for is illustrated in terms of almsgiving, prayer, fasting and quiet trust and confidence. The hypocrisy of public display in almsgiving, fasting and long prayers – all for the sake of being seen – is exposed for what it is. It is enough that 'the Father who is in secret' (v. 18) sees. 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them.' (v. 1)

Interpreting the Word

All today's readings, from Joel, the Psalm, 2 Corinthians and Matthew's Gospel, help us to appreciate and understand the underlying ethos of the season of Lent and especially its beginning on Ash Wednesday. The emphasis is on journeying with Christ through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It is a time of learning from Christ so that we may continuously fulfil our baptismal vows which ushered us into unity with Christ.

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

The leaders of worshipping communities have an important role to play in cautioning the baptised about the possibility of Divine judgements. What God asks for is the heart of the faithful, that they come to him with fasting, mourning and weeping over their sin. But tearing our clothing in an outward display of grief is not what is required: 'Rend your hearts and not your clothing.' (v. 13)

The people are encouraged in verse 14 that God will respond: 'Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him ...?'

Psalm 51:1–17

This psalm is one of the deepest in the Psalter and is the classic expression of penitence. Like the great prophets, the psalmist (perhaps David) interprets religion chiefly as an inner heart experience. In form it goes back to the early ritual of worship. Someone who is sick and accordingly feeling under the censure of Yahweh, goes to the priest at the sanctuary to be cleansed and pardoned. The words are accompanied by ritual acts as in verse 7: ‘Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.’ The suppliant is profoundly depressed (v. 8) and his life is in peril (v. 14). The sense of sin here is unsurpassed in the Psalter in keenness and depth. It is not surprising that this amazing passage is one of the lections for this day in each of the three RCL cycles.

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

Paul himself was deeply aware of how his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus had radically redirected his life. He had sensed that his activities in persecuting members of the new Way were in fact persecution of Christ himself. Hence his passion in urgently calling other people to be reconciled to God and for there to be no delay about this. It does raise for us a question regarding the urgency (or lack thereof) in our own proclamation of the gospel.

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

This entire chapter, part of the so-called Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7), covers Matthew’s take on the teaching of Jesus about devotion and worship and how this is to be appropriately expressed in practice. We are warned against ‘playing to the gallery’ in respect of our giving to those in need, the way we practise prayer and fasting, and our handling of material wealth.

Preaching the Word

The preacher will seek to help worshippers understand and appreciate the meaning and significance of Lent in the life of devotion and obedience. Practical teaching on self-examination, honesty, repentance and renewal could be very helpful. Why do we do these things that we do?

- What should follow genuine contrition and repentance? How should these find expression in the life of the faithful?
- A sermon could helpfully identify and explore areas in which the Church could reach out to the needy in the community.
- The urgency of God’s call for repentance and renewal of life is a theme not to be bypassed.

Living the Word

Help members of the congregation to identify areas in daily life that the prophet Joel would abhor were he to address us today. What type of community would the prophet Joel endorse and how may we reach for it?

The psalmist’s stress on repentance should have each worshipper pondering the forgiveness we need from God and from each other.

It is not only in terms of material things that people may be needy: there are other needs in terms of the totality of life. Even the wealthy are missing something. Therefore, all humanity is needy, and at the same time can offer something that someone else lacks.

Holistically, prayer includes thanksgiving, penitence, adoration, praise, meditation, oblation, intercession, petition and contemplation. And since this would take up a lot of time, the leader may decide which aspects to focus on during corporate worship, while inviting worshippers to explore others in private devotion.

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Word and Life for the 1st Sunday in Lent – 14 February 2027

Rachell Hoogbaard

Texts

Genesis 9:8–17
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Peter 3:18–22
Mark 1:9–15

Introduction

We continue our journey in the wilderness with Jesus. We pray for the Spirit to help us as we uphold the pillars of Lent, which is to pray, fast and give. During this time, we reflect and remove what is hindering our relationship, and we take on what builds the kingdom of God, which is to be compassionate to others, to show love and extend a helping hand. The journey for each one will be different, therefore instead of looking to others we focus on Jesus and tune our hearts to how and where the Spirit leads us.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 9:8–17

Noah, a servant of God, was obedient to God's call. He honoured his covenant with God, and therefore he builds an ark. The rebelliousness of the people leads to God's destruction of creation, but God spared the life of Noah and his family.

God sent a rainbow as a sign of the Covenant and as a reminder of God's enthroned glory, which will be evident at the end of the age. God promised not to send a flood again to destroy the earth. Noah followed the instructions of God, which saved his life, the lives of his descendants, and the lives of the animals.

Psalms 25:1–10

A Psalm of David. David cries out to God. He realised that the enemy is pressing from every side, but he calls on God, his helper, sustainer and protector. To fall at the hand of the enemy will cause him shame. He knows God will shield him because he is God's anointed. His humble request to God was what kept him in perfect peace. God taught and guided him in the way he should go. David does not rely on his own power or goodness but reminds him of God's love, mercy, and compassion. David continues to appeal to God's goodness.

1 Peter 3:18–22

1 Peter reminds us of Christ's suffering for the sins of the people. Christ, the righteous son of God willingly died for the unrighteous. The writer says that Jesus was made alive by the Spirit. Jesus then ministered to those imprisoned and set them free. Their disobedience was the cause death through the flood at the time of Noah. The water symbolises cleansing from sin, baptism, and reconciliation to God. God destroyed and restored creation through the water of the flood and gave the rainbow as a sign of God's everlasting covenant.

Mark 1:9–15

While John the Baptist baptised Jesus he saw a dove descending from heaven and heard the voice of God affirming Jesus as the Son of God. God expressed love for Jesus with the statement, "I am pleased with you." There was no need for Jesus to be baptised, but this was done in accordance with the will of God. By doing this, Jesus became sin for us.

Thereafter, Jesus now filled with the Spirit, was driven into the wilderness. Mark gives no account of the temptation of Jesus but highlights that the angels ministered to him. The Spirit equipped him to withstand the onslaught of the devil, while the ministry of the angels sustained and strengthened him.

The ministry of Jesus took off after John was put in prison. John's assignment to pave the way for Jesus came to an end. Jesus, filled with the Spirit preached the Good News and called for repentance. We continue to follow in his footsteps when we use his words on Ash Wednesday, "Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"

Interpreting the Word

The purple colour for the Season of Lent serves as a reminder of our commitment to repentance. Lent comprises of three pillars namely: pray, fast, and give. Our theme therefore hinges on preparing our hearts for Easter, for the celebration of the risen Christ.

The story of Noah reminds us of a life in obedience to Christ, a life of 'blind' faith. Noah displayed the ministry of a disciple, somebody called to serve, and ready to do what God requires. The life of Noah was not easy. How can you build an ark and prepare for a flood in the absence of rain? Or how do you claim to hear the voice of God and speak to a rebellious people that calls you crazy? Noah and his family had the privilege to see the fulfilment of God's promise. God shows up because God is true to God's nature and promises, which is yes and Amen. Noah reminds us during our Lenten journey to listen to God's voice and to continue to be obedient despite obstacles and ridicule.

To be disciplined in our fasting, praying and giving during Lent is challenging. Our discipline and faith will be tested. It is not a question of ‘if’ but rather ‘when’ trials will come. David faced many trials in his time and even though he was one of the bravest men, he knew that he cannot depend on his own strength nor on the power of men. The Psalmist states that David cried out to God in times of need, when he felt afraid, anxious, threaten, and when enemies wanted to attack him. David knew that God was his only source of strength, power, and protection.

1 Peter reminds us of the disobedience of the people during the time of Noah. This disobedience to God was the cause of their death and the destruction of the world. Peter references the water as a symbol of baptism, moving the sinner from death to life.

Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus and his journey in the wilderness are short and factual, but he emphasises the words of God about Jesus, the beloved Son. Jesus’ baptism, journey in the wilderness, and the imprisonment of John the Baptist earmark the beginning of his public ministry.

Preaching the Word

We find ourselves at the mid-point of our Lenten journey. It is important to stay focussed on our current season even though we are excited about Easter.

Our Lenten journey calls for discipline in terms of our prayer life, fasting and giving. It allows us to reflect on the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. The devil tempted Jesus with regard to provision (turning stones into bread), power and wealth (showing Jesus all the kingdoms), and protection (throw yourself from the highest point).

The themes that emerge from these Scripture may include the following:

- To stay steadfast and disciplined in your prayer life, fasting and giving despite challenges.
- To ask God for guidance with regard to our giving, so that we may make an impact in the plight of the needy and the marginalised. To collaborate with social development organisations who focus on the marginalised.
- To reflect on our own baptism and pray for renewal. Focus on areas of barrenness in our lives and ask the Lord for restoration, especially where relationships of loved ones have broken down.
- To reflect on our worship and to once again put God first, instead of power and wealth that do not last.
- To embrace the suffering, which builds endurance of faith.

The preacher encourages those who struggle to fast and calls for responsible fasting, especially for those who suffer from chronic disease. Alternatives may include fasting from attitudes and actions that keeps us from God.

Living the Word

Lent reminds us of our weaknesses, our frailty, but also of the love of our Jesus who helps us in our weakness. Many face the burden of financial struggles due to expensive educational systems, lack of social relief and unemployment. Lent allows for deepening our relationship with the Lord who sustains and provides in all our needs.

The reminder of the baptism of our Lord may coincide with the preparation of parents and godparents who brings their children for baptism. These sessions are helpful for reflection on what their own baptism means to them.

Liturgical Suggestions

Music

Hymns relating to Lent and Fasting are recommended – such as “Forty days and Forty Nights”, George Hunt Smyttan (1856) Tune: Heinlein.

“When I survey the Wondrous Cross”, Isaac Watts.

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Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday in Lent – 21 February 2027

Ian Booth

Texts

Genesis 17:1–7; 15–16
Psalm 22:23–31
Romans 4:13–25
Mark 8:31–38 OR Mark 9:2–9

Introduction

The main theme for the Second Sunday of Lent is Jesus preparing his disciples for his suffering and death, essentially setting their definition of “Messiah” or “Christ” right. The alternative Gospel passage set for the day is the passage on the Transfiguration of Jesus, which the Revised Common Lectionary places two weeks earlier, on the last Sunday before Lent. In terms of the journey through Lent, it is helpful that the last Sunday before Lent provides us with the assurance that all that will take place is part of the plan of God and Jesus’ focus on the Cross is vindicated by God, so that as we undertake the journey through Lent we are not shocked or horrified that these things might happen, but rather seek to follow the journey through obedience and faith.

Hearing the Word

Genesis 17:1–7; 15–16

The passage from Genesis covers the renaming of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, the covenant God makes with Abraham, and the promise of numerous descendants. It also includes the gift of the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. This is not the first time the promise of numerous descendants is made to Abram/Abraham. Genesis makes mention of two sons of Abram/Abraham: Ishmael, born to the Egyptian maidservant Hagar, who had been offered to Abram by Sarai because she had no child herself; and Isaac, the child of this promise to Abraham, who is the son of Sarah, and the Hebrew scriptures tells us is the one with whom God’s covenant will be established. Ishmael is circumcised (the sign of the covenant) on the same day as Abraham. The concept of “gifting” of land occupied by others, particularly that land in this modern era in which a secular Zionist nation claims to be the exclusive heirs to Abraham’s inheritance, is problematic, and can be addressed historically. For me, this remains a tension in terms of the actions attributed to God causing separation and alienation. The claim that it is Isaac that will inherit the covenant promise has driven the family feud that is at the centre of the Middle East conflict. The Quranic narrative, while highlighting both sons of Abraham, then places emphasis on Ishmael in the context of the Arabian narrative and the establishment of the Kaaba.

For preaching it would be more helpful to focus on a God-initiated covenant for all humanity. Remember that when

God called Abram there were no monotheistic religions such as what are now known as “the Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam”. Of course, from this passage one could also have a little bit of fun picturing a 100-year-old dad and a 90-year-old mom doing night patrol with a newborn, changing nappies, early morning feeds etc.

Psalm 22:23–31

The choice of this Psalm is interesting, as is opening words are one of the most quoted ‘words from the Cross’: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” It is a Psalm that moves from forsakenness to worship. While the pericope assigned for this Sunday begins with a call to the descendants of Jacob to worship God, it expands the call to “all the ends of the earth and all the families of the nations” to worship God who rules over nations.

Romans 4:13–25

The Letter to the Romans is an interesting exercise in tension for Paul. Paul is a Jew, a Pharisee, and yet has a call to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and so he finds himself constantly needing to hold these two identities in tension. In this passage, he is accurately saying that Abraham received the covenant promise through faith and not through the law, because the Law of Moses did not exist at the time of Abraham – in fact monotheistic religion did not yet exist when Abram was first called by God. There was no law by which Abraham could be justified – it was only through his faith and obedience to God. For the religious Jews it was the Law of Moses by which people’s righteousness was judged. Paul holds up Abraham and Jesus as prototype human beings whose faith in and obedience to God paved the way to a transformative humanity which was unifying and not exclusive or divisive.

Mark 8:31–38

The setting for this passage is in the region of Caesarea Philippi, in the north of Galilee, just below Mt Hermon, at the source of the Jordan River. There was a shrine to the god Pan at Caesarea Philippi – and it is here that Jesus had chosen to ask his disciples what the word on the streets was about his identity, and then to seek their opinion. It is after Peter has identified Jesus as the Christ (or Messiah – both words mean Anointed One) that Jesus tells them what is to happen to him. Jesus needs to explain this to them because of the way history had defined the role of the Messiah. The people were expecting a legendary warrior king who would amass a great army and rout the Romans and liberate the land of the Jews, thus restoring the Promised Land to the Chosen people of God. A kind of “Make Israel Great Again” movement. This legend had persisted despite the more universal nature of the Messianic prophecies in Isaiah and Ezekiel. So, Jesus explains that the Way God has chosen for liberation is a different way, and that this different way would be met with

opposition and resistance, and result in execution for the Messiah by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. After putting Peter right, he drew the crowd in and explained the different way of God's choosing: a way of self-denial, a way of self-sacrifice, a way of the Cross, where the means is as important as the end.

OR

Mark 9:2–9

In some lectionaries this Second Sunday in Lent is dedicated to the Transfiguration of Jesus, and so this is given as the alternative Gospel for this Sunday. This will have been given full coverage two weeks prior in the publication, so I am not going to duplicate it here.

Interpreting the Word

Genesis 17:1–7; 15–16

In this rapidly changing global environment, particularly in the geographic space covered in this passage, it is admittedly difficult writing about “interpreting this word” a year prior to the preaching of the word. The risk is that the words written are eerily and scarily prophetic or rendered redundant by what has unfolded. This is especially true in the age of the second coming of Donald Trump because of the unpredictable nature of his actions and reactions, particularly when it comes to the unconditional support that the USA has given to the secular Zionist State of Israel. That secular Zionist state has claimed to be the legitimate heirs of the promise to Abraham – that all the land promised to Abraham belongs to the Isaac/Jacob lineage, and that this by some stretch of the truth includes them. As I have pointed out, there was no monotheistic religion at the time of Abraham. The name Israel was given to his grandson Jacob after an epic all night struggle described in Genesis 32, the name meaning “he struggles with God”. It was name given to a person and then passed on to the descendants of his 12 sons – the people of God. One of Jacob's sons, Judah, gave his name to one of the eventual Kingdoms after serious strife, and from there come the terms Judaism and Jewish. After the division of the descendants of Abraham into two Kingdoms in 931 BCE: the Kingdom of Judah in the south, and the Kingdom of Israel in the north, it was the Kingdom of Judah that became the focus of the Messianic promise of a “King in the line of David”, because David had come from the tribe of Benjamin, in the southern Kingdom – not, note well, the Kingdom of Israel! The striking difference between the two Kingdoms is that succession in the northern Kingdom of Israel was determined primarily by intrigue and assassination, while succession in the southern Kingdom of Judah was determined by natural succession – sons of kings succeeding their fathers. This is why the lineage of the Messiah is in the southern Kingdom of Judah. This is just to highlight that no modern state can claim to be the heirs of the promise to Abraham – who was the father of Ishmael and Isaac. The modern secular Zionist State of Israel was only founded in 1947 as a solution to European guilt over the persecution of the Jews in Europe and was again given land from which others needed to be displaced (a recurring,

problematic, uncomfortable biblical pattern). So, focus on the fact that this passage highlights Abraham's obedience in faith to God's call, and to God's promise of numerous descendants, despite being childless with Sarah at 100 and 90 respectively. And the descendants are universal, not tribal, because Abraham will be the father of many nations, not just the Jews.

Psalm 22:23–31

This portion of the Psalm importantly moves us from the descendants of Jacob worshipping God to all the nations worshipping God – the movement toward the unity of humanity under God.

Romans 4:13–25

The audience to whom Paul writes comprises of both Jewish and Gentile house churches, all of whom are experiencing internal strife and division, and Paul encourages and seeks the unity of the church. The internal strife is caused by the presence and influence of the Empire, which elicits different responses from different people (as happens today). Paul sets out that Abraham is the ancestor of all – Gentile and Jew – and that this is particularly true for people of faith, for it is by faith that we are worthy of God, not by law. It has been said that from Abraham to Revelation runs a golden thread connecting people and acts of faith to each other and to God.

Mark 8:31–38

This passage contains the essence of what it means to be a follower of God in the way of Jesus. There is no ambiguity in the call of Jesus to those who seek to walk in his way. This is a call to self-denial, to self-sacrifice, to the way of the Cross for the sake of others, for the redemption of the world. It required faith on the part of Jesus, who had to accept that this was God's method for the Messiah to be manifest in the world, and so he had to trust that there was life after the Cross. It requires faith for those who follow Jesus, because the traditional interpretations of the role of the Messiah just fit in much better with the global narrative of power and control, the narrative of the empire. The Kingdom of God could not be more different from the Empires of this world – and yet this is the way God chose, and it will require faith to be a faithful follower of the way of Jesus on this path. So it is helpful to be reminded that people of faith are the heirs of the promise to Abraham, a promise of a kingdom of many nations, “a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). Perhaps the National Anthem of the Kingdom of God should be John Lennon's “Imagine”! “Imagine all the people, living life in peace. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.”

Preaching the Word

There is not much more to add to the above to stimulate

your thinking in terms of which direction your sermon will take. What is important is that it creates the golden thread between people of faith, it liberates the believer from a narrow, personal salvation to becoming a participant in the saving work of the universal Christ, and that it leads to a universal understanding of the saving work of God. There is nothing individual, tribal or nationalistic about God's liberating work in the Scriptures. It is for all people, and for all time.

Living the Word

To paraphrase: "If anyone would come after me, he/she must

deny self, take up their cross and follow me." There is no other way to live the word. It is not just a matter of believing what we read about what God has done, but it is a matter of the word becoming flesh in the world through the living testimony of those who follow God in the way of Jesus.

Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday in Lent – 28 February 2027

Scott Couper

Texts

Exodus 20:1–17

Psalm 19

John 2:13–22

I Corinthians 1:18–25

Introduction

Everything about the scriptures this week speaks of divine ‘communication’. How does God communicate with humans, with whom God is in a relationship? In short, the answer is through ‘revelation’. Such was emphasized by the twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth. Yet, ‘revelation’ in and of itself is not a helpful answer, for it simply conveys that God initiates the communication and often supernaturally conveys it to us. What is extraordinary is the numerous ways God communicates with us. Our reading from Exodus reminds us that the giving of the Law through the Ten Commandments is one means by which God communicates to us. The Psalmist reminds us that Creation, that is, the natural environment, speaks of and for God to us: “The Heavens are telling...”. Our epistle reading reminds us that the Holy Spirit (A.K.A. Sophia, or Wisdom) of God also speaks of and for God. Finally, our gospel reading from John reminds us that God communicates to us through Jesus of Nazareth, the embodiment of the Word (also Sophia), and more specifically through the Galilean’s actions, his ministry. For fallible and partially deaf and blind humans, the blessing from God is that God communicates with us in many ways, thus making his message clear for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. God repeats often.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 20:1–17

Verses 1–8: God continues to initiate the relationship with his people by communicating ‘boundaries’ and ‘best practices’ for their lives with God. The motivation to adopt these best practices is that God has already shown God’s benevolence through God’s saving the Hebrews from the oppressive Egyptians during the Exodus. The first four best practices relate to paying attention to and not being distracted from God: have no other gods, no idols, no using God’s name in vain, and honour the Sabbath.

Verses 8–17: The following best practices relate to one’s behaviour toward one’s neighbour and self. Honour your parents, don’t take another’s life, don’t betray your partner, don’t steal, don’t lie, and don’t lament your life in comparison with others.

Psalm 19

Verses 1–6: The Psalmist articulates that which many of us have experienced, the beauty of nature and how nature reflects the beneficence of God. Joseph Haydn’s “The Creation” made the Psalmist’s words of truth even more unforgettable than they already were (The Heavens are telling the glory of God...). The grandeur and the beauty of the heavens (cosmos) and of the Earth testify to God’s immensity, complexity, diversity, and power. They are visual signs of the awesomeness of God.

Verses 7–13: The rest of the Psalm is a reminder of the first communication through the Law (the Torah, and specifically, the Ten Commandments). The author explains the efficacious nature of the Law. One might recall in the Christian scriptures (the epistle of James notwithstanding) how Paul almost vilifies the Law. Yet, Paul does not really; he declares it obsolete while praising its initial benefit. Verses 7–13 explain from the Psalmist’s personal experience just how the Law was intended to affect the human heart and behaviour for the better. God’s intention for The Law was to instil humility, not pride, in the hearer. The Law was intended to bring one closer to God, not to drive others away from God (as Paul found that it did).

Verse 14: The Psalm concludes with a prayer that God will receive the Psalmist’s words of communication as a demonstration of heartfelt devotion.

I Corinthians 1:18–25

Verses 18–19: Paul acknowledges that the narrative of Christ crucified is absurd to most. Yet, for Christians, the story is incredibly hopeful and thus inspirational. The author Paul quotes the Hebrew scriptures (Isaiah 29:14) to justify that the counterintuitive gospel has scriptural precedence. Paul argues a Christocentric perspective that understands the cross communicates that that which is often given a certain meaning by humans is given an opposite meaning by God. The cross for humans being a sign of death and shame is communicated by God to be a sign of eternal life and glory! Hence, what humans understand to be wise, God makes foolish, and vice versa.

verses 20–24: Paul criticizes the understandings of those who humans elevate. Given the deplorable state of the world with so many oppressed and so many poor, Paul asks, “How have those who are in high places, the lawyers, the scribes, the philosophers, the politicians, contributed to the world’s wellbeing? They are actually foolish. Yet, these same foolish people criticize the preaching of the cross that proclaims, ‘who is first is last’, who is high is to be made low’, ‘who is rich is poor’, and ‘who is self-righteous is actually sinful’. Christ crucified, as absurd and foolish as it seems, engenders wisdom, not ignorance, liberation, not oppression, and brings life, not death.

Verse 25: Paul reminds us of the Psalmist's proclamation of God's greatness. Paul is aware of the gobsmacking power of the *cosmos* that God created, and hence, on the scales, even God's so-called 'foolishness' in using the cross as a salvific tool is far greater than humans' most elite tools for attaining perfection through thought or 'works'. Likewise, the lowest rung of God's wisdom is infinitely higher than the top rung of human wisdom.

John 2:13–22

Verses 13–17: Jesus 'flips' the moneychangers' tables in the Temple, thus ultimately becoming the catalyst that leads to his trial and execution on the cross. Jesus objected to the exploitation within the transactions at the temple. Not just tables go flying, but so do money and animals. For many, Jesus caused chaos and thus represented anarchy. The disciples marvelled at Jesus' crazed resolve. In the flipping of the tables, Jesus became a 'zealot,' one who shows religious zeal. 'Zeal' was a quality much admired in the Hebrew faith tradition (Psalm 69:9).

Verse 18: Those gathered questioned Jesus: "By what authority do you challenge our authority?"

Verse 19: Jesus responded cryptically: "Destroy the temple, and I will restore it in three days". On one hand, Jesus referred literally to the Temple (destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, but not rebuilt in three, even to this day it lies in ruins). On the other hand, Jesus referred metaphorically to his body, taunting them: "Kill me. And I will live again in three days!"

Verses 20–22: These verses convey that only Jesus' literal meaning was understood at the time. And they rightfully questioned how the Temple could be rebuilt in three days. The metaphorical interpretation was not imagined until after the resurrection had occurred (although Jesus alluded to it elsewhere in his discourses with the disciples).

Interpreting the Word

The theme of our readings is the many ways God communicates with us. Because God loves us, these communications must have a common purpose. I suggest that the goal of all communication is to bring those God loves closer to God. If God's communication aims to bring us closer to God, then any communication or interpretation that pushes people away from God is either not from God or a distorted version of that communication.

Jesus' ministry is arguably a clarification of God's communication with those God loves. Foremost among the communications Jesus seeks to clarify is the Law, specifically the Ten Commandments. Jesus' ministry understands that the Law, which God intended to bring the people closer to God, was being used by those who interpreted and adjudicated the Law to drive people away from God. Much of Jesus' ministry reinterpreted God's communication to bring about a closer relationship between God and God's children.

Due to 'sin', human beings will inevitably, over time, take anything good and corrupt it. Such is the case with the Law. Those in power with privilege will take that which is good and use it to elevate themselves and demean others. A primary

manifestation of sin is selfishness. Even communication from God meant to bring people closer to God can, through selfishness, be used to acquire for oneself and to withdraw from others. Acquisition for self and withdrawal from others occur materially and spiritually.

The Temple cult included a large economy. Arguably, the Temple was a giant money-making enterprise for the priestly class. The community of faith required a great deal of financial transactions through tithings and animal sacrifice. The Law articulated the exchange rates. Thus, the Law made people rich and poor. Both rich and poor became increasingly separated from God.

The Law determined who was righteous and who was a sinner. In human hands, the Law created an economy of affirmations and condemnations. The Law enriched some with blessings and others with curses. Thus, the Law discerned who was 'in' and who was 'out' of God's covenant. Sadly, those who were 'in' were not actually righteous but self-righteous – they were only righteous in their own eyes and not God's eyes. Therefore, both the self-righteous and the sinners were increasingly separated from God.

The Psalmist proclaimed the glory of God. Nature is God's way of communicating God's beneficence. Yet, like the Law, even something good can be used by sinful humans to alienate people from God. The Earth became something to subdue, to exploit, to own, to deplete, to corrupt, and to use as a cudgel against others. Instead of humbling humans, the Creation increased the hubris of humans. Human beings obtained an inflated value of themselves as they exerted their power over the land, altering it to suit their insatiable needs. In the Ancient Near East, private property accumulated in the hands of a few and became scarce for the vast majority of others. The Earth became a means by which to elevate some and diminish others. The Earth increasingly ceased to communicate the glory of God by humbling humans and instead separated people from the love of God. The Earth for many was hoarded, and others were alienated from it.

While interpreting the Psalm, we would do well to recall the communication God had with Job regarding the purpose of the Creation as it relates to instilling awe and humility in humans. In one famous passage (Job 38:1–41), God interrogates Job: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth? ... Who shut the in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? ... Have you commanded the morning since your days began? ... Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? ... Can you lift up your voice to the clouds so that a flood of waters may cover you? ... Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are'?" ... Who provides for the raven its prey when its young ones cry out to God?" With these passages, we learn clearly that God's Creation, the Earth and the Heavens, are intended to communicate the grandeur of God and thus instil humility in Job and humans in general.

To interpret Paul, we ought to remember the recurring motif found in all the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, of inversion. Without this lens, God's communication with us as humans becomes difficult, if not impossible. God's thought is often 'inside out' when contrasted with human

thought. What is thought to be despised is exemplary (Samaritans). What is seemingly cursed is blessed (the blind and the lepers). Those who give least often give the most (widow's mite). Who are blessed? The poor and not the rich. Who is first? Well, of course, the last! And the last shall be first. Women resonate with the gospel far more than men. Who are considered more precious, the children. What is most cherished? The lost sinner. The gospel almost renders all things upside down and inside out! Even with Creation, the hills shall be brought low, and the valleys shall be raised. God's wisdom is distinctly counterintuitive (from human perspectives). The blind see and those who see are blind. The gospel is a topsy-turvy world in all respects. The so-called 'righteous' are the worst sinners, and the humble sinners shall be in paradise.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians cannot be interpreted without the background of the topsy-turvy gospel being foremost in our minds. Hence, the recurring motif continues with the cross, an instrument of shame, torture, and death, being converted to an instrument of pride, assurance, and eternal life. To such an extent that, for good or for bad, the cross is worn around the necks of millions of believers as a sign of confident identity.

Implicit in Paul's argument is that 'faith' (things that are unseen or even as yet unrealized and often sourced from 'revelation') is the linchpin of the new source of knowledge. Faith, as opposed to "signs" (empirical evidence, miracles, and wonders that are in and of themselves verifiable proofs) that the Jews favour, is the primary source of knowledge. Faith, as opposed to "wisdom" (logic, rational, philosophy, and thought) that the Greco-Romans favour, is the primary source of knowledge. It can be argued that Paul creates a brilliant argument (at least to him and other believers) that is essentially unassailable. That which is ludicrous is the truth. The failure of others to understand and to agree is simply a reinforcement of Paul's argument. That which is incomprehensible is the truth. Divine wisdom is human foolishness, and human foolishness is divine wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. All is inverted.

Our gospel reading is God communicating to us through the life, ministry, and action of Jesus of Nazareth. This human Jesus, rather than the Christ of whom Paul is primarily concerned, communicates and demonstrates to us the will of God.

Jesus 'flipping tables' at the Temple brings us back to the beginning of our hermeneutical exercise by examining the Temple. Technically speaking, nothing 'wrong' was happening. In fact, much of what was occurring during the Passover at and around the Temple was prescribed by the Mosaic Law. Hence, there was for many a legitimate sense of bewilderment at Jesus' actions. The Temple cult was doing its Temple cult thing. Perhaps the best explanation for Jesus' righteous indignation and outrage is that the letter of the Law was being adhered to rather than the spirit of the Law. Recall, all that God communicates to us is intended to bring us closer to God, including the Law. The spirit of the Law brings us closer to God. However, when human sin corrupts the communication, the spirit becomes the letter of the Law, and the letter of the Law separates people from God. And often the letter not only subtly overwhelms the spirit, but the

letter soon dominates and eclipses the spirit of the Law. The letter of the Law becomes ossified, petrified, implacable, confining, imprisoning, corrupting, and even, well, evil. A point is reached where God no longer communicates through the Law. Instead, it is the Accuser (be it Satan, the devil, Lucifer, or Beelzebub) who is speaking through the Law.

At the Temple, Jesus disposed of any diplomacy as he witnessed greed, cheating, profiteering, and abuse. The poor became poorer, the rich became richer. All this aroused in Jesus an indignation. The topsy-turvy world of the gospel comes to the fore when Jesus *condemns* the worship of God at the most sacred site of devotion, the Temple in Jerusalem. The devotion was devoid of spirituality in Jesus' eyes. At this moment, Jesus lived out the prophetic writings of Hosea, Amos, and Micah when he demonstrated that which God communicated once before: "I despise your worship" (Amos 5:21–24)! Paul picks up the same theme in I Corinthians 13:1: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have *not* charity [*agapé* love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal".

In our gospel reading, God communicates that worship must be motivated by and saturated with love; otherwise, it is not worship. Love is the linchpin that holds all of God's communications with us in common. The Law, Creation, the Holy Spirit (Wisdom or Sophia), and even Jesus of Nazareth's cleansing the Temple all convey that love is the key. If all God's communication with us is to bring us closer to God, then love is that to which we are all drawn. Is this not stated in I John 4:8 when the writer simply declares, "God is love"?

Preaching the Word

Preaching the Word is all about communication. Perhaps ironically, that is the theme of this Sunday's liturgical Sunday. The most likely means by which to communicate with someone is to affirm. If we begin with a spirit of inadequacy or insufficiency, we are likely to turn our audience off and thus fail to communicate.

Perhaps begin by pointing out that their presence at and their participation in the worship service is a means by which they are communicating with God by listening to and responding to God in worship. In our study, we emphasized how each of the four readings elucidates a means by which God communicates: The Law, the Creation, Wisdom (Holy Spirit/Sophia), and the life, ministry, and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. It is right to highlight that the hour of worship is in and of itself a sampling of various means by which to communicate. Music (with or without words), sitting in silence, prayer (spoken or unspoken), preaching and hearing, the reading of responsive litanies, offering (giving of tithes), fellowship (Passing of the Peace), and eating and drinking (Holy Communion and 'coffee hour') are all various means of communication with God. Does worship welcome, or gatekeep? Is worship a burden, or a relief? Is worship done out of love or obligation? Suggest to the audience that what is done in their worship is done in love, is communication, and brings us closer to God, and thus affirms them.

Another effective means to communicate in the pulpit is through stories. The Bible teaches us that. In your message to the congregation, share with them one, two, three, or four personal stories of instances where God communicated with you or with someone you knew through one of the Ten Commandments, through Nature, through an epiphany, or by a lesson taught by Jesus during his ministry. It is important to tell stories and examples that vary from trivial to life-changing and substantive. The key is to demonstrate that all of life ought to be governed by communication with God, and that communication in matters small and large brings us closer to God.

Living the Word

If all our scriptures are premised on the various means by which God ‘communicates’ with us, then it is incumbent upon the preacher to catalyse the congregation’s responsive actions to that communication.

Of all the commandments, that is arguably the most neglected and has the greatest potential to bring us closer to God, is honouring the Sabbath. As a minister, I can and rarely do observe the Sabbath as it was intended (no work throughout the day). Laypeople often have as difficult a time not working on Sundays as clergy. Yet, I still have a Sabbath practice: taking a nap. During the work week, I can never nap. It is a luxury, and one that I feel guilty in indulging in at that! Yet, every Sunday, I make sure to have a nap. It is my Sabbath practice. Other means by which to honour the Sabbath can be done. Perhaps it is to have a ‘happy hour’, alone or with family or a friend, over wine and cheese. The point is, whatever practice it is, it must be regular, devotional, and bring you closer to God.

The means by which to receive epiphanies (God-given wisdom) are more difficult to prescribe. Reception necessitates more of a disposition, a willingness to be alert, open, and receptive, than a task. Intentionality is more of a state of mind and heart than practice. Yet, practice enhances intentionality, and vice versa. I find meditation, in particular, Zen Buddhist meditation held in my church, allows me to empty my mind of my earthly thoughts and obsessions and, thereafter, allows for the transcendent to fill the vacuum, so to speak. To sit in silence for half an hour or an hour is as difficult as it is transformative. Jesus practiced retreat many times.

We conclude with Jesus of Nazareth and the ways he lived the word. Perhaps ‘service’ to others is the penultimate practice Jesus communicated with God, and God communicated with Jesus. Jesus taught and demonstrated, “Whatever you have done for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done for me” (Matthew 25:40). Jesus communicated with God and discerned God’s will in service to others. Our neighbours are created in the *imago dei*, and we all possess the spirit of God within us. While discovering and attending to others’ needs, we continue the communication with God initiated by God. Service to others by feeding, clothing, visiting, healing, and being in solidarity with others is the fundamental means by which God communicates with us. And if that communication is from God, it brings us closer to God rather than separates us from God.

Liturgical Suggestions

Sending

Go forth into the world, having been inspired by God’s Word. God initiated the conversation during the Creation and God continues it today.

God is still speaking! May we continue to hear!

And after your hearing, may you respond by demonstrating to the world what you heard.

Go well. *Hambani kahle*. Amen.

Music- referring to your own local repertoire

Some suggested hymns:

“O God of Earth and Altar” (Gospel)

“God of Grace and God of Glory” (I Corinthians)

“In the Cross of Christ I Glory” (I Corinthians)

“Sing, My Tongue” (I Corinthians)

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday in Lent – 7 March 2027

Scott Couper

Texts

Numbers 21:4–9
Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22
John 3:14–21
Ephesians 2:1–10

Introduction

The dominant theme of all four readings is ‘deliverance’. Other thematic words may be ‘restoration’, ‘redemption’, ‘salvation’, and ‘renewal’. The central text from John’s gospel is the latter portion of the narrative about Jesus teaching to the Pharisee Nicodemus. The gospel includes what is arguably the most well-known and memorized scripture, John 3:16. All of this week’s readings allude to humans’ sin, God’s intervention, and humans’ restoration following God’s salvific acts. The cause-and-effect motif is a recipe for that which has occurred in the past, that which happens now, and that which will occur in the future for those who are called according to God’s purpose. The reading from Numbers, wherein Moses fashions a serpentine talisman to heal, is the clearest (and crudest?) lesson. The Psalm emphasizes the importance of recognizing and appreciating God’s restorative work in the past. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians places a strong Christological emphasis on God’s ultimate restorative powers that render life from death.

Hearing the Word

John 3:14–21

Verses 14–15: In John’s gospel, Jesus refers specifically to our reading from Numbers, referencing as an example of God’s healing powers Moses’ lifting up of the snake. Those who saw, and by implication, believed they could be healed, were healed.

Verse 16: Perhaps the most well-known verse in the Bible is John 3:16. It is perhaps most well-known as it is understood to be a summarization of the entire gospel: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”.

Verse 17 emphasizes God’s benevolent initiation of the relationship with Creation, and thus also with humans. Salvation is God’s motivation, not condemnation, as might be inaccurately interpreted from many Hebrew prophetic writings.

Verse 18: Likely much to Martin Luther’s and modern evangelicals’ delight, John places stress on ‘belief’ (as opposed to ‘works’). It is ‘belief’ (alone) that determines salvation or condemnation. The equation is simple: believe and receive life or deny and continue to be lost. The verse also contains a strong hint of exclusivity, as it is in *Jesus’ name* (as the only Son of God) that harbours salvific properties.

Verse 19 states that Jesus is the linchpin that determines whether one chooses ‘light’ or ‘darkness’. Jesus equals light and evil equals darkness.

Verses 20–21: Perhaps disappointing Martin Luther, the text concludes that those who gravitate toward the light (Jesus) are not ashamed for all to see their behaviour (works) whereas those who love evil and thus commit evil deeds will not wish to have them seen. They will keep themselves hidden in the dark.

Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22

Verses 1–2: Though one might conclude that the Psalmist’s praise is aspirational, it is not. It is clearly declarative. Praise is exclaimed by ‘blessing’ God with a reference to the *name* of God, deserving special recognition.

Verse 3: The Psalmist states that the blessings are forgiveness and, incredulously, the healing of all diseases.

Verses 17–18: As with John 3:16, God’s love is the motivation for God’s continued relationship with God’s people throughout history. Perhaps emphasizing deeds more than belief, the Psalmist, in good Hebrew fashion, recalls the benefits of the Commandments and thus the importance of keeping them.

Verses 19–20: The Psalmist heaps praise and adoration on God, God’s realm (heavens and earthly kingdoms), and on God’s angelic intermediaries.

Verses 21–22: The Psalmist blesses all who work according to God’s purposes (Romans 8:28), including God’s court (“hosts”), God’s “ministers” (priests), and all those who do the work of God on Earth just as it is in heaven (all of which are within God’s “dominion”).

Numbers 21:4–9

The Hebrews, fleeing Egypt, are wandering in the wilderness. They are frustrated and impatient and complaining. Snakes bite and kill many, which facilitate a metanoia (repentance and a changing of ways) amongst the people. They acknowledge their petty ways and ask Moses to intercede to God for the snakes to depart. God instructs Moses to fashion a rod on which a bronze snake is affixed so that whoever looks upon the snake will be healed and live.

Ephesians 2:1–10

Paul points out that before being saved by Christ, we were once slaves to sin and thus victims of death. Paul subscribes to a perspective that since Adam and Eve sinned, almost by heredity, all live in sin. Our loving God initiated a relationship with us and extended mercy. The concept of grace, or ‘undeserved forgiveness’, saves us. Paul proclaims that just as the saving serpent around a rod that was ‘raised’ saved the Hebrews from death, so Jesus, who was ‘raised’ on a cross, saves us (*Verses 6–7*).

Interpreting the Word

The subtheme across all four scriptures is that life is a gift from God, given to us by grace, despite our sin, and is only realized through belief (rather than by works).

Numbers

The story of the bronze snake set upon a rod is a difficult passage to preach, because it suggests that God is vindictive and decides to strike down with poisonous snakes those who complain. Moses intervenes and prays for the people and God relents by instructing Moses to place a bronze snake on a rod and lifting it so that whoever sees it will be healed. The lesson is one of divine justice and mercy, repentance and forgiveness. The story is about a test of faith, whereby the people need to trust God's word rather than their own understanding. The story is also one of 'symbolic substitution' whereby the cross of Jesus is foreshadowed. Just as the snake is lifted, so is the cross, and so are believers.

An unorthodox interpretation that draws on ancient Greek mythology shows that the snake to be a sign of healing and rejuvenation. The Staff of Asclepius is used as the South African Medical Association's logo. Asclepius is the god of healing in Greek mythology, and the snake is symbolic of wisdom and rejuvenation because of its ability to shed its skin. Hence, the snake can be interpreted to be a symbol of *metanoia* or transformation (repentance and spiritual conversion).

Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22

Psalm 107 can be seen as an antidote or an antithesis to the whining and complaining heard by the Hebrews in Numbers. Psalm 107 references many of the scenes described during the desert wandering: thirst, hunger, desolate landscapes, no civilization or human habitations. Yet, the Psalmist remembers the good that God has done, and that remembering of the Exodus (the Passover and the Crossing of the Red Sea) and other wonders reinforces that, though times are tough, ultimately, God is on our side, and we will prevail. The Psalmist offers thanksgiving, rather than complaining, for that which God has done. The Psalm promises 'deliverance' for even those who complained, as does the story of the bronze snake. The Psalmist recognizes that God's mercy requires some kind of recognition of wrongdoing for God's grace to be given. Repentance or *metanoia*, is, I suppose, a matter of 'belief', rather than 'works'. In the psalm, after complaining, the sinful people "cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress". The Psalmist concludes, like a bookend, with a declaration of appreciation. One can interpret from both Numbers and the Psalm that thanksgiving, perhaps, is the linchpin to a relationship with God or at the very least a catalyst. 'Counting one's blessings' is the beginning of a relationship with God.

John 3:14–21

In John's gospel, we are permitted to be eavesdroppers on Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee, Nicodemus. The lectionary picks up with Numbers and makes the supersessionist argument that the story of Moses' bronze snake is a foreshadowing of Jesus' ministry, and more

specifically, Jesus' execution on the cross and resurrection. In this sense, the 'interpretation' of the text has been done *for us* by the gospel writer and the drafters of the lectionary calendar.

Many interesting theological points can be debated from the famous John 3:16 text. The English word 'gave' his *only* Son suggests a substitutionary atonement theology – which has become difficult for many contemporary Christian theologians. And 'only Son' found in verses 16 and 18 has interesting Christological debates therein. Who is to say that all of us are not 'sons' (and 'daughters') of God, and hence there is not only 'one' son, Jesus? To what extent is (only son) a metaphor?

The verse also raises the question of Luther's 'justification by faith alone' when it states that 'whosoever believes in him', that is, Jesus, "shall not perish but have eternal life". Jesus, like our narrative in Numbers, is *the* talisman (the bronze snake) that, once lifted and believed in, saves one from death and thus enables life. There is much debatable metaphysics here.

One of the most beautiful verses of scripture is 3:17. This verse is tied to the verse most memorized, 3:16, by the word 'world'. Translated from Greek, 'world' is '*cosmos*', which can be translated (interpreted?) to be 'the universe'. The world or the *cosmos* is not necessarily exclusive to humans. The world can mean the entire earth, the solar system, and the universe (although cosmologically, this would not have been the worldview of a first-century writer in the Ancient Near East. Yet, an expansive interpretation of 'world' to mean 'universe' cannot be ruled out. Read Paul's words in Romans 8:22 when Paul states that the entire *cosmos* is groaning in anticipation of salvation. Paul means the entire Creation! The interpretive gem here is that these are verses that perhaps should not be interpreted anthropocentrically. In short, God's salvific beneficence can't be claimed exclusively for humans. God's salvation includes all living things, all of nature, and even inanimate 'beings' such as mountains, oceans, sky, and stars. This resonates with the theology of the psalms and the prophets, wherein the Creation participates in the praising of God, is changed by God's interventions, and is *included* in God's salvation. Creation is frequently anthropomorphised by the biblical authors. Not just humans need and receive salvation, but all of Creation needs and receives salvation (Romans 8:22)!

In *verses 19–20*, themes of life and death are intertwined with themes of light and darkness. Light is life, and darkness is death. As with our previous readings, some agency by humans is needed to make a choice between the light and the darkness. Whether this choice is 'belief' or 'deed' (works) can be debated. Yet, I believe the now obsolete theology of predestination, as articulated by John Calvin, is a spiritual *cul-de-sac*.

Ephesians 2:1–10

When reading the first three verses of chapter two, one cannot help but recall the mythological story of the Garden of Eden. Paul picks up the theme of sin and its consequences. In Genesis and Ephesians, death is the ultimate consequence of sin. Later, long after Paul, the African theologian, Augustine

of Hippo, picks up the theme of Genesis and Ephesians and develops further the doctrine of ‘Original Sin’. The stories of Adam and Eve, Saul of Tarsus, and the confessed indulgent life of Augustine of Hippo all merge in the second chapter of Ephesians. We are all ‘lost’.

This passage from Ephesians is no doubt one of the Protestant faith traditions cited when speaking about justification by faith alone. We must recall that at the time of Paul’s ministry, he was engaging in a battle with Peter and the leader of the Jerusalem Church, James the Just (Jesus’ brother), for the heart and soul of Christianity. James, Peter, and the other disciples/apostles held fast to Jesus teaching that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and that the traditions and Laws of the Jews still have to be respected and obeyed. Reza Aslan, in his book *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, writes that though James did not write the epistle of James, “the overwhelming consensus is that the tradition contained within the epistle can be confidently traced to James the Just. That would make James’ epistle arguably one of the most important books in the New Testament” (despite Martin Luther referring to the book as equivalent to “straw”). Paul, whose foothold and source of legitimacy lay with the Greco-Roman and gentile world, understood that the Law (particularly circumcision) impeded the gospel and thus his ministry. If the Law fell to the wayside, then ‘works’ must as well, and grace, which Paul received in abundance during his conversion experience, came to prominence, and thus ‘belief’ superseded action. Yet, Paul does not abandon works completely, and thus the epistle of James (2:17 and 26) does not become a complete contradiction to the Pauline letters. Paul does show some support for ‘works’, so the passage is not extreme enough in its favour of grace to advocate an antinominalist position. Yet works are only a by-product of faith. Paul’s support of works as a by-product, rather than as an ingredient for salvation, is perhaps motivated by his efforts to defend against the more scandalous accusations against the Christian community during the first century, such as sexual hedonism and cannibalism (Galatians 5:19–21).

Preaching the Word

The subjects of sin and judgment cannot and shouldn’t be avoided or ignored in our interpretation of the scriptures. What is key is that they do not retain a place of prominence; we move on from them, even quickly. Why? Ephesians 2:1–10, as well as Numbers, Psalm 17, and John chapter 3, all agree that sin and judgment do not have the last word and are not the end of the story. “By grace you have been saved” is the thesis of the Gospel, the Good News, and any interpretation of the Good News ought to, in essence and conclusion, be positive. Love Wins. God wins. In this vein, Ephesians 2:1–10 acknowledges and recognizes sin and judgment, but quickly moves on and expresses the Good News. In the story of the Bronze Snake, the people sin, but healing and life are the result of their trust in God. In Psalm 107, yes, some “were sick through their sinful ways” (verse 17), yet God’s steadfast love is worthy of praise and thanksgiving (verse 21).

Living the Word

We are all called to emulate Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), and thus God. In all four scriptures, God’s grace, mercy, forgiveness, and blessings are offered despite sinful ways.

Methodist Bishop, Richard Wilke, in his book *He Set His Face to Jerusalem: A Lenten Study for Adults*, asks the following questions that lead us to discern for ourselves what it means to live the Word of God as represented by these four scriptures. “Has anyone, long time past or recently, hurt, offended, or betrayed you? What does Jesus’ forgiveness mean to you? How does it witness to your need to forgive or be forgiven?”

“How do you think deep commitment and trust in God get us through tough times? What have your experiences been like?”

“This week, consider prayerfully how Jesus’ willingness to ‘set his face to Jerusalem, to his suffering, death, and resurrection, inspires or challenges you to ‘set your face’ to new life and hope”.

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday in Lent – 14 March 2027

Rodney Whiteman

Texts

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalm 51:1–12

Hebrews 5:5–10

John 12:20–33

Introduction

The world, both local and global, has broken covenant with God through greed, lust for power, and violence, even misusing God's name to justify lawlessness. These texts call us back to God, reminding us that renewal is God's work. The journey with Jesus through crucifixion to resurrection is the renewal of covenant relationship. As Christ learned obedience through suffering, so we are called to follow God faithfully, seeking God with committed hearts and obeying God's word, lest we stray from God's commandments.

Hearing the Word

Jeremiah 31:31–34

This passage is a divine declaration, spoken prophetically to offer hope for the future and to call God's people to repentance. Within the design of the prophet, it forms part of the Book of Comfort, where God's acts of redemption seek to comfort an exiled people who need renewal to obey God's laws and respond faithfully to the new covenant. God makes clear their sin—the breaking of the covenant—and identifies God as their husband, showing that covenant is like marriage, and breaking it is infidelity. Yet the prophet reveals a forgiving God, recognizing that the fault lies within the human heart. The law, once written on stone, must now be inscribed within the heart, at the very core of being. By using the same covenantal language as Sinai, God shows continuity, though human infidelity distorted its essence. Breaking the covenant led to a distorted understanding of God and identity. Through this declaration — “the days are coming”— God opens minds and hearts, acting eternally within human history to shape lives and restore God's people. This text formulates God's prophetic declaration of hope and renewal. Spoken to an exiled people, it forms part of the Book of Consolation, calling them to repentance and faithfulness. God identifies as their husband, showing that covenant is like marriage, and breaking it is infidelity. Yet God is revealed as forgiving, promising a new covenant written not on stone but on human hearts. This renewal restores identity and relationship, opening minds and hearts to God's eternal work in history. “The days are coming” signals God's ongoing creation, shaping lives through mercy and covenant faithfulness.

Psalm 119:9–16

In the post-exilic period, Israel stood at a junction, needing to rediscover its covenantal identity as the people liberated by God. The Word of God was placed at the centre, becoming the foundational narrative for both national renewal and daily devotion. It provided ethical direction and called the community to obedience. Psalm 119, situated in Book V of the Psalter, embodies this rediscovery. Its acrostic structure, built on the Hebrew alphabet, reflects a deliberate educational tool—embedding Torah into memory and worship, ensuring that God's Word shaped every aspect of life. In verses 9–13, the psalmist asks how a young person can remain pure. The youth represent both the vulnerability of humanity to temptation and the hope of faithful living. The answer lies in treasuring God's Word, storing it in the heart, and proclaiming it with the lips. Different terms for God's Word—statutes, commandments, testimonies—reveal its eternal values, designed to transform people into pure, obedient, and faithful servants. This Psalm shows how we can re-experience our covenant identity within the word of God.

Hebrews 5:5–10

The letter to the Hebrews was written to reassure believers facing adversity, affirming Christ's supremacy over angels, Moses, and the Levitical priesthood. The text emphasizes that Jesus did not seek honour for himself; rather, he was faithful to God's purpose. His priesthood was divinely conferred, confirmed by God's voice declaring him the begotten Son. This appointment reveals the intimate relationship between Father and Son and establishes Christ as High Priest in the order of Melchizedek—a priesthood eternal, royal, and righteous. Unlike the Levitical priesthood, Christ's priesthood transcends human ancestry. He embodies both kingly and priestly roles, upholding peace and righteousness. His humanity is revealed in his prayers, petitions, and tears, showing worshipful dependence on the Father. Through suffering, he learned obedience, and in that obedience, God perfected him. Thus, Jesus becomes the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. God announces him as High Priest extraordinaire, the one who mediates redemption and secures everlasting covenant life for his people.

John 12:20–33

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem for Passover signals the climax of his mission. The approach of the Greeks reveals the universal scope of salvation and prompts Jesus to declare that his “hour” has come. This moment fulfils God's promise in Jeremiah 31:31 of a new covenant, now extending to Gentiles whose hearts will bear God's law. Jesus interprets his death through the image of a grain of wheat: only by falling into the earth and dying can it yield abundant fruit. His passion thus becomes the means of life and growth for all who die to self and follow him. Discipleship entails service and sacrifice, yet it carries the promise that the Father will honour those

who serve Christ. Though troubled by the suffering ahead, Jesus embraces the divine purpose of glorifying the Father. The heavenly voice confirms this, echoing earlier divine affirmations. His death is not defeat but victory—judgment upon the world and its ruler, and exaltation that draws all people to the Savior, manifesting God’s inclusive glory.

Interpreting the Word

God’s prophetic declaration of a new covenant is fulfilled by inscribing God’s law not on stone but within human hearts. This expresses God’s desire for God’s people to reconnect covenantally, living in obedience shaped by God’s Word. The psalmist echoes this by urging the young to treasure God’s commandments, to become lifelong students of God’s teaching, and to meditate deeply on Godly principles. To break covenant is to walk away from God’s narrative, so repentance and turning back to God remain essential. God speaks into history—through prophets, through God’s law, through God’s affirming voice to Jesus, and supremely through Jesus Himself. Christ’s priesthood embodies this creative work: at the Kairos moment, signalled by the Greeks’ request to see him, Jesus embraced his vocation of death as the exaltation of the Father. Covenant renewal thus becomes inclusive; salvation offered to all who live obediently by faith. His troubled spirit reveals the cost, yet also the glory: evil judged, God honoured, and disciples called to serve, share in his mission, and be celebrated by the Father. The prophetic promise of Jeremiah 31:31–34 announces God’s intention to establish a new covenant, one not written on tablets of stone but inscribed upon human hearts. This covenant is not merely a renewal of old obligations but a transformative act of divine grace. God desires God’s people to reconnect with God covenantally, to live in obedience shaped by God’s Word, and to embody His law as the guiding narrative of their lives. In this way, covenant becomes not only a theological concept but the very rhythm of daily discipleship. The psalmist in Psalm 119 echoes this vision by urging the young to treasure God’s Word, to engrain God’s commandments deeply within, and to delight in His promises. Youth here is both symbolic and literal: it represents the vulnerability of humanity to deception and temptation, but also the hope of a generation rooted in God’s truth. The acrostic structure of Psalm 119, using the Hebrew alphabet, serves as an educational tool, embedding Torah into memory and worship. This reflects the post-exilic community’s need to rebuild identity around Scripture, ensuring that God’s Word was not peripheral but central to national and devotional life. Breaking covenant, however, is not a trivial matter. To turn away from God’s Word is to walk outside God’s narrative, to follow paths shaped by human pride or worldly influence. The severity of covenant-breaking lies in its relational rupture—it is not simply disobedience to rules but estrangement from the living God. Thus, the call to repentance is urgent: to turn back, to seek God anew, to allow God’s Word to reform the heart. Repentance is not merely regret but reorientation, a deliberate return to covenantal faithfulness. God’s voice is the means by which this covenant renewal is enacted. God speaks through prophets, through God’s law, through affirmations to God’s Son, and supremely through Jesus Himself. In Christ, the covenant promise finds fulfilment.

His priesthood, announced in Hebrews, is divinely conferred, surpassing the confines of the Levitical order. As priest in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus embodies both kingly and priestly roles, upholding righteousness and peace. His priesthood is eternal, his intercession unceasing, and his sacrifice once for all. The Kairos moment arrives in John 12, when Greeks request to see Jesus. This signals the inclusivity of covenant renewal—the nations are being drawn in. Jesus recognizes this as the hour when God’s covenant will be implemented through his death. Though troubled in spirit, he embraces the vocation of suffering, knowing it is the exaltation of the Father. His death is not defeat but the climactic act of covenant renewal, securing salvation for all who live obediently by faith. Evil is judged, the ruler of this world cast out, and the Son lifted up to draw all people to himself. For the church today, this covenant renewal calls us to live God’s Word with devotion and obedience. It means surrendering our thoughts, knowledge, and experience to God, discerning through reflective prayer how God’s Spirit leads. It is a call to hear God’s voice, to ponder God’s guidance deeply, and to embody the values of God’s kingdom: love that welcomes, justice that restores, truth that liberates, righteousness that directs, peace that reconciles, and hospitality that embraces. To serve Jesus is to share in his mission, ministry, and passion. It is to live covenantally, not as isolated individuals but as a community bound together in Christ. The implications are profound. Those who repent and turn to Christ by faith and obedience will enjoy his eternal presence both on earth and in heaven. God the Father will honour those who serve the Son, celebrating their faithfulness. Covenant renewal is not abstract theology but lived reality: it is the daily practice of obedience, the joyful proclamation of God’s Word, and the communal embodiment of kingdom values. In Christ, the covenant is written on our hearts, transforming us into a people who glorify God in every aspect of life.

Preaching the Word

The Scriptures today invite us to contemplate the priesthood of Jesus and its profound significance for our covenant relationship with God. From Jeremiah’s prophetic declaration of a new covenant written on the heart, to the psalmist’s call for purity through God’s Word, and finally to the letter to the Hebrews affirming Christ’s eternal priesthood, we are drawn into the mystery of God’s saving work. God’s people have always struggled with disobedience. Israel broke covenant repeatedly, wandering after other gods and neglecting God’s law. Yet God’s response was not abandonment but renewal. God promised a covenant inscribed not on stone but within the heart, a covenant that would restore God’s people so that they would know God personally and live faithfully. This promise finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, whose priesthood is both human and divine, temporal and eternal. The letter to the Hebrews assures us that Christ did not exalt himself to this role. He was appointed by God, declared to be the begotten Son, and established as priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. This priesthood is unique, surpassing the Levitical order, embracing both kingly authority and priestly mediation. In Christ, God affirms unity and oneness—the divine connection between Father and Son, now extended to us through covenant renewal. But this priesthood is not

abstract. It embraces suffering. Jesus prayed with loud cries and tears, embodying the full weight of human struggle. He was hoisted on the cross, not as a tragic victim but as the faithful priest offering himself in obedience to the Father. In his death, God's intention is revealed: to write God's law within our hearts, to reestablish covenant relationship, and to bring eternal salvation. The hour of Jesus and the days of God unite in this Kairos moment—the creative, saving, renewing work of God made inclusive for all nations. The Greeks who sought to see Jesus remind us of the deep longing within the human heart. They came with desire, perhaps curiosity, but ultimately seeking the One who could fulfil their yearning for God. Their request signals that covenant renewal is not limited to Israel but extends to all who seek God. In Christ, salvation is offered universally, and the covenant is renewed inclusively. What does this mean for us today? It is a call to hear God's voice. We must hear God in Scripture, meditate on God's Word, and allow God's law to be inscribed daily upon our hearts. The divine narrative must transform the distorted inner narratives the world presents—narratives of greed, impurity, and self-centeredness. Without God's Word, our paths are corrupted, our dignity diminished, and our lives exiled from His purposes. But with God's Word treasured within, we gain purity of heart and clarity of direction. Jesus shows us that covenant faithfulness requires surrender. He surrendered his will to the Father, even when troubled in spirit, so that God might be glorified. We too must renounce earthly ways and live lives that honour God through Christ. This is not merely personal piety but communal transformation. When God's covenant is renewed in us, our common humanity is enriched. We learn to live in peace, justice, and hospitality, reflecting the values of God's kingdom. The Gospel call is clear: to serve and follow Jesus daily, to share in his mission, ministry, and passion. Repentance is the doorway, obedience the path, and salvation the promise. Those who serve Christ will be celebrated by the Father, for to serve Jesus is to honour God Himself. In covenant renewal, we discover our true identity as God's people, restored in dignity, living faithfully, and bearing witness to God's eternal priesthood.

Living the Word

As God's people, we are called to celebrate the covenant—not as a distant contract, but as a living relationship of grace. In Christ, the covenant is fulfilled and extended, binding us together in community and anchoring us in God's promises. To honour this covenant is to recognize its intrinsic value: it is the very framework of our life with God and with one another. Yet we must also be honest about what breaks covenant—our pride, our neglect of God's Word, our failure to love. Therefore, we pray for repentant hearts, that we may be restored to faithfulness. A devotional life rooted in Scripture is essential, for in the Word we hear God's voice, discern God's Spirit, and learn obedience shaped by the cross of Christ. His death is the covenant sealed in blood, calling us to surrender our thoughts, knowledge, and experience to God. This covenant life is marked by kingdom values: love that welcomes, justice that restores, truth that liberates, righteousness that guides, peace that reconciles, and hospitality that embraces. To live God's Word is to embody these values daily, building covenant and community in the name of Jesus, to the glory of God.

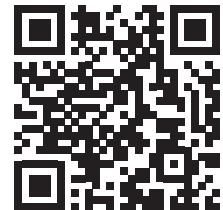
Liturgical Suggestions

Psalm 119:9–16 can be used responsorially as a recommitment to God and God's Word. This could be done credal format after the sermon is preached.

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Introduction to Holy Week – March 21 (Palm Sunday) to March 28 (Easter Sunday)

Introduction to the Season

In South Africa, Holy Week, the Triduum, and Easter Sunday is a particularly holy time for Christians. Many people will travel across country to worship in their family church, or to gather at places of religious significance such as Mount Moriah. There are people who look forward to Easter music like choral cantatas or the Messiah.

Different traditions have developed a wide range of ways in which this focal point of the Church Year is celebrated. In all traditions it is always a busy time for clergy, preachers and others responsible for ordering services of worship. The danger is that one can settle for a familiar and predictable pattern simply because this is the way it has always been done. When planning for Holy Week it could be helpful to ask:

- what do these familiar texts say to this congregation, situated in this place, in this very special week?
- how best can the voice of God be heard within our particular context this year?

Such an approach could assist in reaffirming the faith of worshippers and encouraging their active and helpful discipleship in the communities where they are called to serve.

Locating the Season

Holy Week marks the brief period between the Sundays in Lent and the Triduum. It begins with Palm Sunday, which can be observed in some form of procession with palms into the church as well as the reading of a substantial portion of the Passion narrative according to Matthew (21:1-11). Better still, this could include a procession - ecumenical if possible - in the surrounding streets or around the church grounds and building.

Palm Sunday is then followed by the weekday services of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week. In some traditions there is an option to use the passion readings from Matthew, Mark and Luke instead of the passages from John.

Liturgy for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Palms – 21 March 2027

David Sylvester

Texts

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Mark 11:1–11
John 12:12–16

Introduction

This is a liturgy for the Feast of the Palms where the focus is on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey to the cries of praising and adoring palm bearing crowds.

Palm Sunday opens Holy Week with a paradox at the heart of the Christian story: a king enters his city on a donkey, acclaimed by a crowd that will, within the week, cry for his crucifixion. This liturgy gathers worshippers around that paradox – inviting them to shout their hosannas while already knowing where the road leads. The procession of palms is not mere pageant; it is a participatory act of faith, a bodily declaration that this Jesus, and no other, is Lord.

The liturgy draws throughout on the appointed texts for this day: Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29; Mark 11:1–11; and John 12:12–16 (NIV). Where a congregation can process with palm branches – outside or within the building – this should be encouraged. The gathering with palms in hand is itself the first act of proclamation.

Gathering in God's name

The congregation gathers. Where possible, worshippers hold palm branches. The ministers enter in procession. A processional hymn may be sung (see Music). When the procession reaches the front, silence is kept briefly before the Call to Worship begins.

Call to Worship

Based on Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Leader: Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;

People: His love endures for ever.

Leader: Open for me the gates of the righteous;

People: I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.

Leader: The stone the builders rejected

People: Has become the cornerstone.

Leader: This is the day the LORD has made;

People: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!

All: Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!

Act of Penitence

The palm branches are laid down or lowered. The minister addresses the congregation.

We come with our palms and our praise, and yet we know that we are people who have often welcomed Jesus on our own terms – wanting the king who fixes things for us while leaving us otherwise undisturbed. We have waved our hosannas and then walked away unchanged. Let us bring our honest hearts before God.

A brief silence is kept.

Lord Jesus, we confess that we too carry hidden agendas beneath our branches. We have wanted a saviour shaped to our desires, a king who confirms our comfort. We have turned away from the cross you set before us. We have failed to love our neighbours as ourselves, and we have been slow to seek justice for the poor and the forgotten.

All: Merciful Lord, forgive us. By your grace, re-form us into the people you call us to be, that our hosannas this day may be more than words. Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

The minister pronounces absolution (or, where custom requires, an assurance of forgiveness).

Almighty God, who in his great mercy sent his Son to bear our sin and shame, forgive you all your offences, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. **Amen**

Proclaiming the Word of God

The following pattern is recommended. Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29 may be read or sung as an act of acclamation. The Gospel reading (Mark 11:1–11 or John 12:12–16) is the primary text for the Liturgy of the Palms and should always be included. A homily or sermon follows the readings.

Prayer for Illumination

Lord God, as we open your Word on this holy day, open also our ears and our hearts. What we hear with our minds, let us receive into our lives. Where we have misread your story, correct us. Where we have domesticated your Word, disturb us. May the same Spirit who inspired these scriptures illuminate us now, that we may see Christ more clearly and follow him more faithfully. Through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. **Amen**

Responding to the Word of God

The Nicene Creed or Apostles' Creed is said. Intercessions follow, in the form customary to the congregation. The following versicle may be used to frame petitions.

Versicle for Intercessions

Leader: Lord, in your mercy,

People: Hear our prayer.

At the conclusion of intercessions:

Merciful Father, in the week that lies before us, keep our eyes fixed on your Son – on the table he sets, the cross he bears, and the life he gives. Hear these prayers we bring, for the world he loves. **Amen.**

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

The minister introduces the Peace.

We are about to enter Holy Week – the holiest and most demanding days of the Christian year. Before we come to the table, we offer one another the peace of Christ, the peace that the world cannot give and cannot take away.

Leader: The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People: And also with you.

The congregation may greet one another. Palm branches may be exchanged as a sign of welcome. A hymn may be sung as the table is prepared (see Music).

Invitation to Communion

When the table is prepared, the minister invites the congregation.

We come to this table as those who have waved our palms and meant it – and as those who know how quickly our fervour fades. Jesus knew that too. He set this table the night before he died, for disciples who would scatter and deny. He sets it still for us.

Come, not because you are strong, but because you are invited. Come, not because you are worthy, but because he is. Come, and receive the body and blood of the one who rides toward the cross for love of you.

The Eucharistic Prayer and distribution of Communion follow according to the rite customary to the congregation.

Sending

Post communion Prayer

After Communion, the minister or congregation prays.

All: Lord of all, we have been fed at your table and renewed by your grace. As we leave this place and enter the shadow of Holy Week, strengthen us to follow where you lead. When the road grows dark, remind us of this morning and of the victory you have already won. Carry us through the cross to the joy of resurrection; through Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and for ever. **Amen.**

Sentence of Scripture

The minister reads the sentence. The congregation may respond.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
Hosanna in the highest!” Matthew 21:9 (NIV)

Or:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.” Psalm 118:22–23 (NIV)

Benediction

The minister faces the congregation.

Go in the name of the one who comes not with a sword but with a cross, not with the force of empire but with the power of love. Follow the king whose throne is shaped like a tree. Live this week as those who have glimpsed the end of the story and have chosen, nonetheless, to walk the whole road with him. And the blessing of God Almighty – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – rest upon you and remain with you always. Amen.

A recessional hymn may be sung (see Music) and the ministers and alter party depart.

Music

“Hosanna (Praise is rising)” – Paul Baloché & Brenton Brown. For congregations using contemporary song; captures the acclamation of the crowd.

“Meekness and majesty (This is your God)” – Graham Kendrick. Holds humility and kingship together – apt for this day.

“When I survey the wondrous cross” – Isaac Watts. Bridges the joy of the entry with the shadow of the cross; prepares the congregation for Holy Week.

Communion

“O sacred head now wounded” – Bernard of Clairvaux / Paul Gerhardt. Draws the eye from the procession toward the passion.

“Bread of heaven, on thee we feed” – Josiah Conder. A eucharistic hymn of quiet confidence.

Recessional

“Low in the grave he lay” (*Christ arose!*) – Robert Lowry. Ends with resurrection hope; reminds the congregation where Holy Week is heading.

“Psalm 118” (choral or metrical setting) – Any setting familiar to the congregation. Returning to the psalm at the close binds the liturgy together

Word and Life for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Palms – 21 March 2027

David Sylvester

Texts

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Mark 11:1–11

John 12:12–16

Introduction

Palm Sunday opens Holy Week with a dramatic collision of joy and shadow. The crowd shouts ‘Hosanna.’ – ‘Save us.’ – and spreads cloaks and branches before Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. Yet beneath the festivity lies an unmistakable irony: the one hailed as king comes not on a warhorse but on a colt, not in triumph but in vulnerability. Psalm 118, a great processional hymn of rescue and praise, provides the scriptural heartbeat for the day. Mark’s account is earthy and immediate; John’s is theologically reflective. Together they invite preachers and congregations to consider what kind of king we actually want – and what kind of king arrives.

Hearing the Word

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Psalm 118 is a processional hymn, almost certainly associated with pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. It opens with a refrain that frames everything: ‘Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.’ The Hebrew word translated ‘love’ here is *‘hesed’* – the covenantal, steadfast, unfailing mercy of God. This is a word that cannot be fully rendered by any single English term. It is the bedrock on which the psalmist stands.

The middle section (vv. 19–27) enacts a dramatic dialogue at the Temple gate. The worshipper calls for the ‘gates of righteousness’ to be opened, the gatekeepers respond, the congregation gives thanks. Verse 22 is the theological hinge: *‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.’* This image of reversal – of the despised made central – became one of the most frequently cited Old Testament texts in the early church, applied directly to Jesus. Verse 26, *‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD,’* is the very phrase the crowd will shout in the gospel readings. The psalm ends with a call to bind the festive sacrifice to the altar and an invitation to give thanks. Psalm 118 thus functions as the theological score beneath Palm Sunday’s pageantry.

Mark 11:1–11

Mark’s account of the entry into Jerusalem is characteristically vivid and concrete. Jesus sends two disciples ahead with remarkably precise instructions about finding a colt. The word used (*polos*) indicates a young donkey – an animal that has never been ridden. Mark notes that the owners simply let them go when the disciples give the password: ‘The Lord needs it.’ This seemingly mundane detail may signal that Jesus has made prior arrangements, or it may simply show Mark’s interest in how the everyday cooperates with the divine.

The crowd’s response is spontaneous and layered. They spread their cloaks and cut branches, as gestures of homage to a royal figure, echoing the reception of Simon Maccabaeus a century and a half earlier (1 Macc 13:51). The shout of ‘Hosanna.’ is drawn directly from Psalm 118:25–26. Originally a cry for help – *‘Save us, we pray.’* – it had evolved into an acclamation of praise, though its desperate underside is never entirely lost. Significantly, Mark ends in an anticlimactic key: Jesus enters the Temple, ‘looked around at everything,’ and, because it was already late, simply left for Bethany. No cleansing of the Temple, no dramatic speech. The quietness is almost eerie, a pause before the storm. Mark’s Jesus surveys the scene; there is deliberateness in what is coming.

John 12:12–16

John’s account is briefer but theologically richer. The great crowd that goes out to meet Jesus has heard of the raising of Lazarus. John situates the entry within that charged context (cf. 12:9–11). The Pharisees observe with despair: *‘The whole world has gone after him.’* The use of palm branches is unique to John; palms were symbols of Jewish nationalistic hope, associated with Judas Maccabaeus’s victory and with coins struck during the First Jewish Revolt. John’s crowd waves them with precisely that kind of nationalist fervour.

Crucially, John adds a reflection found in none of the other gospels: *‘At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about him.’* This retrospective understanding, that of recognising the donkey’s significance only in light of the resurrection, is key to John’s hermeneutic throughout. He cites Zechariah 9:9 (*‘your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt’*), a prophecy of the peaceful, humble king. The disciples’ incomprehension at the time, and their later understanding, mirrors the reader’s own journey of faith: we too are learning to see who Jesus really is.

Interpreting the Word

The entry into Jerusalem is not simply a warm and festive parade. It is a carefully staged act of political and prophetic theatre. In Jerusalem for Passover – the great festival of liberation from Egypt – crowds were already stirred by memories of freedom and hopes of deliverance. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate would have entered the city from the west at the same season, with cavalry and standards, a display of imperial power designed to suppress any nationalist uprising during the volatile festival period. Jesus enters from the east, on a donkey, from the direction of the Mount of Olives – the direction from which, according to Zechariah, the messianic king would come. The contrast is unmistakable. This is a counter-procession.

Psalm 118 was sung at Passover and at the dedication of the Temple (Hanukkah). Its imagery of rescue – *‘I was pushed*

back and was falling, but the LORD helped me – resonates with a people under occupation who longed for God's deliverance. The stone rejected by the builders (v. 22) takes on fresh meaning in a context where Israel felt marginalised and crushed by the empire. The early church's application of this image to Jesus, the crucified and risen one, carries a powerful theological charge: God's saving act does not bypass suffering, but instead it passes through it.

In the South African context, this dynamic is recognisable and immediate. The church has its own history of counter-processional witness, those moments when communities, often at great cost, staged symbolic acts of resistance against powers that claimed ultimate authority. The apartheid regime was met with marches, candles, and palm branches of its own kind. The question the texts raise is not merely historical: who and what are we welcoming when we wave our branches? Are we welcoming the Jesus who confirms our political hopes, or the Jesus who subverts all our easy expectations? The crowd on Palm Sunday was desperately hoping for a revolutionary king who would overthrow Rome. They got a king who would overthrow death, but not before being broken by the powers they wanted overthrown.

John's note about the disciples' retrospective understanding is hermeneutically important for preachers. It acknowledges that full comprehension of who Jesus is, does not come in the moment of encounter, but only through the lens of what follows, that of crucifixion and resurrection. This is not a failure of faith, but is rather its very nature. The congregation gathered on Palm Sunday holds both ends of Holy Week in their hands simultaneously: the shout of praise and the whisper of the cross. They know the whole story in a way the crowd in Jerusalem did not. The question is what we do with that knowing.

Preaching the Word

The following are offered as possible preaching avenues. Preachers will have their own:

1. What kind of king?

The central irony of Palm Sunday is that the crowd and Jesus are not singing from the same hymn sheet. They want a warrior-king; he comes as a servant-king. A sermon might explore this gap between the king we want and the king who arrives – and invite the congregation to sit honestly with the question of which king they have been following. In South Africa, with its long history of leaders who promised liberation but delivered self-enrichment, this gap between expectation and reality is acutely felt. What does it mean to follow a king whose crown is made of thorns?

2. The stone that was rejected

Psalm 118:22 – the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone – offers rich homiletical territory. Who are the rejected stones in our communities? The preacher might explore how God's action so often runs counter to the world's valuations: the powerless, the poor, the marginalised find themselves at the centre of God's purposes. Palm Sunday begins a week that will enact this reversal definitively. The cross is the ultimate rejected stone; Easter is its vindication as cornerstone.

3. Retrospective faith

John's note that the disciples 'did not understand at first' opens a pastoral door. Faith rarely arrives in the moment of experience; more often it comes in reflection – when, looking back, we see where God was at work even in what we did not understand at the time. A sermon from this angle might invite the congregation to consider their own 'retrospective moments' – times of suffering or bewilderment that, seen now through the lens of God's faithfulness, yield unexpected meaning. The structure of Holy Week itself enacts this: we know Easter is coming, yet we are asked to walk each day of the week in its own integrity.

4. Hosanna – the cry beneath the praise

'Hosanna' is praise, but it began as a cry for help. In its original form (Ps 118:25) it means: 'Save us, LORD.' A sermon might recover this desperate underside of the word, and invite the congregation to bring their Hosannas – not sanitised, triumphalist shouts, but the honest cries for salvation that well up from communities facing violence, poverty, illness, and loss. Palm Sunday is not a day of managed piety; it is a day when broken people shout their need at the king on the donkey, hoping against hope that he has come to save.

Living the Word

Palm Sunday calls the congregation to honest and open-handed welcome – not of the king we have constructed from our hopes and politics, but of the One who comes on his own terms. In the week ahead, the individual believer is invited to slow down, to resist the rush to Easter, and to walk deliberately through each day of Holy Week: sitting with the Last Supper, standing at the cross, waiting in the silence of Holy Saturday. The congregation is called to ask: where in our community do people still cry 'Hosanna' – save us? How might the church be the presence of the servant-king among those whose voices go unheard? Palm Sunday is not a spectator event; it is an invitation to join the procession, knowing where it leads.

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 118)

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;

His love endures forever.

This is the day the LORD has made –

We will rejoice and be glad in it.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD –

Hosanna in the highest.

Open the gates of righteousness;

We enter to give thanks to the God of our salvation.

Lord Jesus, you came into Jerusalem not as a conqueror with sword and shield, but as a king riding on a donkey – the sign of peace, the sign of service. We confess that we have wanted you to be a different kind of king. We have tried to fit you into our politics and our programmes. Today, open the gates of our hearts. Come in as you are. Teach us to follow where you lead. Hosanna. Save us. Amen.

Suggested Hymns and Songs

“All glory, laud and honour” (St Theodulph of Orleans) – the classic Palm Sunday processional hymn.

“Ride on, ride on in majesty” (Henry Hart Milman) – captures the paradox of kingly humility.

“Hosanna (Praise is Rising)” (Paul Baloché / Brenton Brown) – a contemporary song accessible to a wide range of congregations.

“This is the day” (Les Garrett, based on Ps 118) – familiar in South African congregations and directly grounded in the psalm.

Psalm 118 may also be sung or read antiphonally as a responsive psalm.

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Liturgy for Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday) – 21 March 2027

Craig Morrison

Texts

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 OR 15:1–39, (40–47)

Gathering in God's name

Call to Worship

We come to prepare for the holiest of weeks.

**We will journey through praise, with joy on our lips;
we will travel through betrayal and death, cradling
hope deep in our hearts**

Jesus leads us through this week, and we will follow,
for he is the life we long for, he is the Word who sustains
us.

**We wave palm branches in anticipation,
we lay our love before him, to cushion his walk**

Setting aside all power, glory, and might, he comes:
modelling humility and obedience for all of us.

Hosanna! Hosanna!

Blessed is the One who brings us the kingdom of God!¹

Invocation

Lord Jesus Christ, we welcome you, our Lord and our
Saviour, our servant and friend. We welcome you to this
place, where your people have gathered. We welcome you to
our worship, we welcome you to our lives. Blessed is he who
comes in the name of the Lord! ²

Act of Penitence

In your mercy, O Christ, forgive us. Forgive us the desire
for power, and the willingness to replace one empire with
another. Forgive us when we think that knowing you for a
long time means a privileged place in your kingdom. Forgive
us when we would push away those who seek to know you;
when we consider others too sinful, too distasteful, too
blind to be part of our company. Forgive us when our desire
to follow ends with the joyful procession, and refuses to
hear about the inevitable outcome of speaking truth to the
powerful, or speaking love to the fearful. Forgive us our
failure to follow. Forgive us our failure to love. Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

The Psalmist says:

But I trust in you, O Lord, I say 'You are my God.'

My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies
and from those who pursue me.

Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your
unfailing love.

In Christ, God hears; God answers; God sets us free.

**People: In Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God!
Amen**

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination (all)

**God-who-is-still-speaking, unveil your kingdom in
our midst. Show us who we truly are in you: expose
the illusions that distort our vision, deliver us from
temptations that contort our living, open our eyes in this
time of trial, that resistance may be the secret of our joy
and our joy a sign of your shalom. Amen.**

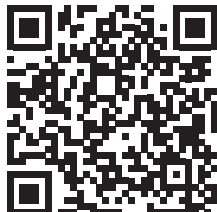
Now let us listen for the word of God, as we find it contained
in the book of Isaiah 50:4–9a; and,

Philippians 2:5–11; and, Mark 14:1 – 15:47 or 15:1–39, (40–
47) ...

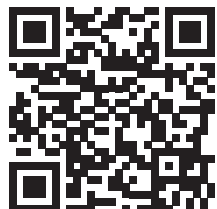
Responding to the Word of God

**People: Spirit... Wind... Breath... fill our lungs and
lives with your energising presence; refresh our tired
minds; and stir our slowly-beating hearts; so that we may
humbly and courageously be your breathing, gusting,
good presence in the world. Amen ³**

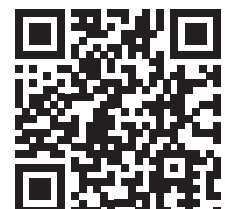
¹ By Thom Shuman, posted on his
Lectionary Liturgies blog.
<http://www.lectionarylitanies.blogspot.ca/>



² The Very Rev. David Lunan, and
posted on the Church of Scotland's
Starters for Sunday website.
<http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/>



³ By Scott Cervas, Meadowthorpe
Presbyterian Church (Lexington,
KY), on <http://www.liturgylink.net/>



Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

Invitation to Communion

Sending

Post communion Prayer

Benediction

People of God: trust in God's promises to his people:

peace,

security,

blessing, even when they are difficult to believe.

Know that God's news is Good News, nourishing,

true, even when people tell you it is not. And when you encounter doubt, may you strengthen your belief guiding you in his perfect wisdom and counsel.

Amen

Word and Life for Palm Sunday, Feast of the Passion – 21 March 2027

Craig Morrison

Texts

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 OR 15:1–39, (40–47)

Introduction

Palm Sunday begins Holy Week. It connects two important moments: Jesus entering Jerusalem and the events that led to his death on the cross. At first, people welcome Jesus with joy. They shout and praise him like a king. But very quickly, the story changes. Jesus is arrested, judged, and killed.

This day shows a different kind of kingship. Jesus does not act like a political ruler or a strong leader. Instead, he shows humility, service, and obedience to God. The readings invite us not only to remember the story, but also to think about its meaning for our lives today. They help us reflect on suffering, faithfulness, and trust in God, even in times of pain and rejection.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 50:4–9a

This reading is part of the “Servant Songs” in Isaiah. These songs describe a servant chosen by God. Isaiah 50:4–9a is the third song. It teaches that suffering is part of the servant’s calling. The historical background is the time of exile in Babylon. Many people thought God had left them. But this text says the opposite. God is still present and active. The servant listens to God every day. The text says God “wakens his ear.” This means the servant learns from God and is ready to obey. The servant speaks to help tired and suffering people. But this message is not always welcome. The servant is insulted, beaten, and rejected. Still, he does not turn away. He “sets his face like flint,” which means he is strong and determined.

A key idea is that God is close to the servant. God is not far away. God is a helper and a defender. Even when others accuse the servant, God stands with him. This gives the servant courage. This passage helps us understand Jesus. Like the servant, Jesus speaks truth, suffers rejection, and trusts God completely.

Psalms 31:9–16

The Psalms are very important during Holy Week. They give words for human feelings like fear, pain, anger, and hope. They help us speak honestly to God. In this psalm, the writer is in deep trouble. He feels weak and full of sorrow. He says his life is full of grief. He feels like a “broken vessel,” something no longer useful. People speak against him and plan to harm him. He feels fear all around him.

But the psalm does not stop with pain. It also shows trust. The writer says, “I trust in you, O Lord.” This is very important. The psalm holds two things together: suffering and faith. This psalm is closely connected to the story of Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Psalm 31:5). This shows that Jesus used the Psalms as his prayer language.

The Psalms help us understand that suffering is part of human life, but we are not alone. We can bring our pain to God. We can be honest, even when we feel afraid or abandoned.

Philippians 2:5–11

This passage is often called the “Christ Hymn.” It is one of the most important texts in the New Testament. It teaches what is called *kenotic Christology*. The Greek word *kenosis* means “to empty oneself.” This text describes Jesus’ journey in four parts:

1. The Great Descent (Kenosis)

Jesus is equal with God, but he does not treat this as *harpagmos*. The Greek word *harpagmos* means something to use for personal gain or advantage. Jesus does not use his power in this way. Instead, he empties himself (*kenosis*). He becomes human and lives as a servant. He even dies on a cross, which was a very shameful death.

2. From Humiliation to Lordship

Because Jesus is obedient, God lifts him up. God gives him the name “Lord.” This means authority over all creation, over all empires and kingdoms. One day, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

3. The Mind of Christ (Praxis)

Paul tells believers to have the same “mind” as Christ. The Greek word *phroneō* means a way of thinking that leads to action (*praxis*). It is not only about belief. It is about living with humility, love, and service.

4. Divine Participation and Promise

Believers are not alone. God works in them. The same Jesus who emptied himself is active in believers today, helping them to live in this way.

The hymn has two balanced parts (verses 6–8 and 9–11). It shows contrasts: God and human, death and life, humility and glory. The main message is not only about who Jesus is, but also how we should live.

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 or 15:1–39, (40–47)

This Gospel tells the story of Jesus' suffering and death. It shows how people often reject God's ways. From the beginning, there is opposition to Jesus. Even though he is called the Son of God, many people do not accept him. Religious leaders feel threatened by him. Even his disciples do not fully understand him. As the story continues, the leaders decide to kill Jesus. They hand him over to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate does not find Jesus guilty, but he gives in to the crowd. He acts for political reasons, not for justice.

The crowd changes quickly. A few days earlier, they welcomed Jesus with joy. Now they shout, "Crucify him!" This shows how easily people can be influenced. Jesus is mocked as "King of the Jews." Soldiers dress him in a purple robe and a crown of thorns. They pretend to honour him but insult him. People laugh at him and challenge him to come down from the cross. All this ignores the good things Jesus did. He healed the sick, helped the poor, and forgave sins. But people want power on their own terms. They do not understand who he really is.

Jesus suffers deeply. He is betrayed, abandoned, and killed. This shows the worst of human behaviour. But it also shows Jesus' faithfulness.

There are important connections between Jesus' baptism and his death. At his baptism, God calls him "my Son." At his death, Jesus cries out to God. The Greek words *pneuma* (spirit) and *schizō* (to tear) are used to connect these events. At the cross, a Roman centurion says, "*Truly this man was God's Son.*" This is a key moment. Someone finally recognises who Jesus is. The women followers stay near the cross. They remain faithful, even when others leave. The disciples are absent. Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus.

The story ends in silence and uncertainty. But it is not the end. The Good News continues.

Interpreting the Word

These texts were written in times of suffering and struggle. Isaiah speaks to people in exile. They felt abandoned, but the message says God is still present. The servant represents faithfulness in hard times. The Psalms reflect real human experience. They show that faith includes pain and doubt. They teach that it is normal to question and cry out to God. Philippians was written to a Christian community facing challenges. Paul encourages unity and humility. The Greek word *phroneō* shows that faith must be lived, not just believed.

Mark's Gospel was likely written for a community under pressure, possibly facing persecution. The story of Jesus' suffering would encourage them. It shows that suffering is not failure, but can be part of God's purposes.

Today, these texts still speak to us. Many people experience suffering, injustice, and rejection. These readings remind us that God is present in these situations. They also challenge us to live with humility and compassion.

Preaching the Word

The preacher can utilise any number of themes that have emerged in this discussion on the lections for today. The lections show a faithful person surrounded by hostility yet not abandoned by God. "God is my helper and vindicator" is not denial of danger but a deeper claim: that God stands with the one who suffers for righteousness.

In the Passion, Jesus is mocked, rejected, and condemned, yet he *entrusts* himself to the Father. This invites the congregation to trust that opposition is not the end of the story. God's justice may seem delayed, but it is not absent.

The preacher can explore several themes from these readings.

First, God supports those who suffer for what is right. Jesus is rejected and mocked, but he trusts God. This shows that God is with those who face injustice.

Second, Jesus gives a pattern for life. His way is humility, obedience, and love. This is not easy. It may involve suffering. But it is the way of true faith.

Third, the Psalms give us language for life. They teach us how to pray honestly. We can bring all our feelings to God. Psalm 31 helps us understand the cross. It shows both fear and trust. This balance is important. Faith does not remove pain, but it holds onto hope. The structure of the psalm moves from lament to trust. This is also the movement of Holy Week. Good Friday is full of sorrow, but it leads toward hope. Jesus' use of the Psalms shows that God understands human suffering. God is not distant. In Jesus, God experiences pain.

Philippians connects with Isaiah and the Psalms. Jesus' *kenosis* (self-emptying) shows God's love. God enters human suffering and brings redemption. The cross challenges ideas of power. True power is not force or control. It is love, justice, and service. What looks like weakness is actually strength in God's eyes.

Living the Word

These readings ask an important question: will we stand with the suffering? The servant in Isaiah and Jesus both show courage and faithfulness. They care for the weak and speak against injustice. Today, many people are still rejected or treated as outsiders. The Psalms remind us that God is close to them. Jesus also showed care for those on the margins.

In a South African context, this message is important. Issues like inequality, poverty, and injustice are still present. The church is called to respond with compassion and action. Believers can choose to support the weak, speak for justice, and live with humility. As a community, the church can reflect the love of Christ in daily life. Faith is not only about belief. It is about action (*praxis*). With God's help, we can live out the "mind of Christ" in the world today.

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* *Lectio Divina* ('divine reading') is an ancient reading method revived today. The four movements consist of: read, meditate, pray, contemplate. This emphasises listening rather than analysing and explaining, thus 'soaking' in the text.

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Word and Life for Monday in Holy Week – 22 March 2027

Alande Mbokazi

Texts

Isaiah 42:1–9

Psalms 36:5–11

Hebrews 9:11–15

Gospel: John 12:1–11

Introduction

The Monday of Holy Week marks the beginning of the church's solemn journey towards the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. The reading reveals Jesus as the chosen servant who brings justice, mercy and salvation to the world. Isaiah speaks of God's gentle servant, while the gospel presents Mary anointing Jesus and loving preparation for his burial. Hebrews proclaims Christ as the perfect high priest who sacrifice brings redemption and the psalm celebrates God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Together these readings invite Christians to reflect deeply on Christ's sacrificial mission and respond with devotion, gratitude and faith.

Hearing The Word

Isaiah 42:1–9

This passage is the first of the “servant songs” in Isaiah and presents God's chosen servant as one who will bring justice and healing to the nations. The words *‘here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen’* identify the servant as specially appointed by God and empowered by the Spirit. Christians traditionally understand the servant as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, especially because of the themes of humility, obedience and suffering are unlike earthly rulers. The servant *‘will not cry out or lift up his voice’*, revealing a mission marked by gentleness rather than force. The image of the ‘bruised reed’ and ‘dimly burning wick’ emphasises compassion towards the weak and broken.

The servant is also called *“a covenant to the people”* and *“a light to the nations”*, pointing beyond Israel to the salvation of all humanity. This universal mission connects strongly with Hebrews where Christ's sacrifice brings eternal redemption and with John's Gospel where Jesus moves steadily towards his death for the life of the world. Isaiah's promise of opening blind eyes and freeing prisoners symbolises both the spiritual liberation and restoration themes echoed in Psalm 36's celebration of Divine light and life.

Psalms 36:5–11

Psalms 36 contrasts human wickedness with the steadfast Love of God. The psalmist praises God's steadfast love, faithfulness, and righteousness, describing them with cosmic imagery that reaches *“to the heavens”* and *“to the clouds”*. These expressions highlighted the immeasurable and dependable nature of God's covenant love. The psalm shifts the focus from humans to divine mercy, creating a tone of trust and worship suitable for Holy Week.

A central image is found in verse 9: *“forward with you is the fountain of life; in your life we see light”*. Life and light are important biblical symbols associated with God's saving presence. In John's Gospel Jesus is repeatedly revealed as the light of the world and this psalm prepares readers to understand Christ as the source of divine life. The abundance of God's house and the “river of delights” anticipates the fullness of salvation accomplished through Christ's sacrifice as described in Hebrews.

Furthermore, the psalm also reflects the intimate devotion scene in Mary's anointing of Jesus in John 12. Those who “take refuge” under God's wings resemble Mary's act of loving trust and worship. Thus, the psalm provides a prayerful response to the revelation of God's mercy in the other readings.

Hebrews 9:11–15

Hebrews represent Christ as the true and perfect high priest whose sacrifice surpasses the Old Covenant rituals. The writer contrasts the repeated animal sacrifice of the temple with Christ's once for all offering. Jesus enters the “greater and perfect tent” – referring not to an earthly sanctuary but to the heavenly presence of God. Through his own blood Christ obtains eternal redemption, emphasising the completeness and permanence of his saving work.

The phrase “blood of Christ” is essential because blood in biblical thought symbolises life offered and sacrifice. Under the Old Covenant sacrifices purified externally, but Christ purifies the conscience itself, transforming the inner person and enabling believers to “worship the living God”. This deep spiritual cleansing connects with Isaiah's vision of liberation and restoration.

The passage also introduces the idea of a “New Covenant” echoing Isaiah's description of the servant as a covenant for the people. Holy Week is therefore understood not merely as remembrance of suffering but also as the establishment of a renewed relationship between God and humanity through Jesus's death. Hebrews provides theological interpretation of the events moving towards the cross in John's Gospel.

John 12:1–11

John's account of Mary's anointing Jesus at Bethany is rich with symbolism and prepares readers for the passion. The setting occurs six days before the Passover, immediately linking the event to Jesus's coming death. Mary's act of pouring expensive perfume on Jesus's feet is both an expression of love and prophetic action anticipating his burial.

The fragrance filling the house symbolises the overflowing abundance of devotion and may also suggest the spreading knowledge of Jesus's sacrificial mission. Judas objects to the apparent waste, but John's Gospel suggests this was motivated by personal greed. This contrast between Mary and Judas highlights two possible responses to Jesus: self-giving love or self-interest.

Jesus's words, "*you always have the poor with you but you do not always have me,*" does not dismiss care for the poor but stresses the uniqueness of the moment. His death is near and Mary, perhaps more deeply than the disciples, sensed the significance of who Jesus is. Lazarus' presence also foreshadows resurrection and thus intensifies the authority's hostility, since many believe in Jesus because of him.

This Gospel ties together the themes of the other readings: Jesus as the Isaiah servant, the source of life and light celebrated in the psalm, and the high priest of Hebrews whose sacrificial death brings red redemption. John's distinctive voice emphasises loving devotion, revelation through signs, and the approach of the hour in which Christ glory will be revealed through the cross.

Interpreting the Word

The readings for Monday of Holy Week emerge from different historical settings, yet together they speak powerfully about God saving action through suffering, faithful, and sacrificial love. Understanding the original context of these texts helps modern readers appreciate both their ancient meaning and their continuing relevance for Christian faith and practice.

Isaiah 42:1–9 comes from a period when the people of Israel were experiencing exile and discouragement. Many scholars associate this section of Isaiah with the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE, when Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people felt abandoned and powerless. Into the setting, the prophet introduces the figures of the "servant of the Lord". For the original audience the servant represented Hope that God had not forgotten the covenant. The servant's mission to bring Justice, restore the weak and become "a light to the nations" would have encouraged exiled Israel to see itself as part of God's larger purpose for the world. Unlike military rulers who imposed power violently, this servant led with gentle faithfulness. Today, this image challenges societies shaped by domination, conflict and political self-interest. Christians interpret the servant through the life of Jesus whose ministry among the poor and suffering revealed strength through humility and compassion.

Psalms 36:5–11 reflects a worshipping community that found security not in political stability but in the steadfast love of God. The psalm contrasts human wickedness with divine mercy suggesting that the faithful community lived amid injustice and moral failure. Ancient Israel often faced threats from enemies, corrupt rulers, and social inequality, yet the psalm proclaims that God's faith "faithfulness reaches to the clouds". The imagery of refuge under God's wings and the "fountain of life" is a reminder that Divine protection and blessings remained available despite uncertainty. In today's world where many are experiencing anxiety, violence and spiritual emptiness, the psalm reminds believers that true serenity is found not in wealth or power but in God's enduring love. Its emphasis on light also speaks to modern spiritual searching offering a vision of Hope rooted in God's presence.

Hebrews 9:11–15 was written for a Christian community struggling with pressure, discouragement, and perhaps persecution. Many members were likely Jewish Christians tempted to return to the older religious practices because

of suffering or uncertainty. The author explains that Jesus fulfils and surpasses the sacrificial system of the temple. In the first century Jewish context, sacrifices were a central expression of worship and reconciliation with God. By describing Christ as the perfect high priest to enter the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood, Hebrews reassures believers that Jesus' sacrifice is complete and final. The audience is encouraged to persevere because redemption has already been secured through Christ. The passage addresses the human search for forgiveness, meaning, and reconciliation. Many still carry guilt, shame or spiritual restlessness. Hebrews teaches that outward rituals alone cannot transform the heart. True renewal comes through the self-offering of Christ which purifies and restores a relationship with God.

John 12:1–11 was written within a community reflecting deeply on the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection near the end of the first century CE. The story of Mary anointing Jesus takes place shortly before Passover and immediately before the events of the passion. In the cultural context of the ancient world anointing with costly perfume expressed honour, hospitality and devotion. Mary's extravagant act therefore symbolises profound love and the recognition of Jesus' identity. At the same time, Judas' objection reflects tension between genuine discipleship and self-interest. John's audience, likely facing opposition and exclusion from some Jewish communities would have heard the story as a quote to remain faithful to Jesus despite hostility.

This gospel passage raises questions about devotion priorities and sacrifice. Mary gives generously without calculating the cost while Judas values money over love. In societies often driven by materialism and personal gain the text invites believers to consider what authentic discipleship requires. The presence of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from death also reminds Christians that suffering and death do not have to be the final word. During Holy Week these readings together call the church to trust in God's faithfulness. We are to embrace sacrificial love and follow Christ the servant who brings life and redemption to the world.

Preaching the Word

For this Monday of Holy Week, the materials hold rich themes of servant leadership, sacrificial love, worship, suffering, justice, and preparation for the cross. One might explore how churches enter Holy Week not simply by remembering the events of the past, but by being invited into the mystery of Christ self-giving love in the present.

One possible avenue is the contrast between worldly power and the gentle way of God's servant in *Isaiah 42*. The servant does not dominate or crush the weak. Instead, he brings justice quietly and faithfully. One could reflect on how people often expect change through force, control, or public strength, while God works through humility, patience, and compassion. This may speak powerfully in contexts marked by political tension, social division, or personal conflict. Preaching this could ask what servant hearted leadership looks like in families, churches and communities today.

Another truthful theme is found in *John's Gospel's* portrayal of devotion and costly love. Mary's extravagant activity in

anointing Jesus with expensive perfume contrast sharply with Judas concern over money. When preaching this, one might consider what true worship looks like. Mary gives without calculation because she recognises the worth of Jesus. Her action is intimate, vulnerable and prophetic. This opens reflection on whether our modern discipleship has become too cautious, practical or self-protective. The image of the fragrance filling the house could also become a metaphor for the witness of authentic faith that influences the surrounding world.

Hebrews 9 introduces another major theme: the difference between external religion and inward transformation. The writer contrasts repeated sacrifices with Christ's once for all offering that cleanses the conscience. A sermon might examine how people sometimes rely on outward appearances of religion while carrying in a burden of guilt fear or shame. The text speaks deep of spiritual renewal made possible through Christ sacrifice this could lead to reflections of grace forgiveness and the freedom to worship the living God with sincerity rather than obligation.

Furthermore, one might also draw connections between Hebrews and Isaiah through the idea of covenant. Isaiah describes the covenant as "a covenant to the people," while Hebrews presents Jesus as mediator of a "new covenant," this creates an opportunity to explore covenant not merely as a legal agreement but as restored relationship. Holy Week becomes the story of God drawing humanity back into communion through Christ's obedience and self-offering.

Psalms 36 celebrates God for Love faithfulness and the "fountain of life." These images may provide a needed counterbalance to the heaviness of Holy Week by reminding listeners that the journey to the cross is grounded in divine mercy rather than in despair. The preacher could explore how God's love remains constant. Amid humid failure, betrayal, and violence, these are realities present in all the Holy Week narratives.

Another possible theme running through all four readings is light amid darkness. Isaiah's servant opens blind eyes; the psalm speaks of seeing light in God's light; Hebrews points to the cleansing power of Christ; and John represents Mary perceiving what other others cannot get to see. The message may reflect on a spiritual vision: who truly understands Jesus and his mission? Mary appears to see more clearly than the disciples or religious leaders. This raises questions about discernment faith and the ability to recognise God's work in unexpected places.

Finally, these readings invite exploration of preparation. Mary prepares Jesus for burial; Jesus prepares himself; the church prepares for Easter. Holy Week is not simply historical remembrance but spiritual formation. The message might encourage the congregation to consider what needs to be surrendered, healed, and renewed as part of the journey towards the cross and resurrection.

Living the Word

In this South African context these Holy Week readings challenge both individuals and congregations to embody Christ's servant hearted love. In a society marked by inequality, violence, corruption, and deep social wounds, Isaiah's vision of the gentle servant calls the church to become a community that protects the vulnerable rather than seeking power or status. Mary's costly devotion in John's Gospel invites believers to move beyond superficial faith towards generous service and compassion. Hebrews reminds Christians that authentic worship must transform conscience, and lead to actions of justice reconciliation, and integrity. The daily life of a congregation might reflect on practical ways to support the poor, heal divisions, mentor young people, or speak prophetically against injustice. Individuals may resolve to practice sacrificial love, to pray deeply during Holy Week and become witnesses to God's love within families, workplaces and communities.

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Word and Life for Tuesday in Holy Week – 23 March 2027

Peter S Grassow

Texts

Isaiah 49:1–7
Psalm 71:1–14
1 Corinthians 1:18–31
John 12:20–36

Introduction

Holy Tuesday (also called Great Tuesday) falls on the Tuesday before Easter Sunday. This Tuesday of Holy Week is also known as “Fig Tuesday” in Roman Catholic tradition, remembering the time Jesus cursed a fig tree (Matthew 21:18–22). Holy Tuesday is traditionally part of the narrative of Jesus preparing his disciples for what was to come in the next few days. The Revised Common Lectionary recognises this in the choice of Gospel reading from John’s Gospel, where Jesus predicts his death.

Hearing the Word (Exegetical)

Isaiah 49:1–7

This is the second of the four Servant Songs of Isaiah. This is also the beginning of a distinct new section of the book which includes chapters 49–55. The previous section included the First Servant Song (42) but it is quite different from the three Servant Songs of this new segment. The First Servant Song identifies Israel as the servant. Now, in this Second Servant Song of our pericope, the Servant is identified as the One through whom the LORD will restore Israel. Christian tradition has understood this passage to be a direct reference to the Messiah.

The words of Isaiah resonates with an enduring theme throughout scripture: that God knows us and treasures us: Isaiah 49 vs 1 “The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name” is found in Psalm 139 vs 13: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb”, Jeremiah 1:1 ““Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart” and again in Ephesians 1:15 “he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace”.

Psalm 71:1–14

The verses laid out in this week’s lectionary passage from Psalm 71 introduce a structure that will be maintained throughout the remainder of this Psalm. The Psalmist issues an opening statement requesting help (v. 1–4) and follows with a statement of trust (v. 5–8). This pattern repeats itself in verses 9–13. This Psalm is primarily a declaration of an individual’s trust and hope in God. Many commentators note that elements of this psalm are strongly reminiscent of the known use of the temple precincts as a place of temporary refuge for an accused individual to flee from his accusers.¹

For example, there are close parallels between this text and Psalms 18 and 31. Central to this passage is the affirmation of lifelong trust in the one who is the “rock of refuge, to which I can always go” (vs 3).

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Paul insists that the “foolishness of the gospel,” is the interpretive key to understand all of God’s work. Where the world’s judgement would suggest Jesus’ mission as “folly” or “weakness” (1 Corinthians 1:18), the gospel proclaims Jesus’ death as “wisdom” and “power.” The Church in Corinth faced division, ridicule and persecution. There were different factions following a persuasive Christian leader, and there was criticism and ridicule by the philosophical teachers in the city. The rhetorical questions asked in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 1 vs 20), “where is the wise one, where is the scribe, where is the debater?” suggest these capacities are worth little to begin with when it comes to the kingdom of God. Further, those who are still looking for a sign that the Messiah has come, and those who want a logical argument for that sign will be disappointed because that is not the way God chose to save the world. Is the work of God powerful? Yes, Paul insists, but this power is mediated through the cross (1 Corinthians 1:23). What, then, is power? It is God, by God’s own doing, uniting people to Christ (verses 27–30). Christ is wisdom and power (verse 30).

John 12:20–36

John 12:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John introduces the sense of foreboding that surrounds Jesus. Here are the words of death and resurrection repeated. The tension is building. And then in vs 33 John bluntly announces that Jesus is going to die: John 12:32 *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* 33 *He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.* Here John says what he has been alluding to – “Jesus is going to die”. Some see in the allusion to crucifixion in the words of being “lifted up”, while others point to the Christian hope in the end of the world when Jesus shall return to “draw all people to myself”.

John 12:35 *So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”*

And so, John returns to the central theme of his Gospel of Jesus – that Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. Here is the invitation to live as children of light, even when darkness threatens.

Interpreting the Word

God's story is always bigger than ours, holding our stories within God's life and weaving them into the wide-open future. The Psalm's message reminds us that those who orient their lives toward the ways of God and the kingdom of God will face hardships, but these hardships are not lasting, but the strength of God is from age to age.

The children of Israel have been defeated and their temple destroyed. Their leadership is exiled to Babylon, where they are alienated from their land and their God. This has led to a crisis of faith. Their lament is that they cannot worship God in a foreign land, and they wonder if God is still listening to them. Then Isaiah speaks a word of hope: God will send a servant who will return the Israelites to their homeland along with a promise of a restored temple and nation. The exile is replaced by a new vision that is more than just returning to the way things were before exile. God has something much more in mind. The salvation history of God's story points toward the restoration of all creation. "The Holy One, who has chosen you" (Isaiah 49 v. 7) calls Israel to inhabit not only its homeland, but its identity as God's blessing for the world. Restoration of individuals, or even of an entire people, moves outward, always expanding toward eschatological fulfilment, "that my salvation may reach the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49 verse 6).

This connects with the story of the Apostle Philip in the story of Jesus. Philip is key to John's story of Jesus – John 12 tells of foreign people who wanted to hear the Gospel. And at this point we hear Jesus giving thanks because the Gospel was never intended to be confined only to Israel. So, in the selection of the disciples, the Gospel of John makes the point that the disciples of the rabbi include a foreigner! And now John makes it clear that the Gospel of Jesus is for everyone – Jew and Greek alike

Preaching the Word

A theme that emerges from the lectionary readings deals with Division and Struggle: This is still with us today. The story of Israel being given Good News in Exile resonates with anyone who feels like they are learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The encouragement of the Psalm that there is a Rock to whom we can cling and of John's Gospel that even the outsiders are welcome gives us courage to keep the faith in the face of struggle and hardship. The power of the cross exposes the foolishness of human wisdom and reveals our need to be united at the foot of the cross.

The story of the cross is one of light piercing the darkness. A theme that threads through the Gospel of John. Today's reading returns to this theme and encourages the followers of Jesus to walk in the light – even if darkness threatens.

Living the Word

In the current South African political environment, when communities, churches and families have been impacted over disagreements about the effectiveness of political leadership, and water shortages, and the national economy, we have been disoriented and are sometimes unsure of whom to trust. Fatigue has overtaken leaders we used to count on, and we have all become demoralized. We realize there is no going back but only forward into a future that is unknown. We need now a word of hope that overcomes our quarrelling and divisiveness.

Realizing that Christ is the substance of everything we could want, the wind is taken from the sails of any argument that would ask us to pray for God to raise up another "great national leader" like Nelson Mandela. We do not boast in earthly leaders, we boast only in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1 verse 31). Having affirmed Jesus as the Rock of our Salvation, we then follow obediently in the paths he calls us. This is a calling that includes everyone, irrespective of whether they are "in" or "out" of the accepted group. God's foolish invitation to even the weakest thus shows the strength and power of the Spirit of God.

Liturgical suggestions

Worship Songs:

"How can it be" by Lauren Daigle
"Cornerstone" Hillsong

Hymns:

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (UMH #384)
"Tell Me the Stories of Jesus" (UMH #277)

In traditional Methodist usage, *The Book of Worship for Church and Home* (1964) provides the following Collect for Holy Tuesday:

Almighty, everlasting God, grant us so perfectly to follow the passion of our Lord, that we may obtain the help and pardon of his all-sufficient grace; through him who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.

The Anglican Book of Common prayer uses this collect for Holy Week:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Word and Life for Wednesday in Holy Week – 24 March 2027

Willingmore Mhlanga

Texts

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 70
Hebrews 12:1–3
John 13:21–32

Introduction

Today, on this Wednesday of the Holy Week, the body of Christ, the church, takes a brief pause at the beginning of the Passion. It is a time to listen and marvel at the Suffering Servant's obedience, the Psalmist's desperate plea for help, the call to enduring faith, and the painful understanding of betrayal and disloyalty at table. In the South African context, various people are confronted daily by the realities of betrayal, anxiety, and exhaustion, and these passages call the reader to see and learn from Jesus Christ's determination.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 50:4–9a

This passage is the third Servant Song. The song focuses on the obedient attention and unwavering trust the Servant has in *Yahweh*. This is a clear difference with the failure of Israel to respond to Yahweh's call in Vs. 2 (...there no one to answer.) The first-person speaker changes from *Yahweh* to the Servant. The shift in speaker is marked by the reference to *Yahweh* now in the third person. The Servant says that he is a disciple of God Himself and thanks God for his informed speech. The Servant learns from God, something that Israel should have done and is able to relay God's Word. Even though the Servant is beaten and insulted, he remains faithful to Yahweh highlighting a difference in how Israel would complain that God has abandoned them when they were conquered and captured by their enemies.

The Servant's faith in Yahweh remains unshaken and firm in direct contrast with Israel's persistent refusal to repent. The Servant's sufferings are caused by the wrongdoing done by others. However, he will be proven innocent and cleared when the truth is known. Whenever this passage has been read during Holy Week, it has been usually taken to be the church anticipating Christ's passion and His confidence and trust in the help of Almighty God.

Psalm 70

Psalm 70 is an individual's psalm of lament where the psalmist pleads in prayer for God to deliver him and humiliate his enemies. He goes on to declare that those who seek God will rejoice in His salvation. He concludes by repeating his petition for God to deliver him. During Holy Week, this lament psalm is used as the church's prayer together with the Servant's suffering. This highlights the plea for God's saving act when one faces enemies and suffering surrounding them.

Hebrews 12:1–3

Hebrews 12 follows the previous demonstration of faithfulness among the people of God in chapter 11. The writer urges believers to run the race set before them "with perseverance," following the way of the models of faith. The metaphor of a race also speaks of the need for effort, discipline, and direction in the faith journey. Even though they have many examples of faith as listed in chapter 11, Jesus is ultimately the focus and the one who waits for them at the finishing line.

The passage clearly connects Jesus' perseverance with hostile opposition. Jesus' endurance of the cross provides the template for believers, who also will endure suffering and shame in this world. Hebrews brings out Christ's passion, on one hand, as suffering necessary for atonement, and on the other hand, serving as a model and inspiration for persecuted and disheartened believers.

John 13:21–32

In John 13, directly after the foot-washing, Jesus is feeling the weight of his looming suffering and death. He announces that one of the disciples will betray him. The scene is deeply intimate as it shows Jesus having a meal with his disciples, with the beloved disciple leaning against Jesus. Judas receives a morsel of bread from Jesus where in giving the dipped bread, it served as a sign of Jesus's hospitality to Judas and yet revealing Judas as the one who would betray Him.

When Judas receives the bread, "*Satan enters into him*," and Jesus tells him, "*Do quickly what you are going to do*," sending him out into the night. It is important to note that when John states that "*it was night*," this does not only speak about the time of the day. Symbolically, it also refers to spiritual darkness and the hour of evil. Nonetheless, even when confronted with betrayal and an imminent arrest Jesus speaks of glory: "*Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him*." Jesus clearly knows that He must suffer for his role as the Son of Man to be fulfilled and for God to glorify him. Since Jesus allowed God's will to be done even though he had the chance to stop the person who would betray him, God makes Jesus great.

Interpreting the Word

Isaiah 50 may be addressing a community going through shame and questioning God's faithfulness. This period may have been in the late exilic or early post-exilic period. The Suffering Servant represents loyal or faithful obedience in times of hostility, proclaiming God's Word to a fatigued people and yet experiencing misery for it. Clearly, the servant suffers beatings and is spat on yet he refuses to be identified by this humiliation because his identity and vindication are dependent on God.

For the original audience, the passage raised the question whether remaining faithful to the Lord in harsh surroundings was worth the cost and suffering. The passage answers by bringing together a call to proclaim the Word, encouraging and nourishing the weary and a commitment to withstand unfair suffering, and still trusting that God's judgement will bring vindication and, in the end, remain standing.

Psalm 70 is a product of Israel's liturgical life. It gives encouraging words to those under pressure from enemies, whether external enemies or internal oppressors. In a background where the poor and vulnerable wielded little or no social power, the plea to "*make haste to help me*" serves as a statement of dependence and an act of refusal to accept the assumption that injustice will have the final say. Psalm 70 teaches the faithful to bring their concerns, anger, and weakness into prayer to God instead of suppressing it or acting in retaliation.

Hebrews was directed to a community of believers facing discouragement, weariness, and likely some measure of social sidelining or oppression. They were tempted to move away or compromise rather instead of enduring suffering for the sake of Christ. By highlighting Jesus Christ's central role as pioneer and perfecter of faith, the writer of *Hebrews* firmly placed their perseverance in Christ's own path. Jesus embraced the cross and its shame because of the joy set before him i.e. resurrection, ascension, and the joy of bringing many children to glory. The "cloud of witnesses" in chapter 11 testifies that faithful endurance, even if it is usually costly, is the normal Christian path.

John's Gospel focuses on the betrayal part in a deeply thoughtful manner. The passage highlights Jesus' foresight, knowledge, and obedience to God's plan. Jesus not only washed Judas' feet, but he also gave him bread, and still sent him out, showing that even Judas' betrayal of Jesus is allowed into God's redemptive plan. Judas not only is shown as having his own negative motives, but he is also under satanic influence, and yet still bears human responsibility.

In the South African context, these passages speak into the people's daily lived experiences of betrayal, that is, promises broken after the dawn of democracy, reported corruption scandals, divisions in communities and churches, breakdowns in families and relationships. Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the suffering Christ speak particularly to those who are beaten down by systems of violence and abandonment, and to those whose calling is proclaiming God's Word even at the risk of their safety, lives or freedom.

John 13 challenges those among us who might be like Judas more than we are willing to admit. These are people who belong in the community of faith who may be tempted to give in to compromise, or to join together with unjust powers, or perhaps sell out the vulnerable for personal security or gain. *Hebrews 12* calls Christians to a communal perseverance, supported by witnesses past and present, as we run a race that includes confronting systemic corruption, confronting gender-based violence and femicide, and continuing in the pursuit of genuine reconciliation.

Preaching the Word

One theme would be to focus on "Faithful endurance in a culture of betrayal." Isaiah's servant sets his face like flint, *Hebrews* presses us not to grow tired, and Jesus moves toward the cross knowing Judas' betrayal. The sermon could explore how Christians in South Africa endure when leaders of society let them down, promises are not fulfilled, and institutions fail. This could include stories of believers who continue to serve in under-resourced schools, clinics, or congregations regardless of continuing underfunding and corruption, drawing strength from the Servant who sustains the weary with a Word.

Another theme might be "The God who stands with the shamed." Both Isaiah and *Hebrews* passages highlight shame. For example, in Isaiah the servant is mocked and spit upon and in *Hebrews* Jesus endures the cross, despising its shame. We live in a society where many people experience shame upon their lives due to poverty, joblessness, sexual abuse, HIV status, or past wrongs or mistakes. The sermon could focus on Jesus Christ who shares our shame and transforms it into honour before God. Psalm 70's truthful plea from the "poor and needy" can be also used to encourage those in the congregation who feel overlooked, ignored or shamed.

Another avenue could be "Christ's love in the face of betrayal." The context of John 13 is when foot washing and table fellowship takes place. Jesus' act washing and giving bread to Judas could open a way to address the challenges of betrayal in families, friendships, and churches. This could open space for lament, confession, and a renewed commitment to honest, and accountable community of faith.

Another sermon theme could focus on Isaiah's servant being empowered specifically to sustain the weary. South Africa is, in some ways, a 'weary society' because of load-shedding, crime, unemployment, and growing inequality. The sermon could seek leading to reflections on contextual ministries, including pastoral care, and prophetic proclamation that speaks the truth in love, not crushing the already burdened people but still telling the truth.

What is important is to maintain the work and person of Jesus Christ at the centre. The texts can be used to address specific issues in the South African context, whether hurts or hopes of the people.

Living the Word

The readings and sermons arising from them could inspire a resolve in the church and the believers to strive to practice endurance and truth-telling when called upon by circumstances. This may mean that individuals, for example, could identify areas where they are tempted to compromise their faith, be it at work, in families, or socially. They would, in turn, ask Christ for grace to persevere faithfully instead of betraying their calling as children of God. Collectively, the congregations could commit to standing in solidarity with those who are shamed or betrayed in our societies e.g. the survivors of gender-based violence, whistle-blowers, demoralised workforce, or members who feel isolated and neglected. Here the church embodies the Suffering Servant's ministry of sustaining the weary with gentle but courageous words.

Suggested Liturgical Ideas

Psalm 70 – *use in worship*: the opening verse may be used to begin intercessory prayer.

Possible hymns / songs

- “When I survey the wondrous cross”
- a hymn on following Jesus in suffering (e.g. “*Ngiyamuzwa uMsidisi engibiza ngimlandele*” – hymn 301 in isiZulu’s *Amagama Okuhlabela* Hymnary or any hymn on carrying the cross chosen according to language of the congregation.

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Introduction to the Triduum

Introduction

The Triduum is a single service that begins with the greeting on Maundy Thursday and ends with the dismissal at the end of the Easter Vigil. This basic unity should be maintained even if the three elements of the service are planned individually. The word comes from the Latin *Triduum Sacrum*, ('the sacred three days'), and refers to the three concluding days of Holy Week that commemorate the Last Supper, Passion, and Death of Christ, and lead to the celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Over the course of time the celebration of the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil) developed and grew. In the Reformation the Protestant churches removed a number of these observances but over the past fifty years many have been adapted and included in the service once again.

Planning the Triduum

Those who have the responsibility for planning the Triduum must decide how each part will fit into the celebration this time, rather than simply taking the order they have always used and inserting other hymns.

Questions to be considered when planning Holy Week should include:

- What services are planned for the period Palm Sunday to Easter?
- How will the Triduum fit into this pattern of public worship?
- What resources are available for the three elements of the Triduum?
- What do we hope to offer the regular members of the congregation?
- How will the Triduum allow the congregation to reach out to the wider community?
- Which elements should we include in the service this year and which might we leave out?

The liturgy should provide a number of spaces where worshippers can reflect on the impact of these episodes on their own lives in their own generation. Space should be allowed for the texts set for the service to address the current situation of the community and the wider world.

Preaching in the Triduum

Some suggestions for those who plan the preaching for Holy Week and the Triduum:

1. It should have its place in an overall plan for the proclamation during Lent, Holy Week and Easter.
If visiting preachers are invited to participate in these Easter services, care should be taken to ensure that all the preachers involved are made aware of the central themes of the sermons that will precede and follow their own contributions.
2. While each sermon should be complete in itself, it should also provide some indication of how its theme relates to what has gone before and what is to follow.
3. The reading of the texts throughout the service is as important as the proclamation. A number of the lessons could be considered for dramatization and the use of different voices.

Hickman *et al* suggest that in the Triduum we 'approach the yearly renewal of our incorporation into the central mystery of Christian life and faith'. It is a time to walk together as a believing and worshipping community, treading gently in our care and respect for those who walk with us.

The Elements of the Triduum Service

Maundy Thursday

This evening service has its focus on the Institution of the Eucharist, on the occasion of the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples. On that occasion:

- they gathered with great joy to celebrate the Passover;
- Jesus washed the feet of the disciples before the meal;
- he dramatically identified himself with the broken bread and the poured wine;
- they left to go out into the darkness of Gethsemane.

Good Friday

The Good Friday devotions can take on different forms. Some churches have a simple morning service which embraces silence and prayerful reflection. Other Church traditions offer a three-hour service, (often called "The Three Hours' Service" or "The Three Hours' Agony,") which is a liturgical service commemorating the three hours Jesus spent on the cross. It is typically held from noon to 3 p.m., and includes prayers, hymns, and homilies on the seven last words of Christ.

The Easter Vigil

Also known as the Paschal Vigil or the Great Vigil of Easter, this is a liturgy followed in some traditional Churches as the first official celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. Historically, it was during this liturgy that people were baptised, and adult catechumens received into full communion with the Church. This act of worship is held in the hours of darkness between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter Day – most commonly in the evening of Holy Saturday or at midnight. In some traditions worshippers remain in the church all night. Features of the Easter Vigil are the lighting of the new fire and blessing of the paschal candle, together with the singing of the Easter song of praise, the *Exultet*, and the celebration of the Easter Eucharist.

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Liturgy for the (Maundy) Holy Thursday – 25 March 2027

Craig Morrison

Texts

Exodus 12:1–4, [5–10], 11–14

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Gathering in God's name

Call to Worship (from Psalm 116)

Leader: "What shall we return to the Lord for all his goodness?"

All: "We will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."

An Opening Invocation might focus on service

"Holy One, make your presence known in this room. Move about the pews, between each of us, pausing in the heart of each of us. Remind us that all of us here and beyond are your beloved, created in your image. We are your people. You have called us to serve one another.

Servant Christ, who knelt to wash the feet of your disciples, cleanse our hearts and teach us to love as you have loved.

O Blessed Trinity, fill this place and these people with your presence. For yours is the power, and the salvation, and the creation, now and always. Amen."

Act of Penitence

A symbolic act of foot washing (or hand washing) can embody the Gospel reading, inviting participation or quiet reflection, and as a precursor to the Act of Penitence.

Prayer: Dear God in heaven, we confess that we try to measure our faithfulness by comparing ourselves with others. **Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us as sinners.**

Forgive us O God where we fail to see your Spirit's work in others, in those who have lived before us.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us as sinners.

Forgive us for choosing comfort and convenience over faithfulness.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us as sinners.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus said: "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world" and "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end".

The good news therefore is this: In Jesus Christ, we are loved and we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Your word is a lamp to my feet, Lord. Your word is a light to my path.

Though the world around me tosses and tumbles, I hold fast to you.

Though I have doubts and worries and I wonder, I hold fast to you.

Though my heart hurts, my spirit aches, and I lose my way, I hold fast to you.

Though I encounter wickedness and hate seemingly around every corner, I hold fast to you.

Open these words of Scripture, divine Spirit, as you breathed on them in inspiration, now breathe on them in illumination. Help us to hold fast onto you. **Amen**

Responding to the Word of God

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

Invitation to Communion

Sending

Are you ready to walk with Christ by faith, he whose life was poured out for you?

By the grace of God, we are.

Can you watch while Jesus prays in the garden?

By the grace of God, we can.

Will you follow Jesus, even into the night of betrayal?

By the grace of God, we will.

Then let us praise God, even in the hours of darkness.

**God of all grace and steadfast love,
greatly is your name to be praised in all the Earth!**

Go, then, in love and peace to serve the Lord! **Amen!**

Post communion Prayer

Benediction

Our God is gracious and compassionate toward us!

It is God who makes things right.

The Spirit bends down to listen when we pray, and reaches out to save us.

And so, we can bring our prayers before the holy One with confidence,

knowing that God hears us when we pray. **Amen.**

Go in the way of Christ, who gives himself for you.

Love one another as he has loved you, and serve the world in his name. **Amen!**

Word and Life for – Holy (Maundy) Thursday – 25 March 2027

Craig Morrison

Texts

Exodus 12:1–4, [5–10], 11–14

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Introduction

Maundy Thursday stands at the threshold of the Triduum, commemorating the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist, and Jesus' command ("*mandatum*" giving us the word 'Maundy') to love through humble service. The readings weave together themes of deliverance, covenant, sacrifice, and love: Israel's Passover (Exodus), thanksgiving and costly praise (Psalm 116), the Eucharistic tradition (1 Corinthians), and Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet (John). Together they form a rich tapestry of memory and action of God's saving work remembered not merely in ritual but embodied in service and self-giving love.

Hearing the Word

Exodus 12:1–14

This narrates the institution of the Passover in Egypt. Key elements include the "lamb without blemish," the marking of doorposts with blood, and the command to eat in haste, "loins girded... staff in hand." The Hebrew *Pesach* ("Passover") refers to God's passing over the marked houses, sparing Israel from judgement. This is both a historical event and a liturgical ordinance: "a memorial... throughout your generations." The lamb's blood signifies protection and covenant belonging, while the meal forms identity through shared remembrance. The urgency ("in haste") underscores liberation in motion.

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

Here is a thanksgiving psalm responding to deliverance from death. The psalmist asks, "What shall I return to the Lord?" and answers with acts of worship: lifting "the cup of salvation," calling on the Lord's name, fulfilling vows "in the presence of all his people." The phrase "cup of salvation" resonates with Eucharistic imagery, linking gratitude, sacrifice, and communal worship. The psalm moves from personal rescue to public testimony, echoing the communal remembrance of Passover.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

This preserves the earliest written account of the Lord's Supper. Paul emphasises tradition, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you," highlighting continuity with Jesus' actions. The bread is "my body... for you," and the cup is "the new covenant in my blood." The language echoes Exodus: covenant sealed in blood, now reinterpreted in Christ's self-offering. "Do this in remembrance of me" recalls the Passover command to remember. Yet, this

remembrance (*anamnesis*) is not merely recollection; it is a participatory proclamation: "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Instead of the institution of the Eucharist, John narrates the foot washing. Jesus, "having loved his own... loved them to the end," takes the role of a servant (*doulos*), performing a task reserved for the lowest household slave. Peter's resistance ("You will never wash my feet") reveals the scandal of this inversion of status.

Jesus' response, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," frames the act as essential for participation in him. The washing symbolises cleansing, humility, and mutual service.

Verses 31b–35 introduce the "new commandment": "Love one another. Just as I have loved you." The novelty lies not in the command to love, but in its measure of Jesus' self-giving love. The mutual love of the community becomes the defining mark of discipleship: "By this everyone will know..."

Connections across the readings are profound. The Passover lamb anticipates Christ as sacrificial deliverer; the blood marking Israel's houses finds fulfilment in the new covenant in Christ's blood. The memorial meal becomes the Eucharist, where past salvation is made present. The psalm's "cup of salvation" finds concrete expression in the Eucharistic cup. John complements this sacrificial imagery with enacted love: the meaning of Christ's body and blood is revealed in humble service. Together, the readings move from ritual remembrance to embodied love, from deliverance to discipleship.

Interpreting the Word

Exodus 12 emerges from a context of oppression in Egypt, addressing a people on the brink of liberation. The instructions are both practical and theological: Israel must prepare for departure while trusting in divine deliverance. The Passover ritual serves as identity formation for a formerly enslaved people. By re-enacting the meal annually, Israel remembers that freedom is not self-achieved but divinely given. This shapes a communal ethic grounded in gratitude and dependence on God.

Psalm 116 reflects an individual's experience of deliverance, likely from illness or mortal danger, later incorporated into communal worship. Its language suggests a setting in the temple, where vows are fulfilled publicly. The psalmist's question, "what can be given in return?" recognises the asymmetry of divine grace and human response. The answer is not repayment but faithful worship and testimony. In contemporary terms, gratitude becomes a way of life rather than a transaction.

1 Corinthians 11: Paul's audience in Corinth faced divisions, particularly in their communal meals, where wealthier members excluded poorer ones. By recalling Jesus' words at the Last Supper, Paul re-centres the community on the meaning of the Eucharist: unity, self-giving, and remembrance of Christ's death. The "new covenant" language situates the church within the story of Israel while redefining covenant through Christ's sacrifice. For Paul, participation in the Lord's Supper demands ethical coherence; one cannot proclaim Christ's self-giving while perpetuating injustice.

John's Gospel, written later, addresses a community grappling with identity and internal tensions. The foot washing becomes a lived parable of discipleship. In a hierarchical world shaped by honour and status, Jesus' action subverts social norms. Leadership is redefined as service; authority is expressed in humility. The "new commandment" addresses a community that must embody love amid conflict and external pressures. Love is not sentiment, but action modelled on Jesus' self-emptying.

For today, these texts speak into contexts marked by inequality, division, and the search for identity. The Passover narrative reminds communities that liberation, whether from political, economic, or spiritual bondage, requires both divine initiative and communal participation. The Eucharist challenges contemporary churches to examine whether their practices reflect genuine unity or reinforce exclusion. John's portrayal of servant leadership confronts modern tendencies toward power and self-promotion.

In South Africa, with its history of apartheid and ongoing struggles with inequality, these texts resonate deeply. The call to remember liberation, to share in a meal that signifies equality, and to practice radical service speaks directly into social realities. The "new commandment" challenges communities to move beyond rhetoric to tangible acts of reconciliation and justice.

Preaching the Word

Several fruitful preaching avenues emerge from these readings. One central theme is memory as action. The repeated command to "remember" in Exodus and 1 Corinthians is not passive recall but active participation. A sermon might explore how Christian memory, especially in the Eucharist, calls believers to embody the story they remember. What does it mean to "proclaim the Lord's death" not only with words but with lives shaped by sacrifice and service?

Another direction is deliverance and identity. The Passover defines Israel as a liberated people; similarly, the Eucharist shapes Christian identity. A preacher might ask: "what identities compete with this primary identity today?" How do communities forget their story of liberation and fall back into patterns of exclusion or injustice?

A third theme is the cost of love. John's Gospel presents love not as abstract virtue but as costly, embodied action. The foot washing can be explored as a symbol of vulnerability and humility. Preachers might reflect on the discomfort of receiving as well as giving service, which we see in Peter's resistance, mirrors modern reluctance to accept vulnerability. Love requires both.

The Eucharist and ethics offer another rich avenue. Paul's critique of the Corinthian community suggests that participation in the Lord's Supper demands justice and equality. A sermon could connect the table of the Lord with issues such as poverty, inequality, and exclusion. Who is missing from our tables? Who is marginalised even within the community?

The "new commandment" as public witness also invites exploration. Jesus links love within the community to the world's recognition of discipleship. A preacher might consider how the church's internal relationships serve as a testimony to the wider society. In contexts of division, what would it look like for a congregation to become known for self-giving love?

Another angle is ritual and reality. The readings move from ritual acts (Passover, Holy Communion, Eucharist) to lived practice (foot washing, love commandment). A sermon might challenge the congregation to bridge this gap: how do our liturgical practices shape daily living? Are rituals transformative or merely habitual?

Finally, servant leadership offers a compelling focus. Jesus redefines leadership through the act of washing feet. In a world that prizes status and control, this inversion is counter cultural. Preachers might apply this to church leadership, workplace dynamics, or family life, asking how authority can be exercised as service.

Each of these themes can be developed with narrative, contemporary examples, and congregational reflection. The goal is not to exhaust the richness of the texts but to open pathways for deeper engagement, inviting hearers to see Maundy Thursday not as a distant event but as a living call.

Living the Word

Maundy Thursday calls believers to translate remembrance into action. Individually, this may mean practising intentional acts of service, especially toward those often overlooked in church and society, and embracing humility in relationships.

Participation in the Eucharist invites self-examination: do our lives reflect Christ's self-giving love?

For congregations in South Africa, the call is communal and public. Sharing in the "one bread" challenges divisions of race, class, and status. Churches might commit to tangible acts of reconciliation, hospitality, and justice within their communities.

The question "What shall I return to the Lord?" can be answered through lives marked by gratitude, generosity, and love in action.

Liturgy for Good Friday – 26 March 2027

Craig Morrison

Texts

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12;
Psalm 22;
Hebrews 10:6–25; OR Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9 and
John 18: 1 – 19:42

Introduction

Welcome to the Good Friday Liturgical Service: “**Standing at the Crossroads of Suffering and Justice**”

The gathering begins in Silence. The clergy and leaders enter the sanctuary; they carry a large cross amongst them. The sanctuary remains dim. A bare cross is placed visibly.

No prelude is required, but a simple instrumental with a single instrument plays, based on the South African spiritual “Senzeni na” or the song “Were You There.”

Gathering in God’s name

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 22)

Leader: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

People: We cry out, “senzeni na”, and still we gather before you.

Leader: All who see me mock me; they shake their heads.

People: Yet, you are holy, enthroned on the praises of your people.

Leader: The poor shall eat and be satisfied. Those who mourn will be comforted.

All: Those who seek justice will praise the Lord.

Opening Prayer

God of the crucified and the oppressed, you are not distant from suffering,

but dwell among the broken and the silenced.

Open our eyes to the wounds of the world, and open our hearts to the cost of love.

As we remember the cross, teach us to stand where you stand – with the vulnerable, the rejected, and the crucified of our time. **Amen.**

The following rituals can be performed individually, or two, or all three may be used.

Ritual Act 1: Naming the Cross Today

A wooden cross is placed centrally. Youth members are invited to come forward and place small papers or stones representing social injustices, like war, poverty, racism, corruption and greed, gender-based violence, ecological harm, the lack of jobs and opportunity for young people, drug abuse, crime and gangsterism.

Soft refrain may be sung: “O Lord, hear my prayer.” *Then the congregation / choir hums as the first reader steps forward:*

First Reading: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Reflection

The Suffering Servant bears wounds not only personal but communal. “By his wounds we are healed” speaks not of passive acceptance but of redemptive solidarity. God is present in those crushed by systems of injustice.

The congregation / choir continues to hum as a new reader steps forward:

Psalm 22 (*May be a Responsive Reading, especially including the verses of lament and trust.*)

Ritual Act 2: Lament for the World

A bowl of water is placed near the cross. People are invited to dip their fingers and mark their foreheads or the cross, symbolising shared grief and baptism into suffering.

Soft refrain may be sung: “O Lord, hear my prayer.” *Then the congregation / choir hums as the next reader steps forward:*

Second Reading: **Hebrews 10:16–25** or **Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9**

Reflection

Christ’s self-offering replaces cycles of sacrifice with a new covenant written on hearts. Access to God is opened—not through exclusion, but through grace. “Hold fast... stir one another to love and good deeds” becomes a justice mandate.

Gospel Reading: **John 18:1 – 19:42** (Dramatic Reading)

Multiple readers may be used, youth or women may act as the reading is narrated: Narrator, Jesus, Pilate, Crowd.

Pause after key moments (arrest, denial, sentencing, crucifixion).

Homiletic Reflection (Brief)

Focus

Jesus as victim of political and religious injustice
The cross as exposure of systemic violence
God's solidarity with the oppressed
The call to stand at the cross today

Ritual Act 3: Veneration of the Cross (Justice Focus)

Instead of traditional veneration alone:

People approach the cross. They may touch it, kneel, or stand in prayer.

A leader speaks: "This is the cross of Christ, where love confronts injustice."

Response: "We stand with the crucified."

Optional: place strips of cloth on the cross representing commitments to justice.

Prayers of the People (Justice Intercessions)

Intercessions may take place as people are gathered around the cross.

After each petition:

Leader: God of the suffering Christ

People: Hear our cry.

Include prayers for:

Victims of violence and war; The poor and economically excluded; survivors of gender-based violence;

Those oppressed by racism and inequality; The Earth and climate justice / creation care; Local community struggles
Contextual to South Africa or each community.

The Reproaches (*Adapted*)

God speaks:

"I was hungry, and you turned away.

I was imprisoned, and you remained silent.

I was crucified in the streets, and you did not see me."

Response:

"Holy God, have mercy on us."

Silent Meditation

The sanctuary darkens further.

A single candle remains, then is extinguished.

Closing Prayer

Crucified God, in the broken body of Jesus, we see the truth of our world, and the depth of your love. Do not let us leave unchanged. Send us to take up the work of justice, to love boldly, and to walk in the shadow of the cross until resurrection comes. **Amen.**

Dismissal (No Benediction)

Leader: Go in silence,
bearing the weight of the cross,
and the hope that love will rise again. **Amen.**

All depart in silence.

Music For Worship Suggestions

Gathering / Prelude (meditative, setting the tone)

"Were You There" (African American Spiritual) powerful, spacious, can be sung a cappella

"Stay With Me" (Taizé) simple, repetitive, ideal for creating a contemplative atmosphere

Opening Hymn

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" classic, theologically rich, invites reflection on sacrifice and response

Psalm 22 / Lament

"Kyrie Eleison" (Taizé or other simple refrain)

"O Lord, Hear My Prayer" (Taizé)

After Hebrews (Hope within suffering)

"There Is a Balm in Gilead" connects healing with communal resilience

During/After the Passion Reading (John 18–19)

"Were You There" (additional verses, possibly with soloist)

"Jesus, Remember Me" (Taizé) especially effective during pauses

Veneration of the Cross / Ritual Action

"*Ubi Caritas*" ties love to the cross and community

"The Servant Song (Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You)"

Prayers of the People (soft underscoring or response)

Sung response: "Lord, Hear Our Prayer" or "Kyrie Eleison"

"*Nkulunkulu, Nkulunkulu*" (if incorporating local South African expression)

Closing / Departure in Silence

"We Shall Overcome" (quiet, reflective version) used carefully, not triumphantly

"*Senzeni Na?*" ("What have we done?") a lament that resonates deeply with injustice and suffering

Word and Life for Good Friday – 26 March 2027

Craig Morrison

Texts

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12,
Psalm 22,
Hebrews 10:6–25 OR 4:14–16; 5:7–9,
John 18: 1 – 19:42

Introduction

Good Friday is the pivot of the Christian year, a day of “terrible beauty” where the depth of human sin meets the infinite height of divine love. In 2027, falling on 26 March, it occurs shortly after Human Rights Day (21 March) in South Africa, providing a poignant backdrop for a narrative centered on the ultimate miscarriage of justice. The common thread weaving through these texts is the “Sacrificial Servant”—the one who suffers vicariously to birth a new covenant, transforming a cry of abandonment into a universal song of redemption.

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

This fourth “Servant Song” presents a figure “marred beyond human semblance,” yet “highly exalted”. The exegesis hinges on vicarious suffering; the Servant bears “our infirmities” and is “crushed for our iniquities”. Key terms like *ga-al* (redeem) signify a “buying back” from slavery to sin. The passage shifts from the Servant’s rejection to his ultimate vindication, providing the theological “blueprint” for the New Testament’s understanding of the cross.

Psalms 22

Often called the “Fifth Gospel,” this lament moves from the agonising cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” to a “flood of praise”. The vivid imagery of hands and feet “pierced,” and garments “divided”, mirrors the crucifixion details in John. The pivotal shift at verse 21 (“You have answered me!”) transforms the individual’s agony into a global mission, promising that “all the ends of the Earth” will remember and turn to the Lord.

Hebrews 10:16–25 (or 4:14–16; 5:7–9)

These lections interpret the cross as the definitive priestly act. In 4:14–16, Jesus is the High Priest who sympathises with our weaknesses because he was “tested in every way”. Chapter 10 emphasises the “once for all” nature of his sacrifice, which “ratifies the new covenant” and grants us “boldness to enter the sanctuary”. The text concludes with a call to communal perseverance: “Let us hold fast... provoking one another to love and good deeds”.

John 18:1 – 19:42

John’s passion narrative depicts Jesus not as a victim, but as a sovereign king. From the “I AM” in the garden to the final “It is finished,” Jesus remains in control of his destiny. The theological climax is the “lifting up” of the Son of Man, where the cross becomes his throne of glory. The detailed burial by Joseph and Nicodemus underscores the physical reality of his death and the fulfilment of the “Servant” who was with the rich in his death.

Interpreting the Word

Hermeneutically, these texts were born in contexts of trauma and exile. Isaiah spoke to a shattered community in Babylon, offering hope that their suffering was not meaningless but redemptive. Psalm 22 reflects the experience of an innocent sufferer whose trust in God is mocked by the “bulls of Bashan,” yet who finds that God does not “hide His face”. Hebrews addressed first-century believers tempted to “drift away” under persecution, reminding them that their High Priest has already “passed through the heavens”.

Today, in a South African context still grappling with the “dust and sin” of systemic apartheid inequality and violence, these texts speak to the solidarity of God with the marginalised. The Suffering Servant is not an abstract concept, but a living reality found in those who “bear the sins of many”. The word challenges us to see Christ’s image in the victims of modern “state-sanctioned” injustices. It calls for a “participating congregation” that does not merely watch the suffering from a distance but enters the “ministry of reconciliation” in solidarity.

Preaching the Word

A sermon for Good Friday might explore these avenues:

The King on a Tree: Place Pilate and Jesus side by side. Pilate has the symbols of power, his title, soldiers, the power to condemn, yet he is trapped by fear, reputation, and the crowd. His power is reactive and fragile. Jesus, the “man of sorrows,” appears powerless, yet he acts with deep freedom.

His “*sovereign submission*” is not weakness but purpose: he chooses the cross. Here *leadership* is redefined. It is not control or self-protection, but self-giving love. The cross shows that true authority is revealed in service, and true kingship is seen in sacrifice.

The Litany of Lament: Psalm 22 opens space for honest reflections on faith and suffering. Jesus takes its words on his lips: “My God, my God, *why?*” This is the “Friday Voice”, the faith that speaks pain in suffering, not around it. In a world marked by war, loss, and uncertainty, and fear, people carry deep questions. On Good Friday these questions are to be spoken in the context of worship. Lament is not unbelief; it is trust that still turns toward God. The psalm also moves, slowly, towards hope. This teaches that even unanswered cries are held within God’s hearing and caring.

Once for All: Hebrews frames the cross as final: a “once for all” sacrifice. This speaks directly to contemporary life, where many feel they must earn human value and worth, through work, struggle, success, security, or social approval. These become daily sacrifices that never satisfy. Christ’s offering is different: complete, sufficient, and freely given. Because of this, we are released from the endless need to prove ourselves. Identity is received, not achieved.

The Solidarity of the Wounds: Isaiah’s servant is “marred,” by bearing suffering in his body. John’s gospel makes this concrete in the crucifixion. Yet the risen Christ still carries scars. This is crucial: resurrection does not erase wounds. God does not by-pass our suffering but enters it fully by entering into our human-ness. The scars become signs of love, not defeat. For a congregation, this means their pain is neither ignored nor wasted. In Christ, God stands in deep solidarity with human suffering and holds it within ultimate redemption.

Living the Word

South African believers are called to move from “bystanders” to participants in the Servant’s mission. Having heard the Word, the congregation might resolve to:

- Advocate for the “Preferential Option for the Poor”: Actively support those suffering from current oppressions and lack of advocacy, such as victims of GBV, human trafficking, systemic poverty or injustice.
- Foster Communal Resilience: Following Hebrews 10, commit to “not neglecting to meet together” and “encouraging one another” in a society often fractured by isolation, loneliness, landlessness, namelessness, addictions, brokenness, and apartheid geo-spatial planning.
- Practice Lament and Hope: Create spaces during communal worship for honest lament over racism, nationalism, discrimination, xenophobia, sexism and patriarchy, the ease with which we resort to violence, and our “sin-sickness” while living as in the future that declares God’s righteousness to the next generation.

Suggested Liturgical Ideas

Call to Worship: (Based on Isaiah 52:13) “See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Come, let us behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

A Responsive Litany based on Psalm 22

Leader: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

People: But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

Intercessory Prayer: (Versicle and Response)

Leader: For the sake of your Son, who suffered for our transgressions,

People: Have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Dismissal

“Go in the peace of Christ, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, People: **“despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”**

Hymn suggestions

“O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”,

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”,

“Ah, Holy Jesus, How Have You Offended”.

Liturgy for the Easter Vigil – 27/28 March 2027

Mkhuseli Lujabe

Texts

Old Testament readings and Psalms:

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a and Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26
Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 and Psalm 46
Genesis 22:1-18 and Psalm 16
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; and Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18
Isaiah 55:1-11 and Isaiah 12:2-6
Baruch 3:9-15, 32 – 4:4 OR Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6,
and Psalm 19
Ezekiel 36:24-28 and Psalms 42 and 43
Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Psalm 143
Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Psalm 98

A minimum of three Old Testament readings should be chosen from this list.

The reading from Exodus 14 should always be used.

New Testament reading and Psalm:

Romans 6:3-11 and Psalm 114
Mark 16:1-8

Introduction

This service is the heart of the liturgical year, which sees the church celebrating the resurrection of Christ and the redemption he won for humanity. The theme throughout the service is the celebration of our salvation, whose fruits and benefits can be shared by Christians through the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. In Baptism we enter into our salvation as we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, made members of his body, and raised with him to new life in the Spirit. In the Eucharist, we are invited to embark on the pilgrimage of remembrance, as we move from the darkness to the light of Christ, fully revealed to humanity in the breaking of his body and the sharing of his blood for our salvation.

Thus great reverence and joy should characterise this service as worshippers embrace the mystery and rich symbolism, while the story of God's great love for all people is retold.

Many traditions choose to observe the service of the Vigil at night, or early evening when it is dark, to highlight the great symbolism of the light of Christ that shines in the darkness to dispel the darkness of the world. It is common practice in many denominations that a Paschal or Easter candle is lit during this service and continues to be so for the entire Easter season, as a constant reminder of the risen Christ, the Light of the world.

The service can be shaped to highlight its key themes: the lighting of the resurrection candle, the liturgy of the word which highlights God's powerful saving acts throughout history, the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. The baptism of new Christians, and the renewal of baptismal vows for all the baptised faithful, take place at this service.

Gathering in God's name

The Lighting of the Paschal Candle

The Church is in darkness, as it was at Calvary when Christ died on the cross. This is a culmination of the three important services of the Easter Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Vigil) at which the gloom of darkness still covers the world. The priest and the people gather outside and preparations for a new fire should be made. People are given their own individual candles as they gather.

The priest addresses the congregation with these words:

Dear friends in Christ, on this holiest night, when our Lord Jesus Christ passed from death to life, the Church invites her children throughout the world to come together in vigil and prayer.

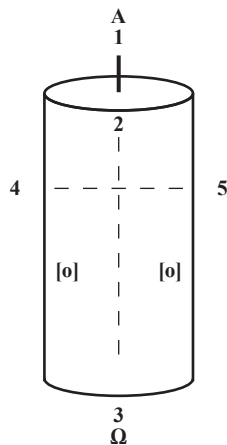
This is the day when our Lord Jesus Christ passed from death to life. Throughout the world Christians celebrate the awesome power of God. As we hear his word and proclaim all that God has done, we can be confident that we shall share his victory over death and live with him for ever.

The priest lights the fire at this point and blesses it with these words:

Loving God,
We share in the light of your glory
Through your Son, the Light of the world:
Bless this new fire,
And inflame us with new hope,
Purify our minds by this Easter celebration
And bring us to the feast of eternal life;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

It is customary for the Easter candle to be marked at this point. The lighted candle represents the risen Christ; the five signs marking the candle stand for his five wounds; the cross in the centre of the candle stands for his death; the Alpha and Omega signs are titles given to Christ in the Book of Revelation; and the date on the candle shows that he is the Lord of all time and he sanctifies our year with his glory. The candle is marked using the following words, said by the priest who is presiding:



As the vertical of the cross is traced the president says
Christ, yesterday and today,

As the horizontal is traced the president says
the beginning and the end,

As the Alpha is traced
Alpha

As the Omega is traced
and Omega,

As the first number of the year is traced the president says
all time belongs to him,

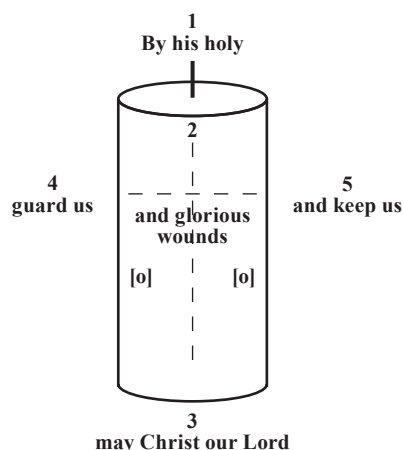
As the second number is traced
and all ages;

As the third number is traced
to him be glory and power,

As the fourth number is traced
through every age and forever.

Amen

Five nails or incense studs may then be inserted into the candle, reminding us of the five wounds of Christ. Each stud is placed in the candle at the points marked, in the order indicated by the numbers. As each is inserted the president says:



The candle is lit from the newly blessed fire, and the priest says:

May the light of Christ, rising in glory,
dispel all darkness from our hearts and minds.

The priest or deacon holding the Easter candle then moves in procession into the church, the people light their own candles from the resurrection candle and the priest at three

different points acclaims, with people responding:

Christ our Light

Thanks be to God

The Easter proclamation (The Exultet) may be sung or said at this point by the priest, deacon, or layperson. Various versions and lengths of the Exultet are found, and the best suited to the context in terms of length may be sourced and used. At the end of the Exultet, the lights of the church may be lit and the candles held by the congregation members extinguished.

Should the above not be suitable as a **practice** in some settings, the following may be used instead:

Call to Worship

Christ yesterday and today,
The beginning and the end,
The Alpha and Omega,
All time belongs to him,
And all ages;
To him be glory and power,
through every age and forever. Amen.

(A Resurrection hymn of praise may be sung, preferably with an 'Alleluia')

Act of Penitence

Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed for us.
Let us, therefore, rejoice by putting away all malice and evil
and confessing our sins with a sincere and true heart.

A time of silence for personal reflection and confession is observed, then it may be said by all:

We confess to God Almighty,
That we have sinned in thought, word and deed
By what we have done, and by what we have failed to do.
We have failed to love God, and our neighbour as ourselves,
And have done what is grievous in God's sight;
Therefore, we pray to God
to forgive and cleanse us from all our sins.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness
May the God of love and power
forgive you and free you from your sins,
heal and strengthen you by his Spirit,
and raise you to new life in Christ our Lord.
Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

Alleluia, alleluia.
I am the first and the last, says the Lord, and the living one;
I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore.
Open our hearts O God, to receive the good news of your
risen Son today. **Amen**

Responding to the Word of God

Baptism and/or the Renewal of Baptismal promises can take place as a main form of response. This may be done in various prescribed ways according to local custom.

Where Baptism and Renewal of Baptismal promises are not practised, the following prayers may be used:

Prayers for the world, the Church, and all God's people according to their needs ...

In joy and hope let us pray to the Father:
That our risen Saviour may fill us with the joy of his glorious and life-giving resurrection.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That isolated and persecuted churches
may find fresh strength in the good news of Easter.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That God may grant us humility
to be subject to one another in Christian love.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That he may provide for those who lack food, work or shelter.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That by his power, war and famine may cease throughout the world.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That he may reveal the light of his presence to the sick, the weak and the dying,
to comfort and strengthen them.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That, according to his promises,
all who have died in the faith of the resurrection
may be raised on the last day.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That he may send the fire of the Holy Spirit upon his people,
so that we may bear faithful witness to his resurrection.
We pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant that, as his death has recalled us to life,
so his continual presence in us may raise us to eternal joy;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

The risen Christ came and stood among his disciples and said, 'Peace be with you.'

Then were they glad when they saw the Lord. Alleluia.
May the peace of the risen Christ be with you always.
Peace be with you.

Invitation to Communion

As many as received Jesus,
to them Christ gave the power to become the children of God.
See what love the Father has given us.

Sending

Post-communion Prayer
Lord, you have nourished us with your Easter sacrament.
Fill us with your Spirit and make us one in peace and love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Risen Lord.
Amen

Benediction

May the God of peace,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
make you perfect in every good way, that you may do his will;
and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you now and for ever.
Amen

Music

Appropriate Easter hymns, with Alleluias, may be sung on this day and throughout the Easter Season.

A hymn appropriate to Baptism may be chosen for the Baptismal section of the liturgy.

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Word and Life for The Easter Vigil – 27/28 March 2027

Mkhuseli Lujabe

Texts

Old Testament readings and Psalms:

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a and Psalm 136:1–9, 23–26
Genesis 7:1–5, 11–18; 8:6–18; 9:8–13 and Psalm 46
Genesis 22:1–18 and Psalm 16
Exodus 14:10–31; 15:20–21 and Exodus 15:1b–13, 17–18
Isaiah 55:1–11 and Isaiah 12:2–6
Baruch 3:9–15, 3:32–4:4 or Proverbs 8:1–8, 19–21; 9:4b–6 and Psalm 19
Ezekiel 36:24–28 and Psalms 42 and 43
Ezekiel 37:1–14 and Psalm 143
Zephaniah 3:14–20 and Psalm 98

A minimum of three Old Testament readings should be chosen from the list above.

The reading from Exodus 14 should always be used.

New Testament readings and Psalm:

Romans 6:3–11 and Psalm 114
Mark 16:1–8

Introduction

The Easter Vigil marks the centre point of the liturgical year as the Church celebrates the resurrection of Christ and the redemption he won for all God's children. It is a celebration of God's ultimate saving acts to bring people out of darkness into his light and glory. Thus, the themes of light overcoming darkness and death, with new life in Christ, are to the fore, as we seek to proclaim newness of life, rebirth, and new hope throughout the service.

The readings assigned for this service are intended to assist the preacher to proclaim a message that is based on these focal points, so that the understanding of redemption through Christ's resurrection is clearly conveyed through scripture, over and above the rich ritual and symbolism that forms the greater part of this service.

Hearing and interpreting the Word

Comments on the Old Testament readings

No specific reading from the Old Testament is singled out here from among those listed for today. But note that the reading from Exodus 14 should always be one of those heard during the service. It records God's great intervention when the fleeing Israelites found themselves caught between the barrier of the sea and the pursuing Egyptians. What happened that day was a signal act of God's salvation. Through the series of these Old Testament scripture readings, each accompanied by a responsorial psalm and a collect, we have an opportunity to rehearse and reflect on the history of God's acts of creation and salvation leading up to the coming of Christ (Gross, p 169). In other words, through the series of chosen readings from the Old Testament, worshippers can hear how again and again God sought out his people,

saved and redeemed them, to claim them for Godself and enter a covenant with them at Sinai. Finally, God sent Jesus his Son to be the ultimate sacrifice for the salvation of humankind. This part of the service, therefore, should develop a sense of appreciation and gratitude. It will lead to a fresh understanding of Christ's death and resurrection as the ultimate cost of our redemption.

The Psalms act as an accompanying commentary and source of reflection on God's amazing acts relating to events in the life of God's people throughout biblical history. They become a source of prayer after each matching allocated reading, as the hearers are reminded of God's relationship with humankind. They afford opportunity for reflection, repentance, regaining hope, trusting in God, and being drawn closer to God's loving presence, the source of our being.

In choosing to offer a brief reflection on any of these Old Testament readings, the preacher should keep in mind this rich backdrop as being part of the proclamation for the occasion.

Psalm 114

With its opening line 'When Israel went out from Egypt ...', this is a song of victory recalling God's saving acts and the safe passage of the people of Israel from their Egyptian bondage to God's promised land. It recalls the crossing of both the sea and the river Jordan. The psalmist uses memorable imagery to describe the joy of all creation at the victory of God over all evil and darkness: 'The sea looked back and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs' (vv.3–4). The psalm ends with a call (v 8) for awe before the presence of the Lord, the God of Jacob. He is the one 'who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water' – a reference to what happened on the way at Rephidim when the people cried to Moses for water (see Exodus 17).

Romans 6:3–11

In this passage Paul writes of renewal, rebirth, and transformation ('walking in newness of life') in those who have turned to Christ. Earlier he has insisted that those who have been justified by God's grace simply cannot continue to live in sin. He asserts that believers are not only delivered in Christ from sin's penalty but are also released from the power of sin through their sanctification by God's grace. The power of sin has been defeated for them. Buried with Christ in baptism they rise to new life in Christ. Believers are to consider themselves 'dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (v 11).

Mark 16:1–8

This is Mark's account of the morning of the resurrection day. It is fitting that it begins in the darkness of the sabbath evening and the early morning of the resurrection. As the

evening of the sabbath marked the end of the observance, the women used their first opportunity to approach the tomb, carrying the spices with which to embalm the body of the Lord in the tomb first thing in the morning. This was customarily undertaken by women as part of the task of preparing the body for burial. Because they were aware of the large stone that had been rolled across the entrance to the tomb they were concerned as to how they would gain access. Mark includes part of this conversation of concern in his account.

The news of the resurrection is presented by a 'young man' in Mark's account. Matthew speaks of an 'angel', John of 'two angels', while Luke speaks of 'two men' breaking the news. Because Mark's young man was dressed in a 'white robe', the assumption by others of his being an angel is understandable, bearing in mind that Mark's Gospel is thought to be the earliest, and the probability that Matthew and Luke had access to it when writing theirs.

The women's state of alarm and shock is a clear indication that they were not expecting the resurrection, despite what they might have heard from Jesus from time to time. This is borne out by their determination to buy the spices required for the embalment. They had accepted the finality of the death. Now there was nothing else to be done but to seal the body in the customary way.

Entering the tomb, they saw that there was no body. The young man told them, 'He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him' (v 6). The women were told to tell the disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you' (v 7). The specific mention of Peter is surely very significant. One can imagine his being tortured by the memory of his earlier disloyal denial of Jesus. This message would have meant the world to him. It may also reflect how Jesus had regarded Peter, and a portent of his role farther down the line.

Mark's account ends very abruptly at verse 8, with the women fleeing from the tomb in terror and bewilderment, saying nothing to anyone because of their fear. It is almost as if a page were lost at some point. Modern translations such as NRSV include for the sake of interest a so-called 'Shorter Ending' and a 'Longer Ending of Mark', both presumably composed at some point in attempts to round off the Gospel satisfactorily. Neither succeeds in this, the longer ending in particular sounds inappropriate and contrived.

Preaching the Word

The readings convey the various themes that are prominent on this occasion, all under the greater theme of the redemption of humankind.

One of these is the theme of light and darkness, which worshippers are invited both to hear and to experience. There is emphasis on the beauty of God's created order, God's perfect plan and harmony which we were made part of from the beginning. Here is the light of God that dawned on God's world before everything else was brought to be. Throughout the Old Testament reflections in this service,

the way sin entered the world to spoil what God had created is very clearly expressed. It is like a dark cloud covering God's plan for the world, creating disharmony between creation and its maker. The preacher should clearly draw attention to this reality, for the gift of the resurrection is all about redemption and the restoration of God's plan for creation, as we are brought out of the darkness into God's marvellous light.

A second theme for possible emphasis is that of salvation, God's endless efforts to rescue and bring humanity back from the darkness of sin and evil to be God's own people. Here the preacher can draw on material from the readings from the prophetic literature, highlighting God's pain when God's people are disobedient to the extent that they end up in exile, and how that disobedience leads to the ultimate sin. As an expression of God's endless efforts to forgive, rescue, recover and restore relationships between God's people and their maker, this theme calls for bold proclamation in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Another important theme is that of sanctification, the ongoing commitment of those who have been saved, redeemed, and chosen as God's people through Christ's saving work in his death and resurrection. Here the reading from Romans is important, with its references to baptismal faith, the promise of victory, and entry into new life. The encounter between the angel and the fearful women, which saw them going on in confidence as heralds of the Good News, can be used to good effect as a way of encouraging the congregation to renew their trust in the living Christ.

All these themes are significant in telling the Good News of the redemption of God's world, of creation, and of all humankind. They can heighten the worshippers' sense of gratitude and appreciation of the gift of Christ's death and resurrection, that ultimately destroys the darkness which clouds the harmony between God and his own, so that all may return to God to serve God in the world.

In relaying these important themes, the preacher should also tell of the ways in which our world is still stumbling in a darkness that seeks to overpower the light of Christ in the world. It is important to reflect on the sinfulness that still entices people to evil, malice, violence, greed, and corruption. More so, the effects of these evils in our time have negative and dire consequences for innocent people; poverty, unemployment, death, grief, rape, abuse, and many other factors are daily realities for innumerable people. It is important that the Easter message is seen to relate to life in the world as experienced. Obviously, illustrations from lived experience could be very helpful.

New hope must be proclaimed, so that the trust of God's people in God may be renewed, and new confessions of faith in God invited.

This way of approaching the readings of the Easter Vigil should enable the hearers to renew a living faith and make the resurrection festival meaningful. The liturgy of the service and the proclamation of the word will complement each other in creating a fresh understanding of the death and resurrection of the Lord.

Living the Word

This service abounds with symbolism and colour, to which many people who come to celebrate the resurrection look forward eagerly. Careful preparation of the text in line with the liturgical symbolism is necessary, in order for the life-giving word to be clearly heard. For instance, one can refer to the significance of our baptismal faith in line with the message to the Romans and encourage people to live out the faith of the baptised disciple. The great symbolism of the lighting of the Easter candle can be used as a constant reminder of the living light of Christ and of our calling as bearers of that light and new hope for the world. Our unity with Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist can be used to remind the people of their sanctification as baptised members who are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. These emphases and the different expressions of the Easter celebration in the various traditions can help the congregation to live out a fruitful faith that has an impact on the world in which we all live.

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- Gross, B. *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Introduction to the Season of Easter

Introduction to the Season

Easter is not just a single day but is rather a separate Season of fifty days in its own right. During Eastertide the Christian Church explores the glorious truth of the Resurrection and its meaning for faith and life today.

The Season includes the seven Sundays of Easter, as well as the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. Between Ascension and Pentecost, the Church in Southern Africa observes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, where the gospel text on the seventh Sunday is always part of John 17 where the Lord prays that his followers ‘may be one’.

Planning for this season will enable congregations to be led seamlessly from Lent into the Easter Season and on to Pentecost.

The Characteristics of the Season

The first three Sundays of the Season deal with the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples, in which we see them gradually becoming aware of their Lord’s surprisingly close presence. The next three Sundays prepare the disciples for the departure of Jesus at the Ascension.

The final Sunday before Pentecost focuses on the prayer of Jesus that the disciples would be united as they moved out to bear witness to him in ‘Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8).

This new life experienced in the risen Christ is what needs to be proclaimed to the faithful and revealed to the world in which we live our faith.

The Pastoral impact of the Season

It is important to keep viewing the Sundays of Easter as a connected season, with each day’s emphasis contributing something towards the truth of a resurrected Jesus. These are not simply separate and disjointed stories of Jesus and the disciples. This requires careful planning, aided by the choice of appropriate hymnody and song.

The celebration of the Ascension and Pentecost provides a great opportunity for churches within a community to worship together in their shared prayer for unity and the call to witness together within the wider community. A well-planned combined service in the early evening of Ascension Day could serve as the launch of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Basic Liturgy for the Season of Easter

Introduction

Worship through the weeks of the Season of Easter should continue the joyful celebration of Resurrection of Easter morning. This can be reflected in the music selected, in the proclamation of our new life in Christ, and in the decorations used in the church.

The songs, both traditional and contemporary, that are selected for the services should carry the joyful message that is for all people everywhere:

**‘Christ has died,
Christ is risen
Christ will come again.’**

And not only the hymns, but also the flow of the proclamation week by week, should explore the great themes found in the Sunday readings of the Easter season. Then, in the final weeks of the Season, there come the great Feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. These round off the Redemption Cycle and complete the first half of the Christian year.

The **liturgical colour** for Easter is white or gold. This continues until Pentecost, when the colour is red. The liturgical colour for the period after Pentecost will be green.

These **Feasts and Special Days** occur during the Season of Easter:

Easter Day, 28 March 2027, being the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Autumn Equinox.

Feast of the Ascension, 6 May 2027 forty days after Easter.

Feast of Pentecost, 16 May 2027, fifty days after Easter .

Decorations

The style of decorations used on Easter Sunday should continue throughout the Season.

Symbols of the Season

The Paschal Candle is the principal symbol of the Resurrection. It should remain in a prominent place in the church throughout the Season and be lit at all public services during this period. An earlier tradition saw this candle being extinguished after the reading of the gospel at the Ascension Day service, but in more recent times this is done after the last service on the Feast of Pentecost.

A Suggested Liturgical Outline:

Gathering the people of God *Silence*

Greeting

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia

Call to Worship

Break forth into joy, sing together:

for the Lord has comforted his people,
and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our
God, who is rich in mercy,

Act of Penitence

Loving God,
If we have fallen into despair,
If we have failed to hope in you,

Lord, forgive us.
If we have been fearful of death,
Lord, forgive us.

May the living God
raise *you/us* from despair,
give *you/us* victory over sin
and set *you/us* free in Christ.
Amen.

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination

God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Your Spirit inspired the prophets and the writers of Scripture. Your Spirit draws us to Christ and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord. We ask for your Spirit's gifts of insight, encouragement, faith, and hope, through the proclamation of the Easter gospel.

Amen

(from The Worship Sourcebook 2nd Edition)

Responding to the Proclaimed Word

The Prayers of the People should focus on the ways in which resurrection life might become the norm in everyday life:

God of the Resurrection life:

we thank you for the possibility of new beginnings and opportunities to implement that life in this world.

We pray for new beginnings and new life in creation ...
in our nations and region ...
in education ... in the ministry of your Church ...

Additional areas of interest and concern may be added to this list.

Guide us that we might hear your clear call
to go from here to our community, that the world may know
that you are Lord of all; for we pray in the name of the risen
Lord.

Amen

Celebrating at Table

Sharing the Peace (from John 20:19–20)

The Risen Christ came and stood among the disciples and said, ‘Peace be with you’.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The Peace of the Risen Lord be with you always! Peace be with you.

*The great **Prayer of Thanksgiving** at the heart of the Eucharist/Communion Service is a joyful rehearsal of the heart of the Gospel. Use should be made of the form that is familiar in your tradition.*

Sending out the People of God

Thanksgiving for Worship

Lord Jesus Christ, risen to new life, you revealed yourself in the breaking of the bread. Open our eyes that we may recognise your work in the world, follow your example by serving others, building up your Church, and serving you in your world.

We ask this in your Name.

Amen

Benediction/Blessing (based on Hebrews 13:20–21)

May the God of peace,
who raised to life the great shepherd of the sheep, make us ready to do his will in every good thing, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. **Alleluia! Amen**

Dismissal

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Alleluia, Alleluia

In the name of Christ, Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen

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Perry, M., ed. *Prayers for the People: Leader's Edition*.
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Liturgy for Easter, Sunday – 28 March 2027

Bruce Theron

Texts

Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Acts 10:34–43

Introduction

Easter stands at the heart of the Christian celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The season of Easter is the culmination of the season of Lent. Ideally the Lenten journey has been a period of quiet reflection and a time of spiritual renewal for all practicing Christians. All the hopes and expectations of Christians are realized in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, making Easter the most celebrated day of the Christian year. Various denominations may have their own tradition to observe. Some traditions begin their Easter celebration with an Easter Vigil service, either late on Quiet Saturday or very early on Easter morning. I remember the tradition in Durban where the Diakonia Council of Churches had a very early walk with a cross, culminating in a combined ecumenical service, before the various church leaders leave for their own service in their respective churches.

The Easter morning service is one of joy, celebration and renewal. Even churches that may not customarily follow the liturgical church year celebrate this day as the culmination of all the gospel is about. After the sombre atmosphere of Holy Week, the Easter worship space should be bright, cheerful and celebratory, with songs reflecting the joy of Christ's resurrection.

Gathering in God's name

Call to Worship

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
His love endures forever.

Let Israel say,
His love endures forever.

Let the house of Aaron say,
His love endures forever.

Let those who fear the Lord say,
His love endures forever.

Based on Ps. 118.

Prayer of Adoration

We give you thanks, great God,
For the hope we have in Jesus,
Who died but is risen and rules over all.
We praise you for his presence with us.
Because he lives, we look for eternal life,
Knowing that nothing past, present, or yet to come
Can separate us from your great love
Made known in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Time of silent confession may follow.
Amen

Prayers of Confession

If, at times we deny you, God forgive.
When the risks of discipleship are high,
And we are nowhere to be found.

God forgive.

When we wash our hands of responsibility,

God forgive.

When we cast our lot with powerful oppressors
And seek to buy freedom with silver,

God forgive.

When fear keeps us from witnessing to your truth,
Or prejudice keeps us from believing it,

God forgive.

In the bright light of Easter morning, O God,
Our sin is exposed and your grace is revealed.

Tender God raise us in your love,

So that with joy, we may witness

To your awesome deeds,

In the name of Jesus, the risen one.

Amen.

Invocation

O God, worker of wonders,
You made this day for joy and gladness.
Let the risen Lord abide with us this day,
Opening Scriptures to us
And breaking bread in our midst.
Set our hearts aflame and open our eyes
So that we may see in his sufferings
All that the prophets foretold
And recognize him at this table
As the Christ, now entered into his glory,
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, forever and ever.

Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead
Your spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture.
Your Spirit draws us to Christ, and helps us to acknowledge
him as Lord.

We ask that you will send your Spirit now to give us deeper
insight, encouragement, faith and hope

Through the proclamation of the Easter gospel.

Amen

The Lord's Supper

Celebrating at the table to be done according to the various
customs and traditions.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

By your power you raised Jesus from death to life.

Through his victory over the grave

We are set free from the bonds of sin and the fear of death

To share the glorious freedom of the children of God.

In his rising to life you promise eternal life to all who believe
in him.

We praise you that as we break bread in faith,

We shall know the risen Christ among us.

Sending

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God,
Be honour and glory forever and ever.

Amen

Benediction

Go forth in joy to love and serve God in all that you do.

We are sent in the name of the risen Christ.

Let us bless our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!

May the God of peace, who raised to life the great shepherd
of the sheep,

Make us ready to do his will in every good thing,

Through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Alleluia! Amen

Word and Life for Easter Sunday – 28 March 2027

Bruce Theron

Texts

Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Acts 10:34–43

Introduction

I have been assigned the Christmas and Easter liturgical and sermon outlines. With the addition of Good Friday, these are the three days are traditionally the best attended days of Christian worship. There may be no explicit reason why, other than these three high and holy days being popular. It may be a carry-over from childhood, or these days make up for an extended public holiday and a time to typically visit the parental home for a time of ‘homecoming’.

In the early days of *Word and Worship*, the thought was advocated that the context interprets the text. The context in which this sermon outline is done coincides with the deployment of the SANDF in the violent taxi violence and the unabated gang violence on the Cape Flats. I conducted a service yesterday (4th Sunday in Lent) in an area rife with gang activity and random shooting. The windows of the church building show signs of bullet holes. The attendance was scant, in what once was a well-attended ‘mainline’ congregation. This decline has not gone unnoticed. Yet, I passed a few non-descript places of ‘modern’ worship situated in industrial areas, and judging from the cars, these appear to all be well attended.

The mainline churches which mostly make up the audience of this publication is really left with the question, “what is the Spirit saying to the church today?” And more especially it begs the question, how can we sing the Lord’s song in an ever-changing context and remain relevant?

Hearing the Word (Exegetical)

Isaiah 25:6–9

Isaiah 25 opens with a song of thanksgiving for deliverance. It is vibrant with praise for the goodness of God to God’s people. The city, the bastion of the enemy has been “turned into a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin.” Yet Isaiah sees all this change. The Lord will prepare a feast of rich food, and a banquet of aged wine, with the best of meats.” Death shall be swallowed up in victory and tears will be wiped off their faces. The Jews could take heart at these prophetic words from the prophet, for they had no real hope of immortality.

Acts 10:34–43

Whether these words were by Peter, or possibly by Luke, it is skilfully adapted to a Gentile audience. Jesus is portrayed in v.36. “Lord of all”. And in v.34, “God does not show favouritism”. Peter explains how Jesus was killed by the Jews “by hanging him on a cross (tree)” v. 39. It is by

virtue of his resurrection that Jesus is Messiah. Luke sees Jesus as the Messiah by birth, “having been conceived by the Holy Spirit” Commentators say this this verse should be taken in a more general sense as an echo of Isaiah 60:1, that Jesus applied to himself in Luke 4:18. It seems that all of the miracles and mighty works of Jesus are regarded in the Gospels and in Acts as triumphs over demonic powers. This is especially evident in Luke 10:18 where at the return of the seventy, after hearing the report of their cures in his name, Jesus cries out, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

Psalm 118 has been described as Luther’s psalm. It appealed to him because it deals with congregational worship and invites all to come to come as supplicants to the mercy seat of the Lord. It contains what has been described as obscure words and phrases. And that a musical interpretation may see in this psalm a company of pilgrims or victorious warriors marching towards Zion’s hill. It is a responsive psalm that starts with a statement of intent – with the leader starting with *(O) give thanks to the Lord, for he is good*. Followed by the response *“His mercy endures forever.”* Then the lone voice again, *“Let Israel say,”* followed by, *“his love endures forever.”*

The psalm can be seen as a march to the temple, especially the later reference to *“Open for me the gates of the righteous ... I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.”* Above all, the Lord has brought deliverance and *“you have become my salvation.”*

Interpreting the Word

As alluded to earlier, Easter is the time of homecoming. With such a captive audience, the preacher has an opportunity to make a connection with the ‘once old-time religion’ and modern-day Easter with the gift of divine grace and inclusion based on the narrative of Cornelius and Peter. The Old Testament prophesies abound with promises of a Saviour to be born. The eschatological Saviour of the world. One such is Micah 5:2, *“But for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small amongst the clans of Judah, out of you will come a ruler ...”*

This narrative challenges the idea of ‘church’ with its creeds and formal statements and its once understood colonial and exclusionary structure and format. Peter is challenged to be counter cultural and asserts, *“you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.”* Peter’s lesson to the other disciples that the fences they have erected had no divine sanction and that God had no favourites. Nor can anyone or any race be superior to others. Peter’s message is not only inclusive but is all encompassing. *“You know the message God sent to the people of Isarel, announcing the good news of peace*

through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.” Peter must have been astounded by his own words as the Spirit moved and spoke through him. The narrator notes that “*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.*” So much so that even the “circumcised believers” were astonished that the gift that the gift of the holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.”

In the face of great criticism, Peter later had to explain his actions in Jerusalem. Even here the Spirit was with him as the narrator affirms that “*When they (the council) heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’*”

What may have started off as a very innocent and non-descript event in the home of Cornelius, had far reaching implications for the wider church. Because of this event, the message spread throughout the Roman Empire. Ordinary witnesses experienced and proclaimed the resurrected Christ. Hence Peter asserted, “surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water.” This discovery may well have been a second conversion for Peter.

That they asked Peter to stay with them (v.48), for a few days is very telling. The headlines may well have read; “Gentiles now join the Christian Church!” There was still much to learn and be discovered in this newfound awakening, and they needed the presence and guidance of Peter.

Preaching the Word

I earlier made mention of the ‘mainline church.’ Traditionally the description referred to the Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The very churches that made up the Church Unity Commission. The mainline churches held sway for many decades in the past, their opinions and that of the church leaders mattered. The pronouncements were often made with reference to the then unjust and prevailing socio-political order. Following the newfound democracy in South Africa, these prophetic voices were assimilated in the various machinations of the state.

The ‘social gospel’ made way to a rapidly rising evangelical-charismatic movement. This evangelical-charismatic movement made no socio-political pronouncements on their pursuit of salvation and conversion in the name of Jesus Christ. Much of this are direct foreign ‘imports’ and virtually none was ‘home grown’. My experience of this movement has been an overt emphasis on the victory of the resurrection, with very little reference to the suffering of the cross. Yet for the then mainline churches, the gift of Easter Sunday starts with the tension of Holy Week and the suffering of *Via Delarosa*, the way of the cross on Good Friday.

With the varied Easter audience, the preacher will need to craft a sermon in which people may see themselves as witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus to the women at the grave and later to the disciples. Those present may regard themselves as nominal Christians, hopefully they will identify with the second conversion of Peter.

While we may be critical of the evangelical-charismatic movement, they evidence a greater lay involvement and participation on the side of its members. It may be that the younger and more professional generation choose to give expression to their faith by being more hands-on. For this reason, they may with greater enthusiasm give expression to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 by seeking to answer the Great Question in Matthew 16:15, who do you say that I am?

Dorothy Bass in her book, “*Practicing Our Faith*” suggests that Christian Practices are those things we as Christians do together and over time. She describes Christian practices as ‘Honouring the Body, Hospitality, Keeping the Sabbath, Saying Yes and No, Discernment, Forgiveness, Dying Well and Singing Our Lives.’ As such, she says we yearn for a richer and deeper understanding of what it means to live as Christians in a time when basic patterns of human relationships are changing all around us. Sadly, much of our teaching is limited to preparation for confirmation. In the uncertain times that we live in, what with the growing tension in the middle east perpetrated by America and Israel, people are wanting to know what Christian faith has to do with our work, our families and friendships and with the way we raise our children.

The conversion of Cornelius heralded a change in the belief and prevailing practice of the church. These questions that should continue to be raised, calling for fresh new ways of thinking about our Christian beliefs. We may not have the answers, but it may help if people know that the church and her theologians are serious about reflecting on their faith in the light of changing times.

This may not be an easy sermon to construct. However, it may call for a round table discussion with other theological thinkers. It may also help to draw from ordinary lay people as their thinking and input may be invaluable. I have discovered it always helps to be honest and to admit to thinking about prevailing issues. The church does not have to know all the answers. And preaching for Easter then, is different to preaching an Easter sermon now. Times have changed and are in a constant flux of change.

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Word and Life for 2nd Sunday of Easter – 4 April 2027

Ian Booth

Texts

Acts 4:32–35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1 – 2:2
John 20:19–31

Introduction

In the Gospel passage for this Second Sunday after Easter we have several significant moments; we have Jesus appearing to his disciples in a locked room, huddled in fear that they may be the next targets for the Jewish authorities; we have the transmission of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples to become apostles (John's version of Pentecost); and we have the unexplained absence of Thomas from the initial visit, and so a repeat visit a week later for the benefit of Thomas and vindicating those who doubt in the absence of tangible evidence. The Acts passage tells us of the characteristics of the early church, and the 1st Letter of John bears testimony to personal experience which leads to pure living.

Hearing the Word

Acts 4:32–35

This is the second time in Acts that the nature of this new community is described in this way – the first being in Acts 2. What is notable is the unity of heart and mind among the community, and the voluntary sharing of goods with the result that there were no needy persons among them. The apostles are not enforcing this – they are going about their work of preaching. The people are so moved by the testimony of the life and teaching of Jesus that they really are moved to live like that. The resources were sufficient for their need, not their greed! The sharing is entirely spontaneous and voluntary.

Psalm 133

This Psalm highlights the importance of brothers (and sisters) living together in unity – as with the early church community.

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

The theme for the author of this letter is the Word of Life who is a real person, who was heard and seen and touched by other humans, and who, in his life, is a gospel (or good news). There are words here that take us back to the Gospel according to John: “from the beginning”, the Word of Life, and light in whom there is no darkness. The light encourages partnership and community – that which we have seen in Acts. In the light is the grace we all need to keep us in line with God's requirements of us. Sin means missing the mark, so the light shows the mark or target clearly.

John 20:19–31

The setting for this passage is a room somewhere in Jerusalem, which could possibly be the setting for the Last Supper – that last evening they had shared with Jesus before the horrific scenes in the Garden, the trial, and the parade to Golgotha and the crucifixion. The disciples are shell-shocked, afraid that they will become targets as followers of Jesus, and confused by the events of the morning, with a report from Mary and the hasty rush from Peter and the other disciple to verify Mary's account. Jesus appears in a locked room and speaks peace to them and shows them his wounded hands and side. This is clearly a physical, flesh and blood encounter, but somehow, he got into the room. Then follows the Commissioning: “*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*” And he breathed on them and said, “*Receive the Holy Spirit*”. In this action, a new humanity is born, there is a new dawn, a new creation. The longest part of this passage is far less dramatic and life changing for the disciples. We are told that Thomas was not present for the first visit and refuses to take the word of his colleagues that they had seen Jesus, so he demands his own experience of Jesus' resurrection to believe. A week later, the scene is repeated, Thomas gets his wish and proclaims Jesus as “My Lord and my God”. Jesus then speaks of those who, unlike Thomas, will not get to see for themselves, but will believe – because they will get the testimony of these events from these men in this room. Thomas has become criticised as “Doubting Thomas”, and that is often the title given to this Gospel passage. But Jesus does not criticise Thomas for doubting – in fact he gives him what he wants. Perhaps because doubting is necessary for faith? Certainty does not require faith to believe. Real faith is born from uncertainty and doubt which leads to questioning and discovery.

Interpreting the Word

Acts 4:32–35

The book of Acts is the second volume of Luke's testimony to the events surrounding the impact of Jesus on the world. In this second volume he moves from Jesus the person to the birth and growth of the movement of those who became known as “the Way”, the early Church. From the dramatic events described on the Jewish Feast Day of Pentecost which had drawn great numbers of pilgrims to Jerusalem had grown a movement that was truly unique in its early stages. At the end of Chapter 2, and at the beginning of Chapter 4, the characteristics of this united, harmonious, egalitarian community is described. Sharing possessions, no division or animosity, everyone being led by their hearts and inner urges, and no one in need among them.

Psalm 133

Psalm 133 is one of the “songs of ascents” which are sung by pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem for the annual Passover Feast. The purpose of the songs is to bolster the spirits of the pilgrims and to help prepare them spiritually for this Festival. This Psalm celebrates unity among the brothers (and sisters) of the people of God. The “dew of Hermon” refers to Mt Hermon in the north of Galilee, which is the source of the Jordan river – where “the Lord bestows ‘his’ blessing, even life for evermore.”

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

The structure of this document would suggest that this is not so much a letter as a sermon or treatise. It is addressed to a specific group of Christian believers who remain steadfast in the “truth” as opposed to others who left the fellowship. Those who remain faithful and obedient to the true testimony of God in Jesus and remain in communion with God are given exhortation and encouragement by the author. The themes of light and darkness are reminiscent of the prologue to the Gospel according to John, as is the Word of Life who is a physical person, not just a disembodied voice. The subject of forgiveness through Jesus is introduced at the end of the passage. For New Testament writers the root of evil is sin, which is a deliberate rebellion against, and wilful disobedience of, the commandments of God. In contrast, for the Gnostics (people who claimed exclusive, secret knowledge) evil was simply error and ignorance for which humans were not responsible. For them, Christ came into the world to bring humans knowledge (gnosis) of the truth – illumination is what was needed, not forgiveness. This explains the statement “if we claim we have no sin we make God out to be a liar and God’s word has no place in our lives.” The sense is that we are hearing from someone who has personal knowledge of Jesus, and here needs to explain God’s purpose in Jesus as the atoning sacrifice, the “once-for-all” sacrifice which ended the ritual sacrifices of Jewish practice.

John 20:19–31

The Gospel according to John was written so that its readers might believe that Jesus is the promised Saviour (Christ or Messiah), the Son of God, and that through their faith in him they might have life – this is spelt out in the last verse of the passage we have read today. This text is about the appearances of Jesus, the commissioning and transmission of the Holy Spirit, and the grace shown to Thomas to dispel his doubts – even though there will be many in future generations (including us) who will not have the opportunity given to Thomas and yet will believe the witness passed down to us. There is one question raised for me in this text: the words spoken by Jesus at the Commissioning Ceremony are crystal clear, and there is no injunction in John, as there is in Luke, to wait for the promised gift from God, because that gift is given in that Ceremony. So, why are they still in the locked room a week later, and Jesus knew that they were still there? I guess we will never know!

Preaching the Word

There are two major options in terms of preaching this Sunday. One would be to focus on the theme of the unity of spirit that runs through the passage in Acts, the Psalm and the portion of the 1st Letter of John – and to link it with the Gospel passage in that this unity of the followers of the Way is the result of the Commissioning of the apostles and their conveying of the Holy Spirit in their preaching and teaching which influenced the early church to be like Jesus. The other would be to focus on the two resurrection appearances, the passing on of the baton – which takes on greater significance now that they know that God sending Jesus included the Cross, and they were being sent in the same fashion – and then go from the closing verses to the early church and the audience of the Letter of John, who were heirs of that commissioning, as are we.

Living the Word

Imagine if the church today looked anything like the church that is described in Acts? Voluntary egalitarianism, no one in need, each one has enough and if they have to spare it is given to others. None of this driven by the apostles, who were free to carry out their mission of preaching and teaching while the members of the church got on with the business of living like Jesus. We know, from the letters that make up the bulk of the New Testament, that this did not last long before there were divisions in the church, that James saw fit to write about the differences in the way church members treated the rich and influential and the poor and needy in their midst. And that is pretty much the church as we know it! Yet just imagine! The picture of that Church, as presented in Acts, should be held up as the goal for all who would be followers of the Way, not those who attend the functions of the institution week by week and call it church. Be the church, rather than just go to church. And then live like followers of Jesus every day.

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Word and Life for 3rd Sunday of Easter – 11 April 2027

Kevin Sprong

Texts

Acts 3:12–19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1–7
Luke 24:36b–48

Introduction

The Gospel passage continues with the post resurrection appearances of Jesus. A characteristic act of eating with His disciples marks this appearance. While the Psalm celebrates that God continues to work with God's people, the Acts passage demonstrates how that will look like in this New Covenant time. The passages ring out with the newfound confidence of the early church.

Hearing the Word

Acts 3:12–19

The occasion of this opportunity for Peter to preach the Gospel arises from the healing of the lame man at the temple gate. The people observing this astonishing feat are attracted by the sight and this gives Peter a chance to serve the Gospel. Firstly, Peter deals with the death of Jesus. While there is a clear note of condemnation of Peter's 'fellow Israelites' and the way they dealt with Jesus '*whom you handed over...*' (vs. 13). He still addresses them as brothers and sisters vs. 17, so there is a tacit recognition that all who participated in the death of Jesus, including the passivity of the disciples themselves, are culpable here. The leaders, the people who called out 'crucify him', the ones who chose Barabbas above Jesus and more, are all culpable. The clear invitation to their culpability in the past is to now choose repentance so that these and all their (and our) sins can be wiped out.

The good news is that God has turned their actions into a much bigger issue, '*You killed the Author of life . . . God raised [him] from the dead*' (v.15). This act of God in Jesus Christ does not end with the resurrection. The healed man is healed by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Repentance leads to seeing God in action to redeem and make new. There is no desire in God to condemn but rather to invite repentance so that healing and forgiveness and a fuller life can arise from past failings. The death and resurrection of Jesus have become a turning point for all believers. A new relationship, not marred by sin but open to the blessing of forgiveness and new opportunities.

To quote Brueggemann: "That which began as a word of judgment is now not judgment at all, but a proclamation of the healing, empowering love of God, a love that not even the plots of evil men and women can frustrate".

Psalm 4

The prayer in this psalm arises from some dire need the psalmist has but the context is of someone with a very confident faith in God. There is an urgency in that the psalmist cites a 'right' she/he has but also an awareness in v.1b that God has come through in past needs.

The psalmist takes time to address the detractors who have shamed the writer v.2 but the writer's confidence lies not in the criticism or shaming of others but in a God who has been faithful in the past. That faithfulness has led to the Psalmist trusting God for the present situation and more. The psalmist's prayer may be evoked by the present need but it is grounded in a deep abiding faith that God listens to the prayers of the faithful.

The tone shifts in vs. 4–6 when the psalmist takes on an advice or teaching role suggesting how the detractors or other hearers can improve their relationship with God and therefore deepen their trust in the Divine. Silence before God and right sacrifices is the direction for a better relationship.

By v.7 the psalmist rests easy in confidence in a God of action on our behalf. As Brueggemann says: "The speaker may be severely troubled, but all the trouble is confidently contained in the scope of a functioning, working, trustworthy relation to God."

1 John 3:1–7

The first two verses of this passage establish the confident statement that we are the children of God and we are so because we have believed and know God. Those outside this special relationship do not know God. The writer affirms that we do not know what the future holds but as a good parent, God will be acting in our lives for us to grow in righteousness.

There is a strange contrast here in that it can be said of the believers 'No one who abides in 'Christ' sins' v.6 but then goes on to address the importance of not sinning. It may be helpful to consider the context. For Jews, morality and a relationship with God are inextricably linked but in the Greco-Roman world not so much. Honouring the gods was to get them on your side or placate them. There was no necessary link with morality. Some believers had to be convinced that commitment to Christ had to have consequential actions that followed. The writer invokes the readers not to be deceived – they need to be righteous.

Luke 24:36b–48

It may be a little strange to be dealing with what looks like Easter Sunday material, but it still has new insights to offer.

Different aspects of the Easter story are dealt with here. The kind of questions that often do arise after the Easter weekend have passed. What was the nature of the resurrected body, for instance. In what ways was the resurrected Jesus the same as and different from the Jesus who walked in Galilee and so on. Jesus addresses the first question directly by inviting the disciples to inspect his hands and feet. *'A ghost does not have flesh and bones ...'*

The risen Christ then turns their attention away from the physical aspects to the resurrection. He addresses the continuing question by reminding them that he told them of these things while he was still with them. This is a continuation of Christ's ongoing mission. He also draws them to the scriptures to open to them scriptures that enlighten what is going on here. He concludes with assuring them that they are to continue this mission in His name. Clear guidelines are given for them to follow: *'... repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'* (vs. 47 and 48)

Interpreting the Word

The Acts passage makes it clear is that we must avoid the idea that it is somehow an anti-Jewish condemnation. Peter is clear that all are culpable. Maybe because of ignorance but certainly everyone involved is culpable in the death of Jesus. Having said that, it is important to note that Peter is also placing that culpability in the broader context of God's saving acts and especially the role of the cross in their forgiveness.

If there is astonishment at a man being healed there is also an invitation to hear how that power is at work in us. The invitation to repentance is also an invitation to experience the forgiveness of God and to invite that power to be active in our lives as well. It is not Peter and John that are somehow specially empowered, but God who is at work here. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead. So this passage, which apparently begins with a condemnation of the listeners for being party to Jesus' death, becomes instead an invitation to new power in God who turned Jesus' death into the Good News of power at work within us.

The Psalm reminds us that it is not unusual for us to experience the absence of God. 'Silence', a book by Shūsaku Endō, given to me by a Japanese Christian, tells the story of Jesuits under persecution in 17th Century Japan who wonder why God is silent in their persecution. This is also our experience when we are in distress. The Psalmist addresses the detractors who shame him by revealing a calm and confident faith in the God who has already acted in previous distresses v.1b. The psalmist's hearers and we, the later readers, are all invited to ground our faith in practices that sustain, maintain and grow faith, silence and right spiritual practices. Then we too may 'lie down in peace and ...safety' v.8.

In v.3 the psalmist addresses the detractors by affirming that the writer has a deeper spiritual grounding that is out of reach of their shaming. The psalmist's own experience is that following right spiritual practices does not lead to desperation but celebration as in a great harvest v7.

The analogy of 'parenting' is a powerful analogy. The writer of *1 John* uses it to contrast the children of God and the children of the devil (v.1) in this lection and v.8 which is not but needs to be known to see how this parenting analogy works. Those who practise righteousness are revealing their ancestry in God, those who practise lawlessness reveal their ancestry in the devil. Every Christian knows that it is not altogether accurate that 'No one who abides in him sins'. The author has earlier said all have sinned and that Christ advocates for sinners which contrasts with what is being said here. The active voice, direct statement may well be a way of asserting that believers are in a different category of people in relation to God. Faith is not getting God on our side or placating an angry god but carries moral and service connotations that faith in some pagan beliefs did not carry. Being called children of God carries obligations to do specific things and especially in this context to do what is right is an unavoidable duty.

The questions raised two weeks after Easter in the Gospel passage are of the very questions that modern readers experience. We understand the disciples' disturbed reaction to the risen Christ. Jesus' response to them here catches our focussed attention. Jesus assures them ghosts don't have bones and flesh and do not eat fish and chips. And, while this does not altogether address our question, we are able to set it aside as Jesus unpacks the scriptures that give context to this appearance and the mission He is calling them to. In a similar way to the way Jesus 'opened the eyes' of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of bread, He now has a similar experience for these disciples as He 'opens their eyes' to the scriptures in the new light of Jesus' own death and resurrection. Something very mysterious is happening here but it is also very real. However we understand the resurrected body, the important thing here is that the scriptures are where we can find the real meaning of what Jesus' death and resurrection signify.

Lastly, their mission is clearly articulated here. Go! They must go to all nations starting in Jerusalem. The message is clear: Repentance and forgiveness is to be proclaimed in the Messiah's name.

Preaching the Word

Since we are still in the 'Easter Season' it is not surprising that the passages reflect an Easter theme. However, they do take us several steps forward. They invite us to contemplate the risen Christ in the post-Easter period. Promises made during the life of Christ as He walked with the disciples now take on a new meaning. The scriptures Jesus opened to the first disciples are places we can go to have our own position opened up. The Acts passage shows how the confidence of Peter has grown. The *1 John* passage invites us to see that the promise that we would be called Children of God might look like in different cultures.

In post-modern culture very little is taken at face value. Post-modernism rejects absolute truths. Yet here is the risen Christ saying I am real, look at my hands give me some food to eat. Post-modernism can help us move past being too quick to say facts are truth. Often what we see as facts are already our interpretation of what we are looking at. But *Mystery* is not a puzzle to be solved but a realisation that truth rises above known facts and confronts us with a greater truth. We may not know exactly how Jesus' resurrection body worked but we do know Christ was raised. We do know that the resurrection brought us into the family of God, Dallas Willard, a Christian writer and professor of philosophy, in an interview said: "My feeling is that Christ is generally outside the boundaries that we would set for him." More than many, Willard shows that to take Christ seriously is to take truth seriously.

Astonishment and confusion are not what we think modern Christians are all about. The resurrection appearance to the disciples was a frightening shock at first. The healing of the man, through Peter and John, caused confusion in onlookers. 'What on earth is happening here?' could easily be their question. Being called Children of God sounds like we are full of pride. However, all these events are the real experiences of Christians. As life changing as they were for the early disciples, so are they for us. Is there a *Mystery* here? Yes there is, but not one we need to solve, only one we need to live and grow into.

Living the Word

In July last year, I was invited to the closing of two small communities of faith that I used to serve several years before. They had enough money to continue but too few people were turning up for services. Numbers of church attendance overall are declining. However, there is some evidence that the lock-downs of COVID-19 raised several questions for younger people about what is true and what is real. The Roman Catholic Church in Europe and the USA (where polls are frequently taken) show a slight but marked and discernible return of younger people to church. The opportunity to proclaim a God who is acting to heal and restore us, means that I John 3:7 has new relevance: "Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous." Younger people are searching for something spiritual even though they have trouble describing what it is. A faith based on what true followers of Christ know rather than on favourite doctrines that no one is interested in, becomes attractive for searchers after truth.

Liturgical Suggestions

(unless a separate, fuller liturgy is required for the occasion)

I offer you the **New Creed** of the United Church of Canada as a more modern way to think of what we believe:

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday of Easter – 18 April 2027

Kevin Sprong

Texts

Acts 4:5–12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16–24

John 10:11–18

Introduction

The Easter season shifts from the self-giving of Christ in the crucifixion to how the resurrection community of Christ followers act and will act. The self-giving of Christ now becomes the empowered self-giving of the followers. The authorities are curious as to where and in whose name the disciples exhibit this power. They are not used to people putting themselves at risk for others and this gives the disciples an opportunity to say in whose power they act. The new ethic of self-giving is not based solely on a change of thinking but arises from the empowering of the risen Christ.

Hearing the Word

Acts 4:5–12

The previous Sundays in these Easter readings have told us where this event leads from – the healing of a lame man at the gate beautiful. The court is convened with the highest religious and political authorities. The question is: "*By what power or by what name did you do this?*" However, there is another agenda "Why are you preaching on the resurrection?" Peter's response to the first question challenges their morality asking why they are making an inquiry about a good deed – the healing of someone? But according to verse 8 Peter is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and so he addresses the hidden question. It is in the name of the risen Jesus "*whom you crucified*", that this man has been healed. Peter then adds some irony by referring to a Psalm his accusers would know. He references Psalm 118:22 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'. This Psalm speaks of a Davidic King being surrounded by enemies and handed over to death, but who was saved by God. It also says 'This is the gate of the Lord;' the righteous shall enter through it, adding another layer of irony. After Jesus resurrection the old ways no longer carry the same weight because the disciples live in a new reality empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 23

This well-known psalm has much to assist a preacher. There are only two assertions of *YAHWEH* (the LORD) – in the first verse and the last. The opening words declare where the psalmist stands, which is a dependency on the shepherd. While the scene is clearly a pastoral scene, there is the underlying understanding that the king was known as the shepherd of his people. So the psalm moves between these two images. The psalmist lacks nothing with the care of this shepherd king.

The pastoral image captures four images 1. Good food, 2. Plenty of water, 3. Restoring vitality, 4. Safe paths. The shepherd looks out for us in all these areas.

The imagery takes on a more royal imagery with the rod and staff. Of course, a shepherd will have a shepherd's crook, but it is equally possible that the double 'rod and staff' evokes kingly imagery. No matter what dark paths we find ourselves in the shepherd king is there to watch over us. Moreover, there is a provision of abundance even in the presence of enemies. They do not stop the shepherd's provision. The obvious conclusion after benefiting from this abundant care and caring relationship is that the psalmist will always abide in the house of *YAHWEH*.

1 John 3:16–24

The epistles in the previous weeks have tended to emphasise that Christians are not to sin. That may seem obvious, but it is possible that some thought that simply 'being on Jesus' side is enough and demands no moral obligation. Here, however, the author spells it out. Asking if it is even possible to keep being in a loving relationship with a loving God when we have resources to help another and don't use those resources generously. In some extreme situations it may even mean laying down our lives for another. The model for this self-giving is quite clearly and pointedly the self-giving of Christ. John's admonition is clear: Let us love not in word or speech but in truth and deed (vs.18).

While vs.19-d seem to be alluding to a love and mercy of God who will continue to love us even if our consciences condemn us. Vs. 23 draws us back to who we are as a people in a loving and dutiful relationship to God through our belief, in Jesus, God's son. The conclusion draws us back into understanding that these loving actions we are called to express arising from our belief in God are not 'works' but are themselves the fruit of the Spirit.

John 10:11–18

The strong imagery of the well-known Psalm 23 takes on new force in this passage. Most people know about shepherds and sheep from TV shows or documentaries, but the imagery sticks with us.

A contrast is made between Jesus as the good shepherd and a hired hand. The hired hand can run away because it is 'only a job' and he could probably find another one elsewhere. For the owner of the sheep the sheep are his life. Jesus ties his own sacrifice very closely to his followers by comparing himself to the shepherd. Jesus keeps the intimate relationship with shepherd and sheep and he and his followers alive by showing he knows his sheep and they know him. Just as there is an intimate relationship with 'the Father' so there is a close relationship with Jesus and his followers. In verse 30 which is later in this lection's reading Jesus will say "The father and I are one". But take note before getting caught up in the cosiness of this pastoral scene: Jesus teaching was

open to violent interpretations and reactions. Vss 19 and 20 see his listeners divided, with some of them accusing him of being mad or having a demon.

Interpreting the Word

The imagery of the shepherd and the sheep offer rich material for preaching from these lectionary readings. In the *Acts passage* Peter is challenged by the authorities ostensibly about a man who has been healed. At face value it seems that there is some interest on the part of the authorities, but clearly their hidden agenda of Jesus and his resurrection is the real issue. In a way they are the ‘hired hands’ referred to in the Gospel passage. Their own doctrines and rules are far more important than the people they are meant to serve. Jesus contrasts the hired hands with his own commitment even unto death.

The passage in *1 John 3* sets the bar for Christ-followers. The outcome of faith has far more to do with actions than beliefs. The instruction not to sin may have arisen from the very sense that faith in God has little to do with morals or actions in pagan faiths, but that is never so for Christians. They are to love and serve. Being human, sin will emerge from various internal sources greed, envy, ego even fear, but it is always something the death and resurrection actions of God in Jesus Christ have empowered us to work against. The model for this obedience is the obedience of Christ in his life, death and resurrection. Lest the hearers miss it the author emphasises that we may even be called on to lay down our lives for our siblings. This is next level obedience.

Psalms 23 is well known because it addresses our deepest hope and longing for just such a relationship to God. When Jesus picks up the sheep and shepherd analogy of *Psalms 23*, he adds another layer and even more nuanced understanding of the psalm. God in Jesus knows us as his own. Here Jesus emphasises the deep personal bond between Him and his followers and he and his Father God.

This intimate inclusion of Jesus followers is stretched to include ‘sheep not of this flock’. It could be seen as an open inclusion for Samaritans, and Gentiles (and people of other beliefs?), but certainly it is not a closed group. This kind of radical inclusion of people even from another flock arises out of an obedient, empowered free will to follow Christ.

Jesus further redefines obedience to the father as something he can freely do, to give up his life, so he can take it up again, but it is also in obedient response to a command from his Father. Jesus will redefine our freedom as also being obedient to his commands: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”* (8:31–32).

Preaching the Word

When it comes to healing it goes without saying that God has more resources at God’s disposal than we can possibly imagine. Resources such as those built into a body’s natural resistance to diseases, the motivation people have to be healthy, herbs and medicines and poultices and much more. Praying for someone to be healed is undoubtedly one of those resources. But if like the authorities in the *Acts passage*, we

look only at a physical healing, we will miss out on the much bigger work of Jesus amongst us. Jesus is far removed from a ‘show and tell’ view of healing in all these passages.

Many of us have heard the phrase “I got nothing out of that sermon”. As though a sermon is designed to please each congregation member in their own way. Rather here we are asked to look at the profound truth that stays a profound truth even though we are familiar with it that Jesus gave His life for us. He did so deliberately. He did so in obedience and in alignment with God his Father’s will for him. He did so as one depicting himself as a shepherd caring for his flock. This deep and personal bond is what we are invited to. If we think that it is an invitation to a fun Jesus club, we have missed the point affirmed in *1 John 3*, That astonishing truth is that we are invited to imitate Christ in laying down our lives for our siblings. Jesus love for us is fiercely practical at so many levels. His self-giving is the very foundation of our faith. We are invited and included in the ‘flock’ He is willing and has already given his life for us. We are in a bonded relationship with the ‘flock’ of Christ followers.

Before it gets to the extreme place of ‘giving our life’, there is the very real practical possibility of sharing what we have of ‘the world’s goods’. While it sounds like a huge demand and one we tend to keep erratically, this instruction to love is always there. In a way if we are asked to forgive seventy times seven, we are also asked to love seventy times seven. Fortunately, it does not depend on us alone. Our obedience is called for but the life, death and resurrection of Christ has empowered us in ways Peter demonstrated clearly in the *Acts passage*.

Living the Word

In South Africa we live in a situation where there is extreme and widespread poverty right alongside extreme wealth. Some have chosen to join those wealthy ones through acts of corruption and even criminal activities. Some even believe it is justified because of our colonial past. Still the opportunities to ‘give of our worldly goods’ are hugely demanding and it takes wisdom to navigate these ways (wisdom I do not have to offer here). One thing I do know is that countries with a healthier Gini coefficient have less crime and fewer social ills. Our country has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world. Our problems are social as well as personal and caring for our siblings may mean referring to social ills.

Liturgical Suggestions

I do not have any credible liturgical suggestions. I do offer a story though. Imagine a wildlife enthusiast discovering an island where one ape gathers and keeps ALL the bananas and fruit, while the many apes on the island are living on scraps and are at starvation levels. The wildlife enthusiast would quickly conclude that the ape keeping all the fruit is very sick. How is that very different from our neoliberal economy?

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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday of Easter – 25 April 2027

Patty Edwards

Texts

Acts 8:26–40
Psalm 22:25–31
1 John 4:7–21
John 15:1–8

Introduction

The common thread throughout the readings emphasizes the importance of knowing and living Christ's love. Being open to God's love and to serve all people will bring encounters with different people who need to experience the love of God and pass on that faith for generations to come. Noteworthy is that we need God in our lives and cannot do anything without his input.

Hearing the Word

Acts 8:26–40

Philip, a follower of Jesus Christ, received a message from an angel of the Lord to go to “the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip was obedient and as a result had an encounter with an Ethiopian Eunuch. A Eunuch is a high official in charge of the treasury of the Queen of Ethiopia. Even though he was a person who loved reading the scriptures he was perceived as an outcast by the Jews. As he was reading from the prophet of Isaiah, Philip was directed by the Holy Spirit to move closer. Philip addressed the Eunuch as he was curious about the reason the Eunuch would read that specific scripture. “*Do you understand what you are reading?*”, Philip asked. “*How can I, unless someone explains it to me?*” was the Ethiopian eunuch's reply. Then Philip was invited into the carriage, and he could proclaim the Good News about Jesus Christ to the Eunuch. This led to the eunuch believing in God and being baptized by Philip.

Psalm 22:25–31

The Psalmist offers praise and thanksgiving to God. The writer praises God publicly and expresses hope that every nation and all believers will one day worship God for his goodness to reach the end of the earth. “Let all the ends of the earth remember and turn to the Lord; and let all the families of the nation's worship before him.”

1 John 4:7–21

In this passage the love of God is emphasized as also the love believers should have for one another. God's love is declared by sending his only begotten Son to sacrifice himself for all people and not because of what humans can offer to God. The love believers have for God must be manifested through loving others and by being non-judgemental. It demands a spirit of acceptance and compassion towards all who cross paths with believers. The indication is that an absence of love for others points to an unquestionable lack of knowledge

of God's nature and his love and is emphasised in verse 8: “*whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*”

The text maintains that it is impossible to love an invisible God while hating those we see. Lovingly caring for others is a sacred responsibility that reflects God's invisible presence through our actions. When love is pure and honest and directed by the Holy Spirit fear will not exist but rather confidence that God is always present.

John 15:1–8

“I am the true vine” is the last of Jesus' *I am* sayings in the gospel of John. This metaphor is part of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples which can be found in John 13:1–17:26. Jesus prepared the disciples for his leaving to be with the Father. In Isaiah 5:1–7; 27:2–6 Israel is equated with the vineyard and vine, because God had high hopes for the Israelite nation. God was disappointed in the nation when they turned out to be non-productive and turned towards other gods. Turning to the New Testament the realization is that Jesus is the true vine, and all his followers should remain in him to produce good fruit for God. God as the vine pruner ensures maximal production by removing dead branches and pruning other branches. The pruning process is understood to be a process of cleansing and transformation for a more productive spiritual life. This process requires a positive and deep relationship with Christ. As this relationship develops one would be transformed and the knowledge that prayers will be answered, and the person will be productive as a disciple of God.

Interpreting the Word (Hermeneutical Notes)

Acts 8:26–40

This story shows God's desire to reach all people, even those outside traditional Jewish communities. The Ethiopian eunuch is a foreigner, a government official, and someone who may have been excluded from full participation in temple worship. Yet, God sends Philip specifically to meet him.

The passage teaches that understanding Scripture often requires guidance, community, and teaching. It also highlights the openness and eagerness of the eunuch, who responds immediately when he understands the gospel.

Acts 8 speaks to our circumstances in that we are reminded that God's message is for everyone, regardless of status, background, or nationality. It encourages us to be attentive to divine guidance, just as Philip was willing to change direction when instructed. It challenges us to be teachers and learners—sometimes we are Philip (guiding), and sometimes we are the eunuch (seeking and learning). It affirms the value of mission, inclusion, and openness in the modern church. We are also reminded to meet people where they are on “desert roads,” unexpected places, workplaces, or daily life moments.

Psalm 22:25–31

This psalm moves from deep suffering (earlier in Psalm 22) to thanksgiving and confident praise. The writer acknowledges God's faithfulness and expresses hope that God's goodness will be known by future generations.

It teaches that worship is not only personal but also public, communal, and hopeful. The psalmist believes his testimony can encourage others. Psalm 22 speaks to our circumstances as it reminds us that pain is not the end of the story; God can transform suffering into praise. Believers are encouraged to share their testimonies, because their stories may strengthen and inspire others. Hope is offered that even in difficult times, God's faithfulness extends beyond our generation. The reassurance is given that God's love reaches all nations, calling us to unity, compassion, and global awareness. Believers are helped to recognise that worship includes remembering what God has done and trusting what God will do.

Both the Acts reading and the Psalm reflect movement from seeking to understanding, and from struggle to hope. Acts shows God reaching an individual on a lonely road while Psalm 22 shows God's goodness echoing through nations and generations.

Together, they remind us that:

- God meets us personally (Philip and the eunuch),
- and God is also working on a global, communal scale (Psalm 22's vision of all nations worshipping).

These texts call us to be open, to teach and learn from others, to trust God in difficult seasons, and to remember that our faith journey connects to a much larger story of hope for the whole world.

1 John 4:17–21

This text teaches that in God's love believers can trust as they reflect that love in the world. This calls for genuine love and faith in action. The early church was confronted with oppression and heresy which brought fear and uncertainty. John wishes to assure believers that believing and trusting in God will eliminate any fears or uncertainty. Being in an intimate and loving relationship with God reflects genuine love for other believers and is in direct contrast to those who claim spiritual intimacy with God but lack love for others. Thus, there is an inseparable link between loving God and loving others. In modern day society we are faced with many challenges therefore we are reminded by this passage that we must trust in a loving and devoted God and need not fear anything. The challenge for believers today is to discern deeply about faith in loving action. With actionable love the church will experience unity and servant leadership. This means that as love for God grows so love for others will also grow.

John 15:1–8

John 15:1–8 communicates that Jesus is the true vine and his followers the branches. To bear fruit spiritually believers need constant dependence on Jesus. Spiritual growth is only possible through a connectedness to Jesus' word whereas no relationship with Jesus means growth is stifled. Jesus spoke these words to his disciples knowing he was on his way to the cross and that he will surely leave them. The disciples are taught that they will encounter opposition and hostility but staying connected to Christ will be beneficial to them. Societal norms are more focused on the individual's power and control however the text indicates total dependence on Christ. Focusing on Christ and acting in his power while serving him and others will bring God glory. In this way it is important for the branches to stay connected to the vine to bring forth the best fruits possible.

Preaching the Word

Possible themes as directed from the readings could be:

- A closer walk with Jesus to become a credible witness for God. It requires an openness to the gospel message and a willingness to be shaped after God's own heart while we are in mission to him.
- God's grace is meant for all people. It is essential to include all people when we serve.
- The faith was passed down to us by the generations before us. Our responsibility is to pass on the faith to the next generations.

Living the Word

Daily we are faced with many opportunities to spread the gospel. This calls for a deep connection to Christ and a trust in the Holy Spirit to give guidance and direction.

Sunday worship could include a time of silent reflection and or meditation to lead God's people to deeper devotion. This requires preparation and a readiness to proclaim the gospel message.

God uses angels as his messengers which requires deep listening by us to hear the right voices and to act accordingly. The spirit of discernment is vital in our encounters with others.

Believers should embody Christlike characteristics such as the fruits of the spirit such as love, joy, peace, and kindness. This is the way to change the world in a positive way. Whatever we are willing to do can never work when we choose our own way rather follow the way of Christ.

The spirit of unity in a congregation should be cultivated. No one can be successful on their own but together we are stronger.

Liturgical Suggestions

The following are suggestions to enhance the worship

Call to Worship

Sing to the Lord a new song

Sing to the lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name;

Proclaim his salvation day after day

Sending

Lead a life worthy of the calling
to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness,
with patience, bearing with one another in love,
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,
just as we were called to the one hope of our calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:1–6

Post communion Prayer

You have fed us, Lord, and we are grateful.

Allow us to respond to this day, and in the days to come,
With hearts made ready.

eyes made open

hands made strong,

and feet made willing,

to do your will in this place,

and in all the places to which you call us. **Amen**

Benediction

May the blessing of God,
the giver of every good and perfect gift;
and of Christ, who summons us to service;
and of the Holy spirit, who inspires generosity and love,
be with us all. **Amen**

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Word and Life for the 6th Sunday of Easter – 2 May 2027

Newton Brandt

Texts

Acts 10:44–48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1–6
John 15:9–17

Introduction

The texts are a compilation of powerful invitations. As with all invitations, their power lies in the *reactions* of the hearers. Obedience to the living God ushers in joy that can be beyond your wildest expectations. There is a recurring idea of bliss through all of today's texts

Hearing the Word

Acts 10:44–48

Cornelius was a centurion in the Italian army, who was a devout man and one that feared God. After fasting, an angel visited him and commanded Cornelius to send for the apostle Peter who would relate the good news to him.

Luke writes of the gathered family and friends as they awaited the arrival of Peter. Luke then described Peter's preaching of the Gospel, followed by a blessing of the Holy Spirit as a sign of the affirmation of the Gospel. They spoke in tongues like at Pentecost, which astounds the Jewish Christian visitors that non-Jews also received the Holy Spirit. Despite their amazement, they baptise all present in the name of Jesus. In the following days they further continued preaching and teaching the group.

Psalm 98

Verses 1–3 praise is given for God's salvation that awes the whole world. Verses 4–6 extolls God in music and instruments while verses 7–9 calls on all nature to join in the celebration of praise.

The quotation "*His right hand and his holy arm*" connects with Exodus chapter 15, the Song of Moses and Miriam extolling the victory of God (cf.v.6,12, 16, Deut.5:15). Another reference is Psalm 44:3, which links this phrase to the victory over the Canaanites as *God's* intervention not Israel's own strength. Here it can be inferred that Babylon's downfall was also God's salvific act. God did not forsake or forget his people but came to their aid and revealed the redemption to the nations.

Liberation is precious. Freedom from oppression calls for celebration. New circumstances call for new songs. Thus, everyone and everything, anywhere need to participate in the jubilation. All the world is invited to contemplate this rescue, to realise a higher hand in the deliverance and to join in the new song. Musical instruments need to be utilized to enhance the festivities of gratitude.

This still was not sufficient for the Psalmist, who calls upon all nature – the sea, dry land, rivers and the mountains and all that habituate them – to strengthen the acclamation to the King, the Supreme Lord. This, according to the last verse, will be the prelude as the Sovereign Lord will ultimately come as the judge of the whole earth.

1 John 5:1–6

Accepting that Jesus was the Messiah did not come naturally to everyone. In our text John states that faith in the *Messiah* leads to *koinonia*. This communal relationship is not exclusive but will extend to all invitees who live in obedience to Jesus' cause.

To John it was crucial to persevere in the faith that Jesus was the Son of God. He states that this belief was based on Jesus' baptism, and his atonement on Calvary. The Holy Spirit on these occasions endowed Jesus with power to persevere till the end of his earthly task. This endurance and help are also possible for his followers.

John 15:9–17

The two main features of this Gospel, in contrast to the Synoptic gospel, are the prologue and the discourses of Jesus. The discourses, long and extended monologues, are mainly doctrinal so that the recipients can believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31).

A broad outline can divide the Gospel in two sections, viz. chaps. 2:12 to 12:50 that depicts Jesus' revelation of himself so structured to address inquirers or to his adversaries. Chs. 13:1–21:25, the second section, has a subsection chs.13–17, Jesus' farewell discourses with his disciples. Our text is embedded in this discourse.

In chapter 15:1–8 Jesus taught his disciples the well-known passage about the true vine and the branches. Here he used everyday experiences to teach the truth about himself. The whole enterprise is about fruit bearing.

Progressively, their privileged position is underscored. This is in stark contrast to the values of the world, as He would show them later.

He continues that a choice towards obeying his commandments is required from them. This implied that they are called upon to love according to his example. A positive choice will unleash a joy that they cannot imagine. More than just a mere emotion, a special bond between them will be forthcoming and Jesus will develop that joy to perfection.

Jesus then reveals that he was prepared to make the supreme sacrifice for them as they are his friends. They were elevated beyond the status of servants who are ignorant of the inner workings of a household. This revelation of friendship made explicit in the Upper Room, they even previously had, as

Jesus already had given them, unselfishly, access to the best revelations and teachings exclusive between him and his Father.

That they are his disciples was not due to their own merit, but rather Jesus' initiative to utilize them to bear fruit in the establishment of his kingdom. Their current position is a gift from God. What they become will be to the glory of God. Their intercession and supplications will secure resources when every request is made in his name. All these promises and privileges will be possible if they love one another.

Interpreting the Word

We are introduced to powerful *invitations* in the various texts. Relationships matter to God, who rewards obedience with joy, friendship and an access to the throne room.

In Acts, Luke tells us of an Italian centurion, Cornelius who was given a wonderful, but scary, vision in which he is commanded to extend an *invitation* to the apostle Peter to explain the Gospel to him, all his family and friends. As Peter was proclaiming the Gospel, the Holy Spirit descended on the non-Jewish hearers, and they began to speak in tongues. The visit culminated in baptizing the joyous believers and teaching them about Jesus.

The Psalm, celebrates the liberation of slaves from the most powerful empire(s). This could be from Egypt or Babylon. Freedom invokes joy and emotions unspeakable. An *invitation* is extended by the Psalmist to all humans and nature to participate in a freedom song. He is confident that all humans even beyond the borders of Israel (who became aware of this liberation) will respond, in jubilation with the emancipated.

In **John's Gospel**, Jesus' final words to his disciples during the Passover meal were *an invitation* to obedience, to abide in Him and experience a joy and access to the Father beyond their wildest dreams.

The Evangelist in chapter 15 continues to reveal to us a powerful portrait in Jesus' inner life and self-identity. While our text can appear to be a diversion from the previous introductory section, a closer look however will reveal a progression that can be viewed as a mirror image of the previous section. This can be deduced from the fact that Jesus returns to the fruit bearing theme in verse 16, with which he concluded verse 8. We can say we have a parable and its application or *a framework* (about the kingdom) and the detailed *process* how to participate therein. These were crucial words (or components) for their future survival and growth that he unpacked.

His teachings of the true vine contain at the same time a stern warning of wrath/death due to disobedience, and the prospects of a bumper crop should they abide in the vine. In vv.9–15, Jesus deliberately sharpens their focus on the positive by speaking of love, joy (and peace). So, the theme of fruit bearing is reinforced with a deepening of the calling of the disciples. This time he uses love relationships to drive the matter home in their hearts.

Fruit bearing is rooted in the model of the interactions between the Father and the Son where love is the essence. Followers of Jesus Christ can have the same experiences and find them culminating in perfect joy. Obedience is the key, which boils down to keeping his commandments.

Fruit bearing is also exemplified in the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ. Fully knowing his future, he knew the culmination of his life and the results it will usher in. We have here a vision and mission of his life. The disciples will partake in this as they were handpicked for the task. Still, choices need to be made. Obedience will mean a choice to love him and loving actions towards others continually. The standards are high but attainable if they abide in his love. Love is the catalyst that ignites and supplies the growth and is anchored in the Godhead in whom all the resources they need are available.

1 John accepted the *invitation* and decades later still persevered in the invitation that Jesus made that they *abide in Him*. Through sermons, teaching, letters the writer still aimed to extend the Christian *koinonia*. In his first *letter* from Ephesus, he is reminding the recipients (who also received and accepted the invitation) to follow Christ with continuous faith in him as the Messiah. Living in obedience to God and love towards others is not supposed to be cumbersome but will become natural and unforced as they abide in Christ.

Preaching the Word

Fruit bearing is our witness to the world. Six weeks from Easter we need to contemplate if we are still abiding in the victory of the resurrected Christ? Are we accessing the resources from the Vine or going it solo? What lessons can we learn and teach so that all can excel in a bumper crop?

The sacred union of Christ and his Church is depicted here. There are lots of fruit for the picking and sharing in a sermon. Fruit bearing or having love relationships, emanating from the resources of the Godhead, is foremost in the heart of Christ as he gives his farewell speech. He yearns for fulfilled lives that glorify the Father. How to do our hearers perceive their journey called life? What is dear to them? Is it a privilege lived in relationship with Christ or my personal right and choice to generate *my own* life picture and dream?

The Evangelist is serious about the pre-eminence of Christ. We can likewise stress this in a world that wants to reduce Jesus to the level of a wise guru or teacher. A precious relationship existed between Jesus and his Father. The disciples (and us by extension) were called upon to partake in that same status. This is crucial for our faith as the Godhead can provide and be present in our lives as a witness to others.

The seriousness of staying connected /abide in Jesus needs to be emphasised. Relationships matter to Jesus as shown in his relationship of obedience to the Father. We are called into a relationship of love that need to be abiding /continuous. Rejection to the invitation or 'going it solo' is futile as death will be the result. On the other hand, joy unspeakable and access in prayer to the heavenly throne and all its resources is a heavenly reward.

The *promises* in the text that stem from obedience can be highlighted. Jesus promised a joy that is full, friendship with him and access to all the Divine resources. We need to demonstrate these to draw others. All humans have equal access to the Vine where the same resources are available free of charge. The invitation to obedience is not easy but must be seriously addressed. Our witness can add love like oxygen to a polluted world.

The threats of wrath/ death on separation from Christ are still relevant to draw attention to, not to scare people, but because it is such loss to miss the mark of our existence and friendship with Jesus. We need not live in a hopeless, deplorable state where all hope and initiative are drained from our system. Let us rather be engaged in fruit bearing to the glory of our Creator and Saviour.

Our hearers need to be encouraged to make all efforts needed to make and attain lasting, loving relationships amongst each other. Jesus qualifies this love to be active until death. Sacrificial love is very scarce and smothered by fear. Still, we need to bear each other's burdens. Friends are enjoined to establish *koinonia* and impart their blessings and status to others.

Friendship with Jesus, fellowship divine. O what blessed sweet communion, Jesus is a friend of mine. We are elevated as his followers to the privilege of friends. We need to cherish and encourage one another to engage in and sustain this privilege.

Living the Word

Are we fighting a losing battle? Are there forces at work that deliberately undermine our goals? Is Christianity still REAL and feasible to follow? Are our claims still valid? Are there enough witnesses to make an abundant life credible?

I am glad for despondency. I am glad for a bleak national and international outlook. I am glad that the odds are against Christianity. It reminds me that Jesus said: *Without Me you can do nothing.* These words were spoken in a situation of loss and despair in the Upper Room. On their own the disciples were helpless feeble (fisher)men. They had no vision, no dream, no enthusiasm of their own. They were ready to throw in the towel. It is over. The farewell speech had all the answers, but they were deaf.

We must implore the Holy Spirit again to come to our aid. The stakes are very high. The bar is very high. We must raise up a standard trusting in the Holy Spirit living in us continually as our companion.

Abiding in Christ was not meant to be a lack lustre boring state, but rather an active vibrant position. We are to draw from the Vine with a continuous sense of being alive in the generosity that fills our emotions. Let us take Jesus at his word and strive for his promises again.

Believers need to reconsider the utilization of their precious *time, energy and attention*. We are called upon to invest in loving, long lasting relationship that matter to us. Balanced lives are still within our reach. We need however to become aware of constant distractions that want to rob our communion and growth with Christ. We need to draw on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to apply Godly principles in our lives. We are also to persevere in our faith as we are extensions of Christ in his kingdom building. Our sacrifice is worth the effort as love will find a way to bring about changes in lives. The same heart and love as the victor of Calvary is to be pursued.

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship

Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvellous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

² The LORD has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

³ He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

Suggested Songs/Hymns

"Friendship with Jesus"

"Light of the World, You stepped down into darkness"

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"

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Liturgy for the Feast of the Ascension – 6 May 2027

Rachell Hoogbaard

Texts

Acts 1:1–11
Psalm 47 OR Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15–23
Luke 24:44–53

Introduction

The Feast of Ascension commemorates the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven. This falls within the Season of Eastertide, on a Thursday, 40 days after Easter. The Easter Season lasts for 50 days (7x7 plus an extra day), which is longer than the 40 days of Lent. Eastertide includes both the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost, the latter being the last day of the season.

Eastern and Western Christianity have celebrated this feast since the 4th century. Now that the day is no longer observed as a public holiday in South Africa and elsewhere, and always occurs on a Thursday, our busy society has little reason to heed it. It is up to the Church to mark the day with appropriate worship at a convenient time that suits as many people as possible.

Gathering in God's name

Greeting

The Lord be with you:
And also with you.

Call to Worship

God has ascended amid shouts of joy.
Come let us sing praises to the Lord seated on high.
God has ascended as king over all the earth.
Come with songs of praise to the Lord exalted forever.

Act of Penitence (based on Acts 1:1–11)

For the times that we doubted your promises,
Lord have mercy.
For the times that we ignored our mission to witness to the lost,
Christ have mercy.
For the times that we lacked faith in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Lord have mercy.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Almighty God, you sent your Son to save us all. In your mercy accept the intercessions we offer through Christ at your throne of grace. Cleanse us by his precious blood and strengthen us by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer for Illumination (from Ephesians 1:15–23)

God of mercy and grace,
grant us your Spirit of wisdom and revelation,
to see clearly with the eyes of our hearts.
Help us to hear the hope to which you have called us
so that we may be worthy of your glorious inheritance.
This we pray, in Jesus' name.
Amen

Responding to the Word of God

A Confession of Faith

**We believe in God,
our creator, redeemer and sustainer.
We believe in Jesus Christ, God's son,
who ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us.
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
our helper and promise of God.
We believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen**

The prayers of the people

Almighty and eternal God,
on this day we give you thanks for your Son, Jesus Christ,
who ascended to heaven.

Fill our hearts with joy as we patiently wait for his coming
again.

Loving and merciful God,
guide and strengthen your church to preach with zeal
the message of the cross,
the need for repentance of sin,
and the Good News, to the ends of the earth.

Father and Mother of the weak, needy, and those who
mourn,
may the Scriptures bring us hope and comfort in time of
need.

God of power and might,
grant that leaders of nations be subdued under your mighty
hand,
to rule with justice and peace.

May we preserve this earth as good stewards of your
bounty.

God of unending grace,
protect and empower our youth, the weak, and our elderly,
so that they may patiently wait on your promises.

Clothe us all with power from on high.

Grant these prayers and the silent prayers of our hearts,
through your Son, Jesus Christ,
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

May our hearts be filled with the same joy
as those who witnessed the Ascension of our Lord Jesus
Christ.

May the Holy Spirit come upon us,
so that our hearts are enlightened with the peace that the
world cannot give.

May the peace of the Lord be with you.

Peace be with you.

Invitation to Communion

Come to this table,
where the hungry are satisfied,
where walls of separation are broken down,
where weakness is turned to strength.
Come with a joyful heart
and receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sending

Post communion prayer

Loving God, we accept these gifts of Christ's body and
blood,

given to reconcile us to you through him
who is seated at your right hand.

We thank you for the opportunity to remember Christ's
suffering and death.

Thank you, merciful God,
for this time of fellowship as your family in Christ.

Grant that we may patiently wait on the second coming of
your Son, Christ our Lord.

Amen

Benediction

May we believe in God's promises
and rejoice in the power of our ascended Lord.

May we go forth and spread the Good News
of the Ascension and second coming of Jesus Christ.

May we be witnesses of his glory, power and splendour
before all those we meet.

And the blessing of God

be amongst you and remain with you always.

Amen

Sending out

May we stop looking heavenward where Jesus ascended,
and look at the people around us and the world
which he left in our care.

May we express our joy to those we meet and serve,
and proclaim the Good News of his return.

In the name of our Ascended Christ.

Amen

Music

"All hail the power of Jesu's name"

"At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow"

"Lord, I lift your name on high"

"Crown him with many crowns"

"Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia"

"Around the throne of God a band"

"O worship the King all glorious above"

"With joy we meditate the grace"

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Word and Life for Feast of the Ascension – 6 May 2027

Rachel Hoogbaard

Texts

Acts 1:1–11
Psalm 47 OR 93
Ephesians 1:15–23
Luke 24:44–53

Introduction

The Feast of Ascension commemorates the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven. This takes place on the Thursday 40 days after Easter and therefore falls within the Season of Eastertide. This Season lasts for 50 days (7x7 plus an extra day), which is longer than the 40 days of Lent. Eastertide includes the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost that marks the last day of this season. Eastern and Western Christianity have celebrated the feast of Ascension since the 4th century. Society in all its busyness might forget the significance of this day, purely because it falls on a weekday. Educational institutions and those at home such as the unemployed, elderly, and those working from home, could appreciate a service on this day. In the absence of a service on the Thursday, the Ascension readings could be shifted to the following Sunday.

Hearing the Word

Acts 1:1–11

Jesus gives instructions to his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the gift promised by God. He promises that they will be baptised with the Holy Spirit. He tells them that it is not for them to be concerned about the time of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. He speaks, instead, of the Holy Spirit's gift of power that would drive their ministry of witness 'to the ends of the earth'. Then he ascended to heaven in a cloud, the visible sign of the presence or Shekinah glory, and also of God's approval of Jesus as his Son. The disciples are assured of the return of Jesus in due course.

Psalm 47

When the Ark, the symbol of Yahweh's presence, has been carried in procession up to the temple (see Psalm 24), all are summoned to praise him, for he has ascended Mount Zion: 'God has gone up with a shout' (thus Psalm 47:5). *Psalm 47* celebrates God's victorious rule and kingship over the whole earth using imagery of a jubilant celebration, clapping of hands, cries of joy, and the sound of trumpets. This picture has a prophetic and eschatological dimension and resonates with our Christian hope in God's power and reign.

Psalm 93 is a hymn in praise of Yahweh as Creator King. By triumphing over the forces of chaos he created the world, and now even the primeval depths pay their homage. This dominion belongs to Yahweh eternally.

Ephesians 1:15–23

Paul's letter may have been intended as a circular to a number of churches. Here he expresses appreciation for the spiritual growth seen in the Ephesian Christians. The letter serves as encouragement as he reminds them of his constant prayers for them. In this passage, he expresses his solemn wish for them to receive increased wisdom and revelation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke and Acts also show a clear connection with the receipt of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul continues to extol the power experienced by Christians because of their faith in the risen and ascended Christ.

Luke 24:44–53

This is Luke's first account of the ascension of Jesus (see also Acts chapter 1). Before he departs from them Jesus opens their minds to understand that what was written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms, had to be fulfilled. This is reminiscent of his opening of the scriptures to the travellers to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13–27). Luke does not specify what the Father has promised but explains it as 'power from on high', a reference to the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:4–5, 2:16–17). Jesus urges the disciples to wait and then he blesses them, after which he disappears from their view. This promise and blessing has a calming effect on the group. The disciples return joyfully to Jerusalem where they worship in the temple, continually blessing God.

Interpreting the Word

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are attributed to the same author and therefore have a unique relationship. Luke was thought to be a second-generation Christian, a physician and a companion of Paul. Luke shows clear intent as he investigates the life and works of Jesus. His purpose is to evangelise non-Christians. His message provides an account of the life of Jesus and the theology of salvation and aims at drawing more people to Christ. This contributed to the expansion of the Christian movement.

The ascension takes place forty days after Easter. The disciples are still struggling with the effects of Jesus' crucifixion and coming to terms with his resurrection. These events triggered a roller-coaster of emotions, from being afraid to being jubilant. Now, to top it all, Jesus does not stay long. Once again his followers feel alone and scared. For some three years they had received personal direction from Jesus and now, left without a leader, they experience loss and bewilderment. But Jesus had spoken words of reassurance and direction: '*...I am going to send you what my Father has promised, but stay...*' (v. 49).

Jesus does not leave them in doubt. He gives them direction and a commission. Provision comes in the form of the Pentecostal gift, power from the Holy Spirit. Believers receive help from the Holy Spirit to aid them in their missionary directive. To embark on a mission without this is

impossible, for believers cannot witness or serve God except through the power of the Holy Spirit (Philippians 4:13).

Jesus also blesses the disciples with God's protection. This blessing grants them the necessary peace to return to Jerusalem where they continue worshipping joyfully. Confusion and worry are turned to joy.

Luke started his Gospel account of the ministry of Jesus with Zechariah's blessing (1:67–80) and ends with a blessing as Jesus leaves this world (Luke 24:50).

Acts 1:3 and Ephesians 1:20 allude to the risen Christ and the many witnesses as proof of his resurrection. Luke goes further as he discusses the assurance that Jesus gave to the worried disciples: *'I am going to send you what my Father has promised...'* (v. 49).

Jesus' words to the disciples bring comfort to them and also to us today. It is our assurance that we are not alone and that Jesus did not forsake them nor us but sends the Holy Spirit as our helper, the *paraclete*, the one who comes alongside us to help us in all areas of our lives. We receive the same blessing, commission and empowerment as the disciples did in the commission to witness 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Our charge is therefore not selective but inclusive of all people, places or countries.

Jesus made clear reference to the past - the Law, the prophets, and the psalms. For the present and the future, he appoints his followers to be 'witnesses' and gives them clear instructions. He sends them on their way with a blessing, the same blessing that resulted in joy and worship of the ascended Christ. The disciples are, then, an example to us in our faith journey. Believers should be ready for the return of the ascended Christ, who will return in the same way that he went to heaven. In the meantime, we are to live a life of joyful worship as we wait on the return and promises of Jesus.

Preaching the Word

Themes from these Scripture readings should focus on the ascension of Jesus. We should be aware of the possibility of this important day being lost to our liturgical calendar. Concerted efforts to commemorate this event by means of a service in the early morning or evening may assist parishioners who struggle to keep up with the demands of work.

Sub-themes relate to the supremacy of Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father and the important work of the Holy Spirit in discipleship.

Luke puts the past and present into perspective. Jesus was the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Luke also draws attention to the Psalms, which sing the praises of the Lord Yahweh, the saviour of the world. This perspective on the present reminds us of the ascended Jesus who is exalted as ruler and King over the earth.

We have the proclamation of Jesus' position as seated on high, not only as ruler but also as intercessor for us in the presence of God the Almighty. Luke stressed that all of these (the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus) took place

for our salvation so that we might live and have abundant life. Jesus' ascension blesses us so that we may be a blessing to the world and a witness to the Good News.

We read that Jesus gives his blessing and asks his disciples to wait. Just so he calls us to wait. Why should we wait? What should we wait for? We should not attempt ministry in our own power. Jesus tells us to wait for what his Father promised. Jesus, in obedience to God, sends the Holy Spirit to help us in ministry and service.

So Luke highlights the importance of obedience in waiting, and he gives us guidance on how to worship with great joy. Daily struggles and hardships that relate to economic, health or family challenges tend to steal our joy. These stifle our worship and cause conflict in our bearing witness to the goodness of God. We therefore preach to encourage our people to latch on to the joy of the disciples. We remind ourselves of the reason Jesus went to heaven. We also put our trust in the work of the Holy Spirit.

We reflect on the following:

- Do we feel the need to control everything around us, yet claim that Jesus, seated at the right hand of God, is the Lord and Messiah of our lives?
- Do we feel powerless in spite of having the Holy Spirit, who is all-powerful?
- Do we praise God and declare his goodness but lack the joy of our salvation?

Living the Word

Jesus calls us to be patient as we wait for his second coming. This creates some expectation, which can waiver because of our impatience; therefore, we encourage one another so that all may stand firm until he comes again. We live in faith knowing that Jesus overcame through suffering. He is glorified; therefore we who die in Christ will inherit the same glory if we persevere.

Continue to witness in spirit and truth to our brothers and sisters, especially those who are themselves suffering or poor in spirit. Trust the Holy Spirit to come alongside believers and continue the ministry of Jesus here on earth.

We do not have to succumb to fear, because we know Jesus did not leave us to our own devices but left us in the loving embrace of the Holy Spirit. We are encouraged to explore our commitment to mission; however we understand that. At heart it is to *'make disciples of all nations...'* (Matthew 28:18–20).

Liturgical suggestions

The liturgy and service today should reflect the atmosphere of a joyous feast. Involvement of young persons, liturgical dancers and a band could set the tone of celebration and inclusivity. Assign families to present the offertory and to bring the elements of the Eucharist to the priest or to assist with the readings. The involvement of people of different ages and cultural groups speaks to the reign of Christ over all, young and old, from every nation and culture.

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Word and Life for the 7th Sunday of Easter – 9 May 2027

Abiaaza Kibirige

Texts

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9–13

John 17:6–19

Introduction

The readings for this Sunday highlight God's call to individuals into God's mission. Acts shows Peter's leadership and the choice of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot. The psalmist, on the other hand, outlines two kinds of lives; the life that is in harmony with God and the disrespectful life that ignores God. John's first letter reminds us the foundation of faith that leads to the certainty of eternal life in Jesus. In the same breath, the Gospel is Jesus' High Priestly prayer over his disciples and those who will accept their message of salvation.

Hearing the Word

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26

The text covers the time between the Jesus' ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it was the Church's first business meeting. Surprisingly, the group of eleven people; (apostles) had grown astronomically to one hundred and twenty.

In the absence of Jesus Christ, Peter, also known as Simon (Mark 1:16–18) assumed leadership and guided the first apostolic election. The group promulgated that the contesting candidates must have witnessed Jesus' ministry from baptism to ascension. The meeting settled on two candidates: Joseph Barsabas Justus and Matthias. They cast lots which was not strange as they believed in God's participation in the venture. Ultimately, Matthias was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot who had not only betrayed Jesus but also committed suicide (Matthew 27:5).

Psalm 1

Psalm 1 commences with the holiness and joy of a righteous person (vv1–3). The holy individual spends time reading God's word and seeking ways of implementing it so as to honour God's name. And (vv 4–5) exemplifies the sinfulness and misery of a wicked person.

V4: links the ungodly to chaff and husks which are thrown away in the process of cleaning the seeds. Chaff is symbolic of faithlessness and worthlessness. The ungodly person keeps drifting away from the main because he is not anchored into God's truth.

V 6: is a summary of the two lives; *“for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish”*. Total extermination of the ungodly is guaranteed.

1 John 5:9–13

John's first letter was to banish the doubts that the gnostics had cultivated among the Christians of the day. The Christians were beginning to doubt Jesus Christ's nature as Son of God and his work and work as healer and mediator between God and humankind.

God had clearly promulgated that Jesus Christ is His Son both at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16, 17) and at Jesus' Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5).

The Church has a duty to banishing errors. As faith is a virtue that keeps spreading, the growth needs to be guided and guarded so that the original foundation doesn't get eroded.

John concluded the portion under discussion by stating the important position that Jesus occupies in the believers. The Living Bible Translation puts it more convincingly; *“I have written this to you who believe in the Son of God so that you may know you have eternal life”* (1 John 5:13, LB).

John 17:6–19

The Gospel presents Jesus' High Priestly prayer which profoundly offers an insight into Jesus' relationship with his disciples and the mission ahead of them. Immediately after praying for Himself in verses 1–5, he prayed for his disciples in verses 6–19.

Jesus was aware that his physical absence would create a vacuum. He thus dedicated them to God's constant safe keeping.

The disciples' lives were going to witness for Jesus' ways and presence.

Vv. 11: *“... keep them in thy name ... that they may be one, as we are one”*. Jesus interceded for harmony, love and unity among His disciples. It is sad that the Church today is at war among believers!

V13: *“... that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.”* To have joy, Jesus' disciples had to abide in Him. The parable of the “True vine” in the earlier chapter 15 of John operates very well in this instance. The disciples' joy was in Jesus and so he prayed for them.

V14: *“I have given them thy word ...”* God's word is God's instructions and guidance of those who have eternal life. The Word was to assist them to navigate the world without Jesus' physical presence. John's Gospel is clear about the Word; *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (John 1:1,RSV). To John the Word was what Jesus was, did and indeed Jesus was God's revelation to humankind. Psalm 33:6 affirms *“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made”*. Since the Word creates, then the Word must maintain and enrich the created.

V17: “*Sanctify them in the truth ...*” The disciples were set apart by Jesus Who cleansed them and made them holy. And God’s word continuously purified their minds and hearts. How does God’s word purify the believers? It points out waywardness, prompts repentance, restores relationship with Jesus Christ and guides the disciples into truth.

V18: “*I have sent them into the world...*” The disciples were going to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13–16). They were going to influence the world and not to be influenced by the world. Jesus’ prayer was grafting them into himself and God the Father, and soon they were going to receive the Holy Spirit – God’s power at work in the world.

Interpreting the Word

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26

Peter emerges as the leader of the group and guides them through the process of replacing Judas Iscariot. The qualifications for election are articulated in verses 21–22. Two people contested and Mathias joined the eleven.

Psalm 1 depicts two persons who lead different kinds of lives. Vv1–3: narrates the life of a righteous person who constantly follows God’s ways. Vv 4–5, outline the disastrous life of a wicked person. V 6 sums the end of both lives; the righteous one to God’s fellowship and the wicked to total extermination.

1 John 5:9–13 and 1 John as a whole, was written to bring people back to the right faith during the disturbances of gnosticism. The portion at hand is emphasizing the relationship of God and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And verse 12 strongly brings it out; “*He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life*” emphasizes God’s testimony about Jesus as His Son. Knowledge of experience of Jesus Christ is the basis of faith. Therefore, eternal life is both a present reality and a future promise. Faith in Jesus Christ must be lived out by the Christians through our lifestyles that must witness to the continuous victory of the Risen and Ascended Christ.

John 17:6–19 is centered on Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, commonly known as the High Priestly prayer. The prayer shows Jesus’ profound concern for the life of the disciples in His absence. Prior to the prayer, Jesus had laboured to clearly show the disciples the intrinsic nature and character of God. And also, that Jesus was pushing forward God’s mission. Therefore, Jesus and God are one. Jesus foresaw the clash of worldly standards and the disciples’ mission. He, therefore, prayed for them not to be influenced by the world but to influence the world that it also becomes like them, people owned by God.

Jesus prayed for their protection and preservation in unity.

Preaching the Word

The texts presented this Sunday allow the preacher to utilize all of them at the same time. As presented, the Acts lesson shows grounded disciples who took the matter of replacing Judas Iscariot without panicking or frustration. Peter’s leadership was unquestionable and the standards set for one to qualify to contest were clear and to the point. The

Christian community was in her infancy and the person to replace Judas needed to be credible. He must have witnessed Jesus’ ministry from baptism to ascension. Such a person would testify to the truth other than being ambitious and promoting self-interest. And indeed Mathias could testify to that truth. He was fully anchored in the objectives of Jesus Christ.

The disciples were able to achieve the goal of Jesus Christ’s Mission because they sought God’s guidance; “*Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place*”, reflected and indeed, God guided them.

The theme of “rooted in faith” is witnessed in Psalm 1 with the blessedness of a person who walks in accordance with the word of God (Proverbs 4:14). The righteous is anchored in God’s word like a tree that is continuously nourished because of its proximity to water. The righteous can withstand harsh conditions. In contrast, the ungodly perishes.

Still on the theme of “anchored in Christ”, 1 John insists that those who believe in the Son of God have eternal life. This fits into Jesus’ High Priestly prayer; profoundly rooting his disciples into the truth of God’s word. The truth guides, guards and revitalizes the believers. The preacher must encourage the congregation to become signs of lives that live out God’s call through Christ who provides, guides and restores His followers.

Living the Word

Today’s Christians are invited to be faithful believers, anchored into prayer, truth and rightful living. At the time of writing, South Africa is watching the two commissions set up by the state president to deal with the rot in the South African police service and the judiciary. Surprisingly, the corruption, fraud, money laundering and murder are alleged to have been committed by people with Christian names and some confessing Christians. Like in Acts, the Church and the nation must seek God’s guidance in discerning leadership so that integrity becomes the norm in homes, Institutions of all services and communities.

The Psalm calls upon us to be rooted in God’s word and thus assisted to overcome injustices. 1 John helps us to be assured that our confidence and hope rest in Jesus Christ and not in circumstances which keep changing. And in the Gospel, Jesus sent His disciples into the world to steer unity, justice and reconciliation that reflect His truth and bring hope to anyone or group that is hurting.

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Liturgy for Pentecost Sunday – 16 May 2027

David Sylvester

Texts

Acts 2:1–21
Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 104:24–35
Romans 8:22–27
John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

Introduction – The Gift of the Holy Spirit

Pentecost Sunday – the fiftieth day after Easter – is the feast of the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the Church, and one of the three great festivals of the Christian year. On this day the community that had been locked in an upper room in fear broke open onto the streets of Jerusalem, speaking in the languages of every nation gathered in the city. What began as a handful of Galileans became, in a single morning, a movement that would circle the globe.

The readings appointed for this day form a remarkable constellation. Acts 2:1–21 tells the story from inside the event – wind, fire, and speech that crossed every barrier. Ezekiel 37:1–14 reaches back to the prophet standing in a valley of dry bones, hearing the promise that the breath of God can raise even the dead. Psalm 104:24–35 sings of the Creator Spirit who renews the face of the earth. Romans 8:22–27 locates us honestly in the groaning present, sustained by a Spirit who prays within us when our own words fail. And John 15:26 – 16:4–15 gives us Jesus' own promise: the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, is coming, and when he comes, he will guide you into all truth.

Together these texts invite the congregation into a Spirit-shaped understanding of the world: the dry bones are not the last word; the groaning creation is not abandoned; the locked room does not stay locked. On Pentecost Sunday in South Africa – a land that has known both the fire of liberation and the fatigue of unfulfilled hope – the Spirit's coming is not a pious memory but a present, disruptive, life-giving reality.

Gathering in God's name

The congregation gathers. Where possible, the church is adorned in red – the colour of Pentecost fire. Worshippers may be given a small red ribbon, candle, or card as they enter as a symbol of the Spirit's flame. Ministers enter in procession. A processional hymn is sung (see Music). When the procession reaches the front, a moment of silence is kept before the Call to Worship.

Call to Worship

Based on Acts 2 and Psalm 104.

Leader: Come, Holy Spirit – fill the hearts of your faithful people,

People: And kindle in us the fire of your love.

Leader: You send forth your Spirit and things are created;

People: You renew the face of the earth.

Leader: On the day of Pentecost you poured out your Spirit on all people –

People: Sons and daughters prophesied; old and young saw visions and dreamed dreams.

Leader: The Spirit of truth has come to guide us into all truth.

People: Come, Holy Spirit. We open our lives to you.

All: Come, Lord, and fill this place. Let your breath move among us as it moved over the face of the deep. Let your fire fall. Let your people live. To you be glory, this day and for ever. Amen.

Act of Penitence

The minister addresses the congregation. The red adornments may be momentarily set aside as a gesture of honest self-examination before God.

We gather on the day of fire, and yet we know ourselves to be people who have resisted the Spirit's movement – in our lives, in our church, and in our world. We have been content with empty forms when the Spirit called us to new life. We have chosen the safety of the locked room over the risk of Pentecost. Let us bring this honestly before God.

A brief silence is kept.

All: Gracious God, we confess that we have grieved your Spirit. We have quenched the fire of your calling with the water of our fear. We have stopped our ears to the cries of those whom your Spirit longs to reach through us. We have preferred the familiar bones of our comfort to the breath of new life. Forgive us, revive us, and restore to us the joy of your salvation. Amen.

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

The minister pronounces absolution, or – where custom requires – an assurance of forgiveness.

Almighty God, the Father of all mercies, who sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins and his Spirit to be our Advocate and Comforter: he forgives you all your sins, restores you to the life of his Spirit, and strengthens you for the days ahead. Go in peace. Amen.

Proclaiming the Word of God

The following reading order is suggested: Ezekiel 37:1–14 (Old Testament), Psalm 104:24–35 (sung or read responsively), Romans 8:22–27 (Epistle), Acts 2:1–21 (as a second New Testament reading or in place of the Old Testament), and John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15 (Gospel). The

lectionary allows for Acts to serve as the primary non-Gospel reading. The preacher should determine which texts to read in full, ensuring the Gospel is always included. A homily or sermon follows the readings.

Prayer for Illumination

Before the readings, the minister or a lay leader prays.

Come, Holy Spirit: breathe on these words as you breathed on the valley of dry bones and they lived. Come as you came on that morning in Jerusalem – not gently, not quietly, but with the force of a rushing wind and the brightness of fire. Break open what has been closed in us. Give us ears to hear what we have not dared to hear, and courage to live what we cannot yet imagine. We ask this through Jesus Christ, who promised you would come and who does not break his promises. **Amen**

Responding to the Word of God

The Nicene Creed or Apostles' Creed is said. Intercessions follow. The following versicle and response may structure the petitions, invoking the Spirit across the concerns of the congregation and the world.

Versicle for Intercessions

Leader: Spirit of the living God, breathe on your Church –

People: **That your people may be bold to proclaim your name.**

Leader: Spirit of the living God, breathe on your world –

People: **That justice may roll down like water and righteousness like a never-failing stream.**

Leader: Spirit of the living God, breathe on all who are as dry bones –

People: **The grieving, the broken, the weary, and the forgotten.**

Leader: Spirit of the living God, breathe on this congregation –

People: **That we may know what it is to be truly alive in you.**

Specific intercessions follow. At the conclusion:

Holy Spirit, you intercede for us with groans that words cannot express. You know what we cannot articulate and ask what we cannot ask for ourselves. Receive these prayers – spoken and unspoken – and let your perfect will be done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Celebrating at the table

Sharing of the Peace

The minister introduces the Peace.

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit crossed every barrier that divided human beings – language, nationality, age, gender. Every wall the disciples had built to protect themselves was blown open. Before we come to the table, we share the peace of Christ – not the peace of people who have no differences,

but the peace of a Spirit who reconciles what was divided and calls us one.

Leader: The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People: **And also with you.**

The congregation greets one another warmly. A hymn may be sung as the table is prepared (see Music)

Invitation to Communion

When the table is prepared, the minister invites the congregation.

This is the table of the one who said: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever.' That Advocate is here. That promise is kept. Come to this table sustained not by your own strength but by the Spirit who prays within you. Come weary and come wondering. Come with your groaning and your questions. Come, because the one who set this table is the one who breathes new life into dry bones.

Come – all who are thirsty. Come, and drink of the living water. This is the body of Christ, broken for you. This is the blood of Christ, poured out for the life of the world.

The Eucharistic Prayer and distribution of Communion follow according to the rite customary to the congregation

Sending

Post communion Prayer

After Communion, the minister or the congregation prays together.

All: Lord God, you have fed us with the body and blood of your Son and filled us with the gift of your Holy Spirit. As we leave this place, send us out in the power of that Spirit – to love and serve the world you made, to speak of what we have seen and heard, and to bear witness to the life that death could not hold. Let the fire that fell on the first Pentecost burn still in us: warming what is cold, lighting what is dark, and setting free what has been bound. Through Jesus Christ, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Sentence of Scripture

The minister reads one of the following sentences. The congregation may respond.

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."
Acts 2:17 (NIV)

Or:

"The Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth."
John 16:13 (NIV)

Or:

"The Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."
Romans 8:26 (NIV)

Benediction

The minister faces the congregation.

Go: the same Spirit who swept over the face of the waters at creation, who raised these dry bones to life, who fell like fire on the disciples in Jerusalem – that Spirit goes with you. You do not leave alone. You do not serve in your own strength. You are the bearers of a living flame.

Go into the streets, into your homes, into the places where hope has run dry. Let the wind of God blow through you. Let the fire of God burn in you. Let the breath of God speak through you.

And the blessing of God Almighty – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – rest upon you, fill you, and send you out; now and for ever.

Amen.

A recessional hymn is sung (see Music). The ministers depart. The flame, if used, may be carried out last as a symbol of the Spirit going with the people into the world.

Music

Processional / Opening

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire – *Veni Creator Spiritus*, tr. John Cosin. The ancient Pentecost hymn; unsurpassed for this occasion.

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart – George Croly. A quieter, more personal invocation; works well if the mood is one of yearning.

Fire of God, titanic Spirit – R.E. Havergal / modern arrangement. Energetic and vivid; excellent for congregations that sing with vigour.

During the Liturgy of the Word

Breathe on me, Breath of God – Edwin Hatch. Contemplative and deeply appropriate before or after the sermon.

O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us – Bessie Porter Head. Captures both the longing and the expectation of the day.

At the Preparation of the Table / Peace

There's a wind a-blowing (Holy Spirit, come) – Taizé / African spiritual. Works beautifully with a South African congregation; accessible and participatory.

Like the murmur of the dove's song – Carl P. Daw Jr. Trinitarian in structure; draws the Eucharist and the Spirit together with precision.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me – Daniel Iverson. Brief, singable, and carries enormous weight in a gathered congregation.

Communion

Come down, O Love divine – Bianco da Siena, tr. R.F. Littledale. One of the great Spirit-Communion hymns of the tradition.

Abide with me – Henry Francis Lyte. For more contemplative congregations; acknowledges the human groaning of Romans 8.

Recessional

Go forth for God – J.R. Peacey. A strong sending hymn; fit for the Pentecost commission to the world.

We are marching in the light of God (Siyahamba) – South African traditional. Irresistible and right for Pentecost; the whole congregation can move to it.

Word and Life for Pentecost Sunday – 16 May 2027

David Sylvester

Texts

Acts 2:1–21
Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 104:24–35
Romans 8:22–27
John 15:26–27; 16:4–15

Introduction

Pentecost falls deep in the South African autumn, when the air over the Highveld carries the smell of woodsmoke and the Cape mountains are streaked with winter rain. It is the fiftieth day of Easter, the ancient Jewish feast of weeks now claimed by the Church as the birthday of the Spirit. The readings gather around a single overwhelming question: *Can these dry bones live?* From Ezekiel's valley of death to the locked upper room in Jerusalem, from the groaning of a suffering creation to the silence of wordless prayer, the Spirit arrives not as a gentle suggestion but as a force that raises the dead, reverses Babel, and prays for us that which we cannot pray for ourselves.

Hearing the Word

Acts 2:1–21 – The Arrival of the Spirit

Luke's account of Pentecost is carefully constructed to echo the great theophany traditions of the Hebrew Bible. A theophany (from Greek *theophaneia*, "appearance of God") is a temporary, sensible, and often sudden manifestation of deity to humanity, appearing in forms like human figures, fire, or nature phenomena. It serves to reveal God's character, presence, and divine, and is seen in the Bible as a tangible interaction rather than just an abstract concept. "A violent wind" recalls the *ruach* that swept over the formless deep in Genesis 1, and the fire that rested on each person echoes the pillar of fire that led Israel through the wilderness. *Ruach* (pronounced roo-akh) is the Hebrew word for "spirit," "breath," or "wind," appearing nearly 400 times in the Old Testament to signify both physical breath and the divine presence. It often represents God's animating power and personal presence, representing the unseen, powerful, and life-sustaining breath of God. The Greek word for "tongues" (*glossai*) is deliberately double-edged: tongues of flame and tongues of speech. The effect is immediate and public – devout Jews from every nation heard in their own dialects. This is not ecstatic glossolalia but intelligible proclamation, suggesting that the Spirit's primary gift is communication, not private rapture.

Peter's sermon draws heavily on Joel 2:28–32, a passage that would have been well known in Second Temple Judaism as a promise for "the last days." Luke signals that those days have now arrived. Joel's vision is remarkably democratic – sons and daughters, old and young, male and female slaves

are all included. In a society structured by age, gender and status, this is a radical levelling. The phrase "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21) becomes the hinge on which the rest of Acts turns.

The gift of tongues reverses the curse of Babel (Genesis 11), where humanity's speech was scattered and divided. At Pentecost the scattering is undone, not by imposing a single language but by multiplying understanding across languages. This is an important nuance for South Africa, where the violent histories of Afrikaans, English and the country's indigenous languages are still very much alive.

Ezekiel 37:1–14 – Valley of Dry Bones

Written during the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is among the most theatrically vivid passages in all of scripture. The Hebrew word *ruach* appears no fewer than ten times in this short passage, translated variously as "wind," "breath," and "spirit" – a deliberate ambiguity that resists our tendency to separate the natural from the divine. When the Lord asks, "*Can these bones live?*" (v. 3) the prophet's answer is profoundly humble: "Sovereign Lord, you alone know." It is not a statement of doubt but of deference before mystery.

The vision has two distinct moments: first the bones come together with sound and sinew, and then the breath enters and they stand. Resurrection, Ezekiel suggests, is a process. The phrase "*I will put my Spirit in you and you will live*" (v. 14) is explicitly interpreted as the restoration of Israel from exile – it is primarily a communal and political promise, not simply a personal spiritual experience. This grounding in historical circumstance speaks directly to communities in South Africa who know what it is to live in a kind of social death.

Psalm 104:24–35 – The Spirit and Creation

This great creation psalm draws the Spirit into the widest possible frame: the renewal of the earth itself. Verse 30 is the liturgical and theological anchor: "*When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.*" The Spirit is not merely an inner experience but the animating force of all that exists. The psalmist moves without embarrassment between cosmic wonder and personal praise, between the leviathan that plays in the sea and the God who trembles the mountains into smoke.

The closing verses (33–35) with their vow of perpetual praise provide a natural liturgical structure for Pentecost worship. The deletion of sinners and the wicked in verse 35 has troubled interpreters – it may be heard as anticipating the purifying fire of the Spirit rather than as a curse, following the broader logic of the psalm which sees the breath of God as both creative and consuming.

Romans 8:22–27 – The Spirit Intercedes

Paul's pneumatology in Romans 8 is remarkable for what it admits: that we do not always know how to pray. The groaning (*stenazomen*) of creation, the groaning of believers who have the "first fruits of the Spirit," and the groaning of the Spirit itself form a trilogy of longing. The Spirit does not override human weakness but enters it, praying "with wordless groans" (v. 26) that transcend speech. This is a deeply incarnational understanding of the Spirit – one not of triumphant power but of solidarity in suffering.

For South African congregations who pray week after week for situations that show little sign of change – persistent poverty, gender-based violence, the slow pace of justice – this passage offers not a quick solution but a profound theological companionship. The Spirit does not exempt us from longing; it prays our longing alongside us.

John 15:26–27; 16:4–15 – The Advocate

John's farewell discourse uses a distinctive term for the Spirit: *Parakletos* (Paraclete) – variously translated Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate, or Helper. The legal connotation of Advocate is significant here: the Spirit will "prove the world wrong" (16:8) about sin, righteousness and judgment. This forensic language suggests that the Spirit is not merely a subjective inner warmth but an active agent in the world's moral reckoning. The Spirit testifies on behalf of Jesus and, crucially, guides believers "into all truth" (16:13) – not all doctrine, but all truth, a phrase that invites humility and ongoing discernment rather than dogmatic closure.

The promise that the Spirit "will tell you what is yet to come" (16:13) has sometimes been misread as predictive prophecy. In context it refers to the Spirit's role in helping the disciples interpret the meaning of Jesus's death and resurrection as history unfolds. This ongoing interpretive work of the Spirit is central to the Church's life in every age.

Interpreting the Word

The original contexts of these texts are strikingly varied. Ezekiel speaks to exiles in Babylon who had concluded, with good reason, that their national and spiritual life was over – "*our bones are dried up and our hope is gone*" (37:11). Paul writes to a Roman congregation navigating life under empire, caught between the promise of the gospel and the daily evidence of a world not yet redeemed. The Johannine community, by the time the farewell discourse was composed, had likely experienced the trauma of expulsion from the synagogue and was wrestling with the absence of Jesus. Luke's Pentecost narrative addresses a community still huddled together after the crucifixion, uncertain whether to stay or scatter.

What these contexts share is a situation of profound in-between-ness: between promise and fulfilment, between death and life, between absence and presence. The Spirit, in every text, is precisely the one who inhabits that in-between. This is a crucial hermeneutical insight for South African congregations who know well what it is to live between the Freedom Charter's promises and daily reality, between the "born-free" generation's hopes and the weight of structural inequality.

The democratising thrust of the Pentecost narrative deserves particular attention in our context. Joel's vision, quoted by Peter, insists on the inclusion of women, the young, the old and the enslaved in the prophetic gift. This was countercultural in the first century and remains so in many of our church communities and in South African society. The Spirit does not respect the gatekeeping of race, class, gender or age. Where congregations and denominations continue to restrict the ministry of women, or where youth voices are marginalised in church governance, Pentecost poses a direct challenge.

The Romans 8 passage offers a vital corrective to any triumphalist reading of Pentecost. The Spirit is not primarily the gift that makes life easy or prayer effortless. Rather, the Spirit is the gift that makes faithful perseverance possible in conditions of suffering and uncertainty. In congregations carrying the weight of unemployment, illness, family breakdown and civic despair, this is not a second-best pneumatology – it may be the most important thing the Church can say about the Spirit.

Ezekiel's vision also invites reflection on the relationship between *communal* and *individual* experience of the Spirit. The bones in the valley are not separate persons seeking private spiritual experiences – they are "the whole house of Israel" (37:11). The Spirit's work is to reconstitute a people, to restore social bonds torn apart by violence, exile and injustice. South African churches, often struggling with the tension between a personalised gospel and the demands of public life, might find in this text a mandate for community healing that goes beyond individual conversion.

Preaching the Word

Several possible directions suggest themselves from these rich texts, and preachers will no doubt find others.

1. *The Spirit as the God of Reversals.* A sermon could trace the reversal motif through the readings: Babel reversed (Acts 2), exile reversed (Ezekiel 37), creation's decay reversed (Psalm 104), hopeless groaning transformed (Romans 8), absence replaced by Advocate (John 16). What reversals do we most need – as individuals, as congregations, as a nation – and how might the Spirit be at work in them, perhaps more slowly and quietly than we would like? Preachers might invite the congregation to name a valley of dry bones in their own community and to sit with the question God puts to Ezekiel: "Can these bones live?"
2. *Praying When We Don't Know How.* Romans 8:26 is one of the most honest verses in the New Testament. A sermon grounded here could explore the experience of prayer fatigue – of repeated intercessions for situations that don't change, of wordlessness before God. What does it mean to trust that the Spirit prays in us even when we run out of words? This connects with the contemplative tradition of silent prayer, with the practice of lament in the Psalms, and with the reality that many South African believers carry a weight of unanswered prayer that can erode faith if not named from the pulpit.

3. *Speaking So Everyone Can Hear.* The Pentecost miracle is not that the disciples spoke in tongues nobody understood – it is that everyone heard in their own language. A sermon could explore what it means for the Church to communicate in ways that reach across barriers of language, culture, class and generation. In a country with eleven official languages and enormous cultural diversity, the question of who feels included in our worship and preaching is a Spirit-question. Who is not hearing the gospel in their own language? Who is excluded from the prophetic gift?
4. *The Spirit in Public Life.* John 16:8 speaks of the Spirit proving the world wrong about sin, righteousness and judgment. A bolder sermon might explore the Spirit as a political force – not partisan, but prophetic. In a South Africa where corruption, gender-based violence and the legacy of apartheid continue to disfigure public life, the Spirit who “guides into all truth” is not confined to private piety. How might congregations, guided by the Spirit, become agents of civic and moral renewal? This connects Pentecost with the prophetic witness of South Africans like Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu, who discerned the Spirit’s call amid political crisis.
5. *Breath, Body and Belonging.* A more poetic sermon might stay close to the imagery of breath (ruach/pneuma) across the texts – the breath at creation, the breath that raised the bones, the breath that enables prayer, the breath that inspired prophets. In autumn South Africa, when the land breathes differently, there are rich possibilities for contextual reflection on what it means to receive the breath of the living God into lungs that know dust and drought and winter.

Living the Word

Pentecost is not primarily a remembrance of something that happened once in Jerusalem – it is a claim about who the Spirit is and what the Spirit continues to do. Congregations might be invited this week to identify one valley of dry bones in their community – a broken relationship, a struggling neighbourhood, a seemingly hopeless situation – and to commit to being present there, not with easy answers, but with the patience and prayer of people who trust in the God who raises the dead. Individuals might be encouraged to practise the “groaning prayer” of Romans 8 – sitting in wordless intercession for something too heavy for speech, trusting that the Spirit translates. Churches might consider how Pentecost Sunday could mark a commitment to more intentional welcome across the divisions of language, culture and generation that still fracture South African church life.

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 104 and Acts 2)

- Leader:** How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all.
- People:** The earth is full of your creatures.
- Leader:** When you send your Spirit, they are created;
- People:** You renew the face of the ground.
- Leader:** In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
- All:** Come, Holy Spirit. Renew your Church. Renew our lives. Renew this land. Amen.

Opening Invocation

God of wind and fire, breath of creation, Spirit of the living Christ – you brooded over the first waters, you breathed life into dry bones, you fell on frightened disciples and sent them into the streets singing. Breathe on us now. Fill what is empty. Kindle what has grown cold. Open what we have closed. Make us your witnesses in this city, this township, this village, this nation. Come, Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Dismissal and Benediction

Go into the world as people filled with the Spirit of the living God – the Spirit who raised the dead, who reverses Babel, who prays your wordless groaning, who guides you into all truth. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Suggested Hymns and Songs

- “Come, Holy Spirit” (Veni Sancte Spiritus)
- “Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow”
- “Breathe on Me, Breath of God”
- “Like the Murmur of the Dove’s Song”
- “Siya Hamba” (We Are Marching in the Light of God) – apt in the South African context, connecting the Spirit’s movement with the march for justice
- “Thuma Mina” (Send Me, Jesus) – for use at the dismissal.

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Introduction to the Season after Pentecost

Introduction to the Season

The Season after Pentecost begins with Pentecost 1 (also known as Trinity Sunday) and ends this year on Pentecost 27, which marks 'Reign of Christ' Sunday (also known as 'Christ the King' Sunday). On Trinity Sunday the gospel reading is from John 3:1-17 and its record of the conversation when Nicodemus visited Jesus under cover of darkness. For the rest of the Season the gospel readings are generally from Mark. The exceptions are the five Sundays between Pentecost 10 and 14, which focus on John chapter 6. Also, on All Saints (1 November) and Reign of Christ Sunday (24 November), the gospel readings are from John.

On Trinity Sunday the Christian community reflects on the fullness of its understanding of God, whom we have encountered as Creator/Father, in Jesus the Son, and also in the Person of the abiding and enabling Spirit. For the rest of the season the Church explores the way in which the salvation that has been established in the life and ministry of Jesus, culminating in his passion, death and resurrection, is to be lived out in our world in the power of the Spirit poured out on all people. This season sees the Church, launched on her world-wide mission at Pentecost, continuing her pilgrimage between the times. God's people move on in hope from the Cross and Resurrection, in the light of the Ascension, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

This is a long and varied Season that also offers sequences of readings from books such as 1 & 2 Samuel, Proverbs, Job, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James and Hebrews. Besides the ongoing readings from Mark these shorter sequences from other books raise the possibility of short sermon series based on such books during the season. These sequences can be clearly seen in the grid below, where all the readings for the season are set out.

The Semi-continuous and Related tracks – and the choice to be made

The season of Sundays after Pentecost is unique in that RCL provides **two sets** of First Readings (Old Testament with associated Psalm) for each Sunday of the season. Then the two readings from the New Testament accompany whichever set of Old Testament passages is being followed in the congregation.

The first set of Old Testament passages (First Reading with Psalm), known as the 'semi-continuous' track, offers a number of series of semi-continuous readings from books of the Hebrew Bible. This offers the preacher the opportunity, over a few successive Sundays, to work through passages from the Pentateuch, the historical books, a particular prophet, or one of the wisdom books, etc. In this way a congregation can become familiar with the ways in which God's relationship with the people under the Sinai Covenant was lived out in practice or, in many cases, not lived out as God intended.

In the alternate 'related' track of First Readings with Psalms the First Reading is *thematically* related to the Gospel reading for the day.

It is recommended that ministers serving congregations should, before the season begins, decide (perhaps in consultation with liturgists and other assisting preachers) which track is to be followed for the duration of the season. Mixing the two tracks - jumping from one to the other - is not recommended.

Therefore, in this volume of *Word and Worship* we provide exegetical and hermeneutical comment on ALL SIX the readings listed for the day in RCL.

Special Sundays during the Season

Several special individual Sundays occur during this part of the Church Year (see the list at the end of this Introduction). These can provide an appropriate additional focus for the sermon on such days. The observance of these special emphases can also be effected within the liturgy without necessarily being the focus for the sermon on that day. It is also possible to include other speakers to provide a focus at a suitable moment during the service. A visual display on the day could also effectively draw people's attention to the cause.

The voice of the gospel writer should not be drowned out by the need to address various special observances. At the same time, the texts of RCL will often give the opportunity for such issues to be addressed on other Sundays during the year.

Some special observances to be aware of during this Season:

16 June Youth Day.

20 June: World Refugee Day

12 July: Sea Sunday

4 October: World Communion Sunday

31 October: Reformation Sunday and Bible Sunday

1 November: All Saints Day

11 November: Remembrance Day

1 December: World AIDS Day.

The Voice of the Evangelist in the Season

(See also the fuller article on Mark's Gospel in this volume.)

Mark's gospel is generally regarded as the earliest of the four canonical gospels. After the Resurrection of Jesus many of his followers looked forward to his return soon after the Ascension and within their own lifetime. As time passed it became increasingly urgent and necessary to have a written record of the life, deeds and words of Jesus that could be handed down to succeeding generations of Christ-followers.

Mark does not include any stories of the Nativity of Jesus but launches with a burst into the clear message, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1). There is also no elaboration as regards the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, beyond the account of the women who went to the tomb early in the morning to anoint his body with spices. Then this somewhat breathlessly urgent gospel ends abruptly, saying that the women, having encountered a young man in a white robe, fled the scene in terror and 'said nothing to anyone' (16:8).

The pastoral impact of the Season

As these texts will be read during the winter and spring in Southern Africa it is important to read them against that background. It will be cold and, in some places, wet as well. It is a time when many people across the region will be suffering discomfort from the weather and will be dependent on places of safety for accommodation and soup kitchens for food. It will be a time when many children will be going hungry to school.

Some churches observe August as a Month of Compassion. The texts for such Sundays need then also to be read through that lens, with an awareness of the oft-quoted words of Jesus regarding widows and children. It is a time for churches within every community, rural or urban, to work together to provide practical alleviation of the needs of those who live in their midst.

Basic Liturgy for the Season after Pentecost

Introduction to the Season

This is the “Green Growing Season” with each Sunday both a celebration of the Resurrection and marking a moment on the pilgrim journey of God’s people travelling ‘between the times’. While some traditions call this ‘ordinary’ Season, it is the season of learning and growing in faith. We are being taught to live out the Gospel week by week, day by day, one day at a time.

It is important also to be aware that this Season differs from the others in another respect. For each Sunday after Pentecost 2 (Trinity) RCL provides SIX readings for the day. (please note the discussion in the *Introduction to the Season* about the semi-continuous and related tracks, each providing as they do a unique duo of First Reading with associated Psalm.)

The Season after Pentecost in this Christian year extends for twenty-seven Sundays in all. It includes the Feast Day of All Saints on the 1st of November. The range of the RCL texts, the pastoral requirements of local communities, the special commemorations that are important for congregations to mark, all militate against attempting to set a single Basic Liturgy for the entire Season. Note that special Feast-day liturgies are provided for All Saints and for Reign of Christ on Pentecost 27. However, when planning the worship programme for a congregation, the development of a Basic Liturgy for any particular sermon series would help to provide some definition during the season by ensuring a continuity through the weeks of that series. The first step in the process is to recognise the importance of a clear overall plan for the Season that can help individual preachers and worship leaders to be aware of how a particular Sunday fits into the pattern that has been set up for the congregation.

Liturgical Features for the Season

The Liturgical colour

The liturgical colour for the season is green, but there are these exceptions:

- The first Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday, when the colour is traditionally white.
- The final Sunday after Pentecost, which is always the Sunday before Advent Sunday, celebrates the Reign of Christ, when the colour is also white.

Word and Life for the 1st Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity Sunday)

– 23 May 2027

James Harris

Texts

Isaiah 6:1–8
Romans 8:12–17
Psalm 29
John 3:1–17

Introduction

Trinity Sunday is always the first Sunday after Pentecost. My own impression is that after Christmas and Easter dominated, rightly so, by Jesus, then Pentecost with the necessary emphasis on the Holy Spirit, Trinity returns us the concept of the one undivided God, Father, Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler. For this reason I believe that every effort should be put into making Trinity Sunday a magnificent day of worship and praise to **the** Father. It is the Father who creates all things through the Son. It is the Father who sends the Son as his incarnate representative to procure redemption. It is the Father who also sends the Spirit at the behest of and through the Son into the world. This then is the day we honour and praise and worship with gratitude **our** God and Father. It is deliberate to highlight **both** the objective and the subjective understanding of God's revealed character.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

John 3:1–17

Obviously, none of the texts under review is explicit in articulating a Trinitarian portrait. However, I suggest that **John 3:1–17** is the nearest, so let us begin here.

Jesus, John records for us, is confronted by Nicodemus, a significant leader of the Pharisees. The way the narrative is phrased it is difficult to tell whether Nicodemus is being sincere or somewhat cynical: "We know you come from God since no one can do what you are doing unless God is present" (my paraphrasing). To which Jesus responds: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The two sentences do not, at least in an initial enquiry, correlate. Hence my question as to Nicodemus's sincerity. The narrative makes no other reference to Nicodemus's opening statement. However, Jesus offers a gentle rebuke to a man who should have known both Scripture and its interpretive history: "*You are a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*" Note here that our Lord clearly expected Nicodemus to "understand" what was meant by "the new birth" for it is an allusion to Jeremiah's prophecy about a "new heart" (see Jer. 24 and 31). Further, by addressing Nicodemus as a "teacher of Israel", Jesus was giving a compliment, yet with a barb perhaps, as if to say "you should know better" or "I expected more from you"! Jesus is not rude nor dismissive; this is wry engagement, with an eyebrow raised, as it were, as he interacts with a highly trained, and let us not forget – a somewhat inquisitive, religious leader.

You need to keep the dialogue under careful scrutiny as you read, looking for the references to the members of the Trinity – they are all there but not always easy to detect. Thus, Nicodemus's recognition that Jesus is "sent by God" suggests a distinction between Father and Son – see vs 13 and 14 where Jesus refers to himself as "son of man". Then in vs 16 and 17: "God gave/sent his only son". Earlier on in this narrative Jesus makes it clear that the new birth is an operation of the Spirit. John's portrayal of Trinitarianism reminds us that the construct is not a rigid formula but rather the mysterious interplay between the persons of the Godhead. John develops this fascinating interplay of relationships further in the thirteenth to sixteenth chapters of his Gospel, as well as in his letters (1, 2, 3 John) – which could/should be used to amplify or to illustrate this third chapter of the Gospel.

Romans 8:12–17

This section of Paul's letter to the Romans follows naturally from the content of John 3, with greater emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit. References to both Father and Son are evident, but Paul wants us to recognise the necessary work of the Spirit in holding us firm in our faith.

Paul is at pains here to remind us of the conflict between "flesh" and "spirit". He wants us to carefully note that "sin" is a dominant characteristic in all human life, even in the believer's life. If left unchecked, the believer is weakened and the old slavish mind-set, together with actions concomitant with such a dulled conscience will occur. God's Holy Spirit empowers us to rejoice in being children of God. The Spirit of Jesus reminds us that we are no-longer slaves to our own passions or subject to the influences of worldly society.

There is an interesting twist in the tail which often disturbs believers: suffering is part and parcel of walking in the Spirit. One often wonders how the "health, wealth, and prosperity gospel" became so popular considering the obvious Pauline (and Jesus') teaching that suffering is concomitant to following Jesus.

Suffering comes before glory! Paul doesn't detail this suffering, but one can glean from other passages what it could mean: misrepresentation, physical violence, physical ailments, ostracism, loss of work or status, economic hardship, sometimes even death, as well as any number of other accusations made by critics of faith. This is sobering aspect often overlooked or even discounted. Yet Paul is clear: if we believe in, and follow with glad obedience, the Triune God revealed in Jesus, then be assured suffering will happen. Equally the Spirit of Jesus enables the believer to overcome fear and to call God, "Father", confident in the saving and sustaining reality of grace and love. True doctrine and experience go together!

Isaiah 6:1–7

This is one of the great pictures of a believer caught up into a powerful experience of the very presence of God. Here is a prophet, a true servant of the Most High, who is confronted by the reality of God. The setting is the Temple, Isaiah was at worship, and against all expectations, God appears!

Look at the description: sitting on a throne, high, exalted, with seraphim honouring their Lord with words of praise and glory. Note the dominance of the term “holy” – the fundamental characteristic of God.

Isaiah is immediately struck by his own unworthiness, but it is an alienation due to the disjunct between holiness and sinfulness; between a holy God and a sinful human being. Isaiah concedes that he is part of a community which is also sinful and alienated. But then, one of the seraphim appears and touches Isaiah’s lips with a live coal: wonder of wonders, grace is experienced. Note the declaration of cleansing from guilt and granting forgiveness elicits Isaiah’s response: “*I have seen the King, the Lord Almighty*”. Should this not be the aim of all our worship? Whilst the coal is a metaphor of the thorough burning away of wrong, the reality of Isaiah’s experience highlights the force and wonder of the cleansing, forgiving grace of God, and more so God’s own presence.

Although vs 8 is not part of the pericope under review, it is an important part of the experience: worship and cleansing and renewal culminate with the divine question: “who will go?” To this Isaiah responds quickly and gladly in obedience: “Send me!”

Now what does this have to do with the Trinity? Nothing and everything! Nothing, because we need to remember that “Trinity” is about relations between the Godhead, and the term does not need to be specified to prove the point. Everything, because Isaiah is stressing the holiness and transcendence of God in relationship to a sinful creature and his corrupted environment. What the text does suggest is the need to proclaim God’s holiness and his separation (at one level) from all creation. God is not to be trifled with or diminished in any way. Let God be God.

Psalms 29

Here is a necessary case of reading the text before consulting the commentaries! The fact that commentators suggest that this Psalm was drawn from Ugaritic poetry can create a bias that the Psalm has a pantheistic or a panentheistic character. But a careful reading does not suggest any such blind idea that nature is god or god is in nature. Nature is subject to the True and Living God who created nature. The Psalmist poetically invites readers to consider God’s voice as “thunder”, booming through both human and natural environments to herald God’s reality. It is well known that both ‘pantheism’ and ‘panentheism’ as constructs are alive and well today. But the Psalmist makes his poem one of praise to the God who made nature, who controls nature – both by nature’s innate design and by God’s rightful interference at will. In this poem nature’s thunder is interpreted as the voice of God, and specifically the creative voice of God which brings into existence whatever the voice declares. Thunder is not the actual voice of God; a storm is not an expression of

the actual reality of God. These are metaphors used to give reasonable and rational explanations of an interpretation of nature’s activities in relation to God.

We must concede that there is nothing in Psalm 29 that suggests a Trinitarian character about the God who creates and uses nature for the divine purposes in history or for humankind. What the Psalm does is to remind us forcefully that God is beyond nature because God created nature and sustains it for his own purposes. What Psalm 29 does do is to highlight that the God who is over nature, is Almighty God, the One God. This God makes and sustains all creation, which ultimately finds its fulfilment in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, and Saviour of the world.

In light of the above, therefore, it is instructive to note that the Psalmist begins by a call to “ascribe” glory and honour to God and to worship “in the beauty of holiness”. Shades of Isaiah, I think?

It is out of worship that the Psalmist reflects on the voice of God being like thunder for it creates or produces things that are glorious and which remind the believer of the mighty power of God. In other words, the voice that thunders is a creative force in and of itself, because it is God’s animating word.

Preaching the Word

How then do we preach about the Trinity? I suggest we speak about God in relationship within Godself, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each in relation to the created orders: nature, history, and humanity.

Our texts all give some form of illustration of how God relates as Trinity, as well as illustrating the economic characteristics of each member in upholding creation, procuring redemption, and guiding history to its God glorifying conclusion.

There is a danger, I think, when preaching about the Trinity, to be clever, erudite, complex, sophisticated. We all know the difficult nature of speaking coherently about Trinitarianism, but for the sake of clarity perhaps here, brevity is best. Allow a personal comment: I have on occasion used the Athanasian Creed – at least a small section of it showing how the ancients tried to describe the Trinity. There are all sorts of checks and balances. My point was that if our spiritual forebears had to use such convoluted language, can we do any better? No, is the simple answer. However, as much as I stress the need to show the relations between the Godhead, we do need to help our congregations to recognise the truth of this doctrine and its mysterious complexity. If we diminish or play down the importance of this truth, we do despite to our faith and the truth of who God is. Hence this is a sermon to which considerable hard work be put into preparation, in its articulation on paper, and then in its delivery.

Trinity Sunday comes once a year. It is too easy to neglect it because the date comes in the middle of a series, or we acknowledge its complexity and don’t want to do some hard study, or even you think it is an arcane idea which has no relevance to our current time and issues we are facing. I can only plead with my readers not to succumb to any excuse to avoid preaching on the Trinity. Trinitarianism is unique to

Christianity. At one level it is what makes Christianity just what it is meant to be: a revelation of God in such a different pattern to all other belief systems. Trinity Sunday allows us to herald the One True God in three forms who have the same substance or “godness”, without falling into the trap of unwittingly communicating belief in three gods. This is a day to balance the emphasis from Jesus as saviour, as if our Lord acts solely on his own, or on the work of the Spirit, who gives gifts and grants power to exercise those spiritual insights, sometimes culminating in excess and abuse. This is a day to celebrate the revelation of the One Undivided Sovereign Lord of all who graciously stoops to give life and new life to all.

Living the Word

What are the practical and ethical implications of these narratives in relation to Trinitarianism? Given what I’ve said about God in relation to nature, history, and humanity, any, and all, ethical and practical outcomes must be seen in that context. Notwithstanding human alienation from God, God in all his revealed patterns enters into living and meaningful relationships with the totality of the created order, but especially with humanity. The Biblical record suggests that God does this through the nature to a degree – it reflects the creator’s actions. The Law, specifically the Decalogue, shows God’s expectations but equally reveals the impossibility of keeping the Law perfectly. Yet the Law continues to be a guide to answers for many of our ethical questions. A single illustration can be offered from elsewhere in Scripture: Micah 6:8 calls us to do justice, kindness, walk humbly before God. Thus, as the prophet of old indicates, law is interpreted through the lens of love, compassion, relationships, and humility, following the model and example of our Saviour Christ.

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Word and Life for the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost – 30 May 2027

Ian Booth

Texts

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20) and Psalm 139:1–6; 13–18
Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Psalm 81:1–10
2 Corinthians 4:5–12
Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Introduction

This is an interesting selection of readings, particularly given the alternates. If we use the Deuteronomy OT reading, we have the commandment about the Sabbath, and the Gospel passage where Jesus uses that Sabbath as an opportunity to restore a person to wholeness. If we use the 1 Samuel OT reading, we find a young boy being raised in the Lord's house in a spiritually bankrupt time, when the word of God had not been heard for a long time, being called to be a prophet. How does that link to the Gospel passage, and how do they link to the passage from 2 Corinthians? Such is the fun, and challenge, of preaching the Lectionary! In the post-Pentecost period, we are looking for general applications for our living as followers of the way of Jesus in our everyday lives, and so that is a place to start.

Hearing the Word

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)

There is a backdrop to this passage, to be found in the earlier chapters. Samuel's mother, Hannah, is barren and prays for the gift of a child, which is granted, in due course. She has promised in her petitions to God that this child will be dedicated to serve God all his days. Eli was the priest, and mistook Hannah's prayers for drunken babbling, until she corrects him. When Samuel has been weaned, Hannah makes good on her promise and presents Samuel to Eli. We then have a prayer of Hannah recorded, which is interestingly similar to the Magnificat of Mary, recorded in Luke 1:46–55, for its theme of reversal of fortune, where the poor and lowly are lifted while the adversaries of God and the wicked will be cut off and shattered. We are then told of the wickedness of Eli's sons, in a time when the service of the priesthood was hereditary. Then, in 2:26 we read "And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and men" – words very similar to those spoken of Jesus in Luke 2:52. Then our passage, in which God calls Samuel, who mistakes the call for the voice of the priest, who only twigs on for the third time of asking that it is God calling Samuel. When Samuel does listen, God tells him about the impending destruction of the lineage of Eli because of the sinfulness of his sons. When Eli asks what God has said, Samuel is reluctant to tell him, but Eli insists. If God has said it, you need to tell me. So, Samuel learns obedience to the word of God, and not to be afraid of the priestly class who had forgotten the sound of God's voice.

Psalm 139:1–6; 13–18

This Psalm is a celebration of the wonder and beauty of God's creation of a human being, and the response of the human in love and obedience to God. It ends with a prayer for purified heart and mind to serve God.

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

This passage contains a portion of the 10 Commandments as found in Deuteronomy, and the portion assigned for this Sunday is on the instruction to observe the Sabbath. The instruction is inclusive: son and daughter; manservant or maidservant; ox or donkey; nor the alien within the gates.

Psalm 81:1–10

This Psalm is an act of worship to God who freed the slaves from Egypt and then provided them with guidelines for holy living.

2 Corinthians 4:5–12

In the letters to Corinth Paul is concerned with presenting the true Gospel, and not the teaching of what he has called the Super Apostles in Chapter 11:5, who sound pretty much like the evangelical, Pentecostal preachers of our time whose messages can be harsh and moralistic, who are trying to frighten people out of hell rather than love them into heaven. He has been accused of using veiled words to proclaim the Gospel (instead of just telling it like it is). So, he contrasts himself and those like him by saying "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord – and ourselves as your servants for Christ's sake". He talks about the frail humanity of the preacher who takes knocks and criticism, even imprisonment, but the treasure within these jars of clay is from God, not from the frail human preachers.

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

The beginning part of this passage is interesting: the Pharisees criticise Jesus because his disciples are picking ears of corn to eat while they make their way through cornfields on the Sabbath. Their criticism has nothing to do with food or the fact that they might be hungry, but with the fact that they are "working" on the Sabbath. Jesus' answer takes them back to an incident with David and his soldiers were hungry, and they entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread – do two wrongs make a right, or is he making the point that sometimes the religious law doesn't consider the needs of human beings? Because his next statement is about the Sabbath and the purpose of the Sabbath. Then there is a second incident in the synagogue where a man with a shrivelled hand was present. Jesus asks a question which is difficult to answer without appearing to be very callous. The question, and the example of David and his men, introduces what has been referred to as situational ethics – the need to be flexible with how we apply moral law. So, he heals the man's hand, and that seals his fate – they

begin to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. It has been suggested that the reason for the plotting was a fear that the interest aroused by the activities of Jesus might attract attention from the Romans and provoke violence – and so it would make sense to remove Jesus.

Interpreting the Word

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)

The First Book of Samuel records the transition in Israel from the period of the judges to the period of the monarchy. This is a significant shift in Israel's national life as it begins the process of unifying the tribes into one nation, which had only happened when there was an external threat during the period of the judges. This narrative is centred mainly around three men: Samuel, the last of the great judges, Saul, Israel's first king, and David, Israel's second and greatest king. The shift to the monarchy arises from an appeal from the people to "have a king in order to be like other nations" despite a warning from Samuel that to have a human king would likely result in oppression and taxation and increased suffering. The whole idea of Israel, according to the Torah, was that it was **not** like the other nations to show the other nations the blessings that come with obedience to God. God agrees, and Samuel becomes the kingmaker – first choosing Saul under the guidance of God; and then anointing the young David as King while Saul still reigned. This portion that we read is then end of the introduction to Samuel, the last of the great prophets. The passage read describes God's call to Samuel, but the background given in the first two chapters is important. Samuel, this child born of a promise to a once barren mother, who is then dedicated to the service of God, becomes a hugely influential character in the unfolding story of the beginning of the monarchical period. The key was that he was obedient to what God told him: the very first message he is given, while a child in the house of God, was the test. When he relayed the message to Eli without redaction he passed the test, and for the rest of his days he was guided by the words God spoke to him – even risking his life by anointing a young boy as king while there was a king on the throne who would have expected his son to succeed him. Saul is rejected because he did not obey the leading of God – and the thread throughout this book is that no-one, not even the king, is greater than God. God's word remains the last word.

Psalms 139:1–6; 139:18

This Psalm expresses the all-knowing, ever present and creative power of God in personal and concrete language. It is this personal and concrete language that makes this Psalm special to many people, as it speaks of being known intimately by God, even to being formed piece by piece in the womb. This creates a link with the passage from 1 Samuel, as the boy Samuel was a gift from God to his mother, and then a gift from his mother to God. He, too, could claim to be known intimately by God, by whom he was guided throughout his life.

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

This passage is an extract of the 10 Commandments, with very particular reference to the Commandment regarding the Sabbath. It is with this reference that this version of the 10 Commandments differs from that in Exodus 20, as it has as the motivation for the Sabbath observance the fact that the Hebrews had endured hard labour in Egypt, and this enables the people to appreciate the value of a fixed day of rest.

2 Corinthians 4:5–12

One major feature of all writings in the New Testament attributed to Paul is the anticipated of the end time, the return of Christ, and the end of the world as they knew it. The imminence of the end explains the blindness of unbelievers and the undaunted hope of the apostles. In Paul's view the end of the present age coincides with the beginning of the age to come. In the concluding time of the present age angelic world rulers influence for ill the decisions of human beings. Among these is Satan, here referred to as the god of this world, who has blinded the minds of unbelievers to prevent them from perceiving God's light in Christ. Besides the apostles of Christ also contending with Satan, they face all kinds of afflictions, carrying in the body the death of Jesus. Their bodies are described as earthen vessels, meaning fragile pots and jars, but the contents are the treasure of the gospel. God's power is transcendent. The possible link to the other readings, particularly the Gospel passage, is in the last verse: "So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you". The message of Jesus to the harsh moralistic approach of the Pharisees is that the Sabbath is meant to bring life to all.

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

This passage highlights the difference between the belief system by which Jesus worked and Jewish legalism, which was interpreted as protecting the Law of Moses (the Law of God). The passage is in two parts, both of which include the violation of the Sabbath. In the first part, Where Jesus' disciples pick ears of corn, it is not clear what the violation of the Sabbath is. The other two Synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Luke) have differing ideas on this: Matthew makes the offence plucking and eating, while Luke makes it a kind of crude threshing "rubbing them in their hands". The Pharisees condoned plucking and eating in case of need but not harvesting or threshing. Perhaps Jesus' response, in relaying an incident from 1 Samuel 21, is to suggest that, if plucking and eating is the offence, there was a need in this instance, thus absolving the disciples from breaking the Sabbath law. There are historic inaccuracies in Mark's account that are corrected in Matthew and Luke, but this is because Mark reflects less accurate knowledge of the Old Testament and is written for a largely Gentile audience. Jesus' statement in verse 27 regarding the purpose of the Sabbath is remarkable – and is omitted in both Matthew and Luke. This statement was understood in early Gentile Christianity as laying the foundation for abandoning the Sabbath, which was on Saturday, and replacing it with Sunday as the day of worship. Strict Calvinists later applied all the Sabbath laws to Sunday – maintaining the one day of rest principle, but with the legalism of the Pharisees. This

missed the point of the Sabbath. The all-inclusive instruction in Deuteronomy mentioning all the possible inhabitants of the house puts an interesting perspective on the instruction regarding the Sabbath. The “master of the house” is able to choose when to work and when to be at leisure. Not so much the children, or the servants, or the beasts of burden, who would have been expected to work without respite – and so the Sabbath rule provides a mandatory rest day for them. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” says Jesus. Jesus’ claim in verse 28 seems to justify that he was privileged to do things on the Sabbath that ordinary people could not. The second part of the passage deals with the man with a withered hand who is in the synagogue. This is a deliberate act of Sabbath violation (perhaps making the point of 2:28) accompanied by a question that is not answered. The question is one to which the answer could be incriminating and would also reveal an inhumane tendency – so the audience remains silent. Jesus experiences anger, possibly indicating his emotional involvement in the question of healing and wholeness as the work of God, not humans, and that surely God would view healing and wholeness as necessary actions on the Sabbath.

Preaching the Word

The golden thread through these passages, whichever the combination of OT and Psalms are used, seems to be the value of listening to and obeying the Word of God. Time can be spent on exploring the fact that a young boy living in the house of the Lord had not heard the voice of God until God calls him; or on the all-inclusive instruction regarding the Sabbath which rescues the Commandment regarding the Sabbath from legalism and an oppressive interpretation to one that is liberating for those who are under oppression; which would then come to the subject of healing a withered hand on the Sabbath, thus bringing the man back into the community as a whole person, able to care for himself; which could open an exploration on the question of situational ethics, and where that interpretation begins and ends; the contrast between light and darkness in terms of being obedient to God and following the gospel as lived and taught by Jesus, and preached by servants. There are a number of angles which could be taken and profitably explored in a sermon based on this collection of readings.

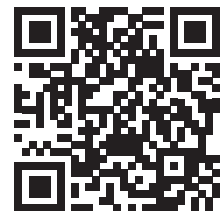
Living the Word

A question that might be relevant to pose to the congregation is the question Jesus asked the congregation in the synagogue that day: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil; to save life or to kill?” Are we able to decide for ourselves what the right, moral and ethical actions might be in our obedience to the call of God, or do we blindly follow what we are told? If the latter, then we are risk of following the so-called super apostles of Paul’s time, which are more than abundant in our time. Is listening and obeying the Word of God a choice that comes from within, or are we allowing others to make our decisions for us? Is the law of God liberating or oppressing? There may be differing views on this – but the people need to be steered toward freedom of expression, freedom of choice, freedom of conscience, in which God speaks to me, and I need to respond in a manner that is consistent with the gospel.

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Word and Life for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost – 6 June 2027

Kevin Sprong

Texts

1 Samuel 8:4–11, (12–15), 16–20, (11:14–15)
Psalm 138
Genesis 3:8–15
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1
Mark 3:20–35

Introduction

The wishes of the people and the outcome of what they wish for seldom coincide. The people want a king to go out ahead of them to fight their enemies but they little realise how demanding a king can be. Psalm 138 even has the irony that kings will only govern well when their instructions are subject to God's instructions for living. 2 Corinthians contrasts this fleeting life with "... a great eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,". Psalm 130 recognises we shall be in the depths of despair at times but even the depths are not out of God's reach. The Gospel helps us see that even those closest to Jesus misunderstood him and did not think the authorities far off, when suggesting he was crazy.

Hearing the Word

1 Sam 8:4–11, (12–15), 16–20, (11:14–15) (Semi-continuous track)

Samuel, as God's representative, senses he is being rejected and certainly, his sons are not likely to be any good as God's representatives. It is true that Samuel is not a 'warrior prophet' and clearly there is a call for a 'warrior king' who can defeat their enemies. The text says they are rejecting God as King. Fortunately, God does not reject them and advises Samuel to go with their wishes, while warning them of the consequences of their choice. In time, they will find this to be a heavy burden to bear and when that happens it will be too late to come crying to God again. God gives the people the choice of following the plan of other nations to either live by the sword or live by God's wishes. They, in turn, trust the sword more than God's leading. The people insist that they want a king even after Samuel's warning and so it goes ahead. Samuel follows God's guidance even in this choosing of the king at Gilgal. When Saul is anointed king there is rejoicing for Saul and the people, but it seems Samuel did not join in the celebrations since he is not mentioned as rejoicing.

Psalm 138 (Semi-continuous track)

Verses 1–3 are in the first-person singular, so the psalmist is thanking God for some previous intervention when his soul was weak but now, he thanks God for intervening and his soul is strong. He cites the double word phrase that is key to God's activities among individuals, kings and nations. He thanks God for 'your steadfast love and your faithfulness'.

This pair appears in many psalms as acknowledgement of God's actions on behalf of God's people.

Verse 4 shifts the language to that of praise, referring here to all the rulers who will praise God. Above all they recognise the glory of the Sovereign God.

Verse 6 continues the language of verse 4 so it probably refers to those kings who are haughty in God's presence and those who recognise their own power comes from God and so are humble before God.

Verses 7 and 8 return to the language of the individual psalmist here. That person expresses great confidence in God who has acted on the psalmist's behalf in the past. God has actively stretched out a hand in actionable intervention on the psalmist's behalf. Verse 8 even has what sounds like a blessing to end the psalm 'your steadfast love, O God, endures forever'. But strangely the ending is in fact another request from God, the first in this psalm, asking that God not forsake the writer.

Genesis 3:8–15 (Related track)

The scene opens with an astonishing description of God peacefully walking in the garden with the people and there is no hint of what is to come. God is depicted as not knowing where the people are because they 'hid themselves'. The huge shift from animals to humans happens when the people say: "We were naked and ashamed". Animals are never ashamed of their nakedness. God's question about how they found out they were naked needs no answer since the obvious conclusion is that they disobeyed God. Predictably their 'shame' evokes blame, and they blame everyone but themselves. The story is depicted in a way that dualistic thinking is encouraged. Good and bad, nature versus human, human and divine seem to be the opposites that dualistic thinking promotes.

The woman is earlier depicted as a 'helper' to the 'man of dust' (Adam). Often that is seen as a lower status as in servant. Yet, when read biblically as 'God is our helper' it takes on a new meaning. Is the woman not perhaps an equal to the man but a helper in the sense that God helps God's people?

The tree, the snake and the fruit are all God's creation as is the woman's courage and curiosity in choosing to taste the fruit. So, in a way God is involved in this activity.

The snake is cunning but the word for "cunning" also has the meaning prudent or clever when used in Proverbs (Proverbs 12:23; 13:16; 14:8 and 22:3). Is it possible that the snake then takes the humans to a new level of obedience – informed rather than blind obedience? Into the peaceful garden trouble has appeared. The humans will need new skills to deal with that trouble. This is a strange invitation to see that our weakness can be used by God even more than any power we have.

Psalm 130 (Related Track)

The cry in this psalm is from the depths – a place where it is difficult to believe God’s steadfast love and hope can still reach. Verses 3 and 4 hint at a need for forgiveness. Yet the style of writing suggests someone confident that even if God notes iniquity, God’s steadfast sustains a long-standing and forgiven relationship with the psalmist. It is the psalmist who reveres an eminently trustworthy God and is not afraid – even in the depths. Waiting and hoping have similar verbal structures in the Hebrew bible so it is not a wishful like hope but a firm hope, based on a God who acts in a steadfast love kind of hope. The reference to the watchman unquestionably suggests watchfulness. As it is, of course, watchman do keep a sharp lookout for an enemy bent on harming a city. On the other hand, they also look out for messengers bringing news of battle or new orders or much needed supplies.

Then comes the encouragement to hope in the God who has been steadily trustworthy in the past and can always be trusted. Redemption can be from sin, but redemption carries the extra weight of redeeming from loneliness, sickness and bondage in an individual and a nation. The depths of despair are temporary, but God is secure.

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1 (Semi-continuous track)

Paul is careful to link the Gospel he speaks to the continuing line of God’s actions in the past. Paul says, ‘we also believe, and therefore we also speak’. The phrase ‘I believed and so I spoke’ Brueggemann tells us, comes from a rendering of Psalm 115 in the Septuagint but is now rendered differently in our versions of the Hebrew scriptures. So, Paul declares that ‘same spirit’ inspires the preachers.

On the other hand the message is also very different in that the Gospel now includes news of Jesus’ resurrection and invitation to know that we will be included in that resurrection. Paul further links the resurrection of the apostles with those of the hearers. So, Resurrection intertwines Jesus, the apostles and all believers in a hope of resurrection.

Paul declares that everything is “...for your sake.” However, the end goal is not just our resurrection but that all of it may glorify God. To lose heart refers more to adverse situations to preach in rather than a fear of death. This temporary body is wasting away but our essential nature is being renewed daily. Some have compared the temporary earthly tent to the tabernacle and the permanent structure to the Temple. The Temple in this case is not made with hands and is eternal in the heavens.

Mark 3:20–35

The events and actions of Jesus’s life evoke dramatic responses in his family and in the authorities. His family wants to restrain him because they believe he is out of his mind. The closed-minded Scribes from Jerusalem appear to already have made up their minds.

Mark does not deal with the question of Jesus’s family until later in the passage but jumps to responding to the scribes. The scribes are more forthright in saying that he manages to do all these signs and actions by the power of the devil. Jesus responds to the Scribes with a narration about a house

being broken in to. A house divided against itself is doomed to collapse, and the argument of the divided house is hard to deny.

Jesus then has the powerful statement of sins and even blasphemies being forgiven. The enigmatic ‘sins against the Holy Spirit’ is invoked but not clearly articulated. The only clue we have is that Mark says it is because they said he had an unclean spirit. When someone is so closed-minded that they cannot perceive when the works of God are good and benefit those on the receiving end but ascribe it to the devil then they have crossed a very dangerous line. Jesus will not let them cross that line without a clear warning to look again.

Mark then includes Jesus’ response to his family. It is scorching. The family was sacrosanct for Jewish people as represented by the fifth commandment, but Jesus reframes family in terms of loyalty and obedience to him. This passage has Jesus responding to two groups both of whom are outsiders to him: His family are outside the house and must send messages and the Scribes are clearly outsiders. Both, however, fail to perceive the divine rule present in Jesus.

Interpreting the Word

It is not easy finding a common thread in these passages. Recent events in the USA have given us a clue to what is going on in the Samuel passage. There have been ‘No King’ protests in 2026 where the protesters believe the President is taking powers to himself that constitutionally belong to several diverse branches of government and not just the president. Samuel’s admonition to the people rings true in our own day and age. Submission to a king is always easier than submission to God. While it is a popular choice, it is a choice that will not be what the people hope for. It may be too radical a step to imagine governments today being submissive to God and glorifying God as the psalmist suggests but it is not out of the question.

We are always being asked to look afresh at the scriptures to see what God’s word for us is in our own time. A fresh look at the second creation story invites us to see afresh a wish on God’s part to be walking in a garden with us. When we fail, God will not abandon us but will clothe us, protect us and feed us. We can trust God.

The Corinthian passage invites us to work with what is temporary and discern what is eternal. Our bodies are temporary. Our link to the scriptures and their reminder of God’s actions in the past as well as God’s invitation to play our part has a permanent quality to it. Our outer nature is temporary, but our inner nation is permanent. Afflictions come and go. They are not of God’s making but God uses them to produce a glory far above our imaginings.

The Gospel passage notes that there will always be people who see God’s actions exclusively in terms of God’s laws and rules. When this dependency on what we ‘know’ from the scriptures prevents us from seeing what God’s actions before our eyes are, we have moved into dangerous ground. Even family may not always understand what we are about. But if we are fortunate, we have an inner circle who do know what we are exploring in our deeper relationship with God.

Preaching the Word

The Samuel passage is rich in questions about how we are influenced by other cultures or people's expectations. Samuel is a prophet, priest and holy man – that does not sound like the kind of person you want ruling you. The fact that he has failed to lead his sons into a similar relationship with God, strains that expectation further. Allowing him to choose 'God's king' seems preferable. None of us like to be rejected and so it is with Samuel. After his interactions with God, he will do what the people want. However, they may be very sorry. Still, Samuel will be there for them, not as a warrior but as a prophet and pastoral carer as they navigate this new way.

An image from *The Lord of the Rings* by author JRR Tolkien resonates with Psalm 130. Gandalf gets a Hobbit to light a beacon calling for help from the Rohirrim whom the steward of Gondor foolishly wants to exclude from the battle. Watchmen all along a series of Mountain Ranges see one beacon after another until the watchman in Rohan goes in to say that Gondor calls for help. They respond and it becomes more hopeful that the battle can be won. Watchmen have many duties as they watch for the dawn.

The Corinthian passage also contrasts the real with the temporary. The Samuel passage contrasts the 'real' kingship of God with the imitation in a human king. In the Corinthian passage it is far more personal. Our own failing bodies are contrasted with the reality of an inner life renewed. Our slight momentary affliction will not be solved by a decision we make that is temporary as in choosing an earthly king but if pursued will lead to glory unimaginable.

Lastly, the Gospel really does invite us to never get lost in assuming culture – and particularly family – is more important than obedience to God. This is not a lowering of the standards of loyalty to family but a raising of the bar in loyalty to God in Jesus Christ. What we must be very alert to is that we do not find ourselves claiming that our favourite doctrines are more important than a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. When doctrines get in the way of loving others we have made a mistake. When doctrines prevent us seeing the work of God in the here and now, we have lost our way. When doctrines lead us to a deeper awareness of God in the world, we can be confident that we are on the right track.

Living the Word

In an age of prolific social media – reinforced by Artificial Intelligence (AI) – conspiracy theories abound and are so convincing they are extremely hard to detect. We have a duty to seek out the truth and not let our congregations be led astray. We need to not only discern the permanent and godly from the temporary and fading but also to preach in a way that reinforces what Jesus affirms all the time.

We could easily become the 'scribes' who turn Christianity into Christian Nationalism or some other cult and falsely lead people astray as the Scribes of old did. These passages, thoughtfully considered, will help us prevent that happening.

Liturgical Suggestions

6th of June is the anniversary of D Day when the tide began to turn in the war against Nazi tyranny. It might be an idea to include that in prayers on this day.

Singing a song in another language sometimes helps people be aware that different languages reflect different viewpoints. An Afrikaans song that is easy to sing and has a popular tune is "*Juig al wat leef, juig voor die Heer*".

A Zulu, Xhosa or Sotho song (with interpretations, if needed), can do the same.

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Word and Life for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost – 13 June 2027

Kevin Sprong

Texts

1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13 and Psalm 20
Ezekiel 17:22–24 and Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15
2 Corinthians 5:6–10, (11–13), 14–17
Mark 4:26–34

Introduction

Christians are often encouraged to walk by faith more than walking by sight. Samuel does not want to anoint another king – even though God has rejected Saul. Yet, by faith, he must look past his fears. He looks past the obvious physical choice of Jesse's eldest son until God's choice, in David, is revealed. The psalm affirms that some trust is placed in chariots and horses, but the psalmist encourages the reader to trust in the name of the Sovereign God. The Corinthian passage further encourages the reader not to look at outward appearances but to look at the heart. Finally, the Gospel passage invites the reader to have the faith of a mustard seed.

Hearing the Word

1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13

It is not surprising that Samuel grieves for Saul, who has turned out to be a tyrant of a king. What is surprising though, is that God is sorry for choosing Saul. Yet it is also refreshing to imagine that our God has feelings of regret – just as we do. Sensitivity in God's people is clearly a sensitivity shared by God.

Having said that, God needs to move on. A new king needs to be chosen. Samuel and the elders are impressed by Jesse's sons, especially the eldest. God is not. The declaration that humans “... *look on the outward appearance, but the Sovereign God looks on the heart*” is how the choice will be made. So Samuel cannot make a selection under God's guidance until all the sons have appeared. Even the youngest, who is shepherding sheep, is called in from the field and, of course he is the one chosen.

While the choosing of David as king is central to this story, there are also other elements that need to be noted. The people are fearful when Samuel comes there because one dare does not mess with this prophet. Well, they should be afraid because earlier in the book of Samuel (15:32–33), Samuel executes a king – hewing him to pieces. So the current leaders respond to him coming in peace and follow his instructions now.

Another important element of the story is that when Samuel does anoint David, the Spirit came mightily upon David. This element is present frequently when Judges or other leaders are chosen. The Spirit marks ‘the chosen one’ as confirmed by God.

Psalm 20

The petition in this prayer is on behalf of the ‘anointed one’ who in this case is the king on the Davidic throne (vs.6). While there are liturgical elements to this poem, it is a real

petition that would have been said and responded to in the Temple. In this case, probably a ‘seeking of God's help in battle’.

There is a cry for help. There is a call on God to remember the king's offerings in the Temple and an invitation for God to, therefore, respond favourably. There is a request that God look favourably on the king's plans and wishes in *verse 4*. There is also a heartfelt petition that God look kindly on the king's petitions *verse 5*. The tone changes in *verse 6* where the reader or liturgist believes the request for help (vs.2) has been granted. Also, the other wishes and requests appear to be responded to by God. *Verse 7* takes it further to say that while other countries rely on chariots and horses, this king finds help in the Name of the Sovereign God. No explanation for how that help will be worked out in practice, though. Yet this is something the people rely on in the battle. *Verse 9* is the real point of the prayer – victory for the king. Anne Lamott says there are only three real prayers in her book of the same name: ‘Help, Thanks and Wow!’ The king, here, is clearly praying the first two.

Ezekiel 17:22–24 (Related Text)

Earlier verses of this chapter tell of the devastation of the exile to Babylon. Leaders turned to Egypt and Pharaoh rather than upholding the Covenant with the Sovereign God. The author even says he will speak by means of allegory:.

There will come a time when, like a tender shoot from a Cedar tree being replanted and thriving on the top of the mountain, so God will work tenderly with God's people. Moreover, as the Cedar thrives and provides strong boughs and food for birds, so God will nurture Israel in order that it can grow strong again. Like birds, they will find food, nesting places and shelter in the shade of a mighty Cedar tree. In contrast to the previous leaders, who sought help from Pharaoh, Godself will restore the people in the same way God can plant a sprig and nurture it to full strength. This is emphasised by the repetition of the phrase “*I myself*” in *verse 17:22a* and *17:22b*. The strength of the words “*All the birds ...*” suggest an inclusiveness absent in the pre-exilic life of Israel. The God who routinely takes small sprigs in nature to grow mighty Cedars is the One doing and saying all this. If you believe that God can grow a strong tree from a tender shoot, you can have hope that any small beginning of the people of God, can be part of something great.

Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15

This is the only psalm in the Hebrew scriptures that has the Superscription: A Song for the Sabbath day (NRSV). A little strange because there is no direct reference to the Sabbath in the rest of the psalm. However, there are clues as to why the superscription is there.

No Christian would doubt that it is good to thank God and sing praises to God. *Verse 1* ‘*Steadfast love*’ is the NRSV translation of a difficult-to-translate Hebrew word but an

easy concept to understand. For the Israelites and for us today, God's love has been steadfast through our betrayal, through hard times and good times. So, it is very good to remind ourselves of this morning and night.

Verse 3 gives us the first clue that this is a psalm to be sung in the Temple, since few people would have the musical instruments mentioned here in their homes and almost never together, except in an act of worship. The remembrance and the singing are, therefore, enhanced by doing so in company with others as an act of worship. Personally, the psalmist has been made glad by God's works and often it is in worship that others are given an opportunity to recall God's actions on their behalf. So, we are planted in the House of the Sovereign God and there we flourish and it is there where we produce fruit. It is here in worship – on the Sabbath – that we celebrate God's presence and faithfulness.

2 Corinthians 5:6–10, (11–13), 14–17

These are amongst Paul's finest words but the key to understanding relies on a matter of perception. Paul says that some view the world from a purely human perspective but Christians view it from the changed perspective, wrought by God in Jesus Christ.

People see Christians at home in the world (the body) but in reality, they are in touch with a world that does not depend on what we can see physically but what we can see after faith has opened new vistas. In the same way, Christians make judgements based on faith and the heart not just on outward appearances. By outward appearances the apostles may even appear crazy but for those able to discern what goes on in the heart, they are known to be sane at a whole new level of sanity.

With the death of Christ, those who have placed their trust in Christ find themselves dying to their old way of life as well. Like Christ then, we have a new reason for living, a new purpose for living found in the risen life of Christ.

One other result of this is another shift in perception. We no longer see the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection from a human point of view as purely physical. Rather, we see Christ through faith as having accomplished God's work of reconciling us to God. Furthermore, we see other humans as transformed in Christ or potentially transformed people. Lest we think this is just a personal thing, we have come to see that everything has become new. The world, people and the very cosmos are a new creation in the saving and redeeming acts of Christ. 'God's action of sending Christ, thereby reconciling human beings to Godself, is the objective act that results in a change in human perception.' (see Brueggemann in *Texts for Preaching*)

Mark 4:26–34

Let us not limit the interpretations of these parables to one 'correct' interpretation. The 'method' of a parable always leaves room for imagination, and nuance to be applied to the parables.

Farmers must lead water to the field, weed it, protect it from animals and birds and even fertilise it when necessary. These extra activities usually lead to an enhanced crop, but the real work is done by the soil, with little help from the farmer. So, while we play a part in our growth in spirituality, the real

work is left up to God.

The mustard seed parable reminds us that even if we don't see much happening, a very small seed planted in the right soil, will do its work and produce 'the largest of shrubs'. If the Reign of God seems slow in coming, we can look to the mustard seed. Growth is slow but inevitable if the right conditions are present. The Reign of God is dependent on God, as we play our part to sow the seeds and prepare for harvest. Often, that work of God happens outside the Church when we choose to sow seeds of love and kindness in unlikely places, like hospital wards, sports venues, workplace ministries and even in the slums of Calcutta.

Interpreting the Word

The rich material of these lectionary readings gives a wonderful range of subjects to address. Surprisingly, God's omnipotence is in a sense limited by human failings. God is disappointed in God's choice of Saul who has let God and the people down. So, there is determination for God and Samuel to get it right this time. The decision is not made based merely on outward appearances no matter how strong and handsome the candidates are. Rather, this is and always will be a faith decision, a choice guided by God. God helps Samuel stay the course until the faithful candidate is discerned. A decision confirmed by history. Even Samuel's faith, which is as small as a mustard seed, is enough for him to make the right decision about God's choice of a king.

This reliance on faith is a theme that permeates every reading. The psalms set this faith in the celebrations during a formal worship setting where faith is nurtured by celebrating God's presence and steadfast faith in God's dealings with God's people. We are at our most faithful when we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. Especially when we have moved to the place where we no longer regard Jesus from a human point of view but rather from a faith point of view. Paul, however, is clear that it is a brand-new perspective and needs to be affirmed. The perspective Christians have is the result of dying in Christ and rising as a new creation with a new perspective on life.

The parable recognises that we may still be growing in this new faith perspective, but it is okay because all that is needed to start and continue this journey, is faith the size of a mustard seed and that will grow to a large shrub.

Ezekiel affirms that God will grow a mighty Cedar or Palm from a small cutting and place it on a high mountain. Making oneself available to God in faith is a growing process. The saying '*plant a tree even if you know you will never sit in the shade of it*' comes to mind. The world believes missiles and drones will decide the future of power relationships. Whilst acknowledging that defence of one's country and its values is important, God is really working with those who stay faithful to God. It may seem like a weak option, but a Cedar tree takes decades to grow, and it is a slow, strong and definite process.

Preaching the Word

At the time of writing this there are concerns of a prolonged conflict in Iran but also fear that other powers may be drawn

into the conflict. Once again, so-called Christians are relying on ‘horses and chariots’ (Missiles, Aircraft Carriers, Drones and so forth) rather than being faithful people, strongly putting forward diplomatic solutions.

It may seem naive to imagine that Christian faith can really make a difference. Yet the circumstances today are not very different for ordinary people in Paul’s day. The faith of a mustard seed was being invoked at a time of cruel domination of the local people whom Jesus addressed. When we have died in Christ and risen in Christ, a new perspective is called forth. Every generation must interpret these passages in the light of the struggles they are going through. If Church is a place where we celebrate God’s presence, it is also a place where we recall the stories of a faithful God who has brought God’s people through far worse than we are going through right now. A faith perspective is a perspective of real hope and may look naive or even crazy out of touch to those who are not of a faith perspective. Still a history of God’s working is a cause for celebration and hope as the psalmists invite us to worship.

The same encouragement applies to the personal and community needs of those around us. When we follow the invitation of the psalms to bring our worship into the place where Christians gather, we take part in the faith building exercises of remembering God’s faithfulness in the past. We also take part in liturgies that affirm our faith and the music and words ground these faith-building and hope affirming words in our soul. They take time, they are careful and require talent, patience, good choices and a growing experience. However, they are reliable. At times we will be fortunate and see the work of God in real time. More likely, we shall see the astonishingly personal actions of God over time as we look back on actions we often overlooked because they seemed so tiny and insignificant at the time. It is time that has allowed them to grow in our perspective, so we see them more clearly now.

Living the Word

South African news depicts ‘commission of inquiries’ that seem to produce no arrests or convictions. Incompetence and corruption seem inevitable in government. It is crucial that Christians retain a perspective, not based on what is seen, but what is experienced in Christ. The hope that grows out of that perspective is the hope that our beautiful land will be a place providing opportunity for all our people. When we see our talented children unable to find meaningful work or even life-sustaining work we can sink into despair. Our lections invite us to lift our view based on a perspective that is not limited to what is on the surface, but what goes to the heart of who we are. Hope not despair has a future worth growing in Christ for.

Liturgical Suggestions

1. Hope is a star that shines in the night,
leading us on till the morning is bright.

Refrain:

When God is a child there’s joy in our song.
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,

and none shall be afraid.

2. Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,
giving a promise of safety and worth.
3. Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn,
telling the world that the Saviour is born.
4. Love is a flame that burns in our heart.
Jesus has come and will never depart.

YouTube link: https://youtu.be/E_P9t4WWOA?si=7RsXYhCRkSf71uEZ



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Word and Life for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost – 20 June 2027

Delme Linscott

Texts

1 Samuel 17:32–49, 1 Samuel 17:57–18:5, 10–16 and Job 38:1–11
Psalm 9:9–20, Psalm 133 and Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32
2 Corinthians 6:1–13
Mark 4:35–41

Introduction

Geo-political wars are raging all over the planet; there is a sharp rise in violence and hate crimes on every continent; intolerance of the views of others play out daily on social media; our cultural and faith debates end up in proverbial mudslinging, without any intention of trying to listen or understand. And so, we cry out, seeking words of hope during our storms. Our readings for this week, will remind us that God is still king of heaven and earth and that Jesus is with us amid the storms of life.

Hearing the Word

1 Samuel 17:32–49

The warring tribe of the Philistines lined up on one side of the valley, while the Israelites gathered on the opposite side of the same valley (v.3). The bravado and taunting started with the Philistine champion, Goliath, hurling insults across the valley to the Israelites, who were happy to keep their distance (v.9–10).

The youngest of Jesse's sons, David, hears the challenge and bravely speaks up. "*David said to Saul, 'Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.'*" (v.32). David, who has been divinely chosen to be the new king of Israel (1 Samuel 16), does not have confidence in his own abilities, but rather in what he has already seen God achieve (v.37).

Saul reluctantly allows David to go into battle with Goliath but insists that he must wear the king's armour – which proves to be too big. Despite the odds, David defeats Goliath. The message is given to us: Faith overcomes impossible odds. As Lawrence Richards says, "God can still do more with one little person willing to try than with a whole army of hesitant soldiers."

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5, 10–16

Very soon David is a permanent presence in the palace, where he establishes a deep friendship with Jonathan, Saul's son. It is through this friendship that David is affirmed and accepted as a royal leader and the author notes that he is given the symbols as protector of the people – *his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt* (1 Samuel 18:4–5).

Jealousy rears its head in verses 10–16, as the community starts to praise David for his successes. Songs are sung of how David killed tens of thousands, while Saul only killed thousands. Saul's response to David's fame is not just jealousy, but murderous rage (v.10–11). If we read 1 Samuel 16:14 in the light of this event, we note: "*Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit oppressed him.*" Saul chose to turn his back on the ways of God, allowing evil to enter his heart.

Job 38:1–11

In this chapter we hear the Lord speaking to Job from the midst of a whirlwind (or storm). This conversation continues an overall theme of God *being with us*, despite our external circumstances. God speaks to Job using a series of questions, almost all of them rhetorical in nature. These questions are not intended to belittle Job, but rather to help him comprehend the Greatness of God, and to acknowledge that human wisdom is nothing in comparison with God's.

If God can create order out of nothing (Genesis 1) then Job should remember that God can do it again. There is a limit to the human understanding of the world, but there is no limit to God's ability and authority. God is Creator and ruler of the universe – there is nothing that is beyond God's ability.

Psalm 9:9–20

This Psalm begins with a declaration of thanks and recounts God's wonders, emphasizing the psalmist's commitment to God. The psalmist trusts in God's justice and protection, seeking refuge in God during times of trouble. The Psalmist speaks of how God brings strength to those in dark places and he reassures us that God notices the evil done by others and that these 'enemies' will fall into their own traps.

The mood of Psalm 9, changes dramatically at verse 13, where we note how threatened the Psalmist felt and how he imagined himself so close to death.

The latter part of Psalm 9:13–20 is seen in comparison with Psalm 10, which some scholars believe was joined together with Psalm 9 at some point in the past. While we may describe Psalm 9 as positive, Psalm 10 would be viewed as being negative. "The two panels picture the same circumstances, but one is bright with dark shadows, the other dark with bright gleams" (Michael Wilcock, page 44, *The Message of Psalms* 1–72, Inter Varsity Press 2001)

In this Psalm we are invited into the narrative that God doesn't turn anyone away, especially those who earnestly seek him. The Psalm ends off with a call for God to hold the nations to account – to remember that they are mere mortals (v.19–20). We see a connection in Psalm 9 with the disciples who cry out to Jesus in Mark 4:38, "*Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?*"

Psalm 133

Psalm 133 is the penultimate song of the *Psalms of Ascent*. Grouped together from Psalm 120–134, these songs were used as the congregation moved towards the Temple for worship. The mood of this Psalm is one of joy and celebration for God's people, especially when they worship together in unity. It beautifully illustrates the profound blessing of unity among God's people, emphasizing that living in harmony is both good and pleasant.

This is not a message of naivety, denying conflict or disagreement in communities or families, but rather a call

for great celebration when there are moments of unity and family oneness. The pain of conflict and division is always compared with the peace and joy of unity.

We note that this was a movement *up to* the Temple Mount. However, when worship was over, there would be a returning back to their communities. A coming *back down* to reality. Worship was compared with the picture of blessed oil running down Aaron's beard. The Psalmist uses the image of "running down" three times in this one verse. Is this a reminder that the blessing of worship and unity is to spill over into our world below?

The final metaphor of the dew of Mount Hermon suggests that unity is refreshing and life-giving, much like the dew that sustains growth and vitality in nature. This dew is lifegiving water that reminds people of God's blessings constantly falling upon us, even when we are blissfully unaware of their presence.

Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32

The Psalm speaks of how God has rescued (redeemed) the Israelites from all kinds of peril and trials. The focal verses (v.23–32), move to a theme of the oceans and storms. The vivid description of powerful swells and pounding waves draws us into the drama of what it was like for sailors to ride out a powerful storm.

There is a similar pattern to Mark's account (Mark 4:35–41), where the disciples call out to Jesus amid their storm and how Jesus calms the storm. In both cases, the contrast of the noise during the storm and then the deafening silence, after God's intervention, is very noticeable. The Psalmist paints a picture of genuine peace and rest, especially after great upheaval. God hears the cries of his people and comes to their rescue.

Verse 23, "those who go down to the sea in ships", has an interesting connection with Herman Melville's famous book 'Moby Dick,' as he uses the same line. It seems that both ageless accounts retell the story of the real dangers awaiting sailors and mariners. (Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, page 386)

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

There is a great sense of urgency in these words of Paul, as he speaks to the church of the 'present' of God's salvation, and his favour. He reminds the church of the great variety of experiences that come our way – hardships and troubles are to be expected, as much as rejoicing and the power of God. He writes, "...having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (v.10)

The readers are urged, not to receive God's grace "in vain," and rather to use our new-found freedom for God's glory. Paul understood the paradox of following Jesus – on the one hand, we are filled with the riches of Christ's love and mercy, yet we will still face trials, sorrow and great challenges. Paul was an eyewitness to God's deliverance and redemption. This makes his plea more sincere and urgent. He wants his spiritual children to realise the call to be ambassadors with him and to share God's love with others.

Mark 4:35–41

This reading is part of a longer section in Mark's Gospel (Mark 4:35 – 5:43) which holds together the theme of victory and redemption. Some commentators refer to these chapters as the *Parables of the Lake*, as many of them take place around the Sea of Galilee.

Mark 4:35–41 announces to the reader that God has victory over all possible dangers (Wiersbe, 59). Other scholars suggest that these seven verses reveal God's authority over all things, including the natural elements, and highlights the fact that Jesus is indeed a miracle worker (Knight, 111).

While Jesus taught the multitudes, it was his disciples that he wanted to train in faith, and this story seems to capture one of these teachable moments. It was the disciple's obedience that got them into the boat and ultimately propelled them into the storm (v.35). Was this Jesus' way of showing them that he wouldn't abandon them during their own trials, or was it perhaps to answer their deeper question: "Lord, don't you care?" "In a series of miracles stories, Mark demonstrated to each reader the ultimate power that Jesus possesses. How wise we are to trust an all-powerful Jesus, even if his present work is experienced subjectively in human lives." – Lawrence Richards

"It is interesting that the words Jesus addressed to the wind and the waves are exactly the same as he addressed to the demon-possessed man in Mark 1:25" (William Barclay, p.115), When Jesus commands the storm with the words: "Quiet! Be Still!", these words really mean, "Be muzzled!" The storm was ferocious – it was fierce enough to attack and destroy – yet, in the presence of Christ, it is quietened and no longer poses a threat.

Lastly, this account "illustrates both the real humanity of Jesus and his powerful divinity. He is both fully man (asleep in the boat) and fully God (calming the storm)." (Hewitt, page. 75) Jesus identifies with our humanity, yet he has overcome our greatest fear, the fear of death.

Interpreting the Word

George Knight writes, "the disciples in the floundering boat must choose between faith and fear" (Knight, 111). Just as in ancient times, we are presented with the same choices as we are challenged daily to choose between faith and fear. We see this in the story of David and Goliath, in the disciple's experience in the storm and in the questions of Job.

Another theme that emerges from this passage revolves around the identity of Jesus. We see a progression in the response of the disciples, and we are invited to join them in questioning: "*Who then is this?*" The question is not a surface question but challenges us all to look deeper into the mystery of this Messiah – remembering that in the Old Testament it was understood that only *Yahweh* had the power and authority to calm natural storms (Knight, 113).

Rodney Whiteman poses an interesting question: "Does victory for Israel mean desolation to the Philistines or was it a call to faith for them also?" And what about King Saul's rejection? Would he have been spared if he showed genuine remorse and humility?

Every time we gather for worship, we are testifying to the goodness of God. Our words and singing do not exclude the challenges we have faced, but rather emphasize how God has delivered us from the hand of the enemy. We are publicly proclaiming that God has still the storm and brought us back to a place of peace. “We are often caught up in the wider purposes of God that are much bigger than our own situation and whose purpose is hidden from us” (Hewitt, David, pg.74).

Preaching the Word

Mark’s Gospel highlights a profound question: “*Lord, don’t you even care what is going on?*” (v.38) It is easy to understand how the disciples jumped to the conclusion, that his sleeping meant that he didn’t care. We can relate to this as we wonder if Jesus is busy sleeping, while the world around us is being swamped with wave after wave of trouble. Donald English suggests this account “is a sharpening of the relationship between Jesus and the disciples on the issue of faith” (page 104).

Jesus’ response is not to answer their question with words, but rather through action – he speaks to the wind and waves. It is only after the storm is stilled that he responds to their question, with his own. “Do you still have no faith?” (v.40) Perhaps a lesson from Mark 4:35–41 is that when we face life’s trials, we should remember that we don’t face them alone. Most of the other lectionary readings also teach us that we don’t need to feel abandoned, but that Christ is always with us.

The Psalmist teaches us that there is blessing in unity, in togetherness as God’s people. The disciples endured the storm as a collective and they called out to Christ together. Although David ventured out to face Goliath, man to man, he was surrounded by a great army of supporters – they were praying that God would grant them victory through the bravery of the young David. We too belong to the family of God, and we shouldn’t have to face our trials alone. Let us be thankful for the community of Faith.

Living the Word

Living in Southern Africa, we understand what it means to be caught up in storms, both natural and man-made. We deal with giants and fears that openly taunt us daily. If it is not unemployment or poverty, then it could be the beast of gender-based violence, racism or corruption. Many of our communities also wrestle with health issues, the breakdown of family relationships, substance abuse and addictions. Our readings remind us that our challenges may not be immediately taken away from us, but that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are given the strength and grace to live us Christ-followers.

Liturgical Suggestions

The Psalms allow us to openly speak of our heartaches and trials, but also to praise God for his deliverance and for coming to our rescue. We can also pray for those experiencing their own storms at present. This can be on a personal level and for people that we personally know, but

it can also be on a global level, where people are living in troubled countries, living in fear, trying to escape war or violence, religious persecution and so on.

Hymns/Songs

“Will you Anchor hold in the storms of life?”

– Priscilla Owens

“It is well with my soul” – Horatio Spafford

“Eternal Father, strong to save” – William Whiting

“Still” – Hillsong

“Peace, Be Still” – Hope Darst

“Praise you in the storm” – Casting Crowns

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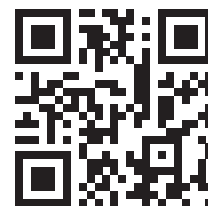
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Word and Life for 6th Sunday after Pentecost – 27 June 2026

Larry Ort

Texts

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27;
Psalm 130 OR [Wisdom of Solomon 1:13–15; 2:23–24
OR Lamentations 3:22–33; Psalm 30];
2 Corinthians 8:7–15;
Mark 5:21–43

Introduction

The reading from Wisdom reminds us that God did not make death, nor does God take delight in the death of the living. This relates to Jesus' mastery over illness and death found in the gospel reading. David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan and the cry of supplication related to illness expressed in Psalm 130 fit nicely with the woman's longing for healing through simply touching Jesus. Jesus' raising Jairus' daughter also foreshadows Jesus' victory over death in the resurrection. Other themes include the sharing of abundance, social isolation, and the restoration of one's status in the community.

Hearing the Word

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

The omitted verses contain the story of a man from Saul's camp who came to David bearing news of King Saul's and Jonathan's deaths on Mt. Gilboa. He claims to have killed the wounded King Saul at Saul's request; he undoubtedly expects that David will reward him. But David rent his clothing and ordered the messenger be put to death. Note: This account conflicts with the accounts given in I Samuel 31, and II Samuel 4, which is undoubtedly the reason for its omission. The main focus should be placed on David's lament contained in verses 17–27. It is generally agreed the poem can be attributed to David.

Psalm 130

The "depths" refer to the waters of *Sheol* in which the dead sink. "Who could stand" acknowledges that all are guilty before God. The psalmist waits for the Lord; indeed, he places his hope in God's word. His soul waits for the Lord as the watchman waits for the morning. Note how the psalmist closes by exhorting Israel to hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is found steadfast love (*hesed*) and plenteous redemption.

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13–15; 2:23–24

The Wisdom of Solomon is one of the apocryphal books. Many protestants are reluctant to use passages from the apocrypha; therefore, they overlook some profound insights. The book contrasts the righteous and the wicked, and comments on the fate which awaits each. Wisdom 3:1–5, 9 is often used in funerals; it proclaims, "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God."

Lamentations 3:22–33

The speakers forcefully express the despair of the community; they raise questions concerning the presence of God in the midst of profound suffering. The reading serves to remind the community, and us, that God's steadfast love (*hesed*) never ceases, that God's faithfulness is great. Hence, we find our hope in God. This reading complements Psalm 30 and the gospel.

Psalm 30

The superscription indicates that this was a psalm of David, later used on the anniversary of the rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabeus (164 B.C.). By then the psalm was understood as expressive of the experience of the nation. The psalm consists of two parts. The first part reveals that the Lord has delivered David from a life-threatening illness ("brought up my soul from *Sheol*"), an illness David felt had been visited upon him due to the Lord's anger. In the second part, David acknowledges that his sin had been prideful overconfidence ("I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved'"); he acknowledges that God had established him, but then had withdrawn ("hid his face") due to his arrogance. In his infirmity, David cried out to the Lord and asked the Lord to be gracious; God turned his mourning into dancing and clothed him in gladness.

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

This week's readings, including the gospel, focus on death and illness. This reading considers another adversity which robs many of the joys of life – poverty. Paul begins by noting how the Corinthians excel in many things, and challenges them to excel in the task of fundraising for the impoverished church in Jerusalem, which they had begun a year ago. Paul tells them this is not a command, but rather a "test of the genuineness of their love against the earnestness of others." Paul further reminds them of the joy that the churches in Macedonia and Galatia experienced as a consequence of raising alms for Jerusalem despite their own impoverished status.

Mark 5:21–43

Key words and phrases include "touched his cloak," "she was healed," "go in peace, and be healed," "your faith has saved you," "do not fear, only believe," "the girl ... arose immediately." The passage includes an intercalation, a story within a story, the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage while enroute to heal Jairus's daughter. Think of the concern Jairus must have experienced when this interruption occurred.

Interpreting the Word

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

The poem acknowledges that King Saul and his son, Jonathan, were slain on Mt. Gilbo'a. Hence, the curse: "Ye mountains of Gilbo'a, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor upsurging of the deep! The deep and abiding friendship between David and Jonathan is acknowledged in verse 26: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me, your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." Such friendships are entered into simply for the sake of the friendship – no ulterior motives are involved.

Psalms 130

Psalms 130 is a penitential prayer for forgiveness: "out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord!" We do not know what gives rise to the psalmist's plea, but three things stand out: First, the psalmist points to the universality of our sinful condition ("If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, who could stand?") We all stand guilty before God. Second, he acknowledges that only God can forgive ("there is forgiveness with thee"). And third, the psalmist acknowledges that his hope and help come from the Lord; he waits more than the watchman waits for the morning. The psalm concludes with the assurance that God will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13–15; 2:23–24

The author commends a life of virtue grounded in the fear of the Lord. This passage proclaims that God is not the author of death, for death entered the world through the devil's envy. Righteousness, and those who are righteous, are immortal.

Lamentations 3:23–33

In addition to finding our hope in God's steadfast love, note the speaker's assurance that "The Lord is good to those who wait for him." Indeed, it is good to wait patiently and to bear adversity in our youth. Such challenges ultimately serve to build character and to strengthen us. I think most would agree that the periods in their life in which the greatest amount of growth occurred were periods of adversity and hardship. We also are assured that "the Lord does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone."

Psalms 30

After acknowledging that God has healed him, David encourages the saints: "Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." After acknowledging his supplication, David, in a bargaining manner, poses a question to God: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me ... be thou my helper!" As The Interpreter's Bible points out, "To the ancient mind a god with none to praise him was an extinct deity."

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

The challenge Paul has set before the church of Corinth is set forth in 1 Corinthians 16:1–3: "Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem." Paul has previously reminded the church of Corinth that the churches of Macedonia and Galatia had given according to their means, and in some cases, even beyond their means. The hardship of doing so was lessened by giving over a period of time. It is now time to conclude the campaign and to send the alms to Jerusalem. As Paul says, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance." By acting in this manner, the church of Corinth will be blessed, for they will experience the joy and the growth which comes from recognizing and helping to meet the needs of others which are essential elements of growing in wisdom, grace, and love.

Mark 5:21–43

Invite your congregation to enter into the minds of the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus. The story of the woman with a hemorrhage illustrates the psalmist's cry in Psalms 130: "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice." For twelve years she had suffered, she had spent all she had on seeking help from physicians. In accordance with the purity laws set forth in Leviticus 15, she would have been unclean, anything she touched would have been considered unclean, and she would have had to declare herself unclean. She was a social outcast! Think of the fear she must have suffered when Jesus asked who touched him. Her faith saved her. Not only was she healed; she once again had status in the social order.

Jairus must have been highly agitated when Jesus, who was hurrying to his house, was interrupted by the woman with the hemorrhage. To what extent might he have been comforted when Jesus told him, "Do not fear, only believe."

Preaching the Word

The combination of Psalms 130 with the gospel reading makes for a powerful sermon. This poor woman had sought help for twelve years during which she also suffered the fate of being a social outcast. Her belief serves as a wonderful example for us to emulate. One who would be healed must believe that healing is possible, and she had heard the stories of the miracles Jesus was performing. She believed – if she could only touch his garment. What a story of risk and faith! Although she had committed several social improprieties in touching Jesus, he reached out to her, and called her, "Daughter." Imagine the joy she must have experienced! Also, imagine the joy that Jairus, his wife, Peter, James, and John must have experienced when the daughter was restored to life. This gospel selection might have been entitled "The Story of Two Daughters." These stories of healing and raising from the dead would have been perceived as acts of

salvation; as such, they prefigure Christ's salvation from death. Again, we encounter joy in our recognition that we, as Christians, have been born to eternal life in Christ.

Another track could deal with stewardship and giving. So often we tend to think of giving only in terms of money, but any time we love others, we freely give of our self. We give them the gift of dignity, of empowerment. I am reminded of Jack Nicholson's line at the end of the movie, *As Good As It Gets*, "You make me want to be a better man." Our love is a great gift which we all too frequently hoard! Before we are truly capable of giving, we must grow into God's love in such a way that we are transformed.

Living the Word

We need to recognize that true healing comes out of the depth of our despair as we respond to God's love as shown to us in Jesus Christ. We are challenged to assist in healing others through offering our love and sharing our material resources. In these stories of healing, Jesus addresses some of our deepest fears and says, "Do not fear, only believe."

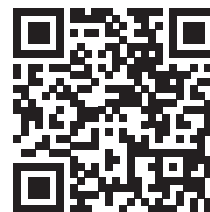
A recent analysis compares a western economy to \$100 shared among five families. The wealthiest family takes home \$47 while the poorest family takes home \$3.60. The middle family takes home around \$17. The richest family continues to become richer; the poorest, poorer. How long can a society function in this manner without tearing the social fabric? Would this comparison also hold true for South Africa?

The Communicator's Commentary offers some practical principles from Paul's message concerning the gift for the church in Jerusalem: First, giving is a reflection of God's grace. Second, giving is more a matter of the heart than it is of one's financial or economic circumstances. Third, our own experience of hardship enhances our ability to empathize with others who are experiencing hardship. Fourth, learning to be generous with our life and our possessions is a matter of spiritual growth and maturity; there is a reason why God loves the cheerful giver – he or she has matured spiritually. Fifth, when we give ourselves to God, we fully come to recognize that all we have and all we are is a gift from God.

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Liturgical Suggestions for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Call to Worship

Beloved, when hope is high, abundance surrounds us, and we bask in the goodness of God's provision, God calls to us ...

Open your heart and your hands.

When disaster strikes, need overwhelms the senses, and we carry the weight and worry of a perilous present and unknown future, God calls to us ...

Open your heart and your hands.

When we are moved with compassion, our hearts urging us to reach out to support our siblings in Christ, God calls to us ...

Open your heart and your hands.

Children of God, as we gather for worship today, listen! God call us to open our hearts and our hands to one another in need and in abundance.

May our worship open our hearts and our hands to one another as we learn to share with one another in all seasons, for we are all one in the Body of Christ. Amen.

Written by Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, April 2024 Introduction

Act of Penitence

We fill our lives with the fear of scarcity,
assuming there is not enough money,
time, patience or love.
We turn away when a stranger asks for nourishment,
claiming there isn't enough even for ourselves.

**Forgive us when we doubt your abundance
and ignore the possibilities in what we have been given.**

We often sit with arms crossed and fists clenched,
crying out that you have turned away
and left us empty handed.

**Forgive us when we reject your abundance
and neglect the possibilities in what we have been given.**

We easily give thanks for the good things in life,
turning away from those
which lead us to deeper community
or second-guessing blessings as too good to be true.

**Open our eyes to the wonders that surround us.
Help us surrender to the loving embrace that enfolds us.**

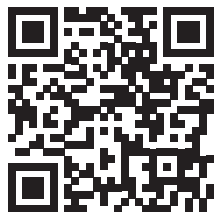
(Individual prayers of confession)

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness

Take comfort:
we, and the whole world with us,
are always embraced in Christ's love.
In Christ, there is always enough. Amen.

*From Stone Soup, a liturgy from the Seekers Church: A
Christian Community. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at*

[https://re-worship.blogspot.
com/2011/09/confession-always-
enough.html](https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/09/confession-always-enough.html)



Sending

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
grace to risk something big for something good; and grace to
remember the world is now too dangerous for anything but
the truth and too small for anything but love.

– The Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr.

Music: Suggestions

“Out of the Depths, I Cry to You”

“Be Still My Soul”

“O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

“God of Grace and Glory”

“Take My Life and Let It Be”

Word and Life for 7th Sunday after Pentecost – 4 July 2027

Ian Booth

Texts

2 Samuel 5:1–5; 9–10
Psalm 48
Ezekiel 2:1–5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2–10
Mark 6:1–13

Introduction

This is an interesting collection of readings. In the Gospel passage Jesus faces hometown envy when he teaches with authority in the synagogue – a “prophet without honour”; in the Corinthians passage Paul speaks of a memorable spiritual experience, balanced with a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble; in 2 Samuel the people of Israel approach David to be their king, so uniting the kingdoms, and David establishes Jerusalem as the capital (and the problems begin!), and Psalm 48 celebrates Jerusalem; Ezekiel describes the call of the prophet to speak the word of God to a stubborn people who will know that “a prophet has been among them”, and Psalm 123 speaks of the people suffering ridicule and contempt. In the Gospel passage we also have Jesus sending out the 12 on a mission trip. The linkages can be found in following the trail of call experiences and the ups and downs that accompany them, leaving no room for complacency.

Hearing the Word

2 Samuel 5:1–5; 9–10

Having been anointed as King in Judah earlier in this book, David is approached by the northern tribes, who had been governed by a son of Saul, and is asked to be their King, citing their blood relationship, David’s exploits in battle, and the divine prediction of his rule. Thus, under David, there is a united Kingdom of Israel and Judah. The conquering of Jerusalem, which was still in Canaanite hands, was a strategic move as it was neutral ground (think Washington, District Columbia, not part of any of the States that make up the USA).

Psalm 48

This Psalm praises both Mount Zion (the site of Jerusalem) and the great king who dwelt there.

Ezekiel 2:1–5

Ezekiel is called and commissioned to speak the word of God, empowered by the wind (or spirit). He is warned that the word he speaks will not be welcomed, but he must just be faithful in speaking the word that God gives him to them. They will know there is a prophet among them by the unmistakable word of God that is spoken.

Psalm 123

This Psalm is probably post-exilic, when Israel was under the direct rule of foreign powers, and were subjected to mockery, insult and contempt. They pray for God to respond because they have had enough of the contempt.

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

While Paul acknowledges that there is nothing to be gained from boasting, he feels pressured by his accusers to write of the abundant experiences of ecstasy that have been granted to him, which have clearly made a significant impact on him, especially one experience, the timing of which he clearly remembers. He then speaks of the “thorn in the flesh” which has kept him humble. This has made the grace of God more particularly meaningful to him. His only boast can be the grace of God.

Mark 6:1–13

The experience Jesus faces at Nazareth is because the people there have watched him grow up, they know his family, and they are astonished at the knowledge and wisdom he displays – and so put him down. He responds with what has become a well-known phrase “a prophet is without honour in his hometown” and is unable to perform any miracles there because the attitude of the people militates against it. He then sends his disciples out in two’s, with specific instructions to carry only a staff, sandals, but no spare tunic. The instruction to stay in the house they enter implies that they should be satisfied with the first invitation they receive and not seek a better offer. Shaking the dust off their feet as a testimony against those who will not welcome or listen to them is a traditional Jewish custom.

Interpreting the Word

2 Samuel 5:1–5; 9–10

The Books of Samuel continue after the death of Samuel and tell the story of the origin of the monarchy in Israel and Judah. There is a considerable body of work regarding David, from his secret anointing to his mixed reception and treatment at the hands of Saul, his special friendship with Saul’s son Jonathan, and David’s flight to escape from Saul, which results in civil war, then David’s election as King over the twelve tribes. The purpose of the collection of David stories is to show that David’s rise to power was not his own doing, but the work of God. The ascent to reign over a united Israel had come at a great cost and is the beginning of establishing the legendary Kingship of David, who would be the inspiration for the Messianic hopes of the people – and the Messiah would be from Judah. From the time of David’s grandson Rehoboam, the kingdoms were split again, with the hereditary lineage continuing in the Southern Kingdom of Judah – from where most of the stories of David originate.

Ezekiel 2:1–5

It seems most likely, based on the evidence within the text of this book, that Ezekiel is based in Palestine, and his oracles of doom were spoken in person to the Judeans for whom they were intended. His sermons are addressed to Judah and Jerusalem. He was a priest who revered the temple and condemned the rulers for allowing the hilltop shrines to foreign gods to flourish again. He was deeply concerned with ethical principles, and equated idolatry with adultery because of the cultic practices of shrine prostitutes. He is going to face challenges to the word of God that he speaks because the message is going to speak to the moral and ethical failures of the leaders of the people, who are responsible for the moral decay and the banishment of exile.

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

Throughout the Corinthian correspondence Paul is addressing a problem of “super apostles” who claimed to have secret knowledge that required special training and insight in order to access this knowledge. Paul’s message from the beginning is a simple gospel message “Christ and him crucified”. In the passage we read we find Paul going against the grain for him and telling of ecstatic spiritual experiences which he has had – almost going head-to-head with the “super apostles”. He then grounds himself with the “thorn in the flesh”, which is never explained. The purpose of the “thorn in the flesh” is to keep him humble, and to acknowledge that in his weakness the strength of Christ strengthens him. This is how we develop resilience and the ability to play the hand that life deals us.

Mark 6:1–13

For some reason we are given two distinct events in this one passage. There is the cold reception of Jesus by his hometown neighbours; and then there is the sending out of the 12. There is some value in holding these two in tension. The treatment of Jesus in Nazareth, where his neighbours do not deny that he does and says amazing things. They seem to take umbrage at the fact that he, the oldest son, has abandoned his mother and his hometown to embark on some crazy adventure that may not end well. Jesus accepts this rejection as part of what it means to be a prophet. The words he uses, about a prophet not being accepted in his hometown, are reminiscent of Plutarch’s observation: “The most sensible and wisest people are little cared for in their own hometowns”. Rather than this experience demoralising him, Jesus immediately takes steps to expand the reach of his ministry. They model simplicity and dependency in what they wear and carry. The disciples succeed in carrying out what Jesus has been doing. This is because: their authority comes from Jesus, they are followers; the word of God always yields a harvest; and the reign of God that Jesus initiates has a corporate or shared character. It is not just about elevating Jesus, but about Jesus creating a new situation. The contrast between rejection by those who knew him and the welcoming hospitality from strangers can be highlighted here as another example of Jesus frustrating conventional expectations. We can’t predict what will happen next – we can just follow.

Preaching the Word

The crafting of a sermon here would depend on the combination of readings used. If the preacher takes 2 Samuel 5:1–5; 9–10 with Corinthians and the Gospel the focus could be on the fact that for both David and Jesus it was the work of God that they were about, not on their own “power trips”. Throughout David’s life it was God moving in the hearts of others that propelled David to the Kingship of a united Israel; in the life of Jesus it was God’s call, solidified in the wilderness experience, that motivated everything that Jesus did, and enabled him to shrug off the rejection of the hometown crew, because he knew his true purpose.

If the preacher uses Ezekiel 2:1–5 with the other two passages, then the focus could be on the fact that a familiar audience would not always be receptive to the message from one they knew.

Living the Word

The focus is on being open to what God is saying and doing through others: David heard the pleas and responded; Ezekiel obeyed the call even though he is told the people will be resistant; Paul persevered, and even went against the grain in order to establish his credentials so that the people would accept his humility; Jesus had one focus in mind, and interpreted everything that happened to him through that lens. Listen to what the people are saying because sometimes God works through them, and sometimes God uses them to challenge our own perceptions of our importance.

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Word and Life for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost – 11 July 2027

James Harris

Texts

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b – 19
Psalm 24 OR Amos 7:7–15
Psalm 85:8–13
Ephesians 1:3–14
Mark 6:14–29

Introduction

We have today something of a confusion! Perhaps my own. The Gospel story is about Jesus preaching the Kingdom by calling hearers to repentance, Tetrarch Herod thinking that John was raised from death (given the similarity of the message), and then the background narrative to John's murder. In the liturgical churches the Feast of the Death of John the Baptist (the Decollation of JB) is remembered on one of several dates – but not normally on July 11th. The BCP has the feast on 24th June. However, during the 5th Century it was moved to August 29th. The South African 1989 APB has this Feast it on August 29th. However, the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church records that in an earlier day John's "decollation" was remembered during Epiphany. What does this tell us? Simply that there is an element of the arbitrary about these feasts and remembrance days. It can be very frustrating when one reads the pieces of fascinating history around special days or of saints, only to find such diverse viewpoints on how historians came to set the days and times. Obviously, Popes and other church leaders play a large role in the changes. Preachers could benefit from a brief study of this issue – various dictionaries help, if for nothing else than illustrative material.

The Gospel narrative focuses our minds on two things: one is that suffering, even to the point of death, can sometimes be the lot of a follower of God and his Christ. Note how our Nigerian sisters and brothers are being persecuted currently by Boko Haram Islamist terrorists, and in Syria 80% of the believers have been lost due to persecution, to offer just two illustrations. The second matter is: hasty promises can often cause hurt, sorrow, scandal, and embarrassment – Herod's drunken pledge to a saucy child under the influence of an embittered woman, brought about the demise of a godly man.

Hearing and Interpreting the Word

Mark 6:14–29

We begin then with *Mark 6:14–29*. Jesus is recorded as proclaiming the Kingdom by calling his hearers to repentance. This was the same message as John's. A variety of opinions are recorded: the new messenger was Elijah (the one prophesies as being the forerunner of Messiah), others claimed this was one of the other prophets of old, still others and this included Herod, maintained that this John the Baptist raised from death. Herod was convinced of this because he had had John murdered.

Now comes the back-story. John had criticised both Herod and Herodias for their marriage. It was illegal according to Jewish law because Philip, Herodias's husband (and Herod's half-brother) was still living. Not that they really cared: Herod's family was terribly inbred and incestuous, but it rankled to the point of vengeance and violence by Herodias. She had long desired to have John done away with, but Herod had a fearful fascination for John. We are told that he liked listening to John but disliked his message. Yet Herod would not concede to his wife's murderous intent.

But now, a party – all the major players in Galilee are in attendance: invited or summoned, they are all there: a power play by the Tetrarch and his lady. Music, food, drink, dance, conversations at the highest level. And cometh the moment: a dance which switches the "lights" on for so many but particularly the host: "Half my kingdom will I give you as a present for your evocative (and erotic) performance!" "Mama, what should I ask for?" "The head of John on a platter!" And so the request is made. "Oh dear, anything but, please". "No, you said anything up to half a kingdom: so come on, honour your word." Herod, conscious of his pledge before a huge audience, must fulfil his word or lose face. And so, John's head rolls.

Herod's case has a salient message: you can hear God's word, value its messenger, recognise the truth of the message, and yet be utterly alienated from the One who sent the messenger and its message.

This is a terribly sad story. But it has a powerful message. Let us learn from it.

Now, what's the nearest Biblical text to follow on from this?

Amos 7:7–15

This passage seems to follow on from the Gospel narrative almost seamlessly. It speaks of rulers, kings and priests, who reject the message of the prophet. Here is evidence of geographical superiority. Bethel lies in Samaria, and very distinct to the Judean context. Amos is a herdsman and a farmer from Tekoa, in the Judean lowlands leading up into Jerusalem. Amos is called of God to go to the Northern regions to proclaim the Word, which he had seen in visions. The vision under review is that of a plumb – line, a typical builder's tool, even into modern times: I was once a builder, and my father taught me to use a plumb-line to ensure the accuracy of an up-right wall. And here it is a symbol or metaphor for a measuring tool for honesty and faithfulness to truth. The Northern State's leaders were more interested in geographical superiority than in honest spiritual and historical truth. However, Amaziah acknowledges Amos as a "seer". Here, as with Herod, the messenger is recognised as a man of God and a man sent from God but equally rejected.

Amos is ridiculed for being a Southerner, with no mandate to speak to the North. Amos claims a call from God which supersedes all geographical boundaries, for all the earth is God's, and God's message is for all people regardless of

the place or ethnicity. Yet we must concede that Amos's message was not a comfortable one: it was one of judgement. It was a critique of the way rulers conducted themselves and influenced the people of God.

The end result of Amos's message, the description of the end of Amaziah and Jeroboam, is out of our given text, but needs to be acknowledged, as does the final note of hope and restoration in the ninth and final chapter of Amos' message.

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12–19

It is unfortunate that this reading leaves out some key elements in the story of the movement of the Covenant Box. There is a rather difficult section on God's anger over Uzzah's effort to prevent the Box from crashing to the ground and the inconceivable death of this man. There is the brief comment on Michal's mockery of David over the near-naked dance, and her barrenness. There is the observation that David was both furious with God over Uzzah's death and, equally, fearful of God over these events. To really understand the given texts the whole chapter needs to be read carefully. The given texts then must be put into context.

The journey from Abinadab's home in Baal'ah to Jerusalem was meant to be a journey of faith and celebration, an extended ascent to the Hill of God. Along the way tragedy struck: the oxen stumbled and, thinking the Covenant Box would fall and be damaged, Uzzah took hold and sought to steady the Box, only to be struck dead by God. It seems such a petty, bizarre act! Commentators seem to have consensus that Uzzah was being irreverent – presuming to do God's work of protecting this sacred instrument. David becomes angry at God, then fearful. What a range of emotions described here. Human and divine expressions mingled, and as always, forcing readers to ponder the meaning of the narrative.

We know that God cannot be angry in a human manner. God cannot be petty nor his behaviour bizarre. Our human words describing our understanding of God, his thoughts, emotions, and actions are of necessity limited and paltry. The story seems to highlight God's unassailable holiness: do not presume to act without God's express permission or command. David was fearful yet the story, in my opinion, seeks to remind us that "awe" is the rightful and necessary attitude to have, which in turn influences our actions. Sad as the story is at one point, the narrative emphasises the necessity of awe, reverence, worship, and a determination to God's work God's way.

After the three-month hiatus in Gath, at Obed Edom's home, David leads the procession out again on its journey to God's Holy Hill. Again, it is a festive occasion. Note David's generosity in giving gifts to one and all: bread, meat, and raisins – an interesting combination.

All told, this is a story of mystery as to the workings of God with humanity. Does evil originate with God? Can human action thwart the purposes of God? Is God playing with us in a capricious pattern, as did the pagan mythological gods of Greece and other Empires? Or are we to be still, are we to think through, and consider the wonders and works and words of the true and living God?

Psalms 24

The theme of this Psalm follows naturally from my observations above. God is utterly sovereign as Creator and Sustainer of the world and its inhabitants, both animate and inanimate.

From this standpoint the Psalmist focuses on the individual who desire to stand in the presence of the Most High. Note the qualifications: clean hands, pure heart, no idols, no lies or false oaths – a reflection of the Decalogue? Perhaps but more importantly, the one spoken of is a "seeker" after God, but **not** any god: this God is defined as the Lord of Hosts, the King of Glory, the Battle-winner, the God from eternity to eternity. These descriptors reveal not an ancient kind of warlord or Viking Warrior-god, but rather a God who truly can and does win all the battles – both physical and spiritual, and bringing into reality the purposes of the eternal realm. It is often difficult to differentiate the divine personas, especially if one is *au fait* with the ancient myths of Norse, Greek, and Celtic, *et al.* Yet we must, because the true and living God, revealed through the Jews and in Jesus is vastly different to the mythological divinities. Our Psalm suggests that our God is a sovereign Lord in every way, providentially bringing meaning and purpose into history and individual lives to reveal God's intimate reality into every sphere of life.

Psalms 85:8–13

Even though Psalm 85 has seven verses before our set text – verses which highlight the "works" of God, the emphasis on vs 8–13 is that of the "words" of God: the God who speaks. So often interpreters maximise the actions of God. Yet so much of Scripture remind us that God "speaks" – to individuals, to a nation, to the nations.

Here the emphasis is "peace to his people". Peace is equated with being "faithful" and devotionally committed ("hearts turned to him"). Notice how virtues like "truth", "mercy", "righteousness" are linked to "peace". All these virtues need to be expanded upon, carefully understood, as well as expounded thoroughly in context. In a day such as ours, virtues such as these really do need to be heralded as valuable and necessary for the flourishing of society. We all long for peace and righteousness to prevail. But these virtues have to be taught, inculcated, modelled, and practiced for the observing upcoming generation to accept and emulate such characteristics of the preceding generation. And the source of such virtues have to be clearly delineated: the God of our forefathers and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:3–14

Paul begins his letter by giving thanks to God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. Remember Paul was a faithful Jew, a former Pharisee, a strict and particular believer, as to the Law utterly righteous. Yet having been confronted by Jesus, as God incarnate and fulfiller of all the Law and the Prophets, Paul realises that his legal righteousness is as nothing. His faith was in Jesus alone – just as Abraham believed the promise of God and righteousness was attributed to him, so Paul believed the promise of God fulfilled in Jesus.

For Paul, election was in Jesus, effected by the Holy Spirit, and confirmed by the Spirit through repentance, faith, and glad, hopeful obedience. And, just as the ancients believed the promises of God, so Paul emphasises the promises of God in and through Jesus are to be believed and accepted. One of the errors of modern Christianity, I believe, is that we do not equate the sacrificial patterns of the OT with the sacrificial work of Jesus. What Jesus did in his life and death is to fulfil the OT sacrificial system, yet at the same time to show that OT believers were saved by the same method: belief in the divine origin of the sacrifices, whereby the sacrifice of the innocent for the guilty atones for sin and reconciles the faithful believer to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, and thus a Trinitarian perspective.

Preaching the Word

Repentance and belief in the Kingdom are a critical aspect of the Christian message. The “kingdom” stands for the very presence of God in Jesus, in the here and now. How important this is for today can be seen by the attitudes towards Gospel preaching in many pulpits: when almost anything goes for the “Christian Gospel” – entertainment, health, wealth, and prosperity, Jesus only, sound-bite sermons, no doctrine only social action, *ad nauseum*. Clearly there is always some truth in poor teaching. Heresy always has a modicum of truth for that is highlighted and downplayed at the same time.

One could wonderfully dramatize this scene whereby Herod yields to Salome’s (Herodias’s) demand – as I have tried to do in small measure under the exposition.

From the various passages assigned to us for today there are any number of ideas which are fertile for the preacher. I think the message of John the Baptist’s death is central: suffering of the righteous, misunderstanding and misrepresentation and mistreating of the righteous and followers of Jesus. The need to proclaim the sovereignty of God in all areas of life: history in general and in the particular the life and times of the believer and the church. The holiness of God, the necessity of doing God’s work God’s way and the attendant evaluation of how this is worked out. Holiness is not legalism or even simply mystery which cannot be fathomed but is practical and clear in Scripture as well as through the example of the saints.

Living the Word

There are, as one should be able to glean from my expositions, a number of ethical and practical implications to be considered from these texts.

Certainly, the example (even if a bad one) of Herod with his excessive promise made in a drunken state needs consideration. Beware of over-indulging, whether drink or food or the aesthetics of beauty and dance and music. The poetic construct of “truth is beauty and beauty is truth” is not a biblical perspective. It is attractive and romantic but not true in all its aspects.

We are faced, I believe, with the age-old dilemma about doctrine and action. As always, it’s not either/or: it really is both-and. We live in an era where doctrine is considered as divisive and action as beneficial for all. Action rooted in a universalism which excludes Christ as reconciler is ultimately unhelpful. Doctrine which is intellectual but impractical is equally uninspiring. True faith is doctrinal and practical each centered in Christ Jesus as the true and living God incarnate.

All ethical suggestions are bound to be evaluated by the doctrines underpinning the truths of those ethical ideas. Given that Jesus is the “truth, the life, and the way”, both doctrine and ethics must of necessity relate to Him.

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Word and Life for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost – 18 July 2027

Mark Stephenson

Texts

Psalm 89:20–27
2 Samuel 7:1–14(a)
Ephesians 2:11–22
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Introduction

What happens in life deepens our awareness of context. Look what happened on this day: on this day in 1918, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (the leader) was born. He promised “a better life for all”. John Glenn (the astronaut) was born in 1921. He brought the promise of “a whole new world” through space exploration. In 1950, Richard Branson (the businessman) was born. He said, “Business opportunities are like buses – there’s always another one coming.” Adolf Hitler (the obsessed) published “Mein Kampf” in 1925 on this day. And in 2013, Detroit (economic collapse) filed for bankruptcy. These images give Word and Worship a glimpse into the importance of “numbering our days”. The readings invite us to consider the controlling theme of God’s promises at work in faith and life and to celebrate this direction in worship.

Hearing the Word

Psalm 89:20–27

This Psalm is a powerful reminder of God’s promises. David writes from his experience as King. Despite feelings of apparent abandonment, suffering, doubt, and complaint, there’s a celebration of Covenant loyalty and God’s steadfast love. God assures David success over his enemies. His promises to David are rock solid, crystal clear, and comforting. Hope in God’s unchanging nature, handling unmet expectations, and faithfulness in hardship is revealed.

We are drawn to the Psalm because the words are arranged in such a way that they appeal to our sense of beauty, balance, and wonder. God makes every effort to reveal God’s identity, urging us to trust God’s promises and keep the faith. The living Word stretches the mind and deepens the faith.

2 Samuel 7:1–14(a)

In life, God writes the script. God remains faithful despite human failure. The dream of a righteous King is central to the story of the people of God. God’s promise points to the future – assuring the people that one day, the Son of God, also the Son of David (i.e. Jesus) will be King. He will reign in justice, righteousness, and peace. Look what happened. David wanted to build God a temple (v. 1–3), but Nathan (his advisor) said, “The King already has a house” – David’s lineage. Through a Covenant promise, David’s throne would be established forever.

Nathan’s oracle teaches us to become active listeners. Nathan was a prophet and advisor serving as a messenger between God and King David. He said David’s son (Solomon) would build the Temple. The construction, built in Jerusalem around 960 BC, became a central place of worship for Israel. The Temple represents God’s Covenant with Israel and God’s desire to dwell amongst them. The Message? God has bigger plans for David and Israel, foreshadowing Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:11–22

This captivity letter (Paul was in prison) was written some 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus and a few years before the death of St. Paul. The Apostle writes to affirm that Christians are all members of Christ’s “body”, the Church. He preaches about the new life, and the new society God has brought into being through Jesus Christ. Christ is our centre point. There should be no barriers, no divisions, no discrimination.

We adopt Christ’s new standard of love, experienced by his Spirit, to live in harmony with one another. This means humbly thanking God for all God has done and encouraging others who are struggling in their faith. We are no longer strangers to God (v.19). Christ has broken down the walls that divide and unified all believers.

Mark 6:30–34

Jesus decides to take his disciples away for some rest and recovery but is confronted by a large crowd waiting for him. He sees the crowd like sheep without a shepherd, shows compassion, and starts to teach them many things. Jesus knew he was a shepherd who could teach them what they needed to know and keep them straying from God. Soon he sensed their hunger and need for something to eat.

Mark 6:53–56

At Gennesaret on the other side of the Lake, they moored, disembarked and exercised a busy ministry of healing. It was faith in Jesus, not magical power, that healed the people. His power brought salvation. They were strengthened by his promises.

Interpreting the Word

When God’s people repent, the Psalmist and Prophets are quick to offer the hope that flows from God’s promises. The eternal God, who is both creator and ultimate ruler of our world, clearly has a passion to speak to us. God is Holy and demands that we be Holy. This is his Covenant (promise), and God’s standard is still perfection.

To best understand what God says to us, we need to ask how God is speaking to us and examine the circumstances, re-affirm God’s promises, and see how they lead to conviction and resolution. We cannot change God’s plans, only live within them. This is how we make sense of the narrative.

Each day we make decisions – both consciously and unconsciously – about how we will treat the people around us. As we interact with others on the Way, we naturally fall into patterns of kindness and courtesy to those who cross our path. Scripture encourages us to take on God’s perspective. Only once we have listened for a while and understand the bigger picture before us can we make sense of the smaller details. In these passages we have looked for the promises of God. God has something to say to us about Faith and Life and the issues we are facing. But what is it? God desires to communicate God’s promises in God’s conversation with us.

The Bible is filled with stories about real people who lived in real places. The Lord made it clear that Israel’s King was to lead the people so that they might remain faithful to God.

Preaching the Word

Psalms 89 was written to describe the glorious reign of David. God promised to make David the mightiest King on earth and to keep his descendants on the throne forever. Because Jerusalem was destroyed and kings no longer reigned there, these verses look forward prophetically to the future reign of Jesus Christ, David’s descendant. This psalm was sung in a time of National trouble. God’s promise to David brings strength and empowerment. The promise expresses love and loyalty, and the extension of God’s love is assured. In the eyes of David, God is sovereign, his protector and saviour. The lineage of David as king and first born is wrapped up in this promise.

David’s lineage leads to Jesus. Always look to the bigger story when preaching the word and worshiping God. Paul says Jesus is our peacemaker, breaking down walls that divide, creating a new humanity. With Christ as our cornerstone, we build together. There is unity in diversity, access to God, peace with one another, living as God’s masterpiece – God’s temple. Jesus sees, cares, teaches, and heals. We claim the Shepherd’s heart through the compassion of Jesus. There is faith in action.

Living the Word

The Lord says, “*I will bless him constantly and surround him with my love; he will be great because of me!*” (v.24)

Throughout history, God has made covenants with God’s people – God would keep God’s side if they would keep theirs. Signs of God’s promise include pain of childbirth (The Fall), the rainbow (The Flood), a flaming torch (Abraham), the exodus (Moses), priesthood (Aaron), the Messiah (David’s line), the New Covenant (Christ’s Resurrection). David realized that these blessings (legally binding obligations) would help fulfil God’s greater purpose and promises for all (the whole nation and ultimately the whole world).

Christ is the way to peace. We are no longer strangers but friends of God, given a new spiritual life. The Good Shepherd knew that he could teach them what they needed and keep them from straying from God.

We must also transfer the truth to our own life situations. Lessons are to be learned from those who celebrate historical events and birthdays on 18 July 2027. Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world”; “It always seems impossible until it’s done!” John Glenn said, “An end of something means the beginning of something else.” Richard Branson said, “Don’t be afraid of your failures, learn from them and start again!” Hitler said, “If you tell a big enough lie and tell it frequently enough, it will be believed”. In Detroit, “The city is insolvent, and we’re going to deal with that reality.”

History has a strange way of taking us back to where we started. Maybe the takeaway from today’s readings could be: “The real church of Jesus Christ comes into being when men and women commit their lives to God.”

Liturgical Suggestions

Collect

Grant us, Lord,
not to be anxious about earthly things,
but to love things heavenly:
and even now,
while we are placed among things that are passing away,
to hold fast to those things that last forever,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Hymn

“O Jesus, I have promised” (Hymns & Psalms 704)

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Word and Life for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost – 25 July 2027

Mark Stephenson

Texts

Psalm 14
2 Samuel 11:1–15
Ephesians 3:14–21
John 6:1–21

Introduction

The code to understanding these readings is God's Providence. The word relates to God's continuous, parental care of the world. The guidance and blessing of God are like having a bigger plan unfolding even when life is uncertain. Look what happened on this day, 25 July: In 1814, George Stephenson introduced the first Steam Locomotive. In 1965, Bob Dylan went electric at Newport. And in 1978, Louise Brown became the world's first test tube baby. Images of engineering, change, and medical science help us understand that God's providence sustains our efforts. In Africa, we define ourselves by what we can become. The call is to live Christ-like lives. All life presents providence – visible signs of invisible grace.

Hearing the Word

Psalm 14

This Psalm is a heartfelt cry about the reality of evil and God's sovereignty. God sees the mess, and the corruption, and brings help and salvation from Zion. *"You, O God, have put my life together!"* We shout "Snap!" to his gift of providence. The words express so much of what we experience in the world today. We face the perspective of those who deny God's existence. People who often live without regard for divine accountability. The Psalmist (and St. Paul) describe their behaviour as foolish. "The Fool", they argue, is "warped and evil". By denying God's existence, they allow wickedness to prevail. David points to God's providence saying, *"God is with those who love him"* (v.5).

He reminds his listeners that *"God is the refuge of the poor and humble when evil doers are oppressing them"* (v.6). He urges us to celebrate God's gift of salvation (v.7).

2 Samuel 11:1–15

A great and devout King was unable to resist the pull of temptation. In one moment of madness, he made the mistake that was to haunt him for the rest of his life. David could have chosen to stop and turn away from evil at any stage along the way. His choices turn into a slippery slope. The prophet Nathan confronts David. Chastened, David repents and God forgives his sins – but the consequences affect David powerfully. The message is stark. Unchecked desire and power bring disaster.

Ephesians 3 14–21

Paul prays to the Father, the source of every family. His powerful prayer asks God to strengthen believers through the Spirit (v.16). He acknowledges Christ dwelling in hearts through faith, then urges us to grasp God's vast love and be filled with God's fullness (v.18–19) and glorify His name. God's ability exceeds our requests (v.20–21). Such is God's provision! God's power at work is awesome. We are given inner strength for outward impact. God's love surpasses knowledge.

John 6:1–21

Jesus feeds a massive crowd of 5000 people with a young boy's lunch (5 loaves and 2 fishes). He transforms scarcity into abundance. The small offering becomes more than enough. The scene changes with the disciples struggling at sea. Jesus comes, walks on water, and calms the storm saying, "It's me, don't be afraid!". The Bread of Life is not only our Provider, but also Master of Chaos, bringing peace. He is in control.

Interpreting the Word

We can relate to Psalms because they express our feelings. We do not always understand God's lead, but we find comfort in the knowledge that God shepherds us. God's breath of life actively works in our lives for good and enables our words and actions to overcome evil with God.

David shows us that sin turns into a slippery slope. The deeper the mess, the less we want to admit having caused it. David's scheme to have Bathsheba's husband killed unsettles us. Have we done sufficient research into a problem when faced with a choice? When the tipping point arrives, God's providence reminds us not to lose sight of what God wants. The answer may be to seek out choices and find the choice that honours God.

Paul is overwhelmed by the magnitude of God's love. Providence comes from the source of all creation and strengthens us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul's prayer reminds us that God's love is total. It stays with us all the days of our lives, reaches us in the depths of disappointment, and covers the breadth of our experience. Paul's doxology acknowledges God's limitless power within us and exposes gratitude for the goodness of God. The focus on divine majesty is endless because of God's master plan in Christ Jesus. The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus give us confidence to recognise that God is at work in our lives and in the stories we tell.

God can do the miraculous. Trust God to provide the resources. The youngster gave what he had, and it made all the difference. God can take what little we have and make it good. Even the leftovers present a picture of resources being multiplied beyond our wildest expectations. God's provision shows how greatly we can be used to advance the work of

the Kingdom. When Jesus came to the disciples during a storm, walking on water, he told them not to be afraid. God's providence is such that if we allow Christ to take hold of our lives, God can give us peace in the midst of any storm.

Preaching the Word

Psalm 14 is a sobering look at humanity's corruption and God's response. Denial of God leads to corruption. It's about living as if God doesn't matter. The wicked oppress and it seems like they're getting away with it. But God is present, watching. The Psalmist longs for God's rescue. There is hope in God's deliverance. When God brings salvation, it changes everything. Let's cry out for God's salvation of our world.

The story of David and Bathsheba remind us that unchecked desires can lead to devastating sin. Cover ups lead to more sin. God sees it all. Nothing is hidden from God. Are we confessing and turning back to God? Let us remember God's mercy and grace and strive to live differently.

Paul wants us to be rooted and grounded in love: comprehend the height and depth, breath and length of God's love. Paul kneels before God reminding us that God can do increasingly more than we ask or imagine, through God's power working in us. He wants us to experience God's presence and power, to grasp and respond to God's unfailing love, and give God the glory.

Do we see Jesus just as a provider or the Bread of Life? How does Jesus test our faith? Let us thank Jesus for being our Bread of Life. Ask for faith to trust in God's promises. Pray for eyes to see Jesus in all circumstances. And trust God as our source of life and abundance.

Living the Word

We cannot separate our faith from context, society, power structures, drives, issues, and everyday life. God's response is found in hope and resurrection. Participation brings interdependence. We are part of a whole. Spiritual life flows from the corporate experience and never in isolation from it.

Desmond Tutu practiced a spirituality of God's providence and reconciliation of all: hospitality to strangers, political practices of inclusion, common prayer, a good sense of humour to disarm tension. Bishop Tutu reminded us that "*Our identity is expressed in relationship with others.*"

We must also transfer the truth of our own life situations. Today World Sport has become the new religion. Fans

can name their team, tell you the latest score, predict the outcome of matches, and bring you up to speed on the latest developments in the sport. With two months to go before the start of the 2027 World Cup in Australia, National Rugby Teams eye their fixture list and dream of lifting the prized trophy. The times are a changing – they've changed.

The ability to choose is an essential part of being human. Throughout our lives, we can point to events that brought change. The process of spiritual formation can differ weekly from person to person. God will continue to call us – move us from the old to the new – and allow the spirit to re-form new desires and patterns. Providence sustains us to make God's love visible. This is the world to which Christ has come, and the Holy Spirit remains present.

Liturgical Suggestion

Collect

Gracious God,
your Son, Jesus Christ, fed the hungry
with the bread of life
and the word of your kingdom.
Renew your people with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness
sustain us by your true and living bread,
even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Hymn

"Guide me, O thou great Jehovah" (Hymns & Psalms 437)

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Word and Life for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost – 1 August 2027

Edward Ontong

Texts

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a and Psalm 51:1–12 OR
Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15 and Psalm 78:23–29
Ephesians 4:1–16,
John 6:24–35

Introduction

The overarching and connecting thought between these passages is God's faithful sustenance and cleansing amidst human faithlessness and sin, leading to the call for unity and spiritual maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:1–16). Whether through providing bread in the wilderness (Exodus 16) or forgiving David's adultery (2 Sam 11–12), God acts to restore. Paired with John 6:24–35 the focus extends to transitioning from desperate need (sin/hunger) to receiving sustaining grace, ultimately prompting a transformed, unified life.

Hearing the Word

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a,

Nathan the prophet confronts King David regarding his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. Using a parable to expose David's guilt, Nathan declares God's judgment: the sword will never depart from David's house, and his family will face calamity. David confesses, "*I have sinned against the LORD,*" resulting in immediate repentance and forgiveness, though severe consequences remain.

Psalm 51:1–12

Here is King David's earnest plea for mercy and cleansing following his adultery with Bathsheba, acknowledging his sin is entirely against God. He requests complete forgiveness, inner renewal, and the restoration of joy and fellowship with God, seeking a pure heart (vv. 10–12) to replace his brokenness and guilt.

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15

The Israelites complain of hunger in the wilderness, wishing they were back in Egypt. God hears their grumbling and promises to rain bread from heaven and send meat (quail). In the evening and morning, God miraculously provides quail and the flaky "manna" bread.

Psalm 78:23–29

This Psalm tells of God's miraculous provision of manna ("bread of heaven") and quail for the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. Despite their disobedience, God graciously met their cravings for food, providing an abundance that allowed them to eat their fill.

Ephesians 4:1–16

The writer urges believers to live worthy of their calling by maintaining unity through humility, gentleness, and love. Paul emphasizes one body, Spirit, and Lord, declaring that Christ gives diverse gifts to equip the church for spiritual maturity, functional unity, and growth, preventing doctrinal instability.

John 6:24–35:

The crowd seeks Jesus after the miraculous feeding, but he challenges their physical motivations, urging them to seek eternal, spiritual food rather than perishable bread. When asked for a sign to believe, they cite Moses and manna. Jesus declares himself the "Bread of Life," the true spiritual sustenance that brings eternal satisfaction, saying, "*whoever comes to me will never hunger*"

Interpreting the Word

This lectionary collection focuses on God as the faithful provider of sustenance, mercy, and truth, challenging believers to move beyond superficial desires (like manna or physical bread) to seek the spiritual life found in Christ. It contrasts human grumbling and sin with divine generosity.

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15 and Psalm 78:23–29

Highlights God's faithfulness in providing "bread from heaven" despite the Israelites' grumbling, highlighting the theme of grace and trusting divine provision.

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a and Psalm 51:1–12

Explores the depths of sin (David and Bathsheba) and the necessity of God's mercy, forgiveness, and transformation.

John 6:24–35

Jesus identifies himself as the "Bread of Life," shifting the focus from physical sustenance (the manna) to spiritual nourishment that satisfies eternally, urging people to believe in him.

Ephesians 4:1–16

Focuses on unity in the church, encouraging believers to grow up in faith, speak the truth in love, and avoid being tossed about by false doctrine, directly connecting to the nourishing, grounding nature of Christ.

Preaching the Word

Divine Provision & Sustenance: God satisfies hunger – physical (manna) and spiritual (Christ). A Possible focus on God as the sovereign source who meets all needs – physical, emotional, and spiritual – often in unexpected ways. It emphasizes trusting in God’s sufficiency over scarcity, rooted in the finished work of Christ (Phil 4:19), providing for both daily bread and total life sustenance.

- *Source over Resources:* God is not limited by natural resources; He is the ultimate supplier.
- *Daily Reliance (Manna Principle):* God provides daily sustenance to foster trust, encouraging believers to rely on Him daily rather than hoarding.
- *Sovereign Guidance:* When God guides, He provides. Provision often follows obedient action.
- *Unexpected Sources:* Provision can come from unconventional places, such as Elijah being fed by ravens or Hagar finding a well.
- *Sufficiency, Not Always Surplus:* God’s provision is always sufficient for the season, but it may not always be in abundance.
- *Finished Work of Christ:* Provision is often presented as a blood-bought promise, flowing from the grace of Jesus, covering both spiritual and practical/financial needs.

Rebellion & Redemption: Both the Exodus story and David’s fall highlight human imperfection contrasted with God’s redeeming grace. The text shows us that rebellion – whether it is cowardly fear (Exodus) or arrogant sin (2 Samuel) – is always met by a God who desires to redeem and sustain. We are called to stop grumbling and trust, and to stop hiding and confess, knowing God hears and responds to cries for redemption.

Rebellion: The Moral Failure (2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a)

- *The Sin:* David abuses his power to commit adultery with Bathsheba and murders Uriah. This is the ultimate “rebellion” against God’s laws, causing contempt among enemies of the Lord.
- *The Confrontation:* Nathan confronts David. Redemption requires a confrontation with the truth of our actions.

The Redemption: Upon confession (“I have sinned against the Lord”), Nathan immediately declares that God has taken away his sin, preventing immediate death.

Living the Word

These scriptures call for a daily life anchored in trust, integrity, and spiritual hunger rather than temporary fulfillment. They challenge us to accept God’s grace to repent of selfish actions (2 Sam/Ps 51), trust God for daily needs rather than complaining (Exodus/Ps 78), and live out a united, purposeful life in Christ (Ephesians), recognizing Jesus as the true “Bread of Life” (John).

Daily Living Applications

- *Trusting Daily Provision (Exodus 16, Psalm 78):* Instead of worrying or hoarding, trust that God provides enough for today, encouraging a lifestyle of contentment and sharing rather than selfish accumulation.
- *True Repentance (2 Samuel 11–12, Psalm 51):* When we misuse power or cause pain, these texts urge honest confession and a plea for a “clean heart,” taking responsibility rather than hiding mistakes.
- *Building Community (Ephesians 4:1–16):* Live a life worthy of your calling by practicing humility, gentleness, and patience to maintain unity in families, workplaces, and churches, using individual gifts to build up the whole community.
- *Seeking Lasting Fulfillment (John 6:24–35):* Avoid chasing temporary satisfaction (material things, validation) and instead “feed” on the spiritual sustenance Jesus offers, seeking meaning in Him rather than just material security.
- *Living as “Bread”:* Just as Jesus is the Bread of Life, Christians are called to be broken and shared – offering love, service, and life-giving hope to a hungry world

Liturgical Suggestions

Suggested Hymns and Music

- “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah/Redeemer” (Exodus/Wilderness)
- “Break Thou the Bread of Life” (John 6)
- “Lord, Have Mercy” (Kyrie Eleison – Psalm 51)
- “Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether” (Ephesians 4 – Unity)
- “For the Bread Which You Have Broken” (John 6)

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Word and Life for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost – 8 August 2027

Edward Ontong

Texts

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33 and Psalm 130 OR
1 Kings 19:4–8 and Psalm 34:1–8,
Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2
John 6:35, 41–51

Introduction

Connecting these texts reveals a profound narrative arc regarding grief, divine sustenance in despair, and the transition from brokenness to communal restoration. The passages move from the depths of human sorrow and failure (2 Samuel, 1 Kings) to divine comfort (Psalm 130/34) and finally to the call for renewed, compassionate living within the community

Hearing the Word

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33

This narrates the tragic climax of Absalom's rebellion against his father, King David. Despite David's strict orders to protect him, Absalom is killed after his hair catches in an oak tree. David deeply mourns his son's death, crying, "Would that I had died instead of you".

David's Command (v. 5): Before the battle, David commands his commanders (Joab, Abishai, Ittai) to be gentle with his son Absalom, a command heard by all troops.

Absalom's Trap (v. 9): While fleeing on a mule, Absalom's head gets caught in the branches of a large oak tree, leaving him hanging.

The Killing (v. 15): Despite David's orders, Joab plunges three javelins into Absalom's heart, and ten of his armor-bearers complete the killing.

David's Mourning (v. 31–33): When news of victory reaches David, his focus is solely on Absalom. He deeply grieves, crying, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you"

Psalm 130

This is one of the biblical "song of ascents" (verses 1–8) focused on crying out from deep despair, guilt, or trouble to God, trusting in His forgiveness, steadfast love, and redeeming power. It highlights patient waiting for God's mercy – more than watchmen wait for the morning – and offers hope for spiritual redemption

The Cry from the Depths (v. 1–2): The Psalmist cries out from a place of overwhelming sorrow, danger, or sin.

The Plea for Mercy (v. 3–4): Recognizes that if God recorded sins, no one could stand but finds hope in His forgiveness.

Patient Waiting and Hope (v. 5–6): The soul waits for the Lord, trusting in His word more than watchmen wait for the dawn.

Abundant Redemption (v. 7–8): Encourages others (Israel) to hope in the Lord, for He offers plenteous redemption and salvation from iniquities.

1 Kings 19:4–8

A Depressed and exhausted Elijah flees for his life and seeks death under a broom tree after high-stakes spiritual battles. An angel ministers to him with food and water, providing physical sustenance that enables him to journey 40 days to Mount Horeb, highlighting God's care in times of burnout.

Psalm 34:1–8

A heartfelt psalm of thanksgiving written by David, likely while escaping from King Saul or during a time of immense danger and fear. It emphasizes praising God continuously (v. 1–3), seeking Him to find deliverance from fear (v. 4–6), and inviting others to trust in God's goodness and protection

Continuous Praise (v. 1): David declares he will bless the Lord at all times, not just when things go well. It is a praise meant for the mouth, not just the heart.

Boasting in the Lord (v. 2): Even in a desperate situation, David finds reason to boast in God, which brings comfort to the humble.

Deliverance from Fear (v. 4): David shares his personal experience of seeking the Lord, who answered him and delivered him from all his fears.

Protection and Light (v. 5–7): Those who look to God are described as radiant rather than ashamed. The "angel of the Lord" is described as encamping around those who fear Him, providing divine protection.

"Taste and See" (v. 8): This famous verse invites individuals to personally experience that God is good, comparing the experience of faith to tasting food.

Ephesians 4:25–5:2

This foundational passage in the New Testament outlines practical, daily conduct for Christians, focusing on living out the "new life" in Christ by discarding old, destructive habits and adopting a lifestyle of love. It emphasizes that believers are to be "imitators of God" (Ephesians 5:1), mirroring the love, forgiveness, and kindness shown by Christ.

Speak Truth (4:25): Believers are called to stop lying and speak truthfully to their neighbors, as all are part of the same "body" of Christ.

Manage Anger (4:26–27): While anger is not inherently sinful, it is not to be allowed to fester or control actions. Paul commands believers not to let the sun go down while still angry, warning that enduring anger provides an opportunity for the devil.

Work Honestly (4:28): Those who were stealing are instructed to stop, work hard at an honest job, and share with those in need.

Use Encouraging Words (4:29–30): Unwholesome or “rotten” speech should be replaced with words that build up others and give grace to listeners. This avoids “grieving the Holy Spirit”.

Remove Malice and Be Kind (4:31–32): Believers must eliminate bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander. They are instead called to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to one another, just as God forgave them in Christ.

Walk in Love (5:1–2): Paul calls Christians to “imitate God” and live a life of love, following the example of Christ’s self-sacrificial love.

John 6:35, 41–51

Jesus declares himself the “bread of life” that came down from heaven, contrasting his spiritual sustenance with the physical manna of the Exodus. He challenges the crowd’s murmuring, emphasizing that true life comes through faith in him and that his flesh is given for the world’s life.

The Bread of Life (v. 35): Jesus indicates that he is the source of spiritual sustenance that satisfies eternal hunger and thirst, unlike physical food that perishes.

Murmuring Crowd (v. 41): The crowd questions Jesus’ claim to have come from heaven because they know his earthly family, highlighting their limited, material perspective.

Divine Drawing (v. 44): Jesus teaches that no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father, emphasizing the active, providential role of God in bringing people to faith.

The Gift of Flesh (v. 51): Jesus makes a direct promise that he will give his “flesh” for the life of the world, foreshadowing his sacrificial death.

Eternal Life: The central promise is that those who “eat” this bread (believe in him) will live forever, emphasizing that he provides spiritual nourishment that extends beyond physical life.

Interpreting the Word

This lectionary collection explores themes of sustenance, grief, and divine sustenance amid despair and conflict. The readings contrast human fragility (David’s grief, Elijah’s despair) with God’s provision of life-giving “bread” (Jesus) and nurturing grace, urging believers to live in love as Christ did. The readings offer a progression from the pain of human loss (2 Sam/Elijah) to the comfort of divine presence (Psalms) and the ultimate provision of life through Christ (John). They guide believers to leave behind destructive behaviours (Ephesians) to embrace a life sustained by the “Bread of Life,” empowering them to live in love and compassion.

Key Themes and Interpretations

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33 (David’s Grief): This narrative portrays profound human heartache and the tragic consequences of violence, focusing on David’s desperate plea to save his son Absalom and his subsequent immense sorrow at the news of his death. It highlights the personal costs of betrayal and war, contrasting David’s love with the brutal political reality.

1 Kings 19:4–8 (Elijah’s Despair and God’s Provision): Elijah, fleeing for his life, finds himself deeply discouraged and wishing for death. In contrast to the violent world, God acts with gentle care, sending an angel to feed him. This miraculous food strengthens him for a forty-day journey, illustrating God’s sustenance for the weary and the faithful.

Psalms 130 or Psalm 34:1–8 (Hope in God): Psalm 130 emphasizes waiting for God’s redemption and forgiveness, focusing on divine mercy.

Psalms 34:1–8 focuses on tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord, bringing comfort to the brokenhearted and providing strength.

Ephesians 4:25–5:2 (New Life in Community): This text calls for a transformation of behavior – putting away falsehood, anger, and malice – and replacing them with truth, hard work, kindness, and forgiveness. It challenges believers to mimic God’s love and live as “beloved children”.

John 6:35, 41–51 (The Bread of Life): Jesus identifies himself as the “bread of life” that came down from heaven, promising eternal life to those who consume it (believe in him). This is contrasted with the physical manna of the past, offering a spiritual sustenance that leads to resurrection.

Preaching the Word

These texts offer profound themes on navigating intense grief, the devastation of broken family relationships, finding spiritual sustenance, and living a transformed life. Key sermon topics include the agonizing love of a parent, God as our ultimate source of nourishment, and walking in forgiveness.

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33 and Psalm 130

The Agony of Human Grief: David’s cry “Would I had died instead of you” highlights the profound pain and consequences of broken family relationships and the limitations of human love.

“Out of the Depths” (Psalm 130): A prayer for divine mercy during deep, emotional, or spiritual turmoil, offering hope that God is attentive to our cries even in the wake of tragic decisions.

The Consequences of Sinful Pride: Absalom’s story (and death) acts as a cautionary tale of how self-absorption and rebellion lead to destruction.

1 Kings 19:4–8 and Psalm 34:1–8

God's Sustenance in the Wilderness: Elijah's exhaustion highlights God's grace in providing physical and spiritual food to the weary, broken-spirited, and discouraged.

Tasting and Seeing God's Goodness: Psalm 34 offers comfort, focusing on seeking God, finding refuge, and trusting in His protection during life's crises

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 and John 6:35, 41–51

Living a Transformed Life: The call to remove bitterness, anger, and dishonesty, and instead live in love, imitating God's grace and practicing forgiveness.

Jesus as the Bread of Life: Jesus provides eternal sustenance that far exceeds physical bread (manna), challenging listeners to believe that he is the source of true, lasting life

Living the Word

Redemption Amid Ruin: Even in the midst of broken families, rebellion, and grief (2 Sam 18), God is working out redemption and offers restoration. *God Sees Our Tears:* The victory in 2 Samuel 18 is bittersweet – a “tragic victory.” While the kingdom is saved, David's heart is broken. This reminds us that we can face profound loss even while walking in God's will. God is present in that grief, offering comfort rather than condemnation. *Turning Pain to Purpose:* The text illustrates that God can take the “worst thing” – death and ruin – and, through His sovereignty, turn it into a step toward ultimate restoration

God as Sustainer: Whether through bread in the wilderness (1 Kings) or the “living bread” (John), God cares for our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Walking in Love: The necessity of forgiving one another, mirroring the unconditional, transforming love of God (Eph 4)

Liturgical Suggestions

Opening Prayer of Lament and Hope: “Lord God, maker and redeemer of all, as we come before you in grief and praise this day, comfort us with your presence, make us attentive to your voice, and sustain us with the hope of your kingdom”.

Prayer of adoration amidst Chaos: “God of joy, In the midst of chaos, you are calm. Amid uncertainty, you are constant ... During despair, you are living hope”

Hymns and Songs

“It Is Well with My Soul”: A classic of trust in God despite immense personal loss.

“Great is Thy Faithfulness”: Celebrates the sustaining, unchanging mercies of God.

“Be Still, My Soul”: Encourages finding rest and trust during dark times.

“Lord From Sorrows Deep I Call” (Psalm 42): A modern song of lament that turns toward hope.

“We Will Feast in the House of Zion”: Focuses on being “upheld, protected, gathered up” in the midst of ruin.

“He Will Hold Me Fast”: Focuses on Christ's power sustaining faith when our own strength fails

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Word and Life for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost – 15 August 2027

Francis Correia

Texts

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14 and Psalm 111 OR
Proverbs 9:1–12 and Psalm 34:9–14
Ephesians 5:15–20
John 6:51–58

Introduction

We are midway through Women's month. Is this a moment to pause and discern the nature of our relationships with the women in our own lives? The 15th of August is Victory in Japan Day, and preachers may like to think about the cost of war, especially in the wake of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All the readings deal with the value of wisdom in ordinary life. The question is 'How to live a good life?', finding its culmination in the Gospel invitation to union with Christ.

Hearing the Word

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

The reading begins by giving us the context that David has died, and that the new king is Solomon. Critical to this passage, is the line, '*Solomon loved God, he followed the precepts of his father David, except that he offered sacrifice and incense on the high places.*' This is a critical flaw in Solomon; he is not wholehearted in his love of God. However, it is also clear that Solomon is thoughtful and striving to be a good leader. '*Give your servant a heart to understand how to govern your people, how to discern between good and evil.*' '*This pleased the Lord*' and Solomon is granted his desire, which is not for himself but others. Then comes God's warning, '*I shall give you a long life, if you follow my ways*' The text is full of promise, but also with warning and the subtle awareness that not all is as it should be in Solomon's heart.

Psalm 111

The psalm picks up themes of good governance, pointing towards right relationship with people and God.

'*He provides food for those who fear Him*' here linking to the Gospel passage, not only the need for physical food but also for spiritual food.

'*He remembers his covenant forever.*' That God is a reliable and consistent ruler.

'*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.*' Links with 1 Kings and John's Gospel text.

Proverbs 9:1–12

Context: this chapter presents two women: wisdom and folly. Their invitations are in opposition to one another. This passage is highly evocative and concrete. Wisdom has

built her house, and prepared meat, bread and wine. She has dispatched her maid servants to call the people to come and eat. This text speaks directly to the Gospel passage.

Jesus' invitation to 'eat this bread' is pre-echoed by Wisdom calling us to '*Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed*'.

'*Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of insight.*' Here is an invitation to everyone.

Psalm 34:9–14

The psalm alternates between praise for God and instruction on how to live. The observation that 'fear of the Lord' is an important component of living a wise life. Clear moral guidelines, and the injunction to seek peace.

Ephesians 5:15–20

In Ephesians we hear even more clearly the call to be wise. 'Be careful about the sort of lives you lead'. Words like don't be 'senseless', or 'thoughtless' don't be lulled by 'drunkenness' all point to a thoughtful and God-fearing way of life. At the same time, we are not asked to be joyless. But rather than drunken debauchery we are to find joy in the Spirit. Our lives should be marked by joy and gratitude, 'giving thanks to God'. The call to living in this joy is not only personal but it is a communal call for all of us to be 'singing amongst ourselves' as well as 'chanting to the Lord in our hearts'.

John 6:51–58

This text has both invitation and caution. 'Anyone who eats this bread will live forever' contrasted to '*If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*', and later '*those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*' This repetition of the imagery of eating this bread, which is Christ, his flesh and blood draw us deeply into the crux of Jesus invitation.

Interpreting the Word

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

In this moment of coming to power Solomon seeks the grace of wisdom. Not for himself but as king at the service of God's people. Thus, emphasising the pre-eminence of wisdom rather than power or wealth for a godly king. In this way the transition from the rule of David to Solomon is managed well. But the flaw is also already alluded to. We know that Solomon's reign ends badly, and already he is trying to both serve God and yet still is sacrificing on the heights. This story holds a warning for all of us to remain faithful to God. On the political front even as flawed as Solomon is, his basic desire to be a good leader challenges our politicians. Do we see politicians desiring what is best for their people, asking God for wisdom? Or do we see corruption as rampant and power being used to protect privilege.

Psalm 111

Written as an acrostic, structured so that each opening line reflects a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The structured nature of the psalm highlights creativity and intellectual focus together in the praise of God. By contrast with Solomon's kingdom, the ideal kingdom, the kingdom of God is described here in the psalm.

With regard to South Africa, this psalm could be taken as a biblical litmus test. Do we as a society meet the grounds of a good 'kingdom'? Or do we fail the poor, are our leaders untrustworthy, is violence par for the course in our society?

In women's month we note especially the violence against women and children, the role wealth and poverty play in the lives of women, and lack of real policing and legal follow through for the protection of women.

Proverbs 9:1–12

This text may well have functioned as a teaching text. The voice of Wisdom is personified to become attractive to young people (men) as they are being helped to think about life. At its heart the text is an invitation to discover how to live a good life. Wisdom is what is necessary for this good life. Wisdom does not exclude, she speaks both the simple and the fool, although there is the warning that some will reject what wisdom offers.

Psalm 34:9–14

Possibly composed during David's flight from Saul, a time of national uncertainty. The text invited us to learn how to live a good life, inspired by 'fear of the Lord.' Like psalm 111 this psalm also asks us to look at civil society. Do we as a society 'turn away from evil and do good?' Do we 'seek peace and pursue it?'

Ephesians 5:15–20

One of the later writings of Paul (or a disciple of his) this text is grappling with the context of Christian life in the 1st century. There is a tension between how we as Christians are called to live and the reality of the Greco Roman world. Here we have an echo of Proverbs 9, the choice between wisdom and folly. Illustrated by the difference between a false sense of happiness induced by drunkenness which is illusory and true joy in being filled with the Spirit. It also invites us to consider our own context. The world remains a place that is not in accord with God's plan. Our society bears witness to the evil we live with. Poverty, violence, rape, corruption are commonplace in our world.

John 6:51–58

The language of this text is provocative and symbolic. As evidenced by the reaction of those who listen to Jesus. Here Jesus has one of the characteristic '*I am*' statements of John's gospel revealing his divinity in a cloaked way.

Jesus describes Himself from the Exodus narrative as the life-giving bread, that sustained them in their journey to freedom. If we look at Jesus, if we 'eat his bread' and take Him into our lives then we too will be sustained and led in the journey to interior freedom. The invitation is at once individual and communal, as is the whole image of eating. No party can happen without food and drink. Our communal life is supported by food. Even though eating is at one and the same time profoundly personal and interior.

The reading may be read as pointing particularly to the invitation to eucharist, but that is not its only message. This is a palimpsestic text, inviting us to ever deeper insights into the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus is revealing to those who hear and see who he is, God with us. 'I am' "whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." God not only with us but is inviting us "to feed on Me", to accept him into our lives.

Preaching the Word

The preacher might find it helpful to ponder poetry that speaks to some of the themes in the readings, as a way of igniting imagination. The following may serve as helpful conversation partners for the texts:

Fall in Love (often attributed to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ) by Joseph Whelan, SJ (how falling in love with God reshapes life) *Love bade me welcome* by George Herbert (echoing the imagery of feast and invitation) *Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou (contrasting freedom and constraint – an echo of Proverbs and Ephesians) *The Covenant Prayer* of John Wesley (an invitation to surrender and abandonment to Christ)

These readings invite us to deeply ponder nurturing wisdom in our lives. What mechanisms do we use for choosing? Whether it is Solomon's gift of wisdom, or the Proverb of Lady Wisdom inviting us into her house for a meal, both readings have the gift of wisdom as a central theme. This is carried over into the two psalms and again emphasised by the Ephesians reading.

How we live our lives matters. The daily choices we make really do matter. Are we living for Christ? Are we aware and awake to what is happening about us? "What shall I give you?" – God asks me, as much as Solomon?

Intimacy with Jesus is a core idea in the gospel. The intimacy of Eucharist. The intimacy of life in Christ. Jesus' words are fundamentally about receiving his life into ours. And in so receiving to allow ourselves to be shaped by Him. The movement of love of Christ drawing us into the mystery of the Trinity. Jesus who draws his life from the father and we from him and so ultimately also from the Father. The lovely quote from the Linns' 'We become like the God we adore'. (Good Goats; M, D & S Linn) helps me to conceptualise this. How do I turn my gaze towards Jesus, allowing him to reshape me?

What does being alive mean? What is Jesus saying when he talks here of 'Anyone who eats this bread will live forever' or 'This is the bread that has come down from heaven, it is not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live forever.' Clearly Jesus

is talking about eternal life, but is he saying something more about life now? How do we live this life alive in Christ life now?

‘My flesh is real flesh’ this is the crux of the issue. We could sit with this as only an allegorical passage. However, Jesus uses strong language, He says to us that this is ‘real’! This is the real invitation. This is the ‘real’ life Jesus is offering us. The world is the ‘shadow lands’ but this is reality. Jesus offers us real food, his own living self, so that we might be united with him. How do I, as pastor to others, allow him to so penetrate my life that the deepest reality of my ordinary life may be His love, the love of Father, Son and Spirit, dwelling within me and reaching out through me to all the people He has sent to me.

Living the Word

Resonating through the readings is the question of how we are living. Are we living according to God’s law. In women’s month it might be important to ask questions about the treatment of women, in our homes, in our churches, in our society?

Perhaps VJ day (15th August) also invited us to consider wisdom and peace? Discernment in the use of force? Where is gross injustice in our own country and world? What does God ask of us here? What wisdom is needed?

‘Turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it’ (Psalm 34:14) this verse could be used as a key to thinking about the situation of the world. Then the emphasis of living well in an evil age might be used to consider how we live at home, in our church community, in our country or in the world.

There are strong themes of living wisely. The tradition of discernment both of choosing good over evil, but also of choosing the best over the good, is part of our Christian heritage. How do I on a day-to-day basis discern what God is asking of me. The prayer of the examen is a good foundational practice to introduce to congregants. It is in the practice of daily discernment, that mature Christians continue to grow in faith.

‘I am the bread of life’ is the invitation to life in Christ. What does this mean for me in my life? How do I deepen into this relationship that Jesus offers?

Liturgical Suggestions

One might introduce the simple form of the prayer of the Examen as a tool for ongoing discernment.

In its simple form it is a prayer of three questions: (This could be explored at the penance or in the sermon)

I look back over the last day/week. Firstly, I ask myself: what I am grateful to God for in this day/week.

Then I look back over the day/week and notice what am I not grateful for? I bring these more difficult moments into the compassionate gaze of God and consider how does God look at them.

Finally, I think about tomorrow. What is happening in my life. What particular graces do I need to be the person God wants me to be? (Here I may ask for graces like patience, courage, perseverance, wisdom).

It can be helpful to have printed versions of the questions available for people to take home and use as a journalling exercise.

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Word and Life for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost – 22 August 2027

Teri Beghin

Texts

1 Kings 8:(1–11), 22–30, 41–43
Psalm 84
Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18
Psalm 34:15–22
Ephesians 6:10–20
John 6:56–69

Introduction

Worship is a central theme in today's scripture readings with community, intentionality and connection being common threads. In this 14th Sunday after Pentecost, we are midway through 'ordinary time' and in South Africa we celebrate the fourth week of Woman's month. Worship as a means of persevering in faith is a message that resonates throughout these scriptures and is relevant as a source of strength.

Hearing the Word

1 Kings 8:(1–11), 22–30, 41–43

As the glory of the Lord filled the temple that David planned and Solomon built, Solomon addresses the assembly of Israel and declares the steadfastness of God. The prayer of dedication proclaims YHWH as covenant keeper, God of steadfast love, God who hears the prayers of the people and God who is forgiving. Verses 41–43 declares God is concerned for and welcomes foreigners, especially when they gather in the temple. It is interesting to note in verse 27 that Solomon declares God as attentive and accessible, and explicitly does not limit God to the sacred temple he has built. Portions of Solomon's prayer have been dated to after the fall of Jerusalem, and this prayer's theological perspective is relevant to generations of exilic believers who no longer have direct access to Jerusalem's temple.

Psalm 84

Psalm 84 is a pilgrimage song of worship by those "longing for the courts of the Lord". The psalm expresses the core messages of desirability of God's presence and strength. In God's strength believers can transform hardship into abundance. For example, verse 6, in the Valley of Baca a place of springs replaces weeping (*Bacah* in Hebrew is translated 'to weep'). Verse 7, In God's strength believers can make the journey to appear before God in Zion and receive blessing through God's favour and honour. Verse 10 "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere" is the well-known verse which sums up the praise, adoration and worship in this psalm.

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18

Joshua's iconic "*As for me and my house we will serve the Lord*" declaration is part of a covenant renewal ceremony which takes place in the city of Shechem. Shechem is situated in the valley directly between Mount Ebal to the north and

Mount Gerizim to the south. The significance of these mountains is found in Joshua chapter 8, where curses and blessings were read from the law in front of each mountain. Joshua's choice of setting in Chapter 24 is a visual reminder to everyone present of God's law. Joshua makes the call to choose to be identified as God's people rather than follow foreign gods. Joshua's speech affirms *YHWH* is a relational God tied to people, as opposed to the prevailing belief of the time that gods were connected to a geographical place.

Psalm 34:15–22

Psalm 34 is a psalm of thanksgiving and deliverance and like a lament psalm includes the highs and lows of human lived experience. It celebrates the nearness of God to the broken-hearted and afflicted, giving voice to gratitude, joy and the majesty of God during hardship. This Psalm expresses the reality of suffering while affirming the connectedness between God and believers.

Ephesians 6:10–20

The whole armour of God passage is Paul's advice on how to live a new Christian life in the midst of persecution. The armour associated with God is in stark contrast with the armour of Roman soldiers who would have aggressively used weapons to enforce peace. Christian qualities of pacifism stood in contrast to Roman military force, and Paul encouraged believers to be strong in the Lord (Vs 10) and to stand firm (Vs 13) in the power of Godly armour. All pieces of God's armour described are defensive save the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God (vs17). The defence against spiritual forces of evil, powers and principalities (verse12) is truth, righteousness, gospel of peace, faith, salvation and prayer. Prayer for all the saints is an important part of defence, and the collective nature of armour imagery reminds us that Christians are part of a collective as they gather to worship and stand firm and strong in the Lord.

Gospel of John 6:56–69

This passage is often referred to as John's eucharistic discourse because it describes ritual sharing as a means of abiding in Christ. Jesus is the one sent from heaven whose relationship with God enables him to offer those who believe true, eternal life through his body and blood as New Testament manna. The shocking words of Jesus outraged the Jews in last week's passage, and this week the same words offend many of his disciples to the point of abandoning their walk with him. Jesus describes a mystery at work which combines spirit, flesh, abiding and belief, which in incarnational fullness leads to life in Christ. Simon Peter, representing the twelve, responds that they 'believe and know' that Jesus is the Holy One of God with words of eternal life.

Interpreting the Word

Worshipping in community is preserved and strengthened through rituals as found in both Old Testament readings, either in the dedication of the temple or in the ritual covenant renewal of Joshua. The psalm of ascent and the psalm of David remind the community who they worship and the steadfast love of God in both troubled and good times. In the New Testament Paul's reference to military armour reminds Christ followers that they are stronger together. He encourages a counter cultural alternative of a peaceful, loving army which he advocates is the source of power, alongside prayer, to overcome spiritual and physical threats experienced in everyday life. The community aspect of worship culminates with John's Gospel passage of abiding in Christ. Jesus is clear that the core of Christian identity is found by abiding in him, just as his identity is found in abiding in God.

Intentional worship is another thread found in today's lectionary readings. Joshua's dramatic setting between two mountains where one represents 'blessing' and the other 'curse' is the visual representation of choosing to follow God. The act of communal worship is a choice that believers are challenged to embrace and so continually choose God. Intentional worship is to be offered to God in all circumstances. Pray, Paul will encourage; Abide in me, Jesus will command; Choose, Joshua will ask; Know God, prays Solomon. Psalm 34:8 says, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good*" and although this specific verse is not in today's lectionary, both psalms are testimony to a relational God whose presence we long for (Psalm 84:2).

Worshipping our relational God is another thread in the worship theme of these readings. Again, John's Gospel brings the aspect of relationship into the forefront of the conversation as Jesus offers the controversial explanation of the miracles performed in the preceding verses of John Chapter 6. In John 6:12–13 five thousand people ate until fully satisfied and twelve baskets were gathered from the miraculous provision of five loaves and two fish. In today's scripture Jesus challenges followers not to seek food which is temporary, but to seek the true food and drink which leads to eternal life. Jesus as the incarnate expression of God's love. In the Hebrew scriptures Joshua and Solomon uphold *YHWH* as God who is not tied to a physical place, i.e. land or a temple, but God who cannot be contained and God who is concerned with human relationship. Finally, the Psalms sing of the intimate areas of life which are connected to *YHWH*, the uniqueness of the one and only God who listens, and who is active in, human life.

Preaching the Word

The swift onset of the corona virus and its subsequent subsidence is a reminder of how fragile life can be. Not only did individuals experience grief and loss through the death of loved ones, the church also experienced fragmentation and difficulty in maintaining the life of church community in a post covid world. The 14th Sunday after Pentecost is mid-way through the common/proper/post-Pentecost season which opens the scope for preaching and experiencing worship during Sunday gatherings. Preaching on worship

in community, intentional worship and God's intimate and relational connectedness will address fragmentation and disconnect between everyday life and our expression of faith.

Possible sermon suggestions could address relationships within the community of God based on a common longing for healing and wholeness found only through faith. Look to the Psalms for guidance on responsive prayer. A healing service, or prayer for individual healing needs, would fit nicely within the theme and threads found in the lectionary. It is interesting to note that space for prayer with one another as part of the service embodies the imagery Paul uses of a counter cultural Christian army and its necessary armour. In this space it could be effective to use intercessory prayer time starting with individuals and concluding with collective prayer for the common good of creation.

Healing and wholeness are made possible through abiding in Christ, and the creative preacher could incorporate the meaning and power of the Eucharist in her sermon. In this scenario it is recommended to share the body and blood of Christ at the communion table in the worship service to give lived expression to the ritual. Often the Eucharist is held as a separate part in the order of service, and today's lectionary encourages the preacher to connect ritual to daily life.

The message could also centre on intentionality; In Joshua's words: "*Choose this day*". Today's scriptures are full of the consequences of choice, and today's world continues to hold a variety of tempting options. Solomon reminded his gathering that God could not be contained, but the prevalent belief system was that God could only be found in the Holy of Holies of Jerusalem's temple. Joshua reminded his gathering that they had a choice to choose God or not, but that they would be held accountable for that choice. Jesus had a similar sentiment regarding 'who would' and 'who would not' abide in him, and many of the disciples' reaction was to take offence and walk away. Intentional worship incorporates action and accountability, and an interesting approach for the preacher could explore individual and communal responses of the local church in its context.

Finally, these scriptures are read during the month of August, which in South Africa celebrates woman's month. Solomon, Joshua and Paul are strong male leaders who address their audience and persuade believers to choose to serve God. In the Gospel reading Jesus addresses the disciples, and 'the twelve' (which refer to twelve men) are the only ones who choose to stay with him. In this narrative setting it is tempting in current male dominated religious traditions to believe that only men continue to be leaders without any reference to their female colleagues. A courageous preacher could deconstruct the narratives to find and include the (silent) female voice and contextualise for today's worshippers.

Living the Word

Scripture upholds traditions and rituals as a means of remembering that we belong to God who invites us into community to intentionally worship Creator, Christ and Spirit. Unity is the power of community, but sadly some of the most vulnerable in our churches are the isolated and forgotten ones. Isolation can lead to fear and doubt and

for some the abandonment of their faith. Congregation members could be encouraged to reach out in an inclusive effort to strengthen bonds of community. Sharing words of encouragement is a choice to serve God, and a reminder that the God who sent the encourager is our God who cares deeply.

Abiding in Christ is an everyday choice made possible by regularly sharing in the sacred ritual of Communion. Participants in Communion/ Eucharist do well to remember that the invitation comes from God and extends to all. In a sensitive way, preachers could uncover deep prejudices that have been normalised in society and encourage those who abide in Christ to look at 'the other' with the same compassion of Christ. We 'other' those who do not 'look like', 'sound like' or 'smell like' us, and it is likely they are the same people who are barred entry into our lives and churches. By asking believers to identify subconscious prejudice we start the journey of healing.

Suggested liturgical ideas

It is a creative preacher who will be bold enough to experiment with a fusion of traditional and non-traditional worship. Prepare responsive prayer, leaving time for expressions of faith through congregational testimony and one-to-one prayer. Remember to share communion and allow the Gospel reading to come to life. Ideally elements of ritual will organically resonate with new worship practices that flow from the congregation itself; a congregation that intentionally chooses to worship God in a bold and honest way.

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Word and Life for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost – 29 August 2027

Alice Fabian-Williams

Texts

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9
Psalm 15
James 1:17–21
Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Introduction

While God's decrees and laws form a common thread throughout this week's readings, the focus is not on their mere observance. Rather, the deeper concern lies in the posture of the human heart as these commands are lived out.

It is tempting to approach these texts in a self-affirming way, as we notice and take comfort in the traditions and practices we believe we are keeping well (and no doubt there are some). Yet, such a reading risks missing the opportunity for growth and refinement that comes when we accept the passages invitation not for reassurance, but reflection. They call us to examine where we, too, may be 'holding to the tradition of the elders' (Mark 7:3) in ways that no longer draw us closer to God or to one another.

Hearing the Word

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

In many ways Deuteronomy is Moses' final address to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land – without him. It serves as both a remembrance of their shared history and a reaffirmation of the laws that have shaped them, coupled with a renewed call to live by them. This passage highlights the central place of the law, not simply as a set of rules, but as the very means by which Israel's life with God is ordered and sustained.

When we hear the word 'law' we often reduce it to 'legalism'. In its original context it would have been understood as guidance and instruction for living well in covenant with God and one another. Sara M. Koenig writes, 'The "law" itself is a sign of God's presence, and even shares God's attributes: life-giving power, wisdom and understanding.' Similarly, Birch *et al.* describe the law as, 'Yet, the law is not presented as a code, a list of laws to be obeyed. The law does not stand alone. Rather, the law is integrated with the ongoing story of Israel's journey from slavery to Egypt to new life in the promised land. The law functions as a dynamic reality within a living community; the law will not stand still any more than the community will.'

Psalms 15

This psalm opens with a searching question: "Who is worthy to dwell in the presence of God?" The answer that follows is not framed in terms of ritual or status. It points to integrity in speech, faithfulness in relationships, and a generosity that resists exploitation.

What emerges is a vision of holiness grounded not in external observance, but in the consistency between one's inner character and outward actions.

James 1:17–21

Traditionally understood to be written to Jewish Christians scattered around the Mediterranean, the letter of James offers deeply practical guidance on a way of life that is visibly shaped by faith. At the heart is a call to wholehearted integrity. God is unwavering (1:17), and so should we be. By contrast, those who are half-hearted are challenged early in the letter (1:6–8).

This theme is sharpened through the metaphor of the mirror (1:23–25). Hearing the word without acting on it is like glimpsing one's reflection and immediately forgetting it. The blessing, James suggests, is not found in momentary attention, but in sustained and intentional obedience – allowing the word to take root and shape one's life.

Reading from 1:12 helps to frame this passage more fully. The verses that follow draw a contrast between those who remain steadfast under trial and those who are led astray by their own desires. Within this context, the appeal to be "*quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger*" (1:19) takes on added depth. James is not condemning speech or anger outright, but the impulsiveness with which they are often expressed. This again typifies the understanding that what is important is not only what we do, but the character beneath it.

Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Jerusalem is a significant focal point in Mark's Gospel, as it is the place toward which the entire narrative moves; the place of Jesus' death and resurrection. From the outset, this journey is framed by the understanding that "*the kingdom of God is near*" (Mark 1:15). This forward movement lends urgency to Jesus' teaching: what is being revealed is not abstract but demands to be understood and embodied.

Mark 7 sits between the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6) and the four thousand (Mark 8). While those surrounding passages highlight God's abundant provision, this episode shifts the focus to the practices and assumptions that shape how people approach something as ordinary as eating. The issue at hand is not the availability of food, but the customs surrounding purity.

Ritual handwashing, originally associated with Temple practice, had come to be observed within the home as a way of maintaining holiness in daily life. Such practices functioned as markers of identity, setting the Jewish people apart within the wider cultural context. Against this backdrop, the disciples' failure to observe these traditions renders them, in the eyes of the religious leaders, ritually impure.

Although Jesus himself is not accused of directly transgressing these practices, he is confronted because, as a teacher, he bears responsibility for his disciples. The challenge brought to him therefore becomes an opportunity to question not only the practice itself, but the assumptions that lie beneath it.

Interpreting the Word

The Gospel reading opens with the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law questioning why the disciples have allowed themselves to become impure by eating without first washing their hands. Rather than responding directly, Jesus answers by quoting Isaiah 29:13. In doing so, he uses the authority of Scripture to evaluate the very traditions that are being used to judge the disciples. The issue, then, is not tradition in itself, but in regarding human tradition above the Word of God.

In this use of the Isaiah Scripture, Jesus exposes a deeper disconnect between outward action and inward disposition: *“These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”* The verses omitted from the lectionary (7:9–13) sharpen this critique through the example of *Corban*, where resources that could have been used to care for one’s parents are instead dedicated to God. In this way, a tradition intended to honour God becomes a means of neglecting God’s command to look after one’s parents.

Jesus thus highlights a profound irony: practices designed to mark purity can themselves become stumbling blocks when they distort the intent of God’s law. What was meant to cultivate holiness instead hinders it.

He then turns to the crowd saying, *“Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”* Jesus emphasises this point with an explicit description of how food ingested bypasses the heart and ultimately leaves the body!

Another point from the omitted verses (16–20) is Mark’s revolutionary caveat that ‘(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)’ This has far-reaching implications. As food laws had long functioned as markers of Israel’s distinct identity (as reflected in Leviticus 11 and 20:25–26), their reconfiguration opens the way for a broader, more inclusive vision of God’s people. Elizabeth Shively observes to following:

The Jews preserved their religious and national identity through practices associated with food laws, hand washing, and Sabbath keeping. Mark’s explanation that Jesus declared all foods clean prepares the way for the Gentile mission, because the ceremonial elements that maintain a separation among groups of people. Indeed, from here, Jesus enters into Tyre, Gentile territory, and ministers to a Syrophenician woman who displays more understanding of his ministry than those closest to him (7:24–30).

Finally, Jesus names what truly defiles: a catalogue of attitudes and actions – evil intentions, theft, murder, adultery, greed, and more – that echo the moral vision of the commandments. Yet even here, the emphasis falls not only on outward behaviour, but on the inner dispositions from which such actions arise. Once again, the focus returns to the heart.

Those who challenged Jesus often sought to expose him as a law breaker. Yet passages like this reveal something more searching: not a rejection of the law, but a reorientation toward its deepest purpose. In chapter 7 alone, we see Jesus speak to the Syrophenician woman (as mentioned above, a Gentile considered ritually unclean) and Jesus touching a disabled man (who too would have been considered ritually unclean). In doing so, he calls into question any understanding of holiness that loses sight of compassion, integrity, and the transformation of the heart.

Preaching and Living the Word

Today’s Scripture readings ask more of us than whether we simply “practise what we preach.” They press us to go deeper, inviting us to examine the motives that shape both our words and our actions, and to question whether there is integrity at every level of our lives.

In preparing to preach, it is always helpful to reflect prayerfully on our context; the life of the church, our communities, and even what is unfolding in the wider world. As we engage these texts, we are invited to turn their questions inward. Where might we, as individuals or as a community, resemble the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? Are there ways in which we exclude others on grounds that Jesus himself would challenge? Where might we honour God with our lips while our hearts remain distant? And are there practices within our worship or tradition that, rather than drawing us closer to God, may in fact be limiting our growth as the Body of Christ?

While these reflections may not be comfortable, they are very important because they help us to discern whether we are serving God or a god which we have constructed – one which is safe and fits into our understanding of the world and cultural practices. As we raise them, we must do so with care. If they are posed in an accusatory way, they are likely to elicit defensiveness. Instead, they are best offered as an invitation: a call to draw nearer to God by letting go of what obscures, distracts, or separates. As Hebrews reminds us, we may “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence... to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

This invitation must also include ourselves. We do not stand outside this call to reflection, but within it. For example, in my own tradition, the wearing of clerical garments such as stoles and cassocks raises questions. Often, when I have been standing alongside a gravesite in the hot African Sun, I have wondered why this clerical attire has become so entrenched in our ministry when it is clearly more suited to the climate from which it originated? While we speak about decolonising our theology, why have we hung onto this symbol? While they can serve to signify role and lend dignity, we might also ask whether they persist, at least in

part, because of the authority they confer? One example of many that could be raised.

To engage these questions honestly is not without risk (I am very aware of what happened to Jesus for having brought these issues to light!). Yet it is precisely this kind of searching self-examination that Jesus asks of us. Not to condemn, but to refine; not to distance us from God, but to draw us closer.

Liturgical Suggestions

Today's message comes with a deep challenge, and therefore it is important that space is made in the service for reflection and repentance.

The Psalm can be used a reflective prayer after the message is given. Here the congregation is invited to reflect on their own life and conduct, and to honestly admit if there are any areas in their lives where their character can be more refined – even if their actions appear sound.

A prayer adapted from Psalm 15.

Lord, I long to dwell in your sacred tent,
to live on your holy mountain.

Lord, make me aware of the areas in my life
where my walk is not blameless [pause],
where I do not do what is righteous [pause],
where I do not speak the truth from my heart [pause].
Make me aware of where my tongue utters slander [pause],
Where I have wronged my neighbour [pause],
Where I have slurred against others [pause];
Where I have honoured what is not honourable [pause],
And have gone against those who fear you [pause].
Lord, make me aware where I have not kept an oath and have
been inconsistent [pause],
Where I have taken advantage of others,
exploiting the vulnerable [pause].

Forgive me Lord.

Help me to live a life where I do not do these things, where I
faithfully follow you and your decrees.

For I know that it is then that I will never be shaken.

Benediction from Deuteronomy 4:6–8 and 1 John 1:9

May the God who is faithful and just cleanse us from all unrighteousness, so that we may go forth in the freedom of God's grace, showing wisdom and understanding in all we do, that all whom we encounter may know that the Lord our God is near. Amen

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Word and Life for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost – 5 September 2027

Rachel Mash

Texts

Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23 and Psalm 125
James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17
Mark 7:24–37

Introduction

The Feast of Creation: The “Feast of Creation” – also known as the “Feast of Creation in Christ”, “Creation Day” or “World Day of Prayer for Creation” – is celebrated by many Christian churches on September 1 or the subsequent Sunday.

Grounded in an ancient liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church, this is a day to praise God as Creator and ponder the great mystery that everything was created through Christ. And, as a result, it also inspires us to care for the gift of the created world – which is why it also is a “World Day of Prayer” for it. This is the start of the Season of Creation which runs from 1st Sep to 4th of October.

Hearing the word

Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23

This passage reflects the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, emphasising justice, humility, and the moral responsibility of those with power.

Verse 1 states that “a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” In the Hebrew wisdom tradition, a “good name” refers to a reputation grounded in integrity and righteous living. Honour and moral character are presented as more valuable than material wealth, reflecting a worldview in which social trust and covenantal faithfulness sustain community life.

Verse 2 reminds readers that “the rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” This affirms the theological principle that all people share equal dignity before God. Economic differences do not erase the shared identity of humanity as created by God, challenging systems that privilege wealth as a sign of worth.

Verses 8–9 warn that injustice and oppression ultimately lead to ruin. Those who sow wrongdoing will reap its consequences, while those who show generosity to the poor are blessed.

Verses 22–23 condemn exploiting the poor or denying justice in the courts. God is portrayed as the defender of the vulnerable, promising to take up their cause. The passage therefore calls the community to align social and economic practices with divine justice.

Psalm 125

Psalm 125 belongs to the collection known as the Psalms titled the “Songs of Ascents” (Psalms 120–134). These psalms were likely sung by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem for major festivals. The psalm expresses trust in God’s protection and affirms divine justice within the covenant community.

Verse 1 compares those who trust in the Lord to Mount Zion, which “cannot be shaken but endures forever.” Mount Zion represents both the physical hill on which Jerusalem stands and the theological symbol of God’s dwelling among the people. The metaphor highlights stability and permanence: just as the mountain stands firm, so those who trust in God remain secure.

Verse 2 continues the geographical imagery: “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people.” Jerusalem is encircled by hills, and this natural landscape becomes a theological image of divine protection. God is portrayed as a protective presence encircling the faithful community.

Verse 3 addresses a concern about unjust rule: “the sceptre of the wicked shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous.” The “sceptre” symbolizes oppressive political power. The psalm reassures the faithful that such domination will not endure indefinitely, lest the righteous be tempted toward wrongdoing.

Verses 4–5 form a prayer and warning. The psalmist asks God to “do good” to those who are upright in heart, reaffirming the covenantal link between righteousness and blessing. Conversely, those who “turn aside to crooked ways” will face judgment alongside evildoers.

The psalm concludes with the blessing “Peace be upon Israel,” echoing the Hebrew concept of Shalom – a state of wholeness, justice, and harmony within the community under God’s care.

James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17

The Epistle of James was written to early Christian communities living within the social and economic structures of the Roman Empire. These societies were highly stratified, with clear divisions between wealthy elites and the poor. Patronage systems shaped daily life: wealthy individuals held power and influence, while poorer people depended on them for work or protection. Within this context, tensions sometimes emerged in Christian gatherings, where believers from different social classes worshipped together but carried these social hierarchies into the community.

Verses 1–7 warn against showing favouritism based on wealth or social status. The example given – honouring a rich person with a special seat while humiliating a poor person – reflects practices common in assemblies. The author argues that such behaviour contradicts faith in Jesus Christ and undermines the values of God’s kingdom, where the poor are often lifted up.

Verses 8–10 introduce the “royal law” “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18). This command summarises the ethical vision of the law and reflects the teaching of Jesus. Showing partiality therefore violates the central command of love.

Verses 11–13 emphasize the unity of the law and the importance of mercy. One cannot claim obedience to God while ignoring injustice toward others. Mercy is the standard by which believers should live.

Finally, *verses 14–17* address the relationship between faith and works. Faith that does not lead to practical care – such as providing food and clothing to those in need – is described as “dead.” Genuine faith is demonstrated through compassionate action within the community.

Mark 7:24–37

This passage takes place within a complex social and cultural context in which ethnic, religious, and purity boundaries shaped everyday life in the first century Roman Empire. Jewish communities maintained strong distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, reinforced by dietary laws, ritual practices, and social separation. These boundaries were especially significant in regions where Jewish and non-Jewish populations lived alongside one another.

In *verses 24–30*, Jesus Christ travels to the region of Tyre, a predominantly Gentile area. A Syrophenician woman approaches him, asking that her daughter be healed. The dialogue that follows reflects cultural tensions between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus’ statement about the children being fed before the dogs uses a common metaphor in which “children” represent Israel and “dogs” refer to Gentiles. The woman’s response – arguing that even dogs eat the crumbs under the table – demonstrates humility, wit, and persistent faith. Her reply overturns the expected hierarchy, and Jesus grants her request, healing her daughter at a distance.

Verses 31–37 describe Jesus healing a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment in the region of the Decapolis, another largely Gentile territory. Jesus uses physical gestures – touching the man’s ears and tongue – and speaks the Aramaic word “Ephphatha,” meaning “Be opened.” Such embodied actions reflect healing practices familiar in the cultural context of the time.

The crowd responds with amazement, proclaiming that Jesus “has done everything well.” This echoes themes from Book of Isaiah, where the opening of ears and tongues signals the arrival of God’s saving work.

Interpreting the word

Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23

Viewed through an ecological lens, this passage from the Proverbs speaks powerfully to questions of environmental justice and responsibility. The opening verse, which declares that “a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,” directly challenges cultures driven by accumulation and consumption. Influencers push a vision of a consumerist lifestyle, exactly the lifestyle of the top one percent that impact the worst on the planet. The ‘once-off’ society of fast food and fast fashion is unsustainable on our Earth.

To choose a good name rather than riches means that an individual or community’s “good name” may be measured by how responsibly it treats the land, water, and ecosystems entrusted to it.

Verse 2 reminds us that “the rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” This principle of shared creation points toward ecological humility. All people – and indeed all living beings – depend on the same Earth systems. Environmental degradation often deepens inequality, with poorer communities suffering first and most from pollution, water shortages, and climate impacts. We all share one common Creator and one common home – the Earth

Verses 8–9 warn that those who sow injustice will reap its consequences. Ecologically, this reflects a profound truth: destructive practices such as deforestation, overconsumption, and pollution eventually bring harm to the very societies that perpetuate them. Conversely, generosity and care – symbolised by sharing bread with the poor – can be extended to include protecting the ecological resources that sustain communities.

Finally, *verses 22–23* warn against exploiting the poor. Environmental harm frequently mirrors this pattern, where vulnerable communities lose land, clean water, or healthy environments. The passage reminds readers that God stands with those who are harmed, calling society to pursue justice that protects both people and the Earth.

Psalms 125

Biblical faith, in particular in the Psalms is rooted in the natural landscape. The psalm’s imagery draws directly from the geography surrounding Jerusalem, inviting readers to see creation as a teacher of spiritual truths.

The psalm compares those who trust in God to Mount Zion, a mountain that “cannot be shaken.” Mountains symbolize stability, endurance, and resilience. From an ecological perspective, this imagery highlights the importance of landscapes that sustain life and provide balance in Earth’s systems. Just as mountains anchor the land and shape climate and water systems, communities rooted in faith and ethical living can provide stability in a time of ecological disruption.

Verse 2 deepens the image: the mountains surrounding Jerusalem become a metaphor for God’s protective presence. In environmental terms, this reminds us that healthy ecosystems also act as protective systems. Forests, wetlands, and mountain ranges buffer storms, store water, and sustain biodiversity. When such systems are degraded, both nature and human communities become more vulnerable.

The psalm’s warning that “the sceptre of the wicked shall not rest on the land” also resonates environmentally. Throughout history, unjust systems have exploited land and resources for short-term gain. The sin of human beings in the Garden of Eden was “to eat beyond the limits.”

The closing blessing of peace over Israel reflects the biblical vision of *Shalom* – a state of harmony between God, people, and the land. Environmental care becomes part of seeking this peace, nurturing a world where both human

communities and ecosystems can flourish together.

James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17

This passage highlights the connection between justice, compassion, and responsible stewardship of creation. As with the Proverbs reading, the text challenges favouritism toward wealth and status.

The warning against honouring the rich while neglecting the poor can also be understood in relation to environmental injustice. Around the world, environmental harm often falls most heavily on poorer communities, who have the least power to resist pollution, land degradation, or climate impacts. The teaching of Jesus Christ calls believers to reject systems that privilege profit while ignoring suffering. Faith communities are therefore invited to stand in solidarity with those most affected by ecological crises.

The “royal law” to love one’s neighbour as oneself” – can also be extended to include care for the ecological systems that sustain human life. Loving our neighbour includes protecting the air, water, soil, and biodiversity upon which communities depend. Environmental responsibility becomes part of living out the commandment of love.

The passage’s central message about faith and works is particularly relevant for ecological discipleship. James insists that faith without action is “dead.” In environmental terms, belief in God as creator must be expressed through practical choices: reducing waste, protecting natural resources, and advocating for justice for communities harmed by environmental damage.

Ultimately, the text calls believers to embody a living faith – one that expresses compassion not only in words, but in actions that nurture both people and the Earth.

Mark 7:24–37

Mark 7:24–37 through an environmental lens highlights themes of inclusion, healing, and the restoration of right relationships within creation. In this passage, Jesus Christ moves beyond the familiar boundaries of his own community into Gentile regions such as Tyre and the Decapolis. This crossing of boundaries can be understood symbolically as an invitation to widen our sense of belonging within the whole Earth community.

The encounter with the Syrophenician woman challenges

assumptions about who deserves care and attention. Her persistence reminds readers that those who are marginalized often have wisdom and insight that can reshape dominant perspectives. In environmental terms, this can be compared to how vulnerable communities – often those most affected by environmental degradation – bring crucial voices to discussions about ecological justice and sustainability. It also challenges xenophobia, so many migrants are forced to flee because of climate change impacts in their own countries.

The healing of the deaf man also offers a powerful metaphor. When Jesus says “*Ephphatha*” (“Be opened”), the man’s ears and tongue are opened so that he can hear and speak clearly. Ecologically, this can symbolize the need for humanity to have its ears opened to the cries of the Earth and of those suffering from environmental harm. Many environmental crises persist because societies fail to listen – to scientific warnings, to indigenous knowledge, or to the experiences of affected communities.

Finally, the crowd’s proclamation that Jesus “has done everything well” echoes the language of creation in Book of Genesis, where God declares creation good. The passage therefore invites readers to participate in God’s restorative work – helping bring healing, justice, and wholeness to both human communities and the natural world.

Preaching the word

The key themes that emerge from these passages are:

- A good name is more important than riches. How can we challenge the consumerist society?
- Environmental degradation impacts most greatly on the poor and vulnerable – how can we stand in solidarity with those most impacted?
- Creation holds the fingerprints of the Creator – how can we protect creation and also hear the voice of the Creator?
- Loving our neighbour does not just refer to humans but to the eco-systems and other creatures

Practical suggestions

- Organise a ‘holy hike’ or prayer walk in nature where you take time to listen to God and sense God’s presence
- Organise a forum or a discussion where you invite an NGO or community group tackling environmental degradation. What can you learn? What actions can you take?
- Visit an area within your community which is degraded – and plan an activity – clean up or planting session.

Word and Life for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost – 12 September 2027

Ian Booth

Texts

Proverbs 1:20–33
Psalm 19 OR Wisdom 7:26 – 8:1
Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 116:1–9
James 3:1–12
Mark 8:27–38

Introduction

This is an interesting collection of passages. Proverbs speaks of the need to listen to and follow wisdom, and the folly of not doing that; Psalm 19 and the alternate Wisdom verses echo this call, with the Psalm equating wisdom with the word of God; Isaiah speaks of having an instructed tongue, which enables him to endure abuse and rejection; Psalm 116 speaks of the saving power of God; James speaks of the power of the tongue to speak good or evil, to create or to destroy; and in Mark Jesus has the disciples share their opinions of his identity, then speaks of his ultimate fate, that for which he has been prepared and conditioned, for which he is rebuked by Peter – then Jesus moves on to the universal call to any who would come after him: self-denial and a cross. These are counter-cultural in our day, as they were in the day of Jesus, but these are unmistakable, non-negotiable conditions to be followers of Jesus. Against the backdrop of this call, we re-read the earlier passages and are challenged to think again about wisdom: wisdom means hearing the call of Jesus and following that way, speaking those words which lead to life for all. This is the thread that runs through these passages.

Hearing the Word

Proverbs 1:20–33

In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman, the Greek name for whom is Sofia. In this passage she raises the alert in public places challenging the simple and foolish who go about their life in blissful ignorance, not realising the danger that is lurking because they have not taken notice of what is going on around them. Wisdom says that she has warned them, and they ignored her – and so when disaster strikes, she will not come to their rescue. They are accused of hating knowledge and not respecting God they will eat the fruit of their ways. The passage ends with the assurance that anyone who listens to Wisdom will live in safety. It seems clear that the words of Wisdom indicate the ways of God.

Psalm 19

In this Psalm nature speaks of the glory of God, displaying knowledge. The law and statutes of God make wise the simple. This is a good follow-on passage from Proverbs as it speaks of the value listening to God speak, and a plea to be shown grace so that sin does not overwhelm the speaker.

Wisdom 7:26 – 8:1:

In this passage Wisdom is very clearly personified as a woman and is referred to in clear personal terms. She reflects the light and power of God, she is the source of newness and enables men who live with her to be loved by God. She is eternal, great, strong, using all her ability for good.

Isaiah 50:4–9a

This passage speaks of the training for a servant of God and is one of the Suffering Servant passages in the book of Isaiah. The disciple is trained with an instructed tongue, enabling the servant to speak words of judgement and encouragement, to speak with sharp clarity. He is also given a sensitised ear, so that he can discern the truth and hear what God is saying to him from whatever source. The test of a servant is willingness to endure suffering, because it seems that this is what following God will always entail. The inner strength to endure the suffering comes from the knowledge that God will always be the helper.

Psalm 116:1–9

This Psalm reinforces the last part of the passage from Isaiah, in which the Psalmist acknowledges that God is always listening to his cries for help.

James 3:1–12

For anyone who stands up to teach, or to preach, the first verse of this passage could be very off-putting. The one who teaches will be judged more strictly than the one who is taught. James then speaks of the power of the tongue, a relatively small organ which can make a disproportionate impact, like a bit in the mouth of a horse that steers the direction of the horse, or the rudder of a ship that steers the course of the ship. Then the tongue! He speaks specifically of an undisciplined tongue, and comments that out of the same mouth can come blessings and curses – which suggests that the internal discipline and commitment are missing.

Mark 8:27–38

The passage starts with possibly one of the best-known engagements between Jesus and his disciples, because it leads to a question each of us needs to ask and answer. “Who do people say I am?” asks Jesus – and then “who do you say I am?”. When Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, he warns them not to speak of it to anyone. When he explains what it means to be the Christ: suffering, rejection, execution, then new life, it quickly becomes clear that the one who says Jesus is the Christ has no clue what the Christ (or Messiah) means. It is clear from his response to Peter that Peter is not speaking with an instructed tongue or a sensitised ear, but is stuck in the tradition of the day, not able to put his own thinking and belief system to work. Then Jesus calls the whole crowd along with his disciples and offers self-denial and the cross to any who would come after him. This is the

only valid call or offer we all have. It is not sugar-coated; it is not downplayed. It is stark and clear. This is the call that Wisdom is urging us to hear, that Isaiah's sensitive ears are tuned to listen for. This is the call to follow Jesus.

Interpreting the Word

The proverbs in the book of Proverbs were written as a form of moral essay, or an instructive saying that expresses a general truth or rule of life. The authorship is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, because it was in Solomon's court that ancient oriental wisdom was introduced to Israel, so it became customary to attribute all books belonging to this genre to him. Proverbs belongs to the general class of wisdom literature, in which wisdom means primarily skill in the management of one's life, a knowledge of the true ends of human existence, the general rules which enable one to attain them, and the ability to put those rules into practice.

Psalm 19

Two poems are combined, one a pre-exilic nature psalm and a late poem in praise of the law. The latter represents a time when the written law was the object of religious veneration, so is probably dated after the reform of Ezra, and definitely post-exilic. The two poems are a testimony to nature and a hymn to the law. The link is that the natural elements were created and are kept in their place by the word of God, while the law is a living expression of the totality of God's will, the obedience to which renews one's life.

Isaiah 50:4–9a

This is one of the "servant songs" of Isaiah, which speaks of the need to the tongue to be instructed so that it can speak words of sustenance to the weary, who have been worn down by the words that wound from the Empire. The tongue needs to be instructed because sustaining words do not come naturally to people, and so each morning the ears listen to instruction for the way the tongue ought to be used to heal rather than harm. In the end the prophet is vindicated, after facing violent resistance to his use of these sustaining words, and the act of turning his back on the speakers of the words that wound. The audience are the exiles, whose world is the result of the spoken ideas of empire.

Psalm 116:1–9

This is an individual thanksgiving from an individual who had been near death and the Lord heard his cry and rescued him. He attributes his deliverance to the gracious nature of God, who is the champion of the simple, and acts with justice and mercy. He affirms that trust in human power is futile, but God alone can be trusted for deliverance.

James 3:1–12

The Letter of James is not a theological treatise but a collection of moral exhortations because his subject matter is the practice of the Christian life. Unlike other New Testament writers who relate their moral teaching to the Christian gospel, which is centred in the person of Jesus Christ, James assumes that the readers know that and

proceeds into moral teaching. It is more about how we live our faith than it is about the foundation of our faith. This is a collection of traditional materials that are circulated among churches throughout the world, and not addressed to a specific audience. In this way it is very different from the other letters in the New Testament. In chapter 3 his point is the importance of controlling the tongue, for through controlling the tongue you control the whole person. He then goes on to speak of the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue. He particularly then speaks of the anomaly of the same tongue speaking blessings and curses – which indicates a lack of self-control.

Mark 8:27–38

Modern scholars agree with the 2nd Century traditions about this Gospel: it was written by a man called Mark, who had been a missionary companion of Peter and Paul, it was written in Rome, and the author did not participate in the events personally, and it dates from after the death of Peter in AD 64. It was the earliest of what are known as the Synoptic Gospels (including Matthew and Luke) and was used by both other authors as source material. The date of the authorship would link it to Nero's persecution of the Roman Christians, and this influenced his focus on the teaching about the costs of discipleship and Jesus' own martyrdom, as a means of encouraging his fellow church members during the persecution, which is part of the deal of being a follower of Jesus. During the period in which the gospel was written Christianity was in transition from the Semitic culture of Palestinian Judaism to the Gentile culture of the Roman Empire. The older version held on to the traditional Jewish customs, but the newer version abandoned these. The older version understood Jesus under the Jewish concept of the Messiah, an anointed human appointed to a role of leadership, while the newer version found more meaning in Jesus as a divine being, the Son of God, Lord and Saviour. The older version viewed religion as obedience to God's will, while the newer version abandoned this as hopeless and espoused a religion which redeemed humanity from slavery to sin by an act of God's grace (the Christ event). Mark presents Jesus from the newer viewpoint. This approach is worth bearing in mind when looking at the text. When Peter declares Jesus as Messiah, he would mean the Jewish concept of an anointed human being. When Jesus refers to himself as the *Son of Man*, he is using an old Jewish idiom meaning simply a man. After Peter's declaration, Jesus predicts his own suffering and death at the hands of the authorities, for which Peter rebukes him. Peter doesn't understand – the doctrine of the cross was central in early Gentile Christianity, but not in the Jewish Christianity which the disciples represented. Jesus then gathers a multitude (which could include the readers) and sets out the standards for true discipleship, which are appropriate because of Peter's failure to understand the significance of the coming crucifixion. Taking up a cross is possibly a post-crucifixion phrase among the early Christians and expresses the view of the Christian life as the way of the cross, as understood in Gentile Christian teaching. The challenge a Christian faced under Roman persecution was to deny Christ and acknowledge the deity of the emperor. For the Gentile Christians this meant that to deny Christ is to be saved in this world but lost in the next.

Preaching the Word

The approach to the sermon will depend very much on the selection of the Old Testament reading. If Proverbs is selected, then the angle will need to be on the importance of following the way of Wisdom in order to find salvation and peace. This can be linked to the importance of using Wisdom in discerning our manner of speech, or controlling the tongue, and ensuring that the tongue that speaks praise does not in the next breath speak curses, and the application of Wisdom in following the way of the cross because that is the way God chose.

If Isaiah is selected, then the concept of an “instructed tongue” which is educated morning by morning in how to speak words that uplift and comfort the weary rather than the words that cause hurt and harm will link directly to James’ emphasis on the importance of controlling the tongue. This can be an opportunity to speak about the importance of words that can create worlds that denigrate and devalue people because they are words that bring empire and empire thinking into being. This is the warning that James gives about the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue – or an “uninstructed tongue” to use Isaiah’s words. Peter’s response to Jesus’ prediction of his suffering and death would be an uninstructed tongue. Self-denial is the ultimate expression of self-control, because then “it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” and so I cannot speak words that harm, or words that deny what God has done.

Living the Word

This will entail the discipline of careful listening for the words of wisdom, careful discernment of the right words to speak in particular situations, to ensure that one only speaks words that heal, and not words that wound, a recognition of the grace and justice of God at work in the world and in one’s life, and a commitment to following the way of the cross, which is a way of self-denial, of self-humbling, a way that speaks of a new way of power and authority in the Kingdom of God.

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Word and Life for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost – 19 September 2027

Steven Lottering

Texts

Proverbs 31:10–31 and Psalm 1 OR [Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–21, 12–22 OR Jeremiah 11:18–20] and Psalm 54
James 3:13–4:3, 7–8a
Mark 9:30–37

Introduction

The readings for this Sunday invite us to reflect on what it means to live in right relationship with God, ourselves, and others. A common theme emerges: life flourishes where humility, justice, and compassion shape our relationships, and it diminishes wherever power, pride, and self-interest dominate.

Together, these texts offer a subversive vision of God's reign: a world reordered around service rather than status, welcome rather than exclusion, and restorative justice rather than retribution. They invite us to examine how we participate in systems of inequality and how we might more faithfully embody the self-giving way of Christ in our own communities.

Hearing the Word

Proverbs 31:10–31

This passage has, sadly, been used to reinforce misogynistic, patriarchal views on the role of women. However, in the light of the context of the whole, it must be understood that this 'noble woman' is a personification of wisdom and is an ideal that does not exist (Jansen, 2020). Wisdom is personified as a woman. "Woman Wisdom gives utterance not only to the voice of the teacher in Proverbs 1—9, but also to that of God, and thus equates wisdom instruction with divine revelation." (Ibid, 2020) The metaphorical picture in this passage is, therefore, not prescriptive but descriptive.

This ideal woman is described from the outset as "A woman of strength" (v.10). The Hebrew word here translated as 'strength' could mean strength, might, ability, efficiency, wealth, force, or army. "Lit. a woman of might, or power, or capacity" Perowne (1899, p.188). She purchases property (v.16) and is a shrewd businessperson (v.18).

The 'noble wife' positively influenced her husband's position in the community as he was respected by the elders at the gate (Pr 31:23). This was a direct result of how his wife was seen and respected within the greater community, even though certain power structures were in place at the time in which Proverbs 31:10–31 originated . . . She was respected in her community because of her 'human-ness' (the person she was), irrespective of her class as a noble woman. (Ibid, 2020)

This certainly does not fit into the patriarchal, misogynistic views on the role of women. These qualities are counter-cultural in their time and ours.

"The connections between the capable wife and Woman Wisdom might suggest another explanation for the picture in 31:10–31: that portrait may be a sapiential and mythological ideal as much as a patriarchal one. That is, this is no "real" woman, but Woman Wisdom." (Strawn, 2009)

This is an ideal picture of one who follows wisdom and not foolishness.

Psalm 1

The first Psalm opens with a blessing. Brown (2024) notes that:

The Hebrew word used here for "blessed" is ashre and describes a "heightened sense of happiness or joy, implying very favorable circumstances, or fortunate." Hans-Joachim Kraus noted that the word ashre is a "congratulatory formula" and may better be translated as observational phrase like "how fortunate is the (one)" rather than a promise or implication of good tidings.

The one who is "blessed" is the one who does not: in the way of the wicked, in the way of sinners, or in the seat of scoffers (those who mock arrogantly). They do: delight in the instructions of , and always meditate on God's ways.

The Psalmist compares these to a tree planted by a river. They have a constant source of nourishment and therefore bear fruit as they should. They flourish and prosper in all they do. It must be noted that this prosperity is not about wealth and power but about bearing fruit and not drying up. It is somewhat like Jesus' words in John 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last". If we abide in Christ, we will bear the fruit of love.

The wicked, by contrast, are like chaff – weightless, blown about, disconnected from anything that gives life. The image is not of villains but of people unrooted, driven by whatever wind is strongest: fear, ego, greed, the crowd.

The closing verse of Psalm 1 offers reassurance rather than a warning. God walks alongside those who follow the path that leads to genuine life. The emphasis is not on judgment or threat, but on the sustaining presence of God for those who choose to abide in God.

In contrast, the path of the wicked "perishes" not due to an act of destruction by God, but because it cannot sustain true life. Without connection to God, this way is incapable of providing nourishment or lasting fruit. The difference between the two paths lies in their outcomes: one is accompanied by God and leads to flourishing, while the other fades away due to its emptiness and inability to nurture those who walk it.

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–2:1, 12–22

This passage contrasts the “ungodly” with the “righteous”. The ungodly believe life is short, accidental, and ends in nothingness. By rejecting God’s ways, the ungodly effectively make a covenant with death, shaping a life that leads nowhere.

The righteous person becomes a target because their integrity exposes what others would rather keep hidden. The ungodly, therefore, plan to mock, torture, and even kill the righteous, specifically to test whether God will save them.

The text concludes that their own corruption blinds the ungodly. They fail to grasp God’s “secret purposes” or the promise awaiting those who live faithfully.

Although the wicked assume the righteous will be defeated, God guards their lives and honours their perseverance. The wicked, meanwhile, are undone by their own choices and their inability to perceive God’s truth.

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Chapter 11 begins with a focus on God’s covenant with Israel and an accusation that Israel and Judah have broken the covenant and face destruction. The lectionary passage focuses on the threats directed at Jeremiah because he proclaims God’s impending judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. He is under attack to the point that his life is at risk. Jeremiah prays to God, placing his trust in God’s justice. Rather than delivering judgment himself, Jeremiah entrusts this responsibility to God. As in Psalm 1, Jeremiah trusts that his faithfulness will bear fruit while the wicked will perish. It would be wise to heed the warning of Amy Merrill Willis (2015):

“Much of Jeremiah’s confession can model an honest and intimate anger with God that can be restorative to those who have been faithful in bearing heavy burdens. Jeremiah’s desire for retribution, however, should probably not be affirmed as a model to follow. The preacher may want to dialogue further with the text at this point and re-direct Jeremiah’s assertion of trust in a more constructive direction.”

Psalm 54

This Psalm is entitled, “A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, ‘David is in hiding among us’”. A Maskil is “a poem intended to promote insight” (Moen, 2021). The title also provides the context. It likely refers to 1 Samuel 23:19–20, where David is betrayed by the inhabitants of Ziph, from his own tribe of Judah.

Saul has become obsessed with killing David, and so David is in hiding, fleeing for his life. Psalm 54 is not just a desperate plea for help but displays absolute trust that God will help.

If this Psalm is meant to promote insight, then perhaps it is that in desperate times we can call on God and trust that God will come to our aid. Jacobson (2018) notes, “When confronted with false witness, with accusations meant to tear down and destroy—reputations, self-image, and, in due course, lives—the psalm turns us not to rebuttal or reprisal,

but to prayer in worship. For Psalm 54, speech during conflict is to be directed to God, not simply thrown back at those who falsely accuse.”

James 3:13–4:3, 7–8a

This epistle is a collection of practical instructions “to the twelve tribes in the dispersion” (1:1). That is, to followers of The Way of Christ scattered throughout the known world. The focus is on living in right relationship with each other. Chapter 3 opens with a warning about the effect of our words and the harm they can cause.

The reading for today shifts the focus to wisdom and understanding that is expressed not in arrogance or superiority but in humble service. It is not self-seeking but compassionate. Pride and arrogance lead to division and conflict, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (3:17) Arrogant pride breeds conflict and division; it fractures relationships. Humility is understanding that our self-worth is not found in putting others down or comparing ourselves with others. We are to meet others openly, generously, without defensiveness.

Barclay sums this up in a paraphrase, “We are all trying to reap the harvest which a good life brings. But the seeds which bring the rich harvest can never flourish in any atmosphere other than one of right relationships ... And the only people who can sow these seeds and reap the reward are those whose life work it has been to produce such right relationships.” (1976, p.97)

Mark 9:30–37

This section of Mark’s Gospel is a pivotal part of the narrative. In today’s reading, Jesus again emphasises that he must suffer and die as he prepares the disciples for the ministry they will continue when he is no longer physically with them. The disciples are unable to grasp the radical subversiveness of Jesus’ intention and begin to argue about who is the greatest (9:34). They are fixated with ideas of power that have no place in the reign of God that Jesus is establishing. Jesus then uses an object lesson to illustrate that, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” (9:35)

Jesus uses a child to subvert the dominant narrative of power. Ched Meyers notes that, “Children represented the bottom of the social and economic scale in terms of status and rights in the ancient Mediterranean world” (2008, p.260). Jesus brings a child from the outside to the centre. He will do this again in 10:13–16. He says that whoever receives () one such child in his name receives () him (and the one who sent him) (9:37). In 10:15, he says, “whoever does not receive () the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” The Greek word has connotations of acceptance and is sometimes translated as “welcome”. William Barclay paraphrases 9:37, “If (one) welcomes the poor, ordinary people, the people who have no influence and no wealth and no power, the people who need things done for them, (they are) welcoming me. More than that, (they are) welcoming God.” (1975, p.203) The reign of

God is not about power or prestige; it is about service to the least. It is about empowerment, not disempowerment.

There is no room for domination or oppression in God's reign. Meyers points out that we cannot hope to break the spiral of violence in the world until we address the intergenerational reproduction of domination in the most basic social unit. "A new social order be constructed until we have dealt with the very foundations of oppression" (Ibid. p.270). Embracing the humanity and dignity of a child (the powerless and marginalised) is essential for achieving the new order under God's reign.

Interpreting the Word

The texts all speak into a right relationship with God, self, and others. Our relationship with others (and even ourselves) flows directly from our relationship with God. God is the source of wisdom, connection, and life. Life with God (deeply rooted in a relationship with God) will lead to the fruit of harmonious relationships. We are to treat all people as having equal worth and seek the very best for everyone. We are to welcome and include all people, especially those on the fringes, regardless of race, culture, religion, sexuality, gender, or any other factors that usually separate us. Following the way of the cross (the way of Christ) is to disrupt centres of power.

In all this, we are to trust God. As we remain faithful in seeking to live righteously, with a justice that is restorative rather than retributive, we build for God's perfect reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Preaching the Word

The preacher could explore the subversive nature of "The Kingdom of God" (God's perfect reign on earth as it is in heaven). Many contrasts within the texts illustrate what leads to life (as God intends) and what leads to death (robs life). Power that seeks to dominate rather than setting free, arrogant pride, and greed that leads to unhealthy competitiveness all rob life. Actions that empower the "least of these", acts of service and humility, inclusion and welcome all lead to a fullness of life that characterises the life God intends for all people. Those who follow the way of Christ are called to an alternative path that is not about power and glory, but about self-sacrificial, self-giving love that leads to the healing and restoration of all things.

Living the Word

In May 2019, South Africa made the cover of Time magazine for all the wrong reasons. The magazine reported that the World Bank had declared South Africa the most unequal country in the world. The World Bank report showed that the richest 10% of the population own more than 85% of the household wealth, while over half the population have more liabilities than assets. We need to reflect deeply on how the church disrupts power and addresses inequalities. How do we serve "the least of these" and work for a world where all people thrive?

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship

(inspired by Psalm 1, Mark 9:33–37)

Our world offers many wide avenues
and beautiful boulevards to walk;

Our God invites us to walk the road of service and sacrifice.

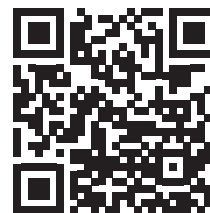
Our society suggests we put down our roots
in the shallow soil of pleasure and greed.

**Our God seeks to plant us on the banks of hope,
watered by the rivers of joy and grace.**

Our culture promotes achievement, success,
climbing to the top, ringing the bell.

**Our God tells us if we want to be first
we need to go to the end of the line.**

*Written by Thom Shuman,
<http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.ca/>*



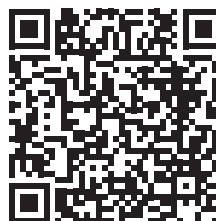
Suggested Songs

"There's a wideness in God's Mercy", Frederick William Faber

"God Of Justice", Tim Hughes

"Who Is Greatest in the Kingdom?", Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

https://www.carolynshymns.com/who_is_greatest_in_the_kingdom.html



"Do Not Turn Away the Children", Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

https://www.carolynshymns.com/do_not_turn_away_the_children.html



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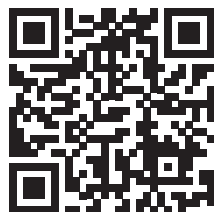
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Word and Life for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost – 26 September 2027

David Sylvester

Texts

Esther 7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22

Psalm 124

James 5:13–20

Mark 9:38–50

Introduction

The nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost falls late in September 2027, as the long season of Ordinary Time draws toward its final quarter. South Africa is emerging from winter into the first warmth of spring – a fitting backdrop for readings that insist, against all odds, that God is on the side of the vulnerable. The texts gathered here speak of deliverance from death's edge (Esther, Psalm 124), of a community that prays together and heals one another (James), and of a Jesus who refuses to police the boundaries of grace (Mark). The thread running through them all is trust: in a God who does not abandon those who cry out.

Hearing the Word

Esther 7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22

The lectionary excerpt drops us into the climax of a carefully crafted narrative. Esther and Mordecai are Jews living in the Persian diaspora – a situation familiar to many communities across the ancient world and resonant in the South African context of displacement and minority vulnerability. King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) has unknowingly signed a decree, engineered by the powerful courtier Haman, authorising the massacre of all Jews in the empire. At the pivotal banquet scene (7:1–6), Esther has risked her life by approaching the king unsummoned, in order to name her enemy: 'This wicked Haman.' The exposure is dramatic and complete.

Verses 9–10 record Haman's execution on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai – the ironic reversal at the heart of the book's theology. The phrase 'the king's anger was pacified' echoes a key theme: human power, however absolute it appears, is never the final word. Chapter 9:20–22 introduces the festival of Purim, established to commemorate the reversal: 'days of feasting and gladness, of sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.' Crucially, joy is not privatised – it overflows in generosity toward the marginalised. The name 'Purim' (from *pur*, 'lot') recalls that Haman had cast lots to determine the date of the massacre; the festival turns that instrument of death into an occasion of life.

Psalm 124

This is a communal song of deliverance – a 'Song of Ascents' sung by pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. Its opening formula, 'If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,' is a device of retrospective gratitude: the congregation is invited to imagine what the outcome might have been without divine intervention. The vivid images include a sweeping flood overflowing, a snare broken, a bird escaping. These are not abstract metaphors but memories of real danger.

The psalm corresponds perfectly with the Esther narrative: both celebrate rescue from forces that had the power to destroy. The final verse – '*Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth*' – shifts from historical recollection to present confession. This is its liturgical genius: memory becomes creed. In the South African context, where communities hold hard memories of oppression alongside present struggles, this movement from remembering to confessing to hoping carries great weight.

James 5:13–20

This passage from the closing chapter of James is intensely practical. The community is addressed in its full emotional range: suffering, cheerful, sick. For each condition there is a corresponding practice – prayer, praise, anointing and prayer of faith. The 'elders of the church' (*presbyteroi*) are summoned to pray over the sick, anointing with oil in the name of the Lord. This is not a private transaction but a communal act: the church gathers around the suffering member.

The reference to Elijah (vv. 17–18) is striking. James insists that Elijah was 'a human being like us' – not a superhuman intercessor but an ordinary person whose prayer was nevertheless 'powerful and effective.' The phrase 'the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective' (v. 16) is not a formula for guaranteed outcomes but a summons to persistent, communal intercession. The passage closes with mutual accountability: bringing back a wanderer from error saves a soul from death and covers a multitude of sins (v. 20). The community is thus responsible for one another's spiritual wellbeing, not only their physical healing.

Mark 9:38–50

The disciples report to Jesus that they encountered someone casting out demons in his name – but he was not 'one of us.' They stopped him. Jesus' response is immediate and striking: 'Do not stop him.' The logic is simple and disarming: 'Whoever is not against us is for us.' This represents a significant rebuke to the disciples' instinct to police the boundaries of their movement. In Mark's Gospel, the disciples frequently misunderstand Jesus, and this is a clear instance. The exorcist is doing good work in Jesus' name; that is sufficient.

The passage then pivots to a series of sayings about scandal (stumbling blocks), the urgency of cutting off what causes sin, and the enigmatic sayings about salt. The Greek word *skandalon* (stumbling block) is used in reference to ‘causing’ ‘little ones’ to sin’ – probably a reference to vulnerable or new believers. The hyperbolic (deliberately exaggerated) images of cutting off hand, foot, or eye are not prescriptions for self-mutilation but expressions of the radical seriousness of sin within the community. The repeated phrase ‘where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched’ (vv. 44, 46, 48, echoing Isaiah 66:24) underlines the stakes. The closing saying – ‘Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another’ – links inner integrity with communal peace, bringing the passage to a surprisingly relational conclusion.

Interpreting the Word

The book of Esther is unusual among the books of the Hebrew Bible for making no explicit mention of God. Yet the theological logic of the narrative is unmistakable: the reversal of Haman’s plot, the providential timing of Esther’s courage, the establishment of Purim as a permanent memorial of deliverance – all these factors point to a God who works through human agents within the structures of imperial power. This matters enormously for readers in contexts where the state has been, or remains an instrument of oppression. Esther’s situation – a woman, a Jew, living in a foreign empire, holding power only through proximity to a powerful man, required to hide her identity to survive – resonates deeply in South Africa’s complex history of race, gender, and survival.

The Purim institution (9:20–22) is significant hermeneutically (interpreting or analysing texts, meanings, or actions). Commemoration of deliverance is not nostalgia but resistance: to remember that God reversed the powerful and protected the powerless is to refuse to accept the permanence of present injustice. Communities that gather in churches across South Africa on this Sunday bring their own memories of reversal – personal and collective. Psalm 124 invites those memories into the liturgy, naming them as instances of the same divine faithfulness.

James 5 was written to communities under economic stress – earlier chapters address the exploitation of workers by wealthy landowners (5:1–6). The call to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil; to confess sins to one another and pray for one another; envisions a community of radical mutuality. In a society where public healthcare is under severe strain and where many people turn to the church as the first and sometimes only place of care, this passage addresses the congregation not as passive recipients of pastoral care but as active agents of healing ministry. The ‘elders’ are not a professional clergy class alone; the entire community is implicated in verse 16: ‘*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*’

The *Mark* passage challenges two persistent tendencies: the instinct to define who belongs and who doesn’t; and the tendency to soften the seriousness of communal harm. The exorcist outside the disciples’ circle is a first-century reminder that the Spirit of God is not the property of any

single institution or movement. This is a pressing word for South African Christianity, where denominational rivalries and theological boundary-policing can obstruct cooperative witness. At the same time, the severity of Jesus’ warnings about stumbling blocks – especially concerning ‘little ones’ – challenges any complacency about the harm communities can do to vulnerable members. Both excessive exclusiveness and excessive permissiveness are corrected by this text.

Preaching the Word

Several rich possibilities emerge from these texts for the preacher’s consideration:

1. *The God Who Turns Things Around*

Esther and Psalm 124 together offer the great biblical theme of reversal – what liberation theologians call God’s ‘preferential option for the poor.’ The gallows built for Mordecai became Haman’s own end. The flood that threatened to sweep Israel away receded. A sermon could explore this theme of reversal not as triumphalism but as a ground of present hope. In a South African context marked by persistent inequality, gender-based violence, and political disappointment, what does it mean to confess that God is ‘on our side’ – not in a nationalistic sense, but in the sense of Psalm 124’s vulnerable community? The preacher could invite the congregation to name their own ‘Hamans’ – not individuals to hate, but systems and forces that feel overwhelming – and to hold them before a God whose history is one of reversal.

2. *The Praying Community*

James 5 offers a vision of the church as a community of mutual care and prayer that could speak powerfully to congregations that have reduced prayer to an individualised, private activity. The preacher might ask: when last did the leadership of this congregation gather around a sick or suffering member and pray? When last did we make space to confess our failures to one another and receive assurance of forgiveness? The passage does not idealise community – it assumes suffering, sin, and wandering are present realities. But it insists that these realities are meant to be carried together. In contexts where mental health struggles, chronic illness, and grief are widespread and often hidden, the preacher could hold up James 5 as a mandate for a ministry of presence and intercession.

3. *Who Belongs? Boundary and Belonging*

The disciples’ impulse to stop the unauthorised exorcist is entirely understandable – and entirely wrong. A sermon on Mark 9:38–41 could gently probe the church’s own tendencies toward boundary policing: Who is allowed to serve in this congregation? Whose theology is sufficiently orthodox? Who qualifies for full inclusion? Jesus’ criterion is devastatingly simple: is the work being done in my name? Is it oriented toward the same healing and liberation I am bringing? This does not dissolve all distinctions – the passage also contains Jesus’ sharpest warnings about causing harm – but it relocates the question from ‘*are they one of us?*’ to ‘*are they with us in the work of the Kingdom?*’

4. Joy as Resistance: The Gift of Purim

The institution of Purim – feasting, gladness, gifts, generosity to the poor – may seem distant from contemporary worship, but it contains a powerful theological insight: joy is not the absence of suffering but the community's refusal to let suffering have the last word. In contexts of poverty, grief, and injustice, the call to celebrate and share is itself an act of resistance. The preacher could explore how the congregation's worship – its singing, its Eucharist, its fellowship – is itself a form of Purim: a declaration that death and Haman have not won.

Living the Word

These texts issue concrete invitations:

Individual believers might ask: Is there a 'wanderer' in my circle – someone drifting from faith, from community, from hope – whom I could gently accompany back? Am I willing to confess my failures to a trusted fellow believer and receive prayer?

Congregations might consider: How does our community respond when members are sick, grieving, or overwhelmed? Are our elders actively engaged in prayer ministry, or has pastoral care become solely the minister's task? Are we willing to celebrate alongside and give generously to those who are poor – making every Sunday a small act of Purim? And are we honest enough to examine where our own institutional boundaries exclude those who are, in fact, doing the work of the Kingdom alongside us?

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 124)

Leader: If it had not been the Lord who was on our side –

People: Let Israel now say –

Leader: If it had not been the Lord, we would have been swallowed alive.

People: Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth!

All: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Prayer of Intercession (versicle and response, based on James 5)

After each petition the leader names specific situations – the sick by name, those in distress, those who have wandered – and the congregation responds:

Lord, hear our prayer.

The service of intercession may conclude with the laying on of hands and/or anointing for those who request it.

Dismissal / Benediction

Go into the world with salt in yourselves and peace with one another. The Lord who delivered our ancestors delivers us still. Feast, rejoice, and give generously – and the God of Esther, of the Psalmist, and of James go with you. **Amen.**

Suitable Hymns / Songs

- 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' (Luther) – resonates with Psalm 124's confidence in divine protection.
- 'God Is Our Refuge and Our Strength and refuge' (Psalm 46 paraphrase) – communal trust in God amid danger.
- 'Thuma Mina' (Send Me) – commission and sending; appropriate for the Mark 9 theme of inclusive Kingdom work.
- 'There Is a Balm in Gilead' – a spiritual connecting healing prayer (James 5) with hope.

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Word and Life for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost – 3 October 2027

Rachell Hoogbaard

Texts

Job 1:1; 2:1–10

Psalm 26 OR Genesis 2:18–24 and Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:5–12

Mark 10:2–16

Introduction

The church is in Ordinary time, which consists of the Sundays after Pentecost until the Feast of Christ the King. The liturgical colour is green, which symbolise growth, mission, and the work of the church in the world. The last three Sundays in Ordinary time are also known as ‘Kingdomtide’ or ‘Little Advent’ because the readings allow us to anticipate the Reign of Christ.

Believers have received the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. Now it is time to, ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.’

Hearing the Word

Job 1:1, 2:1–10 and Psalm 26

The Book of Job starts with Job’s good qualities: righteous and God-fearing. Job was also wealthy. His God-fearing life was the trigger for Satan to test him. What would Job do if he lost all his wealth, possessions and family? Satan was relentless because he also afflicted Job’s body and physical health. Satan confirms that he was always on the move at work in the world. He was looking for good, godly people to inflict with his torment. Job’s wife pressurised Job to renounce his God because of his affliction, but Job refused.

Psalm 26

The Psalmist highlights the injustices, bribery, turmoil and evil that surrounds him. He does not claim to be without sin or blame, but he calls on God whom he trusts. It was the same God who cleanses him from sin and restores him time and time again. The texts relate to the same injustices that fell on Jesus. However, Jesus carried his condemnation in silences knowing that this was not for himself but to save the world.

Genesis 2:18–24 and Psalm 8

Humankind was given dominion over creation and given the opportunity to name the animals and birds. The animals and birds had companions, but the human had none. God decided to make a companion for the human because to be alone was not good. From the life of the first human, God created a companion. The first two humans were naked, but unaware of their nakedness.

Psalm 8

The Psalmist lifts our spirit when he speaks of the dominion that God gives to us his children. Recalling the creation in Genesis, we find ourselves in awe and a bit anxious because it is a weighted responsibility. The Psalmist alerts us to the power of praise that is in the hands of humankind, even in the hands of a child. Our weapon against the enemy is our praise to God who created the heaven and the earth,

Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:5–12

God spoke through prophets in the Old Testament, but this changed in the New Testament because of Jesus who is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus has the nature and glory of God, and he draws the needy and outcast to God. Rejecting Jesus, who is the living testimony of the Gospel meant rejecting the good news and God. Jesus is greater than angels and creation because all things are created through him. He suffered for humankind and entered into glory. Jesus calls humankind his brothers and sisters.

Mark 10:2–16

Pharisees posed questions to Jesus with the hope of trapping him. Jesus referred them to the instruction of Moses, which listed the criteria for divorce. The instruction of Moses was intended to limit divorce and to restore order to disorderly communities. Jesus explained the unity and connection that exist in married couples.

Interpreting the Word

The Book of Job aims to instruct believers, especially in terms of staying steadfast and faithful in times of adversity. This book provides general teaching principles despite exceptions. It was important for Job to manage these difficulties and inconsistencies of life considering his faith in God. Despite his wealth, he clings to God as his sustainer and protector. He shows reluctance to listen to the counsel of his wife and later his friends. His faith in God made him a target of Satan, who devised many plans to torment him. This is still true today. In Job’s case, the affliction of Satan was a testimony of his relationship with God, because Satan finds no need to afflict those that he calls his own.

The Genesis text is different to how a scientist would describe the creation story, but the Bible is not intended to be a scientific textbook. The Bible describes a simple account of order and importance relating to the beginning of things, which are expressed in what we as people can understand. We understand that God made humankind the centre of the world. Does it mean that humankind was made like a baker would make a cake or creation, but that humankind was made from common chemicals, like clay and dust (Job 10:9; Eccles 3:20). The creation story allows us to assess with wisdom and discernment where theology and science complement each other and where tension exists.

The circumstances that surrounded David is familiar to us because the world is flooded with injustice, bribery, and evil. These factors test the faith of any believer. David relies on God, whom he knows came through for him in the past. David put his trust in God to protect him from his enemies and restores him from sin. The texts remind us of the human nature of Christ because he suffered injustice, attacks from the enemy and the evil one while he was on earth. We too like David, must look to God as our helper. This psalmist reminds believers that the weak or simple can silence the enemies. The powerless are powerful in the hands of God. David wanted to please God therefore he rejects the ways of the unrighteous. He expressed his delight in worshipping a God that continue to save him from the enemies.

The backdrop to the letter to the Hebrews is the persecution of the Christians, which left the Jewish Christians quite discouraged. They left their Jewish roots only to find their livelihood threaten. They thought that Christian life would be easy, but realise that they faced treats on every side, whilst Judaism was growing stronger. Some therefore gave up on Christianity and picked up their previous religious legalistic practices. In the face of hardship, they turned their back on Christianity, which means that they turn their back on Jesus, the good news, and the Saviour of the world.

The question about divorce was to trap Jesus. The plot to get Jesus removed thickens. Jesus continues to refer them to the Law of Moses. He knew they were familiar with these Laws and that they wait for him to reject it. Jesus appeased the Pharisees with his response. The question is whether the list or criteria provided for divorce is still valid today? Where does factors such as gender base violence fit into these criteria? If we believe in the authority of Scripture, tradition, and reason, what does this mean of partners and children suffering any form of abuse or violence?

Preaching the Word

This Sunday coincides with the last Sunday in the Season of Creation, which brings us to the commemoration of Saint Francis of Assisi. St Francis is honoured as the patron saints of animals, but overall, he lived a simple life and preserved creation. His mirrored the ministry of Jesus in terms of charity and inclusivity. The readings in the Psalm and Genesis fit in well with the theme of preserving and honouring creation.

Other themes that can be gleaned is the nature of God as protector and provider. God the Almighty comes through for those who walk in the light of Christ.

The Hebrew text serves as a reminder of the supremacy of Jesus and the salvation that he has in store for believers. Christians will suffer, but receive the glory of eternal life, if they stand firm in faith and rely of God for strength.

Other themes may include human sexuality, the Bible and science, and the criteria for divorce based on the Law of Moses. It would be advisable to explore the letter and spirit of the Law and Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law. What is the will of God for humankind? How do we interpret divorce, human sexuality, and LGBTQA in light of Scripture? How does this fit into our world view knowing that humankind

is made in the image and likeness of God, who is Spirit and therefore transcend human gender.

The Hebrew text about the humanity of Christ reminds us not only of his human nature but also about his divinity, and with that we behold the mystery of Christ. This means that we understand in part and leave the rest to God, who is the all-wise God. These lessons are difficult to navigate therefore we pray for discernment and approach this and any other through the lens of the love of Christ, which he has for all God's children.

Living The Word

The lessons of the day allow believers to live in the hope of abundant life, despite the threats of the enemy. Believe and trust that we are strong despite our weakness. Believers are encouraged to embrace diversity and foster inclusivity, knowing that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. Allow God to rule and reign in our lives by creating a safe, nurturing, and healing place for others, especially those who are affected by divorce and those who face discrimination because of race, gender, sexuality or faith.

This Sunday also allows us to care for or take a stance to preserve creation, following in the way of Jesus and St Francis of Assisi. Strive to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, even if it means that we swim upstream or toppling the tables to allow God's will to be done in this age.

Churches doors are open to pets and animals to receive a blessing on the Sunday of the Feast of St Francis of Assisi.

Liturgical Suggestions

Music

"O for a closer walk with God" William Cowper, in Conyer's *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, 1772

"All things bright and beautiful" Cecil Frances Alexander (1848)

"Joyful, joyful Lord, we adore thee". Henry Van Dyke (1907).

"From Heaven you came, helpless babe / The Servant King" Graham Kendrick 1983 Kingsway Music

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Word and Life for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost – 10 October 2027

Sikawu Makubalo

Texts

Job 23:1–9, 16–17 OR Amos 5:6–7, 10–15

Psalms 22:1–15 OR Psalm 90:12–17

Hebrews 4:12–16

Mark 10:17–31

Introduction

What holds these readings together is not simply the theme of silence or abandonment, but the unsettling realization that God's silence is not absence – it is attention. It is a relentless, searching gaze that penetrates beneath the surface of human life, exposing what we often hide behind: wealth, piety, power, longevity, even religious sincerity. Whether through the lens of individual existential suffering (Job 23 and Psalm 22) or systemic social justice (Amos 5), God's Word acts as a "divine surgical strike" (Hebrews 4) that exposes what we truly trust in. These texts draw us into a space where everything is seen, everything is weighed, and everything is called into truth.

Hearing The Word

Job 23:1–9, 16–17

In Job 23, we encounter a man who is not questioning God's existence, but God's availability. After much suffering and loss Job's friends come to commiserate with Job. In this act of commiseration, many questions are asked and many assumptions reached. Shaped by the cause-and-effect theology, they conclude that Job's suffering is a result of his wickedness or sinfulness. To Job's friends, if God is just, then Job's suffering cannot be unjust. The friends find it important to defend this view. "Job refuses these simple answers and even calls out the fact they are offered to the benefit of the comforters not to console the one in need of comfort" (Meg Jenista).

In response to this, we find Job, in the prescribed text, questioning God's availability. Note that he is not questioning God's existence. Job is convinced that if only he could find God, he could plead his case. Yet God remains elusive: "*If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him.*" In this relentless demand to meet God and be heard, we find an audacious, bold Job who seeks to engage God in anger. This is an expression of deep trust in God even when God seems absent or silent.

Psalm 22:1–15

The psalm begins with the raw cry, "me *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" This is a cry that does not abandon faith but clings to it even in suffering and feeling of abandonment. The psalmist still says "my God, my God" revealing that relationship with God endures even when reassurance does not. This affirms that doubt, pain, and even the sense of abandonment are not signs of weak faith, but expressions of a faith that refuses to let go. The psalm holds together memory and anguish. The God who was faithful to past generations now seems absent.

At the same time, the psalm speaks tenderly into experiences of shame, rejection, and vulnerability. The psalmist is mocked, dehumanized, and physically exhausted, portraying suffering as both internal and social. Yet even here, there is a quiet thread of trust: the God who seems distant is also the One who has been present since birth. This allows the psalmist to continue praying, "*Do not be far from me,*" even when God feels far away. This psalm is taken up by Jesus Christ on the cross, raising a theological quagmire, can God abandon God?

Psalm 90:12–17

Psalm 90:12–17 can be heard as a movement from hard truth to hopeful petition, where Israel refuses both denial and despair. The psalmist boldly names realities that life is brief, fragile, and marked by limits we cannot control. The psalm says that being taught to number our days leads to "a heart of wisdom." This lesson is not a call to morbid reflection, but to truthful living abandoning illusions of permanence, success, or self-sufficiency. Wisdom, then, is not mere knowledge but wisdom is a posture of dependence and trust, living each day aware that life is a gift held before God.

This psalm does not end in realism alone it moves toward bold, covenantal hope. The psalm dares to ask God to "turn," to restore joy in proportion to suffering, and to establish the work of human hands. 'God will not establish as something of lasting value that which is short-sighted or ruinous for others of God's creatures and image bearers. When you set God as the standard for the value of your work—and if you expect God to "establish" it in some approving way—then that cuts off a whole lot of the ways too many people choose to live their lives' (Scott Hoezee).

Amos 5:6–7, 10–15

In these verses, the prophet Amos delivers a blistering critique of a society where religious performance has been severed from moral integrity. Writing during a period of outward prosperity for Israel, Amos reveals that this wealth is built on a foundation of systemic rot.

Amos begins with an urgent imperative: "Seek the Lord and live." In this context, seeking God is not an invitation to a private spiritual experience or more frequent temple attendance. It is a demand for a total reorientation of life toward God's character, which is defined by justice. The warning is stark: refusal to seek the Lord results in a "consuming fire," a metaphor for the inevitable self-destruction of a society that does not do justice.

The "gate" was the centre of civic life, the place where the court sat and business was transacted. Amos highlights specific sins that occur by the gate:

- Perversion of Justice: They turn "justice into wormwood" (bitterness). Instead of being a source of healing, the legal system has become a source of poison.

- Hatred of Truth: They “abhor the one who speaks the truth.” The society has become so invested in its lies that the honest witness is viewed as a public enemy.
- Exploitation: The wealthy “trample on the poor” through “taxation of grain.” This describes a structural theft where the basic food supply of the peasant class is taken to build “houses of ivory” for the elite.

Amos concludes by defining what “seeking the Lord” looks like in practice: “*Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate.*” It is not enough to simply “not be evil.” For Amos, righteousness is an active, public act. To “establish justice” means to reform the systems of the city so that the vulnerable are protected. Only then, Amos suggests, might there be mercy for the “remnant of Joseph.” It is a call to move beyond charity to the harder work of structural transformation.

Hebrews 4:12–16

This text develops from a passage about divine observation into one about divine intervention. The “Word of God” is described as a surgical instrument designed to perform a life-saving operation on the human soul. While a gaze might see the surface, the incision penetrates. It reaches the “joint and marrow”, the deepest, most inaccessible parts of our being where our true motives and ideological justifications reside. This is a painful but necessary exposure.

If the passage ended at verse 13, it would be a message of terror. The passage introduces Jesus as a great High Priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, ‘*who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*’ To have such a High Priest enables us to approach the throne of grace with boldness.

Mark 10:17–31

In the Gospel of Mark, the travelling Jesus encounters many people, along the way, with requests. This time he is approached by a rich man with a rather odd but sincere question, ‘*What must I do to inherit eternal life.*’

The rich man approaches Jesus not only as an individual seeker but as someone whose identity is deeply embedded in a high-status social group marked by wealth, moral respectability, and religious observance. His claim to have kept the commandments reflects not only personal piety but alignment with a socially affirmed identity, he belongs among the “righteous.” Yet Jesus’ response disrupts this framework. By inviting him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, Jesus is not merely asking for an ethical act but calling for a radical identity shift from a position of privilege and security to solidarity with the marginalized, a **way** of those following Jesus. This is a movement from one social world (way) into another, where worth is no longer defined by status or achievement, but by participation in the life of the kingdom.

The man’s grief at Jesus’ invitation reveals the psychological and social cost of such a shift. Social identity theory helps us see that what is at stake is not just wealth but belonging and self-definition. To relinquish his possessions would mean losing his place within a network of honour, security, and recognition. His refusal reveals an inability to detach

from an identity that has structured his entire life. Jesus’ teaching about the difficulty for the rich to enter the kin-dom exposes how systems of wealth create insulated identities, where self-sufficiency replaces dependence on God and community (compare with Amos). The image of the camel and the needle underscore the near impossibility of crossing from one identity system into another. It is not just hard, it is humanly unthinkable, because it requires a reorientation of values, loyalties, and social location.

In contrast, the disciples, who have left everything, represent the formation of a new alternative community, where identity is no longer anchored in possessions or status, but in relationship with Jesus and one another. Jesus’ promise that those who leave behind former ties will receive a new network “a hundredfold” reflects the creation of a reconfigured social identity, marked by shared belonging, mutual care, and participation in God’s kin-dom even amid persecution.

The closing reversal, “the first will be last, and the last will be first,” signals a complete reordering of social hierarchies. From this perspective, the passage is not only about personal sacrifice, but about the dismantling of dominant identity structures and the formation of a community where dignity is no longer derived from wealth or status, but from faithful alignment with the values of the kin-dom of God.

Interpreting the Word

Job 23:1–9, 16–17 emerges from the heart of the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, and the Book of Job is best understood as poetic wisdom literature shaped as a dramatic dialogue. It wrestles with the problem of undeserved suffering, challenging the conventional theology of retribution; the belief that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. Within the larger structure of the book, Job 23 belongs to the cycle of dialogues (Job 3–27), where Job responds to his friends who insist that his suffering must be the result of hidden sin. In this chapter, Job speaks after Eliphaz’s accusations, intensifying the tension between traditional religious explanations and Job’s lived reality. Rather than accepting their moral framework, Job longs for a direct encounter with God. He longs for a courtroom-like setting where he can present his case and be vindicated.

In this passage, Job gives voice to the paradox of divine silence: God is not absent, yet God is not accessible. He searches in every direction—forward, backward, left, and right—but cannot perceive God. Yet, strikingly, Job affirms, “He knows the way that I take.” Here the text reveals a profound theological tension: while Job cannot see God, he is fully seen by God. Job’s anguish is not simply about suffering, but about being exposed before a God who sees completely while remaining hidden. His fear in verses 16–17 reflects this unsettling awareness. God’s silence intensifies scrutiny rather than diminishing scrutiny. In this way, the passage dismantles superficial securities, whether moral innocence, religious argument, or human control. In dismantling them we are drawn, together with Job, into a deeper confrontation with a God whose hiddenness is bound up with a profound and unyielding attentiveness to the truth of human life. Without the reassurance of God’s voice, Job must stand exposed, trusting that God’s gaze is just.

That same exposure intensifies in *Psalm 22*, where the psalmist's cry of abandonment is laid bare without pretence. If Job and the psalmist reveal the inner dimension of this gaze, Amos 5 confronts its social and political implications. Here, God's gaze falls upon a society that has mastered the art of superficial religion. Worship continues, offerings are made, songs are sung but justice is absent. Under God's gaze, systems, not just individuals, are laid bare.

In *Mark 10:17–31*, this searching gaze becomes personal and immediate in the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man. The Gospel tells us that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” This is not a casual glance—it is a penetrating, loving gaze that sees the man fully. It recognizes his moral discipline, his sincerity, and also the one thing he lacks. When Jesus calls him to sell what he has and follow, he is not imposing an arbitrary demand; he is naming the truth revealed under divine scrutiny.

This theme reaches its most explicit articulation in *Hebrews 4:12–16*, where the Word of God is described as “living and active... piercing until it divides soul from spirit... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Nothing is hidden; everything is “naked and laid bare” before God.

We return to the introductory remark: God's silence does not mean absence, it is attention. It is a relentless, searching gaze that penetrates beneath the surface of human life, exposing what we often hide behind: wealth, piety, power, longevity, even religious sincerity. These texts do not allow us to remain concealed.

Preaching the Word

These are possible themes that can be explored:

“Seen in the Silence” – This theme emphasizes that even when God seems hidden, God is actively seeing, probing beneath appearances.

“The Silence that Strips us” – God's silence dismantles what we rely on be it wealth, status, piety, control.

“Exposed and Invited” – God's gaze is not only critical but compassionate. It exposes to invite transformation.

Living the Word

In contexts marked by inequality, it is often assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that silence equals permission; that the absence of immediate judgment justifies the accumulation of wealth, the consolidation of power, and the normalization of exclusion. But if God's silence is instead a relentless, searching gaze, then it means that every structure of inequality, every policy that marginalizes, and every system that privileges the few at the expense of the many is already seen, weighed, and exposed. Injustice persists not because God is indifferent, but because human systems resist the truth God's gaze reveals.

In the context of war and conflict, political leaders often construct narratives of legitimacy such as national security, economic growth, cultural identity to justify decisions that are rooted in self-interest, domination, or fear. God's searching gaze penetrates these narratives, exposing the hidden motives beneath public rhetoric. It reveals how power is weaponized,

how human lives are reduced to collateral, and how pride disguises itself as patriotism. This challenges the church and society alike not to wait passively for divine action, but to name, resist, and transform these realities considering what God already sees through lament, prayer and acts of justice.

Inequality and conflict are not only the result of distant leaders. They are often upheld by everyday choices like silence in the face of injustice, comfort with privilege, or complicity in exploitative systems. God's gaze does not only fall on presidents and powers; it rests on communities, institutions, and individuals. It questions the ways we hide behind religious sincerity, moral respectability, or cultural norms while benefiting from unjust structures. In this way, God's attention becomes a call to radical transparency and transformation, a call to examine what we cling to, what we justify, and what we refuse to see.

Liturgical Suggestions

Music suggestions

Hymn – “The kingdom of God is justice and joy” Bryn Rees (1973)

Hymn – “Have faith in God my heart” Bryn Rees (1911–1983)

Hymn – “Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult” Cecil Frances Alexander (1852)

Song – “The wonderful cross” by Chris Tomlin and Matt Redman

Song – “Beauty for Brokenness” (God of the poor) Graham Kendrick

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<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-10-07/job-231-9-16-17-4/>



<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-10-08/psalm-221-15/>



<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-10-08/hebrews-412-16/>



Word and Life for 22nd Sunday after Pentecost – 17 October 2027

Ian Booth

Texts

Job 38:1–7 (34–41)
Psalm 104:1–9, 24, 35c
Isaiah 53:4–12
Psalm 91:9–16
Hebrews 5:1–10
Mark 10:35–45

Introduction

The Gospel passage for this Sunday is about a common human dispute. Two disciples want positions of honour when Jesus is glorified, which Jesus says is outside his control. The others become indignant and Jesus speaks about the difference between the Gentiles and the followers of Jesus who should aspire to be servants. Job relates the response of God to Job, in which God speaks of the details of creation which were the work of God, and the wonder and beauty of creation all of which are the work of God. Isaiah speaks of the suffering Servant and the ultimate reward from God. Hebrews speaks of the High Priest in the line of Melchizedek, which means “King of Righteousness”. The link seems to be understanding what the work of God is and the distinction between what God can accomplish and what humanity (including, it seems, Jesus) can accomplish. Whatever happens is the work of God, and humanity is invited to be part of that work without trying to intervene or influence the outcome.

Hearing the Word

Job 38:1–7 (34–41)

This passage contains a response by God to Job’s challenge, and the challenge comes from the midst of a storm, a whirlwind. This is the traditional accompaniment to God’s appearance in the Old Testament, e.g. in Exodus 19:16, in 1 Kings 19:11, and in Ezekiel 1:4. When God breaks the silence of which Job has complained, it is not done on equal terms, “man to man”, because the divine voice is wrapped in the epicentre of the storm, which humans cannot penetrate or control. The distance between God and humanity is increased in this response. God does not pass judgement on Job, but simply lays out the work of God in creation which no human being could have accomplished. There is also reference to the non-human living beings of creation who fall under the scope of God’s care.

Psalm 104:1–9; ; 24; 35c

This Psalm praises the majesty of God, the creator, using language that celebrates the power of the creator.

Isaiah 53:4–12

This passage is possibly one of the best known “Suffering Servant” songs in Isaiah, because it is used during Holy Week each year, and is read as a reference to Jesus. The

degradation and humiliation suffered by the servant is recounted in detail, and he is seen as a representative of the people – a substitutionary sufferer. It is possible that the one person is a collective of the ancestors of the current audience, whose suffering made the lives of the next generation more palatable. The key lies in the last verses, in which the servant is restored and rewarded with offspring, a place among the great, and a share of the spoils, because he did not hold back from the self-sacrifice that was demanded of him.

Psalm 91:9–16

This Psalm includes the verse with which Jesus is tempted as he emerges from the wilderness, used at the beginning of Lent each year. It is essentially a reminder that if we make God our refuge, our safe space, there will always be protection for us whatever life might throw at us. Again, the greatness of God compared to the frailty of humanity. This is a good accompaniment to the Suffering Servant passage.

Hebrews 5:1–10

This passage unpacks the role of the High Priest in the life of the Hebrews when they were in Palestine and had the Temple in Jerusalem. What is highlighted is the fact that the High Priest (or any minister, in fact) is not self-appointed, but called by God, and then uses passages from the Old Testament to testify that Jesus was appointed (ordained) to the role of High Priest by God in the order of Melchizedek. We first encounter this figure in Genesis. He was both a king and a priest and was revered by Abraham. His name is a composite of Hebrew words meaning King and Righteousness, and it is to that order that Jesus is ordained by God. Again, God does the choosing, God is in control.

Mark 10:35–45

This passage presents James and John as ambitious disciples seeking a place of honour with chief seats in heaven. The timing is particularly illuminating, as Jesus has just spoken of his impending suffering and death and subsequent resurrection, and all they can think about are themselves. This provides Jesus with an opportunity to teach about humility. In linking this to the other passages we have read in this block it is interesting to read part of Jesus’ response: “to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared” There are some things that are outside Jesus’ power: God is in control, and Jesus acts in obedience to God – even to the point of death on the cross, which is where the identification of Jesus with the suffering servant in Isaiah comes in. The other disciples are obviously indignant, and we are not sure that it is because they think that what James and John have done is inappropriate, or because they are left out, and disappointed that they didn’t think about it first. The self-centred inward looking human nature is contrasted to the self-denying outward looking nature of the one obedient to God is highlighted in this passage.

Interpreting the Word

Job 38:1–7 (34–41)

Job is a noble work of literature, standing among some of the great ancient literary texts. It combines prose with poetry, it contains some sections which could stand alone and be as majestic. There is a parallel to the story of Job that has been discovered in an ancient Sumerian poem dating to about 2000BC. The author of Job is unknown. The point of the book is to deal with the problem of suffering, particularly innocent suffering, and its meaning. The idea of God simply dishing out punishment and suffering based on whim is addressed. Job's friends have a theology which says, in essence: "just suck it up and deal with it. And have done with God because what is happening is unfair". Job won't give up on his faith, but agonises over why this is happening, and wants to face God and seek answers. The opportunity comes in the whirlwind, in God setting out the credentials of the one who is God, higher than all human reckoning, in whose presence humanity is fit only to repent in dust and ashes. Job repents, and his estrangement from God, the world, and humanity is ended, and he becomes a new man. The point is that it is important to maintain the relationship between God and humanity at the right level: to not underestimate God nor overestimate the importance of humanity.

Isaiah 53:4–12

The substitutionary element of the suffering of the servant is clearly expressed in this passage. The servant is stricken with disease, and is pierced through, and endures pain and sickness because of the sins of others. The well-being that comes to them is because of what the servant has endured. The image of a lamb being silent as it is led to slaughter finds resonance in the New Testament images of Jesus as the substitutionary sacrifice for humanity, the once-for-all sacrifice that renders all further sacrifice unnecessary, and the lion of Judah who is the lamb bearing the marks of slaughter in Revelation 5. But the prophet intended this to be a message for the exiles, in order to prepare them for the mission of suffering which awaited them, and for the victory which awaited at the end of the mission and was not prophesying about Jesus. The servant is not named. This could be because the prophet was speaking about the future, and could not name the person; or because he was showing the Judean exiles what their mission of suffering for the world would look like, and did not have an individual in mind; or he was thinking of a person who would represent the whole people; or he wanted future generations to recognise individuals who fulfilled the mission of God in their own time. This last point is one that we can carry through to our time. "The new revelation which became the basis for the Christian faith is this: the undeserved suffering of Israel, whether of the whole people or of individuals, brings relief for suffering from others, whether nations or individuals." (p155) The closing verses show us, not the passive lamb of vs 7, but the active, struggling servant working with God to achieve the fulfilment of the will of God. The mission of the exiles was part of God's will for the whole world, and so they must accept it with complete dedication and self-sacrifice. This is the call to all the people of God, to be willing to endure suffering for others. This relieves us from the sense

that Jesus is the only substitute for us, and that we can sit back and bask in the glory of it, but draws us into being part of the suffering servant image ourselves.

Hebrews 5:1–10

Priests are chosen from among humans to act on behalf of their fellow human beings. Priests stand in the gap between God and people and offer gifts and sacrifices to God for their own sins and those of others. The position is not one humans seek for themselves: the priest should be called by God, just as was Aaron. Jesus fulfils the qualifications. He did not seek the appointment but was appointed by God and identified with the people by his life of temptation and prayer. His fellowship with God and obedience to the will of God were achieved through strenuous effort and acceptance of suffering. Designating Jesus as "from the order of Melchizedek" introduces an order of priesthood that predates Aaron, even predates the Abrahamic faiths themselves, which provides a universality to the priesthood of Jesus. The letter was addressed to Jewish converts to the Christian faith across the empire and sought to assist them to find the bridge between their original faith and the new faith that they had embraced. This includes going back to Abraham, who was before the development of faiths, and was the father of all humanity.

Mark 10:35–45

Once we get through the arrogance and insensitivity of James and John, and the indignation of the others, we get to the heart of the teaching moment that Jesus seizes: the meaning of discipleship is not privilege but service, and the type of service is exemplified by Jesus, the highest service being that he gives his life as a ransom for many. This is one of the passages in the same Gospel according to Mark, and so we can't just have Jesus as the ransom for many without being reminded that he has called any would come after him to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. This is the link with the mission of the exiles, which is linked to the original mission of the people chosen to be the people of God, to understand their lives as lived on behalf of others. To follow Jesus means to be willing to give our lives on behalf of others as an act of obedience to God.

Preaching the Word

A sermon based on these texts, whichever Old Testament passage is used, would need to face the fact of human suffering head on. Job deals with the question of innocent suffering inflicted on Job, for which Job seeks answers. The exile is an example of suffering inflicted upon a whole people, supposedly due to the sins of those who had gone before them, so this is also a form of innocent suffering. At the beginning of Matthew, we have the suffering of the innocents, with the slaying of boy children under the age of two. At the time of writing, we have had four years of war in the Ukraine resulting from an invasion by Russia, two and half years of genocide waged against the people of Palestinian Gaza by Israel in a disproportionate response to an insurgence by Hamas into Israel under extremely suspicious circumstances, and a war raging in the middle

east started by Israel and the US against Iran five weeks ago, which threatens to escalate into a Third World War. I don't know what the world will look like in October 2027, but there will be the ongoing problem of human suffering, including the suffering of the innocent. It is important, using Job's experience as an example, to state that there is not always an answer to the question of the suffering of the innocent, but there is a need to maintain faith in God who is larger than human beings, and finding a home in God provides the resilience to endure the suffering. As long as humanity looks like James and John competing for status, and the other ten indignant for the wrong reason, there will be conflict and suffering.

There is another important point to pick out of the passage in Hebrews, particularly in the context of the attention that is being paid to the plethora of churches in the South African context by the CRL Commission, that ordination is not an office that humans seek for themselves, but is a response to the call of God. All the historic churches have evolved effective mechanisms for testing the calling of individuals who seek to enter the ordained ministry, or priesthood, in their churches. This assists to ensure that those churches are not personality cults following self-made, self-seeking pastors. This is not the self-denying, cross carrying discipleship Jesus seeks.

Living the Word

We live in a world in which human suffering is a reality, a world that was created by the magnificence of God but is inhabited by human beings who seek to control the world. The collective message of these passages is that God is in control, that whatever the experiences we endure God promises comfort and shelter. There are times in which God calls people into suffering for a purpose, most often on behalf of others, and that is a calling which must be followed, as did Jesus. Jesus is not the only substitute sacrifice for all humanity, but all humanity is called to be willing to offer themselves for the sake of others, should they be called to this. All should be willing to follow down this road.

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Word and Life for 23rd Sunday after Pentecost – 24 October 2027

Lisa Grassow

Texts

Job 42:1–6, 10–17 and Psalm 34:1–8, (19–22) OR
Jeremiah 31:7–9 and Psalm 126
Hebrews 7:23–28
Mark 10:46–52

Introduction

By this point in the year, Christian people have journeyed far from the immediate joy and celebration of Easter's salvation message. We are now deep into Ordinary time – the green season of growing that is marked by sustained discipleship. In short, the celebrating of Easter is long gone and only the everyday, committed Christians continue to attend Sunday services. The enthusiasm for the year has worn off and life begins to take its toll. This is a time that can often feel mundane, where believers are perhaps feeling weighed down by the weariness of everyday life.

Hearing the Word

Job 42:1–6, 10–17

This passage arrives as a resolution to suffering. This is not a cheap resolution but rather the end point after long drawn-out suffering, many brutally and much honest wrestling with God. In this passage we can see an echo of the Easter resurrection, where Job's life is resurrected from the ashes of devastation. Here at the end of the book, Job is finally given a rebuilt and restored life. Job is given new life, not simply the old life repaired, but a new and better life.

This passage is powerful because it refuses to give us an easy resolution to the story. While at first glance this might seem like an "everyone lived happily ever after" ending, this is not the case. We are shown Job who refuses to give false comfort to himself and refuses to give dishonest flattery to God. In this we discover something about the nature of who God is to us – a God who can handle our honesty and truth even if it is not flattering and will still give us resurrection. This passage invites us to hold the reality of unresolved suffering in tension with the stubborn hope of resurrection and restoration through God.

Psalm 34:1–8, (19–22)

The pairing of Psalm 34 with Job 42 is not an accident. This is not a praise verse offered up from a place of victory or security but rather praise offered from a place of weakness, much like Job's praise of God was. This offers us a theology that does not wait for deliverance before giving God praise but rather gives praise even in the midst of hardship. It is not reductive or offering religious platitudes but rather it is honest and vulnerable. In the Psalm, as in Job, the picture of God we are given is of one who sees the suffering of the oppressed and is there. Like in Job, the Psalm pushes against knowledge of God that is only received from others to a place

where knowledge of God also comes from direct experience. We notice that in both passages restoration comes as a result of honest engagement with God and not in spite of it. This Psalm, like Job, resists a reading that would reduce God to one who simply rewards praise with pleasant outcomes.

Jeremiah 31:7–9 and Psalm 126

Jeremiah 31 begins with a call to praise. Like both Job and the Psalm, this is not praise that comes out of a place of triumph, instead it is anticipatory praise. This is praise that calls a community under oppression to offer praise in anticipation and hope of a liberation still to come. Like Job and the Psalm, Jeremiah speaks of the restoration of those on the margins, it speaks again of God's preferential option for the vulnerable. This passage tells us about the restoration of dignity while resisting any cheap reading of restoration. The return it speaks of is not one of triumph but rather one where tears and comfort coexist. It is honest and offers a view where restoration does not erase suffering but rather transforms it. Where both Job and the Psalm speak of individual restoration, Jeremiah's restoration is one that is communal and political. It is the restoration of a whole community from the margins to the centre.

Psalm 126

This psalm can function as the communal voice for both Job 42 and Jeremiah 31:7–9. It can become liturgy and language for a shared vision of restoration. Here Psalm 126 can be used to give the congregation speech where memory, plea and hope are woven together in a story of both weeping and joy. Psalm 126 offers a voice for the people. It stubbornly insists on honest lament and unceasing hope both coexisting as the two sides of faithful living.

Hebrews 7:23–28

In this passage we are given a view of how salvation works for us. The author presents us with Christ as the one who will negotiate with God on our behalf. Christ is perfect and has already made the necessary sacrifices for us. Christ does not require any money to be paid or sacrifices to be bought. He is the everlasting intercessor who does so freely. Here there is a picture of Christ who speaks for those who would be unable to buy their own sacrifices. Christ stands with the voiceless, the poorest and the most vulnerable and Christ is not fallible like human priests are.

This passage connects to the day's other reading through its dealing with the idea of restoration. While for the Job passage and the Psalm of David, restoration is personal and for Jeremiah and Psalm 126, restoration is communal, for Hebrews restoration is now permanent and comes because of Christ. Hebrews offers the assurance that there is a permanent advocate who will always stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and the suffering and who will not be compromised or silenced before full restoration takes place.

Mark 10:46–52

In the Gospel reading we can see Mark giving us a single vivid moment of insight into who God is to us. A man who is marginalised in multiple ways is the vulnerable who Christ stands with. He calls out to Christ for restoration. Like the day's other passages, through God Bartimaeus receives restoration. Like Job and David, like the communities of Jeremiah and Hebrews, Bartimaeus is given restoration on all fronts – social, economic, spiritual, physical – and the restoration is not a repair of his life but a bettering of it. The day's passages show us that God brings full restoration to both the person and the community. We have a growing picture of a God whose preference is for the suffering and now we see a picture of God who can be appealed to directly and personally. Bartimaeus appeals directly to Christ to have mercy. He cries out to God directly for salvation and it is given. He does not need anyone to mediate on his behalf but instead is given direct access to the Divine who sees, hears and answers him like Hebrews 7 theologises. We are given proof of the truth of Hebrews 7. In this way Bartimaeus moves from a place of second-hand knowledge of God to direct experience – like Job and the Psalms – and his life is forever changed.

Interpreting the Word

Job 42:1–6, 10–17

Job is as a book about the suffering of the innocent and the pain that life brings with it. It is the story of an innocent man who nevertheless still experiences great suffering, but not as a result of a sinful life. The book offers a critique on the theology that believes that Godliness is blessed with prosperity and sinfulness is punished with suffering. Chapter 42 is the verdict on that theology. It offers a perspective on suffering that says that not only the sinful suffer. It also offers the reader the hope of restoration. However, restoration is not a neat conclusion tacked onto the end of a long poem. Rather, it is an ending born out of wrestling honestly with God, of journeying through devastation that is not deserved. Understanding the book's context is important as it helps us resist the twin temptations of sentimentalism and moralism. It can be tempting to reduce this to a feel-good ending where the restoration of Job erases all the suffering and protest that came before it. It can also be tempting to reduce this passage to a lesson about the rewards that endurance will bring. Doing this would rob us of a deep and complex message.

Psalms 34:1–8, (19–22)

Psalms 34 is an acrostic psalm – each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. The use of this literary structure signals to us that the psalm is carefully crafted and intentional. While the inscription says that it is a psalm by David, many scholars believe that rather than being an indication of authorship, this was a later editorial addition. The psalm fits within the broader post-exilic tradition of wisdom literature. Its context is that of a community who has known suffering – exile in Babylon – and has learned how to survive it. The community now wants to teach others how to understand that experience theologically.

The lectionary's pairing of Job 42 with this Psalm is theologically intentional. Both trace an arc for suffering through to honest encounter with God and authentic praise. Both then move into offering the reader consolation but not cheap consolation, rather the more authentic, costly and tested consolation that can be offered by those who have been through the fire. This is trustworthy and useful because it comes from experience.

Jeremiah 31:7–9 and Psalm 126

Like Job, Jeremiah is wrestling with the theological worldview that believed that the good and holy were rewarded and only the sinful suffered. However, if only the sinful suffer then it would follow that everyone who suffers is sinful. Jeremiah is wrestling with this. The book is considered a book of consolation and it is written to the Israelites in the midst of a tragedy of displacement and destruction. The book is either from the period of Exile or post-Exile and is written to a people who are traumatised and struggling to understand their suffering at the hands of Babylon, the destruction of Jerusalem and the erasure of everything vital to their identity.

Psalms 126

Psalms 126 is one of the Songs of Ascents, believed to have been created in a post-exilic world in the context of a people who hold the memory of their first return from Babylon and find themselves living in a place of despair where restoration is still an unrealised hope. When they returned from Babylon, they did not return to paradise as they had dreamed but rather were confronted by a destroyed city, hostile neighbours and desperate poverty.

Hebrews 7:23–28

Hebrews is a preaching letter to an early Jewish-Christian community, developing the idea that Jesus is the great high priest. The community being written to is experiencing social pressure and possibly persecution for their beliefs. The community is possibly feeling the temptation to distance themselves from their faith beliefs. The letter is often placed in the period around the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. The context is of wondering who mediates between God and humanity if the Levitical priesthood is no longer functioning. The central message to the letter is that Christ is the source of permanent access to God.

Mark 10:46–52

The healing of Bartimaeus is one of three blind men healing stories found in the Gospel of Mark. This narrative is one that is written to a community 60 to 70 years after the death of Jesus. The community of believers is one that is under pressure. The passage is written in the context of war with Rome. Jerusalem is either about to be destroyed or has just been destroyed and the community are wrestling with questions of power, suffering and who truly belongs in the movement of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is filled with politically charged commentary.

Preaching the Word

There are numerous threads that can be picked up in the preaching of these texts. For me, the most profound are the themes of honesty, hope and restoration. The theme of honesty is present throughout all the texts where we are given the message that God does not need us to lie about how we feel or offer false praise or false comfort. God is with us in the devastation and is big enough to handle our raw honesty. We see that God deeply desires a more honest relationship with us not a relationship built on lies and platitudes. This theme urges us towards a theology of honesty and away from a theology of comfort.

The second theme is that of hope – real and stubborn hope, that is unrelenting, persistent, gritty and raw. This is hope that refuses to let suffering have the last word, hope that knows that God sees the suffering of the marginalised and weak and God sees each of us no matter how small we might feel. God sees the destruction and promises that it is not the end. This hope allows us to praise God even during despair.

The third and final theme goes hand in hand with stubborn hope. It is that of restoration. I have struggled to come up with an ‘H’ word for this but perhaps the closest is that of *‘Heilsgeschichte’*. It is a German theological term encompassing God’s restorative salvation of the world. Hope does not die alone in the dark, rather it gives birth to restoration through God. This is the ultimate message of good news. Not only does God see our suffering but God desires an honest relationship with us that includes honesty about suffering. God does not punish the sinful with suffering and God offers restoration. Furthermore, the restoration is not merely a cheap spiritual promise. Rather, restoration is fuller and bigger than this. It encompasses all the human experience – economic, physical, emotional, social, spiritual. God does not merely mend the old, but God gives something better and we do not need others to interceded on our behalf for us to get restoration.

Living the Word

Honesty, Hope and *Heilsgeschichte* are the good news, but there is also a challenge. Often, we can be tempted to read scripture from the point of view of the victim – we see ourselves as the suffering and we hear the good news with joy. However, we also need to ask ourselves if we truly are the most marginalised and suffering. Are there others in more despair than us or more silenced than us? It is to these people that we need to look. The challenge is to ask who we are excluding from the restoration of God. Who have we neglected to include. Who do we tell the story of salvation but reduce it to only a cheap imitation? Is there a way that we can be greater participants in God’s restoration? We are called to work with God to better the lives of others; we are invited to follow Jesus’ call to serve others, include others and thereby help to bring about God’s restoration for all.

Liturgical Suggestions

Hymns and Songs

“Siyahamba” (We are marching in the light of God)
“Hallelujah! We Sing Your Praises” (Haleluya! Pelo tsa rona)

Sing in both English and seSotho, sing with joy and jubilation

“God of Grace and God of Glory” Harry E. Fosdick, 1930.
Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love Tom Colvin 1963
Nkosi Sikelel’iAfika

Sung in its original form as a prayer of intercession for Africa’s suffering people

Closing Exhortation

Go now – as those who have tasted and seen.

Go as the ones who have been told: take heart, get up, he is calling you.

Go with the knowledge that you have a high priest who never ceases to intercede,

who saves you to the uttermost,

who stops when you cry.

And as you go – cry louder when the crowd tells you to be silent,

walk with those who cannot march,

sow your seed even through tears,

and follow him on the way.

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An Introduction to Reformation Sunday

24th Sunday after Pentecost – 31 October 2027

James Harris

As much as historians and theologians of the Protestant Reformation attribute its beginnings to Martin Luther when he posted his 95 theses on Wittenberg's Cathedral door on October 31st 1517, they also acknowledge the huge number of antecedents going back at least two centuries. Thus, Luther's attempt to have an academic discussion on a number of issues became the spark which led to the tumultuous upheaval and fire-force of faith that had been rumbling in Europe's belly already for generations.

Put simply, concerns over many of the Church's doctrines and practices (here the Roman Catholic Church, since it had hegemony) had been raised often but due to the totalitarian power and its ruthless use of such, any question or challenge was subjugated, if not annihilated, speedily. Excommunication, imprisonment, torture, burnings at the stake, to name a few, were all too common methods which put an end to objections or dissent.

However, the critical concern here is to give some justification for celebrating the Reformation. Surely, some may say, the abuses and false doctrines have been dealt with, both by the movement of history and the restructuring and real changes within the Roman Catholic Church. This is a consequence of the Council known as Vatican II, and to some degree by the developments in the Ecumenical Movement. If truth be told, most observers would claim that any result of rapprochement or renewed commonality, is a mixed bag. Again, we need to acknowledge that other observers are unconvinced that Rome has changed significantly or even meaningfully, and that the Ecumenical Movement is so reductionist as to be unhelpful.

There are a number of Essential Reformation Markers: **The first** marker is that it was a "protesting" movement. By this we note that the intention was never to break from the Church, but rather simply to protest, to have such acknowledged, and to return to a simpler, more honest, more Biblical approach to faith, morals, practice, and authority. Sadly, the Protestant Movement began to fragment quickly over disagreements over some critical points, for instance: a definition of Church, the nature of Holy Communion, the locus of Authority, as well as other key doctrinal and practical matters. Some of these ideas continue to be debated 500 years later, without necessarily being the locus of protest.

The second essential marker which emanates from the 16th century Reformation, and which remains relevant for today, is the doctrine of Scripture. I suggest that it be placed at this point because, even though Jesus is the "living Word", it is out of the "written Word" that our ideas about Jesus, God, and all other ultimate interests, stem from Scripture. For Luther, Calvin, and the other leaders of the Reformation, Scripture was not simply "found or contained" in the Bible, Scripture is the Bible. And of course, this is in part a reaction to the mediaeval construct whereby Scripture was joined authoritatively to Tradition, and the Magisterium. For

Luther *et al*, authority rested solely in Scripture, for this set of documents were given from God.

Third, must obviously be understanding Christ as redeemer, reconciler, and procurer of a definitive atonement, and sole mediator between God and humanity. Paul is emphatic that by no other name is salvation found. Thus, Jesus cannot be viewed as one of any number of "ways" to God or forgiveness or reconciliation. Associated with our Lord's unique saving and reconciling mission is the process by which humanity experiences Jesus' objective in reconciliation: it is through or by "faith". This entails a person trusting solely and explicitly in the merit of Christ alone by which the Father accepts the believing and repentant sinner. The argument is then expressed as "being justified" before God through glad and obedient faith. One other characteristic feature necessary in this set of "solos", is "grace". This emphasises that justification or salvation or reconciliation is an act or series of acts given by God's sole prerogative and unmerited favour, unearned and undeserved by the recipient. The logical connection between Christ, faith, and grace is the assumed activity of God's Holy Spirit regenerating – making alive, a person and thus enabling such a person to recognise her or his alienation from God, sense the need for Christ as the only effective saviour and reconciler, then to wholeheartedly repent and believe (exercise faith or trust) in Jesus. The outcome of any genuine work of the Spirit of God is obedience, humility, prayer, and meaningful changes in character which reflect the nature of our Lord himself. These significant moral changes, the exercise of gifts of the Spirit, any evidence of God's grace and love and renewed humanity, all bring honour or glory to God, for such highlights the fact that salvation in all its diversity comes from God for God's own purposes.

Other important areas or doctrines which emerged from Reformational thinking, and for which we should be thankful, that I think should be considered in our current era are, the Nature of God, the concept of a Christian Worldview, and a renewed vision of the Church. Again, briefly, who or what is God? Is God the unmoved mover, the basis of being, the uncaused first cause, the necessary ground of existence, the ultimate reality, or some such philosophical definition? The Reformation brought the Church, the Sciences, and the Humanities back to the concept of a personal God. Not merely a creator in the deist or even theist pattern, but an engaged, communicative, relational God with distinct personality, immanent, yet remaining utterly transcendent. This through a careful study of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible or Torah. And then through the equally careful study of the New Testament realising that Jesus is very God of very God, incarnate. The exact replica or image of the true and living God, one might even say the absolute manifestation of this mysterious being. The point is that over against a more philosophical approach to this doctrine (certainly not wrong in and of itself), the Reformers found a greater significance

and meaning when recognising God as immanent person desirous of, able to communicate through word and action.

That this God is Creator and Sustainer of all, revealing meaning and purpose through providential and sovereign demonstration of power indicates that not only creation but history at both macro- and micro- levels must be considered. A biblical worldview simply means that everything falls within the ambit of God's purposes and thus everything is answerable to God. Whilst speaking of faith-based mathematics or a particular language or arguing for some kind of faith-biased science often becomes farcical, there is value in maintaining that the study of these and all other disciplines with a consciousness of their Divine origin and alert to the Divine Presence during such study, enhances and deepens any reflection.

Finally, for the purposes of this essay, I think the Reformation enables us to see a very different concept of the Church to that of Medieval, and in some ways the contemporary, Roman Catholic Church. Luther baulked against practices like indulgences, a works righteousness, totalitarian authority vested in popes, cardinals, bishops, and even priests, plus so much more. He wanted a simpler more honest church centred on the Word, the Sacraments, and the faithful care and cure of souls. For some he didn't go far enough, for others too far – and that is probably true for all reformers.

The leaders of the Reformation were people of their own time, culture, and history. But they started a movement which changed the world and continues to impact our own day. As we celebrate the Reformation today (October 31st) let us do so with thankfulness and pledge ourselves to continue reforming the church in whatsoever areas are unaligned with Scripture, reason, and history, bringing glory to God and our Saviour in all things.

Word and Life for 24th Sunday after Pentecost – 31 October 2027

Newton Brandt

Texts

Ruth 1:1–18 and Psalm 146
Deuteronomy 6:1–9 and Psalm 119:1–8
Hebrews 9:11–14
Mark 12:28–34

Introduction

This Sunday in Protestant circles is called Reformation Sunday, commemorating Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenburg. This act ushered in a quest back to the Bible as the source for theological thought.

Our texts reveal that change brings opportunities but can be daunting. New opportunities need to be grabbed with both hands. This is easier said than done, however Biblical history and experience taught us that (unwanted) change can be the threshold to a new dimension of growth. Entering the Promised Land was a new opportunity and so Christ ushering in his kingdom and extending it to a scribe of the Law.

Hearing the Word

Ruth 1:1–18

Our pericope is the tragic introductory part of a time-line story of Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. We find this family in dire straits when their home country could no longer provide for their needs, and they leave their country to find relief from the famine in Moab. Here, Naomi loses her husband, and her sons marry two local Moabite girls. It is possible that the sons were physically challenged due to their names – Mahlon (meaning “sickness”) and Kilion (meaning “disappearance”). Things went from bad to worse when Naomi lost her sons too. Then she hears that the Lord had brought relief from the famine in Judah, and Naomi decided to return home.

Initially her daughters-in-law accompanied her, but then it dawned upon Naomi how futile this step was for them. They would not find husbands. She had given up on her God and advise her daughters to return to *their* gods as there was still a possibility of a homelife for themselves. Orpah turned back, but Ruth with an unwavering commitment towards her mother-in-law, remained adamant not to leave. Ruth, meaning ‘friendship’, married into this Israelite family for life.

Determined to remain steadfastly loyal to Naomi, she was willing to step out of the circle of her security to a new country, new religion, new family, new traditions. In complete surrender she invoked the name of Naomi’s God (whom she used three times earlier) if she breaks her pledge.

Psalm 146

The psalm opens with no (customary) introductory remark to hint to the author or circumstances of composition, but ‘booms onto the stage’ with a *Hallelu Yah* at the beginning (and the end).

The psalm can be divided in three sections viz. vv.1–2, 3–4, 5–10.

In vv.1–2, the Psalmist addresses himself to wholeheartedly extoll the Lord and to keep that up while his life force is in him.

In vv.3–4, the psalmist sounds a warning not to trust in mere mortals even nobility.

In contrast, vv.5–10, advocates that real help and hope can be found in the God of Jacob, the Creator and controller of the universe.

The Psalmist makes it implicit that the Lord cares for the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, blind and the dejected bringing healing and transformation in their lives. Furthermore, his protection is extended to the aliens, fatherless and widows who can depend on his intervention in their lives. As the Supreme Judge this will come to pass and the wicked will get their just punishment by being ruined. In contrast to the princes (v3), the Lord’s reign is eternal and must be praised.

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

The Israelites are on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses seeks to teach them the commandments, statutes and judgements that they must observe in the new country (cf. Deut.5:28).

This is a call for allegiance to their God, their powerful Liberator and Sustainer. This commitment entails God to be the focal point of their desires and is much more than mere random and external acts of loyalty and obedience. Their primary and constant devotion required *love* for God, an intimate relationship using all your faculties (heart, soul and might) by which they are to get emotionally attached to their God. The *heart* must be undivided to *one* deity and in love, a complete surrender to the will of God is called for. The *soul* should at the core of our being, bring the wishes, desires and inclinations submissive to God. Hereto, all the *might* is to be harnessed with the full concentration of human feeling and power.

Based on this calling, they are called to a conscientious lifestyle keeping the instructions in their heart, that is perceived as a tablet where the divine words are to be inscribed. Furthermore, besides using auditory forms to impress God’s will on their hearts, they need visualize stimulation by displaying objects. On their bodies they need reminders (*tephillin*) and each household will need to

display a *mezuzah* on the door post. Likewise, the gates need to display signs of their devotion to their God. The reward for all these efforts will be fulfilled lives, prosperity and prolonged lives.

Psalms 119:1–8

We encounter from the Psalmist an extraordinary declaration of the joy for the *Torah* and its observance which brings direction for a blessed life.

We are dealing (with an acrostic psalm) with the first of the 22 stanzas based on the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza comprises eight verses. The eight verses will each start with same letter (in our pericope Aleph).

Six keywords are used to subsections in the moral law revealing to humans our knowledge of God (cf. Psalm 19 where two sources are distinguished). The *law* refers to instruction/direction. *Testimony* is a regulation that demonstrates to the will of God. *Precepts* are particularized rules that is our duty to obey. *Ordinances* or judgments are regulations of interaction with fellow human beings.

The Psalmist is in awe of the direction deriving from the *Torah* and strives for blameless living. He implores God to help him not to stray from the *Torah*, as that can result in him being dishonoured and (his dread) to be forsaken by God.

Hebrews 9:11–14

The pre-eminence of faith in Christ over against that of the Jewish faith is expounded here. Christ was superior to the angels, Moses, and the mortal High Priests of the Old Testament.

For our context we need to take Hebrews 8:1 – 10:18 into consideration where the new covenant, that was established by Christ, is expounded. In the preceding portion the first covenant, with its regulations for worship and the (earthly) place of worship, is described in the epistle. Attention is given to the annual High Priestly role on the Day of Atonement.

The author stresses that the old covenant was mere external regulations (dead works) and could not satisfy the conscience of the worshipper on a permanent basis. That was until the time of the Restoration brought about by Christ.

The writer then unpacks the mystery (in our text) about what really happened on Calvary and why? This is the greatness of the Son of God (who became human on our behalf), fulfilling all the prophecies with His supreme personal sacrifice. Christ became the High Priest of a superior covenant, offering his life blood in the perfect (celestial) Holy of Holies.

Mark 12:28–34

Our text links up with Jesus in his closing ministry, his last week in Jerusalem. Our pericope captures one of Jesus' most profound teachings emanating from a discussion with a teacher of the Law. To understand the context, Mark 12 started with a parable from Jesus about a vineyard leased to wicked tenants. This agitated the religious leaders who

left to plot and arrest Him (Mk.12:12). The next sections are two attempts by firstly the Pharisees (with Herodians) to trap Jesus, followed by the Sadducees when the first group failed. Our text is a third attempt (to trap him cf. Matt.22:35, Luke 10:25) using a question from a scribe about which commandment is the greatest? Jewish tradition came up with 613 laws, and some religious leaders tried to further distinguish between major and minor laws. Direction was crucial, though controversial.

Without hesitation Jesus recited the *Shema* from Deut.6:4–5 and added Lev.19:18 completing the divine and human relationships important to God. Thus, Jesus circumvents the traditions that underpin the question and affirms that *love* for God and love for your neighbour are of the essence to fulfil all of the Law and Prophets (cf. Matt.22:40). The scribe lauded Jesus' knowledge of the *Torah* Him and affirmed the answer. He then interpreted the answer stating that the implementation of the two commandments of sole devotion and wholeheartedness combined by a genuine love for the neighbour, supersedes all external acts of sacrifice. Jesus in return praised the scribe for his insight and deemed him fit for the kingdom of God (should he believe in God).

Mark's version of the *Shema* portrays Jesus as adding an emphasis – *to love God with all your mind*, to the version in Deuteronomy, implying a need for conscientious living and genuine action. And this is what the scribe latches on in his praise of Jesus, replacing the segment, *with all your soul*, with *all your mind* that must be active in their devotion to prevents them from going through the mere outward display of piety when rendering the repetitive offerings in the temple.

Interpreting the Word

We have two sets of supporting texts. It is up to the preacher to make the choice. Both sets are about opportunities to move into a new country to sustain (and enhance life).

From the book of Ruth, it sounds unbelievable that there could be a famine in the Promised land that was supposed to be flowing with milk and honey. The reason for the famine was however disobedience and neglect of living according to the divine directions of the *Torah*. We read that during the periods of the Judges, a very dark period in the lives of the Israelites, they had no king and *everyone did as he saw fit* (Judges 21:25).

Trying to escape the famine Naomi experienced what it means to be an alien and a *female* alien in Moab. Later becoming a widow, life became very frightening and intimidating and Naomi was bitter from weariness and dejection. She trusted in the three men in her life but was utterly disappointed. Then Naomi decided to go back to her home country. This window of opportunity at least had the hope and relief to be with familiar kin. For Ruth, her daughter-in-law, Naomi's opportunity was a daunting task and yet she put her trust in the *God* of Naomi.

Psalms 146, the companion text, has a message (warning) that God alone is an unfailing source of help to everyone. No-one is to trust in mortals no matter how influential, as they are not in control of their life force and their plans can come to

nought. The Creator God however, sustains and intervenes for all (and especially those in dire straits). No-one is beyond the scope of God's compassionate reign. God watches over the *alien*, the fatherless and the *widows*.

As Creator nothing can frustrate the reign of God through all generations. Even in the worst of times, God is at work in His world. With God there is purpose and meaning in life despite the apparent and visible futility. It is necessary to contrast Naomi's *emptiness* with her *fullness* in the concluding chapter of Ruth, being able to experience a bumper harvest, community, fertility (in Ruth) and hopefulness for the future. It shows the watchful care of God 's providence over those who fear and trust God.

The second set is aligned with the Gospel text. In *Deuteronomy*, permission to entry into the Promised Land is a marvellous new opportunity and Moses is commanded to talk about the commandments, statutes and judgements, ground rules and attitudes to be considered for the new land. Linked with the Aleph section of Psalm 119, we see the same key words at play. In *Deuteronomy*, the moral laws are crucial for failure and success and need to be considered continuously. The Psalmist is in awe of the Torah as it invokes the fear of the Lord leading to obedience that will bring blessings and longevity. To the Psalmist, the Torah is the way of life that he will never forsake.

In the *Gospel of Mark*, Jesus is a new opportunity and his kingdom is being extended to a scribe (not far from his kingdom). In the text, occurring centuries later since Sinai, Jesus affirms the age-old instructions to attain the highest divine and human relationships and thus to a fulfilled life. Jesus is clear that relationships build on love will withstand the test of time.

In the *Epistle to the Hebrews* the writer appeals to his audience not forsake the golden opportunity Jesus created for all humankind. Christ partook in the yearly *Yom Kippur* sacrifice on Calvary with his own blood, ushered in a new order through his blood atonement for all.

Preaching the Word

Jesus is emphatic: There is only one God. Sole devotion and wholeheartedness are enjoined. How do we preach this message amidst all the contra-teachings and modern-day emphases on respect (for all religions) and inclusivity? How is it possible to keep the faith and not give offence?

Jesus acknowledged that the scribe showed spiritual discernment. He had understanding that mere external sacrifices and display of work righteousness were insufficient, even futile. How can we help and give direction to our members in this regard?

The highest duty towards God is to *love* God with all our mental, cognitive and emotional faculties. It does not help if we give our heart to the Lord, but our ideas in our heads remain the same. Love has a claim on our whole life and being and need to be extended to our neighbour as true devotion.

God is love (1 Jn 4:8,16). We are created in the image of God. Why is it so difficult to answer and imitate this *agape* love in the light of the Passion of Calvary? How do we help our hearers to bestow gratitude, complete surrender and lifelong commitment to Christ? How to open/gain access to our inner resources, from our inner reservoirs, to last (and live) a lifetime in honour of God?

Living the Word

The texts for today have exposed us to a strong attachment resulting in loyalty till death in the example of Ruth. There was twice the call to the most supreme duty, viz. to love God and our neighbour. Those who have taken up the call (Psalmist and writer of Hebrews) describes a relationship beyond any comparison and urge other not to relinquish it. Jesus is ushering in a new kingdom where love is the core and is inviting us to join in. New opportunities from the hand of God, even to the most vulnerable and helpless of souls, are extended. Like Ruth (taking on a completely new identity in Judah), we have inner and divine resources to do the same.

Liturgical Suggestions

Benediction

The Lord bless you with loyalty and allegiance like Ruth,

The Lord bless you to be a mediator (of a new dawn) like Moses,

The Lord bless you with a love for his Word like the Psalmist,

The Lord bless you with an active love for God and your neighbours,

The Lord bless you with perseverance like Jesus, the Christ,

and receive you in his kingdom with exceeding joy. Amen.

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Liturgy for All Saints Day – 1 November 2027

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1–9 OR Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1–6
John 11:32–4

Liturgy

Gathering

- **Processional Hymn:** “Come In, Come In and Sit Down” (VU #395)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csnt7CAnMVQ>



- *We welcome the Word and the Light of Christ into our midst.*

All responses are in **bold print**.

Call to Worship (please stand, if able)

In the beginning, God called the world into being, saying:
“Let there be light!”

In the fullness of time, Jesus came from God to us, saying:
“I am the Light of the world.”

In our everyday life, we see the work of the saints ...
The ones in whom God’s light shines.

So let us give thanks for the saints this day;
And let us worship God.

We gather today to remember our call:

To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

We bring with us the events of the week in the world and in our lives.

Trying to know how to be just and loving and humble in the midst of it all.

We gather here, and see those who are doing justice, who are kind beyond measure,

who set the example for humility.

With gratitude for living saints, with thankfulness for the purpose of faith, we enter into worship God.

Opening Hymn

“Praise to God, Immortal Praise” (VU #521)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWgX3oSkWFA>



Responsive Psalm – Number 24

‘Entrance into the Temple’ A Psalm of David

¹ The earth is the SOVEREIGN GOD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,

² **for God has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.**

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the SOVEREIGN GOD? And who shall stand in God’s holy place?

⁴ **Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully.**

⁵ They will receive blessing from the SOVEREIGN GOD and vindication from the God of their salvation.

⁶ **Such is the company of those who seek God, who seek the face of the God of Jacob, Leah and Rachel.**

⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the Ruler of glory may come in!

⁸ **Who is the Ruler of glory? The SOVEREIGN GOD, strong and mighty in battle.**

⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the Ruler of glory may come in!

¹⁰ **Who is this Ruler of glory? The SOVEREIGN God of hosts is the Ruler of glory.**

Prayer of Acknowledgment, Adoration, Praise and Confession (quiet reflection)

Eternal God, hope of all who trust in you, in Christ you are made known to us and today, especially, we are aware of your power and might. You are the creator of the heavens and the earth in all their magnificence. It is so easy for us to sing your praises when we look to the hills, the lakes, the rivers and the oceans. You, our God, are the One who makes life beautiful and we wish to express our deep gratitude today. When we focus on your holiness we are instantly made aware of the things which separate us from you and from one another. We bring to mind those things in our own lives ... (*silence*) and we ask that you forgive us, once again, and restore us to a right relationship with you, O God. We revel in the thought that we may one day join that great crowd of saints who forever sing praises to your holy name, through Christ, the resurrection and the life. **Amen**

- *If it is customary to sing or say the Prayer Jesus taught the Disciples – insert it here.*

Absolution and Commissioning

We are forgiven people and have been equipped for sainthood.

We are ready to respond.

We have been called to minister to our broken world.

We are ready to respond.

Listening

- **Story Time:** *All the children are invited to come forward*
- **Children's Hymn:** "Jesus Loves Me" (VU #365)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqghCEtITFo>



- **Prayer for the Children**
- *Special Music (Choir or Musician)*

Prayer of Illumination

God of every generation, as we remember the saints who have gone before us, open our hearts to hear your Word to us this day with faith and gratitude. May the witness of those who have loved and served you inspire us to do the same. Through your Spirit, speak to us of hope beyond the grave, of courage in the present moment and of your faithfulness that endures forever. Illumine your truth in us today, that we may walk as your saints in the world. Amen

Scripture Readings

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1–9 *The Destiny of the Righteous* or
Isaiah 25:6–9

Revelation 21:1–6 *The New Heaven and the New Earth*

Sermonic Hymn: "Sing With All the Saints in Glory"

https://youtu.be/FML_usf8NR0



Gospel Reading: *John 11:32–4*

Prayer of Preparation

"Now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable unto you – our Rock and our Redeemer." Amen

Sermon

Responding

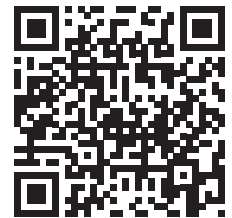
Special Announcements

Offering Invitation: We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses today. In their presence, we are invited to bring our offerings in faith, trusting that God will use these portions of our resources to bring healing, hope and love into our world.

Offertory Hymn

"What Can I Do?" (MV #190)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwO9pDphRZs>



Prayer of Thanksgiving: As so many have done before us, we make our offerings now. As so many have prayed before us, we ask your blessings upon it. As so many have dreamed before us, we pray that our gifts will touch many lives, in Christ's name we pray. **Amen**

Prayers of the People

Gracious and benevolent God, we thank you for the example of the saints – both past and present. We now take seriously our responsibility to pray for others. We ask you to hear our prayers and help us to be part of your response. We pray for the leaders of our world, the leaders of our country and the leaders of our community of faith. We pray that you would raise up people of integrity and compassion – people who will govern and lead wisely. We also pray for those in our circles who need you most today. We pray for the discouraged, the lonely, the frail in body and the sick in spirit. We pray for both the young and the old – may they discover their full potential in you, O God. We bless you for those who exercise their skills and develop their talents in order to serve our communities better. We pray especially for all those in medical professions who care for the sick and disheartened. We pray for countries in our world where there is war, famine, drought and disease. We pray especially for children today and for those who play a part in their education and upbringing. Lastly, with gratitude, we pray for our own personal needs ... (*silence*). Help us to continue to look to you for guidance. We join with the saints of old in worshipping you with joy. Please help us to follow in their footsteps, and especially in yours, Christ Jesus. Encourage us to continue to seek your will in all things, as the saints

did. Please help us to devote ourselves, and all that we do, to your glory and to the service of our neighbours. Through Christ, we pray. Amen

Invitation to the Table

As we come to this table, we remember that this is not our table; nor is it the table of the local church. This is the table of Jesus Christ, the family feast of the whole people of God. All who seek to be nourished and sustained in the journey of faith and who long to live in peace and justice with their neighbour, are welcome here. Let us eat and drink together for our strengthening and the for the sake of the world.

Communion Prayer

God be with you!
Lift up your hearts.
Let us give thanks to God.

And also with you!
We lift them up to God.
We give God our thanks
and praise!

Holy God of wind and fire, your Spirit renews the face of the earth and warms the hearts of your people. We give you thanks for the gifts of courage and hope, vision and compassion, which your Spirit inspires in this and every age. Throughout all of history you have carved paths for your people through the wilderness of their fear and uncertainty and brought them safely to the far shores of uncharted seas and so we join with all creation to give you praise:

Holy, holy, holy God, power of life and love!
Heaven and earth are full of your glory!
Hosanna through the ages!
Blessed is the One who comes to bring your justice
to earth!

Let us remember together that vision of God's reign Jesus practiced at table: Jesus shared food with followers and friends,

with saints and sinners,
with crowds of thousands on the hillside,
and a few friends in an upper room.

On the night before Jesus died, he had supper with his companions.

He took a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, saying:

"Take, eat. Whenever you do this, remember me."

Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God, and passed it among them, saying:

"Drink from this, all of you. Each time you do this,
remember me."

Through this bread and this cup, Jesus lives within us.

In word and deed, Jesus lives among us.

Eternal God, we unite in this covenant of faith, as we break bread and share the cup, giving thanks for your love, shown to us in Jesus.

We spread your table with these gifts of the earth
and of our labour.

We present to you our very lives, committed to
your service on behalf of all people.

This we remember, this we believe:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come in
glory.

By these signs of bread and wine, we recognise the longings of all our hearts for a time when all humanity will be one family – when justice and compassion will be the way we live according to the One we seek. Holy Spirit, hover over our lives, uniting us in these signs and strengthening us to live the resurrected life of Christ in the world. **Amen!**

Presentation of Gifts

Lift and break the bread, saying: In the breaking of this bread, we remember all who this day will have no bread, all who are without shelter, all burdened by loneliness and fear.

We pray for the day when all people will find on
this earth a generous home.

In the brokenness of this bread, we remember the brokenness within ourselves.

We pray for the day when each one of us shall
enter fully into the wholeness of Jesus Christ.

Lift the cup, saying: In the sharing of this cup, we are united with Christ.

We pray for the day when all people will truly
experience unity with Christ.

Come, for all is now ready.

[Distribution of elements]

Prayer after Communion

Eternal and gracious One, though we live in a world of need,

here we have tasted your goodness and hungered
for a more just world.

Though afflicted by brokenness and division,

Here we have heard your call to be a people of
healing community.

Though daily we touch our limits,

Here we have received the fullness of your grace.

Send us forth, O God,

In faith, in hope, and in love. Amen!

Going Forth

Closing Hymn

“Come Touch Our Hearts” (MV #12)

<https://youtu.be/UDMc2I3hCcU>



Blessing

We have been called to fellowship.

We are ready to respond.

May we go now, in the spirit of Christ.

May we go wherever God calls us. Amen

- “Sing Amen” (VU #431)
-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9i-99QVvMGQ>



We follow the Word and the Light of Christ into the world

- Postlude

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Word and Life for All Saints Day – 1 November 2027

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1–9 (An Apocryphal Book) OR

Isaiah 25:6–9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1–6

John 11:32–4

Introduction

This Sunday gives the preacher an opportunity to pay tribute to those who have gone before! During the feast of All Saints, the church is encouraged to look back to the founders of the local community of faith and to recall with appreciation their faith and commitment. Both past and present saints' lives influence believers and on this day, there is as much reason for celebration as there is for reflection. This feast day originally honoured those who were considered particularly 'holy' such as biblical heroic figures and martyrs, who had given their lives nonviolently, in witness to their faith. However, it is now acceptable for the feast to honour not only those who had lived exemplary lives, but *all* who have been baptised into Christ's death and resurrection. All Saints resonates with the conviction that in Christ every saint is a sinner and every sinner a saint! Use this opportunity to emphasise that it is God's grace, quite apart from their works, that makes people saints. We find our rest only in the mercy of God.

Hearing the Word

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1–9

This passage offers a profound theological defense of the virtuous who die, pledging that their pain is not an annihilation but a kind of refinement and an ultimate peace in God's hands. This book was written at a time of probable persecution, and this apocryphal text delivers a theological, rational and authentic response to the problem of pain, mainly for those who are faithful to God's Law. This passage dynamically contrasts the insight of the "foolish" (who see death as an annihilation) with the spiritual reality of the "faithful" (who see it as a transition to divine favour). The most appropriate connection to 'All Saints' is that the author stresses the relevance of honouring those who have departed. The focus is shifted from the sorrow of loss to the victory of being found "worthy" by God. The passage concludes with a promise that God's grace and mercy are with God's chosen ones, who are called to trust in their Sovereign God.

Isaiah 25:6–9

This text, contained in the so-called 'Isaiah apocalypse' (Isaiah 24–27 – see *Texts for Preaching*), is exceptional in its joy. This text does go beyond in that it makes no distinction between those in Israel (who have been faithful to God) and all of humankind. *All* people (v.8) will share in

God's banquet. This would be a time in God's realm when all sorrow and death would be overruled. Mount Zion, the revered site of Solomon's Temple, became the significant place where encounters between God and human beings took place. This passage affirms the hopes of the people and the role of Mount Zion in the coming reign of God. It is interesting to note that all three phrases, which describe the delicious food, are repeated. The only intimation of judgment in the passage appears in v7, where it is avowed that the cover over "all peoples/all nations" will be destroyed by God. This seems to point to a form of mourning, which is ended. How can it be that all people would eventually be reclaimed by a just and compassionate God? Brueggemann offers a reminder that the text does not answer this question. In fact, the author does not even refer to it. This might infer that the prophet's thought is the realisation that the God who made creation 'good' in the first place has the power and desire to again restore it to goodness in the end (see *Texts for Preaching*).

Psalm 24

A priest probably announced the processional ascent to the Temple on Mount Zion with this doxology – which starts with a solemn declaration (vs.1–2). It is divided into three parts.

Firstly, into a "liturgy of entrance" that seems to include the whole congregation of Israel because God is rich in blessing.

Secondly, the question is in fact raised as to who should be eligible to share in the liturgical procession up and into the Temple. "One cannot enter into the worship of the Creator if one has violated the rules of creation" (see *Texts for Preaching*). The response points out that those whose hearts and hands are pure are allowed as well as those who do not engage in falsehood or deceit.

Thirdly, history is acknowledged and Brueggemann suggests that this liturgy would probably be reenacted long after the reign of David – signifying the periodic reentry of God into the Temple.

This psalm reaffirms that the world belongs to God – in its entirety. All of life belongs to God – only God can permit, authorise and evoke life. Quite simply, only those who live in ways that enhance the fragile ordering of creation are admitted to the procession and enter the Temple.

The One who enters first, who in fact leads the procession, is not the priest or the people, but God. The Ark of the Covenant, which would be carried and taken in first, signifies that the "Ruler of Glory" enters the Temple first. Brueggemann further suggests that this is the God "who has defeated the powers of chaos and death, who has created a safe place in which the world may live ... It is no wonder that the people entered the Temple with such exuberance" (see *Texts for Preaching*).

Revelation 21:1–6

Many preachers tend to avoid the book, and when preachers do venture into it, they would interpret each line with reference to some or other latter-day event or apocalyptic idea. I appreciated the guidance in reading Revelation provided by Walter Brueggemann. The vision in chapter 21 eventually appears and it is almost exciting because, finally, the language seems more familiar. *The New Jerusalem* – God abiding with God’s people and the eventual end of death and grief. Although one now seems comfortable with the language and the promises in the passage even sound familiar, this *new creation* is celestial and its context quite extraordinary.

Other New Testament writers indicated an ‘end of heaven and earth’ (see Matt. 5:18; 2 Peter 3:10–13). In Revelation 20:11 the presence of One on “a great white throne” suggests that “the earth and the heaven fled from God’s presence, and no place was found for them.” An image of heaven and earth – hiding from God’s presence – dramatically expresses both the marked power of God and the helpless state to which other “powers” have been reduced (see *Texts for Preaching*). The significance of this situation warrants its repetition in the text for today. The old heaven and earth have simply “passed away” and “the sea was no more”! This signifies the triumph of God over chaos. As in ancient literature and in the New Testament also, the sea represents chaos over which human beings have no control.

After the demise of “the first heaven and the first earth” and even of chaos itself, God makes “all things new.” Using the language of Isaiah (65:17; 66:22), the author introduces God’s action of renewal, which includes three aspects: location (the New Jerusalem), the presence of God and the demise of death itself (see *Texts for Preaching*).

The New Jerusalem is a recurring theme (see chapter 3:12) and here a picture is painted of its magnificence. The prophet Ezekiel (chapter 48:30–35) also referred to this theme – giving quite specific measurements – even though these seem to be merely symbolic. Both Ezekiel’s vision and this Revelation vision are symbolic – expressing the final hope which believers have that God will eventually live amongst them. One promise which believers look forward to God fulfilling when God makes a “home” with humankind, is the promise that God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more”. This section (v3) ends with repeating verse 1. The writer affirms that some of the “first things” that are to vanish are “mourning and crying and pain”. Paul, too, had an apocalyptic vision (recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:54–57), which referred to the death of death itself. The passage in Revelation concludes with words that reiterate the central thrust of all of Revelation: God stands at the beginning and at the end, not simply of human lives, but of her/history, of creation itself (21:6a). As creator of that life, God holds all of it responsible and will demand an accounting (vs. 6b–8). This vision offers hope in a broken world and one of the key objectives of this puzzling text is to offer comfort and strength to those in despair and need.

John 11:32–44

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a long reading. For this author it was important not to leave anything out. John points out that even though Jesus didn’t respond immediately to the sisters’ message, Jesus’ love for these three people at Bethany was very evident. This story is vitally important so that people may believe that God is being glorified through Jesus’ ministry. This is the event that initiates the plot to kill Jesus (11:55–57; 12:9–11). Moreover, this story brings to a culmination one of the chief themes of the Gospel – that of Jesus being the One who gives life.

Examining this passage in the context of the bigger picture, three aspects of the narrative are most important! *One*, the reality of death is devastating! The story highlights the sisters’ grief. (v39). John informs his readers that Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (vs.33, 38), and that once he saw the tomb of Lazarus, he too “began to weep” (v.35). How do people deal with an emotional Jesus? Jesus is deeply disturbed by Lazarus’ death. We believe this is something he finally overcomes only through his own death (see *Texts for Preaching*).

Two, the story is about Jesus being the giver of resurrection and new life. Even though most people in the congregation would know about this incident, the retelling of the story is usually dramatic and startling. Like Martha, they too, would have nothing to compare this with. Jesus’ prayer, his loud voice and the appearance of the ‘dead’ Lazarus – still wrapped in grave clothes – is almost too much to take in. The mixture of fear, shock and overwhelming gratitude seems strange, at least. Then the instruction: “*Unbind him, and let him go*” (v.44) concludes this baffling experience. What Jesus did do was to show that resurrection is a kind of deliverance from bondage.

Three, this story emphasises that this ‘miraculous’ event revealed the glory of God (vs.4, 40). Much more happened here than the mere resuscitation of a corpse. Lazarus would in fact die sometime later. As always, preachers are reminded that for John, miracles are “signs” that point to something or someone else. In almost every story, where Jesus performed a miraculous sign, it pointed to God’s glory being revealed. In a sense, the raising of Lazarus also predicts Jesus’ own death and resurrection – this was to be called Jesus’ hour of glorification (see 12:27–28; 13:31–32; 17:1–5, 24). Brueggemann reminds the preacher that “As extraordinary as the raising of Lazarus is, we miss the point of the miracle if we miss the ultimate reality to which it points, namely, the revelation of a death-destroying, life-giving God.” (see *Texts for Preaching*)

This story is most certainly the most appropriate text for All Saints’ Day. The Jews who went with Mary to the tomb were faced with a sign – either believe in Jesus or join the conspiracy to crucify him (11:45–46). This miraculous sign then advances a predicament. For the leaders in Jerusalem, it also became the point at which judgements had to be passed. The followers of Jesus were yet again challenged whether to believe in Jesus – and catch a glimpse of the divine glory – or to reject him and be overcome by death (see *Texts for Preaching*).

Interpreting the Word

It is quite strange that a connecting theme when preparing a sermon seems to be 'death'. The gospel passage helps the reader to begin to make sense of all the other passages for the All-Saints feast day! Looking at Solomon's Wisdom and Isaiah's Apocalypse, it becomes clear that these passages of scripture stress God's involvement in people's lives. God wishes to dwell with the people, and the ultimate resurrection and new life expressed in the Revelation passage remind the preacher of the hope of glory, that so many hymn-writers have written about. The psalm for today is liturgical and embraces a liturgy of praise but also holds believers accountable for their actions and attitudes. The gospel story is a beautiful reminder that everything Jesus did has a deeper significance in people's lives. Although human doubt and disbelief were factors in Jesus' ministry, it is acknowledged that Jesus said things in order that the followers of The Way would eventually come to a fuller understanding of who Jesus is and what his ministry was all about.

Preaching the Word

There is a strong connection between the scripture readings, set for the All-Saints feast day. One of the problems the preacher faces when preaching from the wonderful narratives of John's Gospel is that they tend to be long. They stretch to the very limit the congregation's ability to stick with the reading of the lesson. Yet the narratives have an integrity about them that makes it difficult to slice them into smaller pieces for a shorter reading. Often, the pieces, apart from the larger story do not make good sense. Some device, such as a quick retelling of the whole story, is almost always necessary to provide continuity and context. The psalm usually offers the preacher a great opportunity and this Sunday is no different – the only caution would be to keep away from moralizing. Even though Revelation usually seems a daunting option, there is much material here for a great sermon on hope.

Living the Word

On All Saints' Day, it is proper that God's victory over evil and death should also be related to the death of people's loved ones. Often, members of a congregation wish to pay tribute to a loved-one, place flowers in the sanctuary in memory of someone, ask that a special hymn be sung or have a candle lit in their memory. Space could be provided for some of this and the necessary planning by worship leaders would be essential. It is equally important, however, that God's great victory should not be too tightly linked to our sense of grief and loss. We also treasure the Saints of the Church who have suffered and died in their resistance to the power of evil, and who were often destroyed by the power of evil. All the texts for this day, with Psalm 24 among them, celebrate God's cosmic victory over all deathliness. This victory offers us not only comfort in loss but freedom and courage in the face of the continued, blatant threat of evil that takes daily, concrete form in our midst. This psalm offers not only consolation in death but courage for faithful living in the face of deathly powers.

Brueggemann asks a pastoral question: "Does the 'cosmic context' of the vision in Revelation suggest that a pastoral

interpretation of these words, such as is implicit when they are read in memorial services, is inappropriate? Certainly not." (see *Texts for Preaching*) It is widely accepted that much of the Book of Revelation remains a mystery to most believers. These promises are, therefore, precious beyond imagination. "The promise that God's future will include an end to grief is a promise Christians can understand and by which they can be sustained." (see *Texts for Preaching*)

Liturgical Suggestion.

Benediction

God invites us into the future,
where the One who makes all things new
has made a home among us.
We are called and chosen,
together embraced by the God in whom tears,
mourning, crying, pain and even death will be no more.
Remember God's future, for this is our story.
Christ Jesus says: "See, I am coming soon!"
and we respond, "Come, Christ Jesus, Come!" Amen

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Word and Life for 25th Sunday after Pentecost – 7 November 2027

Jenny Sprong

Texts

Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17
Psalm 127 (OR 1 Kings 17:8–16 and Psalm 146)
Hebrews 9:24–28
Mark 12:38–44

Introduction

This week there is a strong emphasis on the role of women in the story of God's relationship with people. This gives the preacher a valuable opportunity to address the scourge of patriarchy and point out how Jesus corrected it at every opportunity he got. The passage from Hebrews affirms the ultimate point of Jesus' incarnation – to usher in God's eternal realm and provide salvation for humanity.

Hearing the Word

Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17

The relationship between the past and present is a significant one. The story of Ruth seems to be an unpretentious "*once upon a time*" kind of tale. Two women in calamitous situations remain loyal to each other and find happiness through the love and generosity of Boaz – a relative of Naomi's deceased spouse. This story may easily lead the preacher to the wrong conclusion, that of believing that Yahweh rewards expressions of loyalty of persons by the return of these same qualities. The true purpose of the story of Ruth becomes clear when Yahweh's surprise is revealed right at the very end of the tale. The conclusion of the story points forward rather than backwards. Boaz and Ruth belong not only to Israel's past, but to the future God has in mind for Israel and, undeniably, for all of humankind (see the reference to Ruth in Matthew 1:5).

Psalm 127

A wisdom poem, full of both negative and positive musings about God's blessings. This psalmist visualises an extended family or city, 'devoted to the purposes of Yahweh and committed to Yahweh's covenantal modes of power' (*Texts for Preaching*). The likelihood of a Yahweh-founded house (or city) is a positive option, which the psalmist contrasts with the idea of a house (or city), which is not directed toward Yahweh. The psalmist views such an initiative as ineffective and doomed to failure. A warning is given about '*rising early and returning late*' (referring to long hours of strenuous work) and is deemed futile. This kind of excessive work is prideful, which deprives people of true joy. Both the constructive as well as destructive statements acknowledge that God gives and/or withholds the gifts, which makes a future possible. The psalmist stresses that God is in control and suggests that all attempts to self-sufficiency are prideful. The emphasis on heirs (particularly sons) stresses that believers must reproduce.

1 Kings 17:8–16 (an alternative passage)

God commands Elijah to go to Zarephath, where a widow (who replaces the ravens) is commanded to feed him. Upon his arrival, Elijah discovers that the widow is an unlikely source of hospitality. In fact, she is so short on food that she is preparing for her own death (1 Kings 17:12). The story of the unnamed widow of Zarephath plays a significant role in the ministry of Elijah. It is as though she sees herself and her son living under a death sentence, which shapes her words and her behaviour. Much like in the story of Hagar (see Genesis 21:16), this widow has resigned herself to the fact that she and her child are close to death. Elijah indicates, however, that the God of Israel focusses on feeding the hungry (1 Kings 17:1–7) *and* on raising the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24). This story proves both those points. Although the widow confronts the prophet with the facts, Elijah still commands her to bring him a little water and a morsel of bread (1 Kings 17:10–11). Elijah is reminded of God's promise. This story is, nonetheless, the painful contradiction between God's word of promise and a death sentence (*Working Preacher*). It is during this contradiction that God acts. Creation is summoned to provide for God's faithful prophet and the widow and her son.

Psalm 146 (an alternative passage)

Psalm 146 is one of the doxological hymns of 'the Old Testament Psalter'. Psalms 146–150 begin and end with the same affirmation: 'Hallelujah'. Yahweh is praised and creation is viewed joyously. Although similar to the others, this psalm has distinctive aspects. It is the most individualistic of the five hymns and somewhat introspective. The ancient world, including Israel-of-old, placed such a premium on community that the individual's life was often submerged to the interests of the larger group. This psalm asserts that individual people are to praise God. Another distinctive feature of this psalm concerns the reasons for which Yahweh is to be praised. The ancient poet celebrates both the true object of human trust and the mood in which that trust is to be extended: "*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob (and Leah and Rachel)!*" This is also the God whose compassion is unending, who is "faithful forever" (another way of phrasing the second line of Psalm 146:6). The central issue, however, is Yahweh's role as the liberator and bringer-of-justice.

Hebrews 9:24–28

This passage draws attention to the differences between Christ's eschatological sacrifice and that of the annual Yom Kippur sacrifice. The result of the Jewish sacrifice (ritual purity) is also contrasted with the purity of conscience. Christ entered heaven to "appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (v.24). Perhaps, because of thinking of God in

terms of “friend” and “companion” Christians often imagine that being in God’s presence would be a comfortable and soothing experience and that the troubles of the world would be left behind (*Texts for Preaching*). By contrast with this benign and wistful portrait of God’s presence, the Bible reflects a very different understanding. Christ enters this most holy of all places for salvific reasons, “on our behalf”. This short phrase might be unnecessary, for the Yom Kippur sacrifice is also carried out on behalf of the people. Unlike the ordinary high priest, however, Christ has no personal need to sacrifice. In addition, this phrase guarantees that the entry into God’s presence does not occur to satisfy some longing of Christ’s, some personal need for self-glory. It occurs solely to meet the needs of the human community. Christ’s sacrifice takes place once and only once because the one sacrifice is adequate to achieve salvation. Christ’s sacrifice deals with human sin in a salvific way. This is clear throughout Hebrews but this passage strengthens that argument. Some might interpret the “once for all” character of Christ’s sacrifice, especially with the emphasis on entering God’s presence, to mean that Christ is no longer present with believers. The promise about Christ coming “a second time” assures believers that God does not remain distant (*Texts for Preaching*).

Mark 12:38–44

A traditional reading lifts this widow up as an ideal figure, whose small gift is set over against the contributions of the rich and is honoured because it comes out of her poverty—“*all she had to live on.*” Jesus’ comments in Mark 12:43–44 are accepted as a recommendation of the widow, making her a character (much like the woman at Bethany who anointed Jesus), to be remembered for her astonishing commitment. Jesus’ comments about the widow are really a lament about her plight and a condemnation of the scribes, who instead of caring for this woman – as the Law directs them to do – are in fact robbing her of her last dime. The widow is contrasted, not with the scribes who benefited from the offerings, but with “many rich people” who may or may not have earned their money unjustly. A single scribe, like the one who asked about the first commandment, might be commended (12:28–34), but the typical behaviour of the scribes, as a group, demands severe criticism. Their pretentious practices—strolling about in long robes, seeking public acclaim, taking the best seats at the synagogues and local banquets, lengthy prayers—mask their ruthless exploitation of poor people, in particular widows, who in a male-dominated society are left without defense (*Texts for Preaching*). The fact that the scribes were recognised religious leaders prods the readers of the text to ask questions about their own style of life, whether or not there is a contradiction between religious display and social practice. Immediately following the condemnation of the scribes, the narrator establishes the powerful contrast between rich people putting large sums of money into the Temple Treasury and the destitute widow, giving her copper coins.

Interpreting the Word

The story of Ruth provides important dramatic and literary developments within this significant Old Testament story. The preacher has the opportunity to place this story within its context and examine the ways in which it refers to both the past and the future of Israel’s relationship with God. The story of the widow of Zarephath continues to draw attention to the benevolent God of Israel. Reflecting on Elijah’s words, it is difficult to fully understand him because even though his eyes see only scarcity, he talks about abundance. The prophet assumes provision when the widow’s words speak only of desolation. Elijah brings a word of faith into a moment of deep fear and resignation. After hearing about the widow’s preparations for death, Elijah gives the widow the same word of promise, which God gave to Hagar: “*Fear not*” (1 Kings 17:13; cf. Genesis 21:17). The prophet goes on to speak as if the promise of God was already fulfilled: “*Do not be afraid ... but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son*” (1 Kings 17:13). Elijah’s words, although seemingly absurd, actually invite the widow to participate in the new reality God’s promises were creating, but which for the moment remain hidden from view.

Quite interestingly, in Psalm 146, the Hebrew releases a string of participial phrases, making of these lines a fountain of splendid epithets concerning the quality of God’s person. The orphan and the widow God will sustain but there is also a figurative sense in which these statements about Yahweh are made. Yahweh is an “*opener of blind eyes*” for example, not in casting away all diseases of the eye (blindness was a persistent problem in antiquity) but in sharing with humankind those important realities which give life meaning and purpose, those realities which allow people to “*see*” where they have come from and where they need to go. Similarly, while persons who have been released from some form of bondage might justifiably credit their release to God, Yahweh comes to humans as “*a liberator of prisoners*” and as “*a raiser of fallen ones*” in that it is Yahweh who reverses the terrible effects of sin and alienation and who creates that freedom of the spirit in which women and men love and serve Yahweh.

The Gospel passage for today is often used as the text for sermons during “stewardship” seasons. How then should this story be interpreted? Exactly how does one understand the symbol of the widow? The penniless widow is used as the symbol for Christian generosity, since the two copper coins she gave represented all she had. Preachers often tend to overlook the rich people mentioned in the text and seldom comment on the scribes in the story. The “stewardship season” is not a time to offend the richer members of the community of faith, whose large contribution are needed to balance the budget. In a context like this, the attack on the scribes cannot be minimised. Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes in the Gospel story is reminiscent of the prophets who attack religious leaders for similar practices. Does the traditional reading of this passage ignore the social and political dimensions of the text? Do these verses in fact praise the widow’s action? Why would she be commended for giving to a Temple whose destruction was at hand? Does she not rather serve as a concrete example of how innocent people are victimised by the Temple Authorities?

Preaching the Word

If the preacher chooses to use the alternative reading, Elijah's ministry in this story is to bring a word from the outside that silences and finally invalidates the 'death sentence' resting over the head of the widow and her son. The gracious gift of salvation – so beautifully portrayed in this story – comes in the form of nourishment: that of daily bread. While most preachers will not find themselves preaching to drought-afflicted persons, they will be preaching to people who live in various ways under a death sentence. Like Elijah, preachers are also called to bring a sustaining word of promise from the outside.

Using the Gospel story at a time totally unrelated to 'stewardship' in the church's life might yield a less sentimental and more prophetic reading. Contextually, the location of the story is critical. The passage comes at the very end of the public ministry of Jesus, immediately preceding both the speech to the four disciples in which Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13) and the Passion narrative itself (Mark 14–15). It represents the climactic event in the sequence that begins with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and includes several incidents that point to the corruption of the Temple and the growing opposition of the religious authorities to Jesus; for example, the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25), the purifying of the Temple (Mark 11:15–19), the challenge of Jesus' authority in the Temple (Mark 11:27–33), the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1–12), the testing questions of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mark 12:13–27), and the conversation about the Messiah while Jesus is in the Temple (Mark 12:35–37). It may be that the two readings of the story need not be set so sharply against each other as some commentators propose. The scribes are pointedly condemned, no doubt about that (Mark 12:40). The widow in her destitution may concretely represent those many widows whose houses have been "devoured" by the scribes. Thus, in a direct way, the condemnation of the scribes is continued in the picture about the widow. At the same time, it is hard to ignore the element of commendation in Jesus' words about the action of the widow.

Living the Word

The preacher has the rare gift today to stress the importance of the stories of women in the Bible and communicating their messages seriously. In the South African context, the preacher does not have to look very far to find gender injustice, inequality, corruption of leaders or poverty. The passages for today give various openings and opportunities for preaching a transformational gospel and stressing the theology of a preferential option for the poor.

Suggested Liturgical Ideas

Call to Worship

The Sovereign God is ...

a doer of justice
a giver of bread
a liberator of prisoners
an opener of blind eyes
a raiser of fallen ones
a lover of the righteous
a watcher of homeless ones.

Two Suggested Hymns

"At the Name of Jesus"

"It is Well with My Soul"

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Liturgy for the 26th Sunday after Pentecost – 14 November 2027

Ecclesia de Lange

Texts

1 Samuel 1:4–20 and 1 Sam 2:1–10 OR Daniel 12:1–3 and Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11–14, (15–18), 19–25
Mark 13:1–8

Introduction

As the liturgical year draws toward its close, the readings confront communities with instability rather than reassurance. In Mark 13, Jesus foretells the fall of the Temple – the very symbol of religious certainty and national identity – yet describes the turmoil as “the beginning of birth pangs.” The accompanying texts echo this unsettling hope: God hears the misread and marginalised, relocates access beyond hierarchy, and sustains faith under empire. Together they invite discernment about what may be ending – and what God may be bringing to birth.

Hearing the Word

Mark 13:1–8

The Gospel reading anchors the day. As Jesus leaves the Temple, a disciple draws attention to its grandeur: “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” The Temple in Jerusalem was not merely impressive architecture; it represented covenant continuity, divine dwelling and national stability. Jesus’ response is abrupt: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

The discourse that follows begins with a warning: “Beware that no one leads you astray.” Mark situates the prediction within a broader context of deception, false messiahs, wars, earthquakes and famines. Yet Jesus names these not as the end, but as “the beginning of birth pangs.” The Greek term *ōdīnōn* evokes labour pains – an image of suffering that anticipates new life. Mark’s community, likely living in the shadow of the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE, would have heard these words as both sobering and strangely hopeful. The fall of a sacred centre does not signal God’s disappearance, but a reconfiguration of expectation.

1 Samuel 1:4–20 and 2:1–10

The Hannah narrative unfolds in a very different register yet resonates deeply with Mark’s theme of destabilised security. Hannah’s barrenness in a patriarchal society renders her vulnerable and socially diminished. Her anguish is intensified by Peninnah’s provocation. When she prays silently in the sanctuary at Shiloh, the priest Eli misinterprets her distress as drunkenness. Only after correction does he perceive her sincerity.

Key elements here include Hannah’s vow, her direct address to “the LORD of hosts,” and her naming of God as one who “remembers.” The narrative emphasises divine attentiveness to hidden suffering rather than institutional mediation.

Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2 extends the theological implications. God “breaks the bows of the mighty,” “raises up the poor from the dust,” and “brings low and also exalts.” This hymn articulates a radical reversal of power structures. The imagery anticipates later biblical songs of reversal, notably Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). The God who overturns entrenched hierarchies in Hannah’s song stands in continuity with the God whose purposes unfold even when visible structures falter.

Daniel 12:1–3 and Psalm 16

Daniel 12 belongs to apocalyptic literature shaped by persecution. The reference to “a time of anguish” reflects historical experiences under oppressive rule. Yet this anguish is framed within divine oversight: Michael “the great prince” stands for the people, and deliverance is promised. The striking affirmation that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” signals one of the clearest Old Testament references to resurrection hope.

The description of the wise shining “like the brightness of the sky” and those who lead many to righteousness shining “like the stars” links endurance with moral clarity. Suffering does not nullify faithfulness; it refines it.

Psalm 16 complements this hope with language of refuge and trust: “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” The psalmist rejects other allegiances and confesses confidence that God will not abandon them to Sheol. Stability is found not in structures but in relationship with God.

Hebrews 10:11–25

Hebrews contrasts the repetitive nature of temple sacrifices with Christ’s once-for-all offering. The priest “stands day after day” offering sacrifices that “can never take away sins,” whereas Christ “offered for all time a single sacrifice.” The imagery of sitting at God’s right hand signals completion and authority.

This theological shift leads to communal exhortation: “Let us hold fast ... let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds ... not neglecting to meet together.” Access to God is described in terms of confidence and mutual encouragement rather than ritual repetition. The emphasis moves from sacrificial system to sustained community.

Across these readings, themes of destabilised power, divine attentiveness to the vulnerable, endurance under oppression and reconfigured access to God converge. The fall of visible structures does not negate God’s activity; rather, it reframes where and how that activity is discerned.

Interpreting the Word

Mark 13 speaks into a context of profound instability. The Temple symbolised divine presence, national continuity and theological certainty. To predict its destruction was to unsettle the architecture of meaning itself.

Yet Jesus reframes collapse as “the beginning of birth pangs.” This metaphor is significant. Birth pangs are painful and disorienting, yet they signal emergence, not extinction. The shaking of what appears permanent may be the labour of something more faithful being born.

When Jesus speaks of “birth pangs,” he draws on imagery from bodies historically marginalised within systems of power. Labour cannot be controlled by architecture or hierarchy. It is embodied and transformative. The metaphor suggests that newness does not emerge from preserving stone but from processes that unsettle control. This invites reflection on whose bodies have been excluded from decision-making in religious institutions. Women’s leadership has been constrained; queer and trans bodies scrutinised; disabled bodies treated as objects of pity rather than theological subjects. If transformation is imagined through embodied labour, then those sidelined by institutional authority may become indispensable witnesses to what renewal requires.

Placed alongside Mark, the Hannah narrative provides a crucial interpretive lens. Before the Temple falls in Mark’s story, Hannah has already been misread within the religious system. Her silent anguish is interpreted as disorder. The priest assumes impropriety before discernment. Yet God hears what institutional authority misjudges.

This pairing invites a difficult question: when religious structures tremble, what – or whom – have they been misreading?

Temple systems regulated access: who could enter and whose body was considered ‘whole’ enough to approach God. The fall of the Temple therefore symbolises not only architectural destruction but the exposure of a controlled and mediated access to holiness.

Hebrews deepens this relocation. With Christ’s once-for-all offering, access is no longer dependent upon ritual hierarchy. “Let us hold fast ... let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” Holiness is re-centred in embodied, communal faithfulness rather than guarded sacred space.

Daniel 12 adds another dimension. Apocalyptic hope arises under oppressive regimes. It is theology written by those who know what it is to live under threat. The promise that “those who are wise shall shine” is not escapism; it is resistance. It insists that empire is not ultimate.

Together these texts suggest that instability may expose what has been falsely stabilised. When systems fall, what becomes visible? Whose voices were silenced whose bodies were policed, disciplined or misinterpreted?

It moves uncomfortably into our own time. Religious systems have always risked mistaking control for discernment and exclusion for holiness.

In our own global moment, institutions once considered stable are showing strain. Democracies wobble, religious nationalism resurges, and economic and ecological systems feel fragile. Public trust in political and ecclesial leadership erodes. In such a climate, the temptation is to fortify the stones – doubling down on control and certainty. Mark’s Gospel offers another possibility: instability may be labour rather than collapse.

In South Africa, this question sharpens further. We have witnessed how churches stood differently in moments of upheaval. Some provided theological justification for apartheid, constructing sacred architecture around racial exclusion. Others proclaimed liberation, helped shape resistance movements and nurtured the moral imagination that contributed to the regime’s collapse. The fall of apartheid was not simply political change; it was also theological labour. Stones shifted. Certainties cracked. Something new emerged – imperfect, unfinished, but real. The question is not whether the church is shaking, but what kind of birth those tremors signal.

That history does not stand at a safe distance from us. The legacy of state capture, systemic corruption and widening economic inequality continues to erode public trust. Infrastructure failures and governance scandals have left many citizens weary and sceptical of institutions once assumed stable. When moral authority weakens – whether in government or in religious communities – people begin to question what can still be trusted. In such a moment, the temptation is either cynicism or defensive protection of reputation. The Gospel invites a different response: discernment. What if exposure is not only decay, but revelation?

Today, faith communities continue to wrestle with patterns of exclusion – sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. Women’s leadership is constrained. Children are not always protected. LGBTQI+ believers are welcomed rhetorically yet resisted in practice. People living with HIV encounter stigma cloaked in spiritual language. Disabled bodies are treated as objects of charity rather than full theological subjects.

Who is not in the room when decisions are made? Whose testimony is interpreted as disorder rather than prayer? Whose suffering is spiritualised instead of addressed?

Hannah’s story suggests that God’s redemptive work may already be gestating in the lives of those the system misunderstands. Structures unable to bear such hearing may not endure unchanged.

The question for contemporary communities of faith is not preservation, but participation in what God may be bringing to birth.

Preaching the Word

Several homiletical directions emerge from these texts. Each invites congregations not merely to endure instability but to discern what may be gestating within it.

1. “When the Stones We Admire Begin to Crack”

The preacher might begin with the disciple’s admiration of the Temple’s architecture. What “large stones” do we admire today? Buildings? Denominational histories? Cultural dominance? Moral authority? Institutional longevity?

Jesus’ response unsettles nostalgia. The fall of the Temple does not signal the absence of God, but the end of misplaced security. A sermon could explore the difference between faith in God and faith in structures about God. What happens when congregations confuse preservation of form with fidelity to Christ?

This direction invites communities to examine where their ultimate trust lies – and whether God’s Spirit may be at work beyond familiar frameworks.

2. “Who Is Not in the Room?”

Hannah’s story provides a second trajectory. Misread by religious authority, her prayer is dismissed before it is discerned. The preacher might invite congregations to ask: whose voices are interpreted as disorder rather than devotion? Whose testimony is doubted? Who remains absent from decision-making spaces?

This direction may gently yet clearly name contemporary exclusions: women whose leadership is constrained; children whose safety is insufficiently prioritised; LGBTQI+ believers whose identities are debated rather than embraced; people living with HIV whose bodies still carry stigma; disabled members treated as objects of care rather than theological contributors.

The sermon need not accuse; it can ask whether institutional shaking may expose where we have mistaken control for holiness. If God heard Hannah before Eli understood her, where might God already be at work beyond our recognition?

3. “Birth Pangs, Not Death Throes”

Mark’s metaphor of labour offers a third homiletical path. Birth pangs are painful and transformative, signalling that something new is pressing into the world.

Preachers might explore what congregations fear losing – and whether some losses are necessary contractions. What if instability is not divine abandonment but divine midwifery? What if the discomfort many churches feel is part of a larger reconfiguration toward deeper justice, wider inclusion and renewed integrity?

This trajectory allows the sermon to hold both realism and hope. Labour is not romanticised. It hurts. But it leads somewhere.

4. “Holding Fast in Community”

Hebrews shifts attention from architecture to embodied practice. “Let us hold fast ... let us provoke one another to love and good deeds ... not neglecting to meet together.” In times of uncertainty, faithfulness is communal and ethical.

A preacher might invite congregations to consider what concrete practices sustain hope: shared accountability, mutual encouragement, courageous conversations, visible acts of solidarity. If temples fall, community remains.

This direction guards against despair. The church’s calling is not to defend stones but to cultivate love that survives structural change.

5. “Shining Under Pressure”

Daniel’s apocalyptic vision speaks to communities living under threat. A sermon could affirm that faith in destabilised times is not naïve optimism but resilient hope. “Those who are wise shall shine.” Wisdom here is not cleverness; it is moral steadfastness.

In contexts where justice work feels exhausting, where racial inequities persist, where marginalised bodies still struggle for safety and recognition, Daniel reminds congregations that faithful endurance participates in God’s long horizon of restoration.

Concluding Movement

The preacher might gather these threads with a final question:

If the Temple falls, what will remain?

Will what remains be architecture – or Christ-shaped community?

Will what remains be guarded boundaries – or widened embrace?

Will what remains be nostalgia – or labour for new life?

The texts do not invite panic. They invite discernment.

And discernment always leads to action.

Living the Word

If instability is labour rather than mere decline, congregations are invited to participate consciously in what God may be birthing. This may require more than reassurance; it may require examination. Who is absent from leadership spaces? Are women’s voices fully trusted? Are children genuinely safeguarded? Are LGBTQI+ believers embraced without qualification? Do people living with HIV or disabled members experience dignity as theological equals rather than as recipients of charity? Churches might undertake intentional listening forums, review inclusion policies, and align public theology with embodied practice. Labour is painful, but it is purposeful. The question is not whether change is happening, but whether we will midwife it faithfully.

Liturgical Suggestions

Call to Worship

Leader: The stones we trusted are not eternal.

People: Yet the Lord remains our refuge and strength.

Leader: In times of shaking and uncertainty,

People: God is birthing new life among us.

Leader: Let us worship the One who is not confined to temples of stone.

People: We worship Christ, our cornerstone.

Prayer of Confession

Holy God,
we confess that we have admired stones more than we have trusted You.

We have protected structures while neglecting people.

We have misread bodies You were already hearing.

Forgive us when we confuse stability with faithfulness.

Teach us to discern the labour of Your Spirit in unsettling times.

Amen.

Assurance

In Christ, access to God is not controlled by walls or hierarchy.

Through mercy and grace, we are gathered, forgiven and sent.

Thanks be to God.

Intercessory Response

Leader: In times of shaking,

People: Make us faithful midwives of justice.

Benediction

Go into a world that trembles –

not as guardians of stones,

but as bearers of hope.

May the God who brings life through labour

give you courage, tenderness and strength.

Amen.

Music

“O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

“Thuma Mina” (Send Me, Lord)

“Siyahamba” (We Are Marching in the Light of God)

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Word and Life for a Reign of Christ Liturgy – 21 November 2027

Jenny Sprong

Texts

2 Samuel 23:1–7 and Psalm 132:1–12, (13–18) OR
Daniel 7:9–10,13–14 and Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b–8
John 18:33–37

Introduction

Today the congregation is challenged with the question: Who reigns in your life? In a broken world, often dominated by fleeting empires, communities of faith are once again invited to choose and to pledge their allegiance. How then, is Christ's reign distinguished from any other? Followers of Jesus would embody a 'kindom', which is rooted and grounded in God's mercy and love.

Gathering in God's Name

- *Prelude and Introit: Musician and/or Choir*

Words of Welcome: All responses are in **bold** print.

Call to Worship

From city and suburb; from farm and forest; from work and home;

Together in worship!

We join with communities of faith all over the world;

To pray, to praise and to receive the Word together in worship.

Opening Hymn: "Crown Him with Many Crowns"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h2iRfK1mJI>



Responsive Psalm: (The Alternative Psalm 93 –
The Majesty of God's Rule)

The SOVEREIGN is ruler; and is robed in majesty;
the SOVEREIGN is robed; and is girded with strength.
God has established the world; it shall never be moved;
your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.

The floods have lifted up, O GOD, the floods have lifted up their voice;

the floods lift up their roaring.

More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the SOVEREIGN GOD!

Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house, O GOD, forevermore.

Act of Penitence

Our sin surrounds us in the air that we breathe and in the water that we use – how can we be forgiven for the damage we have done to your Creation, O God? (*silent reflection*)

Absolution or Assurance of Forgiveness:

We listen, once more, for your words of grace, O Christ.

We ask that you speak to us beyond words – until we hear you.

The One who made us knows our sin and our goodness.

The Holy Spirit gives us the power to begin again.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Response Hymn: "You Are Holy" (Hamba Nathi)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bMJdjU17uE>



Listening

Proclaiming the Word of God

Prayer of Illumination

Sovereign God, as we hear your Word for us proclaimed today, remind us that Christ reigns not only in heaven but in every corner of our lives and in every moment of our story as human beings. Open our hearts to receive Christ's rule with joy, your truth with humility and the Holy Spirit's peace with deep trust. Help us to live as citizens of Christ's Realm – seeking justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God. **Amen**

Scripture Readings

2 Samuel 23:1–7
Psalm 132:1–12, (13–18)

Alternative Reading:

Daniel 7:9–10,13–14

Revelation 1:4b–8

Gospel According to John 18:33–37

Prayer of Preparation

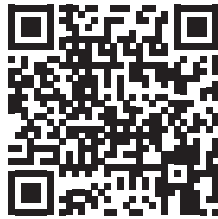
And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. **Amen**

Sermon

Responding to the Word of God

Hymn: “O Christ, What Can It Mean for Us”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di6fLocjCm8>



- **Sacrament of Holy Communion**

Invitation to Holy Communion: Come, people of God, come to receive Christ’s heavenly food. This is the table of Christ, a place of joyful feast at the banquet in the Realm of God.

The Great Thanksgiving

Loving God, we remember that when Jesus ate with friends, he took a loaf of bread and after blessings it, he broke it and gave it to them, saying: “Take, eat. This is my body, given for you. Each time you do this, remember me.” Then, he took a cup and after giving thanks, passed it around, saying: “Drink. This cup that is poured out for you, is the new Covenant of God, made in my blood. Whenever you drink it, remember me.”

Prayers of the People

At this time, we also remember all with whom you would have us share your feast. We pray for those in sorrow or in pain We pray for all who are alone or frightened ... We pray for those who are young and vulnerable ...

In your mercy, O God, ... **hear our prayer. Amen**

May the God of peace make you holy and keep you free from every fault as you wait in joyful hope for Christ’s coming – peace be with you.

And also with you.

We share the Peace of God with one another!

Prepare the Table for the Sacrament of Holy Communion Celebrating at the Table

We ask, gracious God, that you send your holy and life-giving Spirit upon these gifts of Bread and Wine, that they may be for us the Body and Blood of Christ. Unite us with Christ and bring us with the whole creation to your eternal realm.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come in glory! Recalling Christ’s death and resurrection, and in reverence for God’s call, we celebrate the offering of this Holy Sacrament. When we break the bread is it not a means of sharing in the Body of Christ?

Though we are many, we are one body because we all share in the one loaf.

When we give thanks over the cup, is it not a means of sharing in the Blood of Christ?

Thanks be to God.

Distribution of the Communion Elements

(The Body of Christ, broken for you, receive this bread and may your spirit be nourished ...)

The Cup of Blessing, poured out for you to restore you to everlasting life...)

Post Communion Prayer: (in unison)

We thank you, God, that you have fed us in this Sacrament, united us with Christ and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all people. **Amen**

Going Forth

Commissioning: (in unison) We have listened, we have shared. We have sung and we have prayed. We have been about God’s work and now we go from this holy place with hope. Forgiveness has been received and will be given. Friendship will be nurtured and compassion will be practiced. Justice will be sought out and Christ will be recognised among family, friends and strangers. With God’s help we shall be about God’s work in the world. **Amen**

Closing Hymn: “Blessed Assurance”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdFnZFTP1eY>



Benediction

May the love of God, the peace and the Sovereignty of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit go with us into this week and beyond. **Amen**

- *We follow the Word and the Light of Christ into the world*

Sentence of Scripture: “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37b)

- **Postlude:** Musician and/or Choir
- Optional

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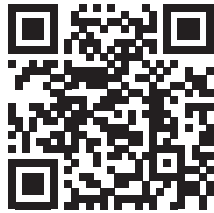
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Word and Life for The Reign of Christ – 21 November 2027

Jenny Sprong

Texts

2 Samuel 23:1–7 and Psalm 132:1–12, (13–18) OR
Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14 and Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b–8
John 18:33–37

Introduction

This Sunday's theme focuses on 'power'. There are very few opportunities during the liturgical year to reflect on both power *and* powerlessness. The passage from 2nd Samuel refers to the "everlasting covenant" God established with the House of David. During the coming season of Advent, the fulfillment of that covenant – now with all people – would again be celebrated. This passage also points out that David only had power because he had been "exalted by God". The titles ascribed to God and to Jesus – in the Revelation passage – reinforce the nature of God's power. Even those who crucified Jesus and thought they had power, would eventually learn that their power was totally ineffective. Only the One who is the Alpha and the Omega has real power.

Hearing the Word

2 Samuel 23:1–7

The author of this poem points out that David was chosen by God and emphasises the rightfulness of the Davidic dynasty. David was a son of Jesse, a man whom God chose and the one through whom the spirit of God spoke (v.2). The relevance of the images in v.4 "like the light of morning" and "the sun rising" are especially fitting for the coming celebration of Advent. The principal 'Davidic King: Jesus Christ' is superior to the original Davidic king – being the One who "dispels darkness by the illumination of God's word" (John 1:5).

Psalm 132:1–12, (13–18)

This psalm is viewed as one of the "royal psalms" and addresses the role David played in moving the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. This was viewed as quite an event, with David creating a religious ceremony. The presence of the Ark was a dramatic confirmation of the "real presence" of God in Jerusalem. It was accepted that the king was custodian and defender of the Ark and the Ark was linked to the House of David. David pledged that during his reign he would continue to ensure that the Ark of the Covenant was kept safe. This refers to the great promise recorded in 2 Samuel 7:11–16. Lumping together the Temple claim and the royal claim is rather conservative because in practice they reinforced each other. In theory, the monarchy was lessened in significance, and the Temple (Ark of the Covenant) was considerably raised in significance.

From v.14, the psalm reflects God speaking. God is seated on the Ark and indicates that Zion is an elected, lasting place of manifestation. Mount Zion, where both the Ark and God abide, would be a dwelling of distinctive blessing and wealth. There is a specific reference to 'bread for the poor' (v.15) and Zion would be the home of faithful, effective and jubilant priests (v.16). A priesthood is founded and approved, and the Davidic claim is hereby reaffirmed (vs.17–18).

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

This sets out Daniel's understanding of the struggle between good and evil and is currently a most relevant topic – with the world presently full of wars – and in its understanding of how these conflicts might be resolved. The alternative Old Testament lection for this Sunday is only seven verses of Daniel 7 but forms a critical part of the book. Daniel 7 starts the second section of the book. The first part (chapters 1–6) tells the stories of Daniel and his friends and how they try to adapt to living in a foreign land. The second part (chapters 7–12) records Daniel's four visions. These describe the coming breakdown of the wicked world order and how Daniel anticipated the reign of God.

To fully appreciate this first vision of Daniel, the first fourteen verses of chapter 7 are important and the second half of the chapter provides an interpretation. The first three verses introduce the vision of the four beasts and vs. 4–12 describe the vision. These beasts signify the four empires that ruled at that time: the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks.

Although outside of the actual lection for this Sunday, it is essential to understand that Daniel's description of a messiah has more to do with the faithful people of God than the 'Human One' to which he also refers! The first two books of the Maccabees (see the Apocryphal Books) indicate that during the time in which Daniel was written, there was great persecution of the people of God. Those who remained faithful to the God of Israel and to the Law of God were persecuted. Daniel encouraged the people of faith and assured them that God was ultimately in control – even amidst their suffering.

The purpose of this book was to point out that after the exile and persecution, the people of God would survive. In a similar way the Christian Church looks back over several centuries, acknowledging with pain that there is much of which it can never be proud. Yet, the Church celebrates the faithfulness of people who have trusted God – knowing that this God has promised never to abandon them. Daniel inspires a different way of looking at the Reign of God.

Psalm 93

This short poem is most appropriate for today's theme as its opening line proclaims that 'the Sovereign God is Ruler'. The psalm points out many of the symbols of royalty: robes, majesty, thrones and rulings. The psalm also embraces creation in the first two verses: referring to God being praised

for being ‘robed in majesty’ — that is, in the magnificence of the creation! In a similar way, God is praised for in fact establishing creation (or the world) in the first place. The focus on creation continues — especially on the precious gift of water in all its deafening profusion. The preacher is encouraged to consider how the images in v.3 impact worship and more especially, the Sacrament of Baptism. Without water, there would be no life on planet earth!

Revelation 1:4b–8

It is crucial to understand that ‘the letter’ had been widely accepted as the preferred method for instruction by the Early Church. Those who used Paul’s epistles were not the only ones using this teaching method. Ignatius and Polycarp also used this format, through which to communicate and teach. Revelation was obviously also influenced by ‘the letter’ format even though it largely consists of visions. The first two chapters do contain what is known as ‘the letters to the seven churches’ but the rest of the Book is written in the same structure. The text for today is part of the introduction and outlines some of the key themes of the Book. Chapter 1:4a, which isn’t part of today’s lection, offers a short introduction to the author and recipients. Today’s lection offers the salutation (vs.4b–5) and the doxology (vs.5b–6), followed by two prophetic statements (vs.7–8). One remarkable feature of this passage is its extended descriptions of both God and of Jesus. Verse 4 describes God as the One “*who is and who was and who is to come*” and ends with an even more extended description of God as “*the Alpha and the Omega*”.

Jesus is affirmed for being the One who freed humanity through personal sacrifice and the One who formed believers into becoming a ‘church’. God’s love — experienced in Jesus’ life and ministry — is viewed as being functional. Jesus is “*the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth* (v.5).” Jesus is also “him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be a kin’dom.”

The introduction to the various themes is essential in understanding this Book as a whole. One key aspect is the Church’s *faithful Witness* — Jesus Christ. Later in Revelation, that faithfulness is praised, and a reward is promised for all who remain faithful (17:14). The book concludes with promises that its own words may be regarded as trustworthy. (21:5; 22:6). An important theme is also introduced — that of the apocalyptic concept of the return of Jesus. The prophetic exclamation of v.7 combines the thought expressed in Daniel 7:13 (“coming with the clouds of heaven”) and in Zechariah 12:10 (“when they look on the one whom they have pierced”). Matthew 24:30 seems to combine components of both those passages and stresses, in the Revelation passage, what it might mean that “every eye” will see Jesus’ return.

That “all the tribes of the earth will wail” strengthens the idea of judgement but it also presents a prevailing ambiguity. For the believers, in the Early Church, the author of Revelation provides a message of hope — strongly introduced in the opening lines of the Book. “*So it is to be. Amen*” — the conclusion of the first prophetic utterance (1:7) declares that the Church’s hope originates from the assurance that Jesus will certainly ‘come again’. The God “*who is and who was and who is to come*” is trustworthy — whatever the doubts and failings of humanity.

John 18:33–37

John explains to the reader that the religious authorities did not want to enter Pilate’s headquarters because that would cause ritual defilement because the Passover was about to begin. The irony, however, is not lost as religious (and pious) leaders are plotting the death of Jesus — God’s Messiah! This scene (see John 18:33–38a) relates a conversation between Jesus and Pilate. Yet, the religious leaders who were bringing charges against Jesus, were right there, too. Commentators recommend at least three different ways in which a preacher might choose to attempt a sermon on this theme:

Firstly, by simply ignoring the limits of the lectionary and focusing on the broader drama — particularly on the role of Pilate, who is faced with a critical decision. Pilate seems to lean in one direction but is pressured by the circumstances to move, though reluctantly, in the opposite direction. This is seen clearly when Pilate responds to Jesus with the unusual question: “*I am not a Jew, am I?*” (v.35). Pilate was technically the judge — the one with the authority. Even late in the proceedings, Pilate still believed he had retained his power (19:10). However, the religious leaders robbed him of his power and forced him into a corner. (19:16). In actual fact, the reader is aware that the real judge, the One with decisive power, is Jesus. “Pilate, like most power brokers, lives in a world of illusion of power and is mocked by his ultimate lack of power” (see *Texts for Preaching*).

Secondly, the preacher could use this passage to focus on Jesus as “*the King of the Jews*”. This title for Jesus is a key theme in John’s Passion narrative. “*Are you the King of Jews?*” Pilate asks (v.33). Jesus responds with his own questions: “*Who do others say that I am?*” “*Who do you say that I am?*” (v.34) The chief priests are later faced with the same question and they falsely reply, “*We have no king but the emperor*” (19:15). The soldiers carry out an actual ceremony of coronation for King Jesus (no mention in John of mocking or pretense — see 19:2–5). The label ‘*King of the Jews*’ may seem strange to most contemporary congregations but “as a political term it retains amazing relevance” (see *Texts for Preaching*). Too often, when people have to make difficult decisions, these are political in nature and — in the final analysis — boil down to the choice between Jesus and Caesar.

The Third direction in which the preacher might move with this passage is to concentrate on Jesus’ words about the nature of his rule (vs.36–37). The assertion that “*my kingdom is not from this world*” is not to imply that Jesus and his followers have no role to play in human affairs, in the struggle for justice and peace. Instead, the statement separates Jesus’ reign from other forms of power that mark most earthly institutions: domination, violence and economic exploitation are common (and some would often say, even necessary) weapons of maintaining power (see *Texts for Preaching*). Jesus’ power originates from a vastly different foundation. Jesus wants to talk about “truth,” which turns out to be an utterly strange topic for Pilate (and to most imperial figures). Pilate functions in a cautiously preserved world of delusion, and the presence of One whose task is to strip away deceptions and point to what is genuine, poses this huge threat. “Disillusionment” is precisely what Pilate needs if he is to be set on the road to truth, but it is

what he fears the most (see *Texts for Preaching*). Truth is always threatening, and particularly so when the One in our midst is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (14:6). Jesus' very presence calls into question the many flawed observations on which our worlds are built. At the same time, Jesus is the Life-Giver and gives it abundantly.

Interpreting the Word

Although all the passages, set for this Sunday, are critical and most relevant to this question of Christ's Reign, the Gospel passage takes precedence. The Revelation passage sums up Christ's Reign, and the other texts provide links between the various passages but the story of the interaction between Pilate and Jesus brings the theme to its full importance. The drama is recorded from John 18:28 and continues through to John 19:16, with a conclusion in John 19:19–22. The lection, set for this Sunday (John 18:33–37) is this captivating interchange, in which John includes the religious authorities as well as Jesus and Pilate. There is both physical movement and intense dialogue. The physical movement refers to Pilate: back and forth from inside his headquarters in Jerusalem, where Jesus was held, to the religious authorities standing outside the building (John 18:28–29, 33, 38b; 19:4, 9, 13).

Throughout chapters John 18–19, Jesus is “handed over” through a chain of command that implicates a number of characters as responsible for his death. Although Judas Iscariot is widely recognised as the one who “betrayed” Jesus (see John 18:2 & 5), the Greek word translated “betray” also describes the actions of the Jewish leaders and Pilate. In John 18:36, Jesus uses this word to describe his being “handed over to the Jews” and Pilate also tells Jesus that the Jews “handed you over to me” (John 18:35). At the end of the trial, however, it is Pilate who “hands Jesus over” to be crucified (see John 19:16). Thus, the culpability in Jesus' death does not rest with Judas alone but is shared through this action of betrayal and/or handing over.

Preaching the Word

Part of the irony of John's presentation of the trial and crucifixion is that Pilate uses his own authority to declare Jesus' kingship. He places an inscription over the cross, “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*” (John 19:19). The chief priests protest, asking him to clarify that this was only what Jesus claimed but Pilate refuses their request with a solemn pronouncement: “*What I have written, I have written*” (19:22).

Living the Word

The overarching theme for today is the Reign of Christ and this is something believers pledge to acknowledge and uphold when they decide to follow Jesus. In the psalms, set for today, there are calls to worship and to allegiance. The apocalyptic texts stress that the visions of both Daniel and John point to the One who will finally reign over all the earth. In the South African context it is important to acknowledge the ongoing quest for justice and equality for all. In the context of the world today, it is important to acknowledge that Christ isn't yet hailed as ‘Ruler of the World’ – on the contrary, too many human tyrants view themselves as ‘kings of this

world’. Greed, avarice and jealousy cause wars and rumours of war. Preachers have this privilege to call believers back to the place of acknowledging Jesus as the Supreme Ruler.

Liturgical Suggestions

(see the liturgy included in this volume)

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Writers for Word and Worship

Ian Booth:

Ordained minister of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA).

Newton Brandt

Retired pastor and lecturer of the Lutheran Church (ELCSA).

Teri Beghin

Methodist local preacher and graduate of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary.

Francis Correia

Spiritual Director and Church Consultant.

Scott Couper

Minister and Teacher at the Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Brattleboro, Vermont USA.

Ecclesia de Lange

Ordained minister and the Director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries.

Petro Edwards

(Anglican) Archdeacon of the Overberg.

Lisa Grassow

schoolteacher, graduate of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary and UKZN.

Pete Grassow

Retired Methodist Minister.

James Gribble

Retired Methodist Bishop of the Cape of Good Hope District.

James Harris

Ordained Anglican priest in retirement.

Rachell Hoogbaard

Ordained priest in the **Anglican Church of Southern Africa**, serving within the **Diocese of False Bay**.

Abiaaza K. Kibirige

Ordained Anglican priest in retirement.

Mkhuseli Lujabe

Provincial Executive Officer for the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Delme Linscott

Methodist Minister.

Steven Lottering

Methodist Minister and convenor of the Justice Desk for the Cape of Good Hope District of the MCSA.

Sikawu Makubalo

Methodist Minister and General Secretary of the Church Unity Commission.

Rachel Mash

Anglican Priest and environmental Coordinator of the *Anglican Church of Southern Africa*.

Alande Mbokazi

Intern minister associated with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA).

Willingmore Mhlanga

Ordained Minister of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA).

Craig Morrison

Ordained minister of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa and lecturer at Theological Education by Extension College.

Marius J. Nel

Professor of New Testament and Departmental Chairperson of the Discipline Group Old and New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University.

James Nicolson

Retired Methodist Minister.

Edward Ontong

Resident minister at Ebenezer Congregational Church in Kuils River, Cape Town.

Larry Ort

Retired Episcopal priest in Brookings, South Dakota, USA.

Lynette Petersen

Retired Ordained Methodist minister.

Kevin Sprong

Retired Methodist Minister working in the United Church of Canada.

Jenny Sprong

Retired Methodist Minister and passionate feminist theologian.

Mark Stephenson

Retired Methodist Minister who pastors the Llandudno United Church.

David Sylvester

Rector at St Francis of Assisi *Anglican Church Simon's Town*.

Bruce Theron

Retired Ordained minister of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa.

Neil Vels

Methodist Minister.

Carol Walsh

Retired Methodist Minister.

Rodney Whiteman

Retired priest in the Anglican Church Diocese of False Bay.

Alice Fabian-Williams

Ordained minister of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa.

WORD & *worship*

The seventeenth edition of ***Word and Worship***, edited by Rev. Dr. Pete Grassow and published by CLF Publishers, serves as an indispensable liturgical and preaching companion for worship leaders throughout Southern Africa. Grounded in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) for Year B, this volume guides congregations through the complete Christian year, spanning from Advent Sunday (29 November 2026) through to the Feast of the Reign of Christ (21 November 2027). Centred primarily on the Gospel of Mark and supplemented by selections from John, it provides a structured framework for long-range worship planning and ordered doctrinal teaching.

Designed for both ordained ministers and lay leaders, the volume provides rich exegetical reflections (“Word and Life”) for all four weekly appointed Scripture passages - the Hebrew Bible, Psalms, New Testament Epistles, and Gospels. Each entry translates scholarship into practical sermon themes, pastoral guidance, and contextual applications tailored to the daily realities of local Southern African communities. In addition to seasonal overviews and basic liturgies for Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, and the Season after Pentecost, the book features example liturgies for major feast days, guiding every element of worship from the gathering and call to worship to the table and dismissal.

Written by clergy and preachers actively serving local churches across a wide range of denominations, *Word and Worship* embodies a vibrant ecumenical spirit. It fosters unity, cooperation, and shared resources across traditions, equipping worship leaders to proclaim the Gospel with imaginative clarity and faithful engagement.



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