
Lectionary Reflections

February 14, 2018

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Go to your room – you’re tired!” A friend is fond of recalling this admonition from her mother – spoken on occasions when one of the kids was feeling cranky or frustrated or generally disagreeable. In her maternal wisdom, she knew that a little down time would be a helpful remedy – an opportunity to cool off, slow down, take a deep breath, and come back to the family with a more positive attitude.

How many of us are tired these days? How many are weary of doing what we believe to be God’s work, and the work of Christ’s church... the work of peace and justice and reconciliation? Even when we know this is our call as followers of Jesus Christ, we also know that such effort can be exhausting – and we can become cranky and frustrated.

Lent may be a call to step away for a time from the more political, social, and public work to which we are committed, and to refocus on the God we seek to honor in all of those external efforts.

The gospel text for Ash Wednesday calls us to turn our attention inward. Calls us to go to our rooms – to the secret places of our hearts, where no one but God is watching. Calls us to slow down, to take a deep breath, to examine our motives, to reconnect with the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

The Psalmist agrees: “You desire truth in my inward being; teach me wisdom in my secret heart” (Ps. 51:6).

As we begin the Lenten journey, let us hear Jesus’ admonition: “Go to your room. Go to the quiet and secret place where God promises to meet you.” May these days remind us that the Christian path is one that requires a balance between the work of the heart and our work in the world.

The Rev. Jean Dow
Associate Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

February 18, 2018

Mark 1: 9-15

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness...”

That’s not what the Holy Spirit is supposed to do. It is a protector and an inspiration. It is supposed to keep us safe and living a “Godly” life. How could it drive anyone, let alone Jesus, out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan?

So often, we think of a Christian life as one full of hope and love. We look around and we see all the wonderful things going on in the lives of others and we think how fortunate, how blessed. Too often, we look at faith as a reward-based system, one in which if we just do and say and pray the right things, good will come out. God will prevail. The darkness always overcomes the evil, right? But what happens with God drives you into darkness, when God places you in a path of destruction, when the place you see God leading you is one of despair?

The reality is this: bad things happen (to everybody). There is not always a reason why or an excuse. We cannot always see the silver lining or pretend like everything will work out. Ask the childless couple, the grieving spouse, the unaccepted

teenager. We like to think God is the Disney Movie where the Spirit is the savior in the end and makes everything better. But what if God challenges us, convicts us, moves us into a place we do not want to go?

God does this. Sometimes our Holy place is in the darkness. Sometimes we are challenged to go into the depths, to suffer consequences, to endure heartache, loss, trauma, despair and more and more. And sadly, sometimes there is no light at the end of the tunnel. I think about all those Holocaust victims, the refugees perishing at sea, the victims of hate crimes, those suffering incurable diseases, isolation and destruction. Is this the Good News we were told about? Is this really where the Spirit leads?

The Spirit leads us in many places, some good and others gut-wrenching. God doesn't only comfort us, but also challenges us, convicts us to go in a way that isn't always pleasant and flower-filled. The moment the Spirit enters Jesus, he is taken into unknown territory and tormented. Yet, he is never left alone, nor forgotten. The Spirit stays. The Spirit remains. The Spirit is there.

The Holy Spirit inside us does not always lead us to green pastures and lush river valleys. Sometimes we are led to deserted places, places of war and destruction, places of pure Hell. Yet, even in those places, the Spirit is with us. The Spirit is still helping, still supporting, still working. No matter where we go, the Spirit is with us. So do not fear the shadows and the deeps. Remember that sometimes God leads us there, but never abandons us there. For once we know God, we never walk alone.

Rev. Katie Van Der Linden
Ebenezer Moravian Church, Watertown

March 4, 2018
“MISSION POSSIBLE”
(John 2:19)

We are living in the most uncertain of times. While our faith compels us to speak truth to power and to share the burdens of the weak; present policies and practices that do not reflect the “Gospel of Jesus Christ”, has made our assignment an almost impossible.

Attacks on immigration, healthcare, economic empowerment for the poor, restorative justice, racial equity, voting rights, child poverty, and the homelessness have made it almost impossible for certain groups of the population to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The feelings of hopelessness and helplessness adversely affect the mission of the faith community. The roadblocks tempt people to throw in the towel and give up. During such moments we should remember the words of Jesus recorded in the text: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

The crucifixion of Christ was a tragic turning point in the lives of the believers. Their hopes had been dashed one dark Friday afternoon. Their deliverance had been nailed to a cross on a hill called Calvary. But that was not the end of the story. Three days later, the power of God was demonstrated at an empty tomb. The place where Jesus once lay.

Thus Easter and the resurrection give evidence of God's power not only to bring life out of death, but also to demonstrate God's ability to change circumstances. Just ask the two on the Emmaus Road.

With Easter comes hope. Hope is secured through faith. Faith reveals itself in endurance. For the scriptures admonish us: “do not grow weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.” (Galatians 6:9)

Hope helps us to understand the words of the writer of Hebrews 11:1 when he says: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hope says: “although I can't see it, I believe it.” This hope, this assurance

gives to us the strength and the encouragement to face the future. It helps us to continue the “good fight.”

So, as we continue the struggle for justice. As we continue to fight for those who have no hope, no help, and no voice; let us remember that Easter validates our mission. It may look impossible, but looks can be deceiving. Easter says to us: “keep on keeping on, the mission is indeed possible.” Easter helps us to realize that we can “do all things through Christ.” Easter says to us: “we will be, more than conquerors through Christ and his resurrection power.”

The Reverend Joseph B. Baring, Jr.
St Paul African Methodist Episcopal

March 11, 2018
4th Sunday of Lent
Ephesians 2:1-10

For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (v. 10)

The grace, power, mercy, love, compassion and life that we receive from God is utterly breathtaking when you take just a moment to think about it. This pseudo-Pauline text depicts a transformation from our former selves pushing against God and God’s expectations of us as part of his creation, to a renewed and raised up self with Christ Jesus through the gift of grace. We are reminded that receiving God’s love and salvation is nothing we have done on our own accord. It is a “gift from God.” And it is here that the writer makes the rubber hit the road. The purpose of this gift is not just to sit there with it and make sure it is kept safe and sound. The purpose of this gift of salvation is for good works. Not only that, we are told that good works is what God has prepared for us beforehand as a way of life.

There is no shortage of good works today to reflect the saving grace of a loving and merciful God. It is good work to speak truth to power. It is good work to care for the immigrant, to shelter the homeless, and fight for justice for the imprisoned. It is good work to provide food for the least of these, and work to negate food insecurity in our land. But good work is more than just talking about around a table or from a pulpit. Good work calls us to action. To be out of the walls of our churches and houses, and being the gift of love, grace, care and compassion in a hurting world.

The Rev. Pat Siegler
Zion Faith Community, Madison

March 18, 2018
Fifth Sunday of Great Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 51:1-12 Hebrews 5:5-10 John 12:20-33

Happy to Fight

Raoul Wallenberg was the Swedish Ambassador to Nazi occupied Hungary, arriving there in July of 1944. This young man was probably not quite prepared for what he would encounter. It was toward the end of the war and the Nazis were feverishly transporting Hungarian Jews toward extermination camps. His response was immediate. He produced thousands of Swedish Certificates of Protection and issued them to as many Jews as he could. He had safe houses in Budapest, protected by the Swedish flag. His heroic zeal saved tens of thousands of Jews. In writing home about all that he was doing, he told his parents that he was “Happy to fight.”

Could that not be our battle cry for Lent? Happy to fight. Fight against injustice, fight for the poor, the oppressed, the under privileged. In today’s Gospel, Christ suggests that he will sacrifice himself. Though not understood by the Apostles at the time, Christ’s plan was to take on death and give us Resurrection. In a way, he was “happy to fight.” His Resurrection empowers us to follow him.

Lent is a joyful time to plan and prepare for how we will follow Jesus in his fight against darkness. There are so many battles to be fought. All we have to do is pick one. Be involved with the Wisconsin Council of Churches in advocacy for affordable health care, fair treatment of immigrants, environmental health, and more. Your Pastor or WCC Representative has all the information you need. Subscribe to the WCC newsletter and find out for yourself.

The Psalmist in today's reading sings, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me." The Resurrection restores us; the power of the Holy Cross will sustain us in the fight for the Light. Let us always be "Happy to Fight."

Postscript

When the Soviet Army occupied Hungary, they arrested Wallenberg. He died in some gulag. No one is sure when he died or what happened to his body, but his example of joy lives on.

Fr. Yeprem Kelegian
Armenian Church of America (Eastern)

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11

In some ways, this final stretch of Jesus' earthly journey has been laid out for him. We know what will happen to him after he enters the city. Yet, Jesus is not passive here. He is not dragged into Jerusalem, nor does he sneak into the city hoping to hide from whatever awaits him. In fact, quite the opposite is true: Jesus gathers his disciples, gets on a colt, and moves forward with purpose – showing clarity and courage.

On this day every year, we wave our palm branches and sing Hosanna's to join with our ancestors in celebrating that the One who came to bring the fulfillment of God's unconditional love, justice, and peace has arrived in Jerusalem. With the same hopes experienced by those who stood there that day, we want his peace to reign in our world. This is what the palms and the shouting are all about. This is what all our singing and worshiping and preaching and praying are all about if they are about anything that matters: The hope that finally, by the grace of God, the impossible will happen. (Jan Richardson)

We hold on to hope that through the love of Christ, people will be healed, justice will prevail, and peace will be experienced in all hearts and places in cities filled with fear. We hold on to the hope that you and I also, each in our own small but crucial way, will pray and advocate for the things that make for peace. So, may this Palm Sunday be a day when we allow our faith to call us to prayer and action for our brothers and sisters who are being marginalized. Are we ready to enter Jerusalem with Jesus?

Rev. Ann Beaty
First Congregational UCC, Madison

March 25, 2018

Passion Sunday

Mark 14:1-15:47

Because many people do not attend services during Holy Week, it is important in some churches to address the passion narratives on Palm Sunday. In Mark's gospel, there are many directions one can go in preaching. According to Mark, there are several reasons why Jesus ended up on the cross. He was betrayed by his closest allies and also his enemies. But, despite the failings of those around him, Jesus did not shy away from moving on into what was to face him in his last

days. He carries on the themes we have seen throughout Mark's gospel of total commitment to loving the lost and those marginalized by society with his own self-giving love. This love is shown nowhere more strongly in that he holds no grudges against those who betray him.

In the end, Mark is clear that Jesus died because he chose to give his life for others. Mark's passion narrative is overall a drama to be explored again and again by those who are willing to consider how their own lives can be lived with the courageous and faithful theme of self-giving love even when the people involved are not easy to love.

For Reflection:

Read the passages slowly, noting what phrase or section calls your attention in this particular season? How does it stir your heart to pray? Does it call you to action in some way? Are there current people and situations brought to mind? Spend some time resting in silence, remaining open to any impressions from God. Who is God inviting you to be and what is God inviting you to do with this text?

Rev. Ann Beaty
First Congregational UCC, Madison

March 29, 2018
Holy Week Reflection – Maundy Thursday
John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

For I have set an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 13:15

It is often argued among theologians that we have gotten the sacraments wrong. Now I know there has been a lengthy discourse about how many sacraments there are and Catholics and Protestants may each make a good claim. But neither offer foot washing as a sacrament. But is this what Jesus is really saying? So much happens on this evening... passover, betrayal, foot washing, premonitions, commands, promises, deception.

If you have been in church long enough, you probably have experienced a foot washing at some point. Foot washing is about being humble and taking the time to clean an area often overlooked and calloused. Walking about in sandals and in desert areas, feet would be terribly dirty and need much more upkeep than perhaps are nicely socked and shod feet need today. So where is our moment of humility and service?

I volunteered once in the nursery at my home church and I will never forget it. There were two of us "adults" (I say that as we were both college kids who had little childcare experience) and a good amount of little kids. We had a bathroom in the nursery, but alas a young boy was using it, well he had failed to use it in time and the other adult was dealing with that situation. I was relieved until a little girl told me she had to go to the bathroom. I ended up taking her to another bathroom and in my naiveté just let her go in. I soon heard her shouting and I entered to find her pants-less and waiting for my help. I had no idea this was in my job description. I thought that if she could talk, she could take care of herself. In that moment of internal panic, I realized that I had to care for her, that was my role. I wiped her and helped her wash her hands and we headed back to the nursery. I now understood what it meant to serve someone else. I had no kids, no younger siblings, never babysat and never changed a diaper. But I knew how to care, how to serve, how to let go of my ego and do what was needed.

I think this is our command, let go of your ego. Do what you can to serve. You are not too good to bathe someone, wash a foot or walk a path with someone else. You are not above anybody. We all need help in this life, do not judge someone needing it and be able to provide it if possible. Get on your knees, get in the dirt. Your command is serve one another.

Rev. Katie Van Der Linden
Glenwood Moravian Community Church, Madison

April 1, 2018

A Resounding Victory

John 20:1-11(20)

Recall the exaltation the time your favorite team, as the saying goes, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat—a last second, hail-Mary pass for a come-from-behind win; a climatic, two-out, two-strike home run in the bottom of the ninth; a three-point shot in the air as the horn sounds for a one-point victory.

Recall the disciples. They had followed Jesus for three years, thinking that he was perhaps the long-expected Messiah. But after arrest and a rigged trial, he was crucified, the Roman death sentenced designed to terrorize the locals into submission. Their hopes dashed, the disciples hid.

Mary Magdalene first discovered the empty tomb and told Peter and John. After the men left, Mary hung around, weeping at the thought that Jesus' body had been removed and she did not know the location. Then she saw Jesus. She ran and told the disciples. That same evening, as the disciples were gathered in a locked room, Jesus appeared. When they saw who it was, they "rejoiced" (John 20:20).

I am surmising that "rejoiced" is an understatement. After the despair of seeing Jesus summarily taken from them, imagine their elation at seeing him standing in their midst, alive—a great victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.

We celebrate this great victory today. In Jesus, the reign of God is victorious over the ultimate enemy, namely death.

But resurrection is more than a victory to celebrate. It is also an invitation to all people to join themselves now to the story of Jesus, and to live in his life, and thus one-day to experience resurrection with him in the reign of God.

This is truly a victory to celebrate.

Dr. J. Denny Weaver, member of Madison Mennonite Church
and Professor Emeritus of Religion, Bluffton (Ohio) University

April 8, 2018

Easter 2

John 20:19-31

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

They disciples have locked themselves away. They are scared out of their pants. They saw what was done to Jesus and are now wondering if the same will be done to them.

I often find myself locking myself away. I do so physically, emotionally and psychologically. All as a means of avoidance. Usually because I don't want to get hurt or I am simply scared about a situation that I have made worse in my head than it really is. I don't really want to be vulnerable because being vulnerable means that I may get wounded. But to be authentic we have to be vulnerable, we have to be willing to have our feelings hurt, we may even have to take responsibility for something we have done wrong.

And yet, in the midst of locking myself away, Jesus shows up. Jesus passes through every barrier that I try to put up, he enters my heart and declares, "Peace be with you." It would be great if he ended with "Peace be with you." But no, Jesus has to add more, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Really, you're going to play that card? God sent you, and now you're sending me? That means I'm going to have to be vulnerable, it means that my faith is going to have to have legs, it means the world will have to reckon with Christians like you and me sent out to make a difference.

There's been another school shooting. This time in Florida. 17 people were killed and many more injured because of senseless gun violence. The children of the school are demanding more than prayers and kind thoughts. They are demanding that something be done. And they are right. Something needs to be done about the gun violence in our country. Stronger laws, background checks, education, eliminating assault weapons and longer waiting periods are just a few things we can work for. Jesus sends us out with peace and a strong voice. We should not have to lock ourselves away. We should not be scared. It is time to make a difference in the name of Christ who makes a difference for you and me.

Rev. Pat Siegler
Zion Faith Community, Madison

April 15, 2018
A Crucial Story
Acts 3.12-19

When explaining the source of the power for healing the lame beggar, Peter told the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Today's text is one of six such instances in Acts (including 2.14-36; 4.8-12; 5.29-32; 10.34-43; 13.16-41) that posit this story as the foundation of Christian faith, forgiveness of sins, and changed lives (see also, v.26). Whether asked who Jesus is or how his followers should act, the answer is the same: tell the story of Jesus. For contemporary Christians, that story is still (or should be) the beginning assumption for both theology and ethics.

Jesus' story is linked to the history of Israel. It is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who raised Jesus. The Jews who recognized Jesus as the Messiah—the Christ—were not rejecting Judaism. Rather, they were a continuation of Judaism, with Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. And as becomes clear in Acts 10, another new element is that gentiles are included in God's people. Or as Peter concludes this sermon in 3.25, in the story that began with Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." That reminder speaks loudly to our current debate about the status of refugees and immigrants.

Another point can be extrapolated from the acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah. Not all Jews believed that Jesus was Messiah. However, those who did and those who did not continued to worship together in church or synagogue for decades, without this disagreement resulting in one or the other being expelled for unbelief. Historians have never reached a consensus when this disagreement became final and resulted in mutual exclusion. Thus, without either side surrendering its belief, we could still be engaged in this discussion, but as an "in house" argument rather than one of mutual exclusion.

Dr. J. Denny Weaver, member of Madison Mennonite Church
and Professor Emeritus of Religion, Bluffton (Ohio) University

April 29, 2018
Fifth Sunday of Easter
1 John 4:7-21

In John 4:7-21, John continues with the the theme of God's love. Only a few weeks ago we celebrated Easter, a visible sign of God's love through the resurrection of Jesus. Love is the essential quality of God. God is love, as John reminds us. If we are to be the branches abiding in Jesus, the vine, then we must abide in love. Love must be our defining quality as well. John tells us clearly that we cannot love God if we hate our brothers and sisters.

It's easy to say, "Love one another," but what would that look like in the world we live in? First we must search our own hearts. Is the way we treat others based on love? Do we respond with love to others—even, or especially, those with whom we disagree?

Then, we must be bearers of God's love to a broken world. We must speak out for our brothers and sisters whose voices aren't being heard...maybe immigrants fearing deportation, or Muslims fearing backlash. We must support those voices raised for justice...people of color showing us the racism they live with daily but that is often invisible to whites, or the voices of youth advocating for measures to end gun violence so that no youth will ever have to experience the horror of another school shooting. Out of love for our brothers and sisters, we advocate for common sense measures that save lives by preventing guns being used in suicides or domestic violence deaths. Those are only a few of the issues challenging us to respond as recipients of God's love which compels us to also love those whom God loves.

Through God's love, we are empowered to bring healing and wholeness into the brokenness of the world...to be the branches that bear fruit.

Gloria Carter, Church Women United

May 6, 2018
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. (Acts 10:44-45)

In the verses that precede today's lectionary text, a dramatic, Spirit-led meeting has taken place between a Gentile and a Jew. In Caesarea, a centurion named Cornelius receives a vision from God in which he is told that God has heard his prayers, and God directs him to send for Peter. Meanwhile, in neighboring Joppa, Peter also receives a vision. In Peter's vision, God tells him to kill and eat a variety of animals considered unclean under Jewish dietary laws, and Peter refuses.

Amidst Peter's confusion over his vision, God also tells him to go without hesitation with the men who are searching for him. When Cornelius' men find Peter, he does not refuse God's request again. Peter goes with them and meets Cornelius. Through their conversation, Peter finally realizes that God does not deal in categories of clean and unclean—not with animals, and certainly not with people. In this way, Peter comes to believe that Jesus came to save Gentiles as well as Jews.

Peter's conversion might have ended here. It is, after all, a humbling and uncomfortable experience to recognize one is sorely mistaken, particularly when one is a leader. But Peter doesn't keep his learning to himself. God's radical love is too good not to celebrate, even if it means eating a bit of crow. So, Peter stands among the gathered assembly of Jewish believers and tells them that he now believes the gospel is for all people, not just for the people of Israel.

The astounding part of this story is that Peter's audience believes him. They Holy Spirit falls upon them, and they are thus able to see that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have been poured out "even on the Gentiles." A radical change of heart and mind is always possible, not only for each of us but for all who prefer to keep circles of privilege small. With the Spirit's help, our church communities can be courageous leaders in the ongoing work of expanding who is counted, included, and celebrated.

The Rev. Dorota Pruski, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Madison

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