

How Can We Sing

the Lord's Song

in a Foreign Land?



Isaiah xl: 1-9
Larghetto e piano (♩ - 80)

TEXOR SOLO
Com-fort ye, com -

- fort ye my peo-ple, com - fort ye,

a tempo
com - - fort ye

Creative Resources for Lent & Eastertide

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Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group intends to seek out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable, and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

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Seeds of Hope is housed by the community of faith at Seventh and James Baptist Church. The mailing address is 602 James; Waco, Texas 76706; Phone: 254/755-7745; Fax: 254/753-1909; E-mail: SeedsHope@aol.com.

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Material in this packet is for the use of the purchasing faith community to enhance worship and increase awareness in economic justice issues. ISSN 0194-4495

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How Can We Sing the Lord's Song in a Foreign Land?

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a word about this packet

These materials are offered to you on clean, unattached pages so that you can more easily photocopy anything you wish to duplicate. We are constantly looking for ways to make the pages more attractive and easier for you to photocopy. Feel free to copy any of this, including art, and adapt these tools to your needs.

The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We make a conscious effort to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams.

We are delighted to introduce you our new featured artist, Lara Luksis, a student at Woodway High School in Midway, Texas. You will find her art throughout these pages. The art design on the cover was inspired by Lenora Mathis and uses art by Lara Luksis, as well as a page from *The Messiah*. We also include creations from artists you have met before: Rebecca Ward (a University of Texas art student), Sally Lynn Askins (costume professor at Baylor University), Lenora Mathis (an Austin College art student), Nancy Cagle (an educator in Waco, Texas) and Peter Clark (a chaplain in Alameda, California). For sermons and meditations we have gone back to some preachers you have met in our pages—Brett Younger, Dawn Ripley, Ken Sehested, and Matthew Schobert.

A Brainstorming Session

from editors and friends

We are all in exile, in one way or another. We are all pilgrims; this world is not our home. Sometimes we feel more estranged than at other times. Now seems to be one of those times. Recent and impending world events seem to have cast a gloom over our lives, and Lent seems to be a good time to admit to those feelings and cast our laments before God.

We have taken our theme for the 2003 Lenten/Eastertide packet from Psalm 137:1-4: the lament of the exiled Hebrews in Babylon.

As I write these words, the haunting refrains of Stephen Schwartz's "On the Willows" (from *Godspell*) repeat themselves in my head:

*On the willows there
We hung up our lives,
For our captors there
Required of us songs
And our tormentor's mirth,
(repeat)
Saying, "Sing us one
Of the songs of Zion;
(repeat twice)
But how can we sing,
Sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land?*

We have gathered together what seems at first glance to be an eclectic group of resources. There isn't much material dwelling on the lament itself; the writings plunge right into dealing with the sense of exile and trying to turn it into reconciliation—and resurrection. We have also gathered a somewhat eclectic grouping of art, including that of our new featured artist, Lara Luksis. Our hope is that you will find materials that you can adapt to your own needs as your people come to terms with their own exile.

Some people are more exiled than others, however. We hope that your congregation will remember, in the midst of this gloom, those who are even more marginalized and left to suffer in many forms of exclusion. We have touched upon ways to respond to these as well as ways to find hope for all of us. Perhaps they are bound together.

In brainstorming visual and sensual "props" for this packet, we came to realize that we have no way of knowing what kind of exile your congregation experiences and witnesses. So we tried to think of ways to allow you to adapt these ideas to your own community. John Ballenger suggested some ways to point out that the nations of the world are on

the brink of war. It could be that, by Ash Wednesday, the United States might be at war.

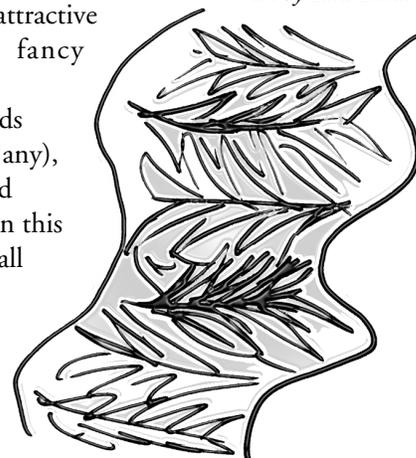
To respond to that within our theme, he suggested using the Christ candle (we use the one from Advent) or a peace candle in the middle of the altar table, surrounded by barbed wire or items that represent war. Or perhaps you might entwine flowers in the barbed wire to represent hope.

Another way of responding to unsettling world events would be to clip headlines from newspapers that threaten war or show how people are mistreating others in various ways. (This would be a great project for your youth.) Get some butcher paper or a large bulletin board and affix those clippings to it, along with scriptures you have found to respond to them—such as "Blessed are the peacemakers," "Love your enemies," "I was a stranger and you took me in," etc. You could also do this with hunger statistics.

John also suggested, as a way to portray the stranger in your midst, a tableau of several mannequins in which one is dressed differently from the others. Perhaps one is dressed poorly and the others sumptuously. Perhaps one is a female and the others male, or one is of a different ethnicity. Perhaps one is disabled or elderly. (You could also depict this by arranging clothing or other symbolic objects on a table or trestle, or on a bulletin board.)

In the fellowship hall (or the foyer, or a side of the sanctuary) you could set up a homeless person's abode surrounded by tables set for fine dining. A refrigerator box would serve as the person's "home," with shabby clothing or blankets arranged around or in it (and perhaps a shopping cart filled with "junk"). You could add a tin or aluminum bowl or styrofoam cup. Around the box you could place several card tables, set with tablecloths, attractive pottery or china, fancy centerpieces, etc.

Whatever visual aids you decide to use (if any), we hope you will find many helpful items in this packet, and may we all learn during this Lent and Eastertide how to sing the Lord's song in this foreign land, or anywhere.—lkc



The Voice in the Temple

This is the year that King Uzziah died.
There is brokenness and death all around us.
There is violence and injustice and hunger.
We have hatred in our hearts,
And we dwell in the midst of a people with hateful hearts.
We fear that our dreams and hopes are dying.
We believed that we were supposed to dream along with God,
But we wonder sometimes if it's worth all the pain.
We see evidence that the work is not in vain,
And we cling in the midst of our fatigue to those glimpses of truth,
We cherish those rumors of glory.
This is the year that King Uzziah died,
And we have come to the temple to weep.
We wait now to hear that word that will keep us going.
We wait to taste of the holiness of God,
The vision, high and lifted up.
We wait to hear that voice that we love so much.
Somewhere in the middle of our weeping we hear a question:
"Who will go out into a world such as this,
Where people suffer and die
And infant hopes are dashed against the rocks?"
And we search our hearts.
Are we ready for this task?
Are we worthy to go where God sends us?
Can we do this?
We feel too young. We feel too old.
We tend to stammer. We tend to fall down.
We each feel unfit in different ways.
But we have heard a voice, a beloved voice,
In the temple, where we went to weep.
This is the year that King Uzziah died,
And we have heard a voice in the temple.
May God give us grace,
May God give us courage,
May God keep us on the journey,
For we must go and tell the people what the voice has told us.
—Katie Cook

Fasting for Lent

The modern relevance of an ancient ritual

by Ken Sehested

When we hear the word “fasting,” the initial image is with dieting. To many, fasting is a foreign—even threatening—notation, conjuring thoughts of self-deprivation and ascetic mortification.

In Scripture, fasting is among the most common acts of religious piety. Yet it also comes in for severe judgment.

“Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not?” whined the people of Isaiah’s day. To which Yahweh thundered in response, “Is not this the fast that I choose: . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. . . ?” (Is. 58:6-7)

Similarly, in his only explicit listing of behavioral qualifications for entrance to heaven—when sheep will be sorted from goats—Jesus’ short list includes care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. No mention of fasting or any other form of “pious” behavior or doctrinal orthodoxy.

So why fast? If spiritual disciplines are not a means of bargaining with God—for a better deal here or a bigger

mansion later—why bother? Not because we are bad, although “unrighteousness” is a symptom of our predicament. But because we are blind, because we are “conformed” to the world’s way of doing business, and have lost sight of God’s intention.

Such loss of sight will not give way to moral vigor or heroic willfulness. If we are to regain our sight we need to develop personal and communal habits (another way of saying “spiritual disciplines”) which clarify vision, which remind us to Whom we belong and to Whose purposes we are called.

Fasting can be an effective tool for affecting appetites which are forever getting out of control.

The Struggle With Appetites

The struggle to control appetites is a pertinent issue for those of us who live within a wealthy, gluttonous culture. When 27,000 to 31,000 children die daily from starvation and nutrition-related diseases, the fact that our media is crowded with dieting ads is proof enough that something is wrong.

Uncontrolled appetite is identified by James as the root of war. “What causes wars? Is it not your passions”—your cravings, your appetites—“which are at war within you? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war” (4:1-2).

Seen in this light, personal and corporate cravings are interconnected afflictions. Fasting encourages us to acknowledge our own personal inclination to gluttony and gives us a remedial step toward restored health. It also helps us identify the gluttony in which we participate on a larger scale.

By fasting we sense the deeply spiritual roots of consumptive tendencies. We begin to understand the intimate connection between spiritual dysfunction and material distress.

Some Practical Suggestions

Want to experiment with fasting? Here are a few suggestions.

art by Peter Yuichi Clark



So why fast? If spiritual disciplines are not a means of bargaining with God—for a better deal here or a bigger mansion later—why bother?

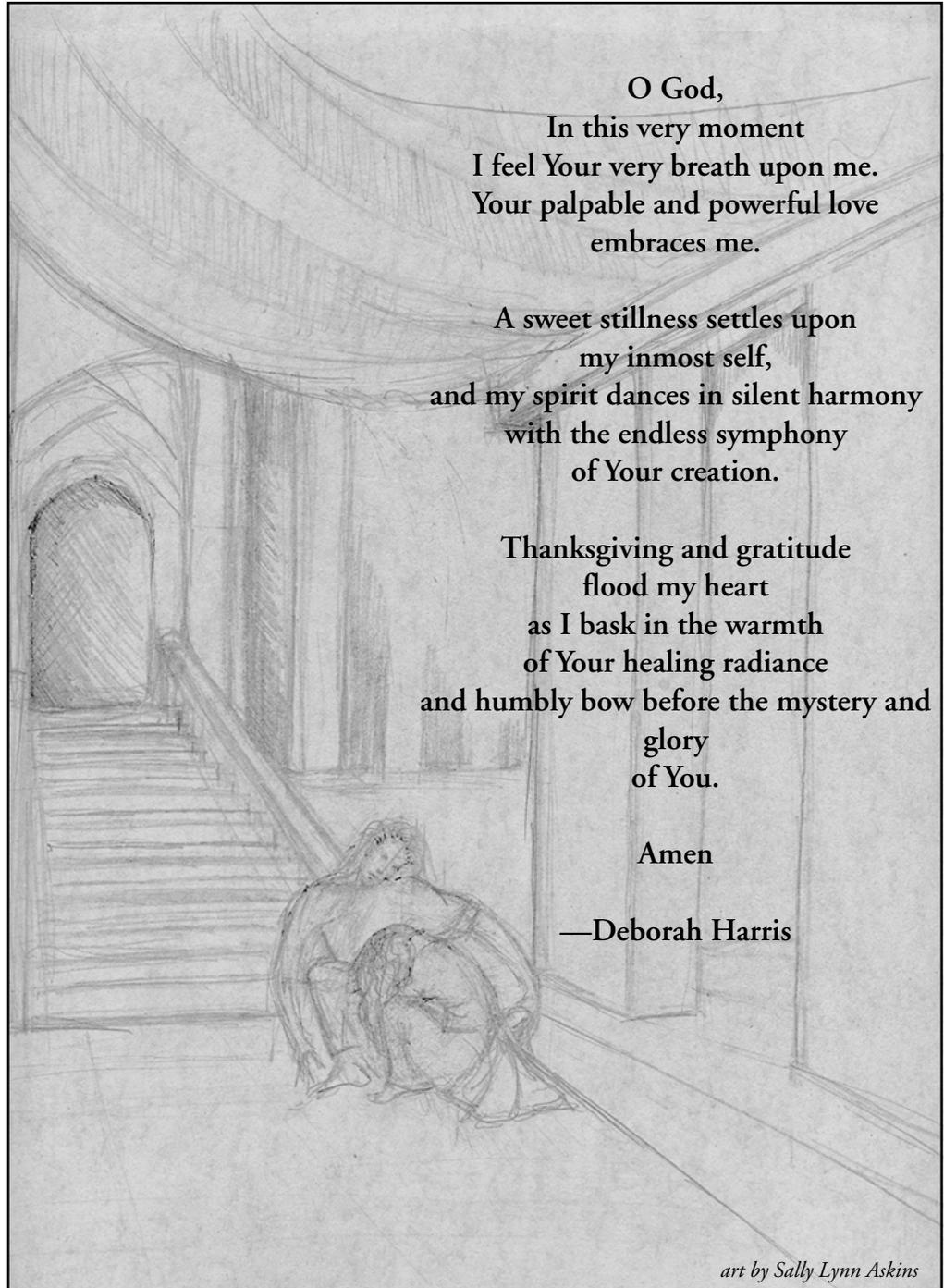
- As with physical exercise, begin modestly. A week of fasting, or even a full day, may be too big a step to begin. Try missing lunch during Lent, at least one day each week.
- Use that time to pray, to read Scripture or other devotional material. Clip newspaper accounts of violence and offer intercessory prayer. Begin your evening meal by mentioning these stories and offering prayer. If you have children, involve them.
- If physical health prevents you from skipping a meal, substitute appropriately: a bowl of rice, raw vegetables or a piece of fruit.
- Another way to fast: forego a certain kind of food or beverage during Lent: meat, sugar, caffeine, chocolate or alcohol. Or snacks between meals.
- Fast from certain other behaviors (or forge new ones). Put the television in the closet for Lent. Swear off the mall. If you work too many hours, reduce that schedule to free time for your family. Consider rising before dawn each morning to write in a journal or walk around your neighborhood, pausing to offer appropriate prayers: at neighbors' houses; at your local school; in front of neighborhood businesses; at the local health clinic.

Conclusion

Wherever you begin, make it a point of challenge, not fearfulness. The point of fasting from food is not calories. Rather, it is to gain control over our appetites.

Bringing personal habits under control, adjusting them so that they nudge us toward health rather than heart attack, toward life rather than death—these are reasons for fasting. And as we do this, we become aware of the need to bring public, corporate habits (policies) under control; we face the need for policies that nudge our nations toward health and life.

—Ken Sebested is a minister in Clyde, North Carolina. This material is reprinted from a bulletin insert produced by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.



O God,
In this very moment
I feel Your very breath upon me.
Your palpable and powerful love
embraces me.

A sweet stillness settles upon
my inmost self,
and my spirit dances in silent harmony
with the endless symphony
of Your creation.

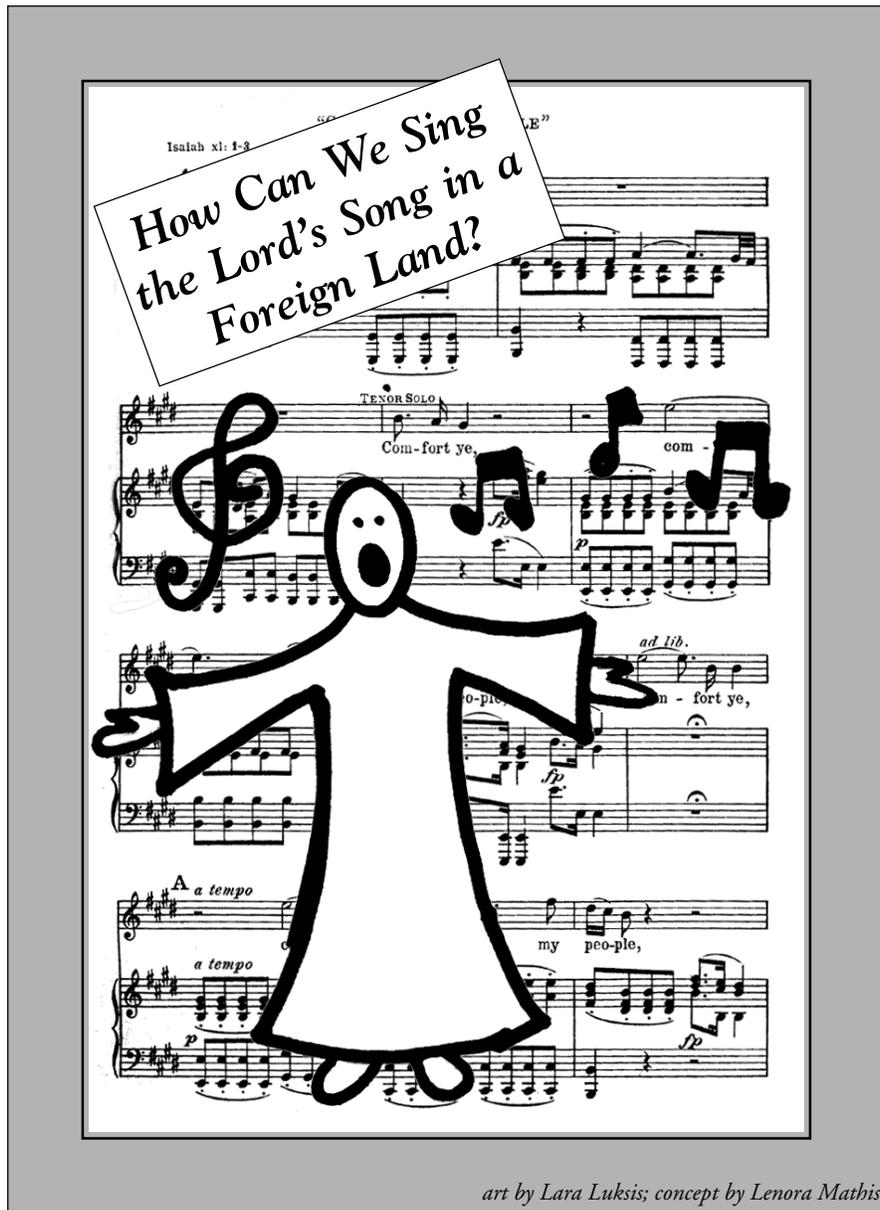
Thanksgiving and gratitude
flood my heart
as I bask in the warmth
of Your healing radiance
and humbly bow before the mystery and
glory
of You.

Amen

—Deborah Harris

art by Sally Lynn Askins

bulletin art



art by Lara Luksis; concept by Lenora Mathis

Prayers We Don't Pray

a sermon for Ash Wednesday

by Brett Younger

Text: Psalm 51:1-12

I finished the book, but it's still not finished with me. In *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene tells the story of a man he calls a whiskey priest. During a period of religious persecution, the priest is on the run in one of the southern states of Mexico. He's not a very good priest, because, like a lot of ministers, he's learned to compromise.

Greene writes: "The good things of life had come to him too early, the respect of his contemporaries, a safe livelihood. The trite religious word upon the tongue...the ready acceptance of other people's homage..."

The only other remaining priest, Padre Jose, avoids arrest by getting married and promising not to act as a priest. That leaves him in the eyes of the government, "a living witness to the weakness of faith." Jose takes a walk in the cemetery and comes upon a grave being dug. The mother of the child being buried recognizes the father and begs him to say a prayer.

"It's against the law," he says.

The mother begins to cry. "Not a whole service. Just a prayer. She was innocent."

"It's against the law," he begs her to leave him alone.

An old man standing there pleads: "You can trust us. It's just a short prayer. I'm her grandfather. This is her mother, her father. You can trust us."

Greene writes:

...But that was the trouble. He couldn't trust anyone...An enormous temptation came to the Padre to take the risk and say a prayer over the grave. He felt the wild attraction of doing one's duty and stretched a sign of the cross in the air; then fear came back. Safety waited for him. He knew he was in the grip of the unforgivable sin, despair.

The whiskey priest knows that his "years [are] littered with similar surrenders." He points out: "It's hard for a sleek and well-fed priest to speak of poverty." He recognizes that he's gotten good at appearing religious, and he wonders: "God might forgive cowardice and passion, but could God forgive the habit of piety?"

After running for weeks, the priest is asked to perform last rites for a dying man. He realizes that it's a trap. The police will arrest and execute him, but he goes anyway. As

he looks back on his life, Greene says:

...He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have taken a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.

The sentence that's still bothering me is this one: "It was no good praying any longer at all; prayer demanded an act and he had no intention of acting."

He didn't pray, because he didn't want to change. That's true for me far too often. Is it true for you? Do you avoid praying about the things which you have no intention of changing?

One night last week we had spaghetti for dinner. My wife, Carol, had made two sauces, one red and one white.

There's no end to the situations in which we avoid praying.

It smelled wonderful. French bread and green beans were on the table. It was Carol's turn to say grace. She prayed, "God, help us to know when we have eaten enough and to stop." How cruel does a person have to be to pray like that? There are some things we just don't pray about.

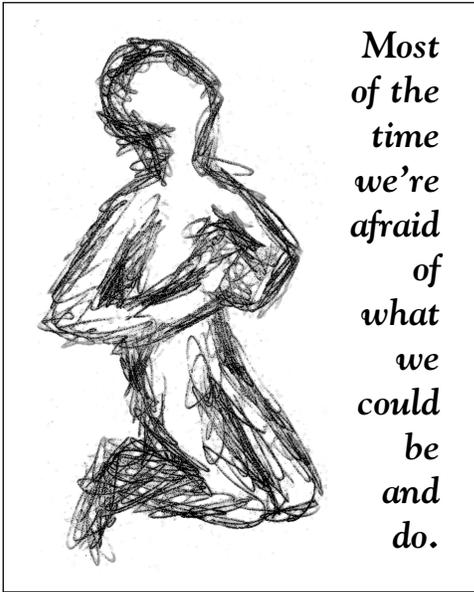
Hunger, for instance, is one of the subjects about which we've learned to be careful. If you pray too seriously for hungry people you'll end up skipping meals and sending money to Bread for the World. Last year after our world hunger emphasis, one of our members told me that he makes sure that he doesn't have cash in his wallet on world hunger day. He understands that if you're honest with yourself and with God about hunger, then you have to give something.

That's why most of us are careful not to pray too seriously for the homeless. It's awkward to pray for people

who have no home when we have empty guest rooms. After Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give it to the poor you can be certain that young man didn't go home and pray about it. If you pray for poor people, then you have to help.

One thing I don't pray about very often is my mail. Almost every day I get a request from someone for money. Almost all of them are worthy causes: the Christian Children's Fund, Habitat for Humanity, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, homeless shelters, Alzheimer's research. The message on the outside of the envelopes from Amnesty International reads, "You can help stop torture." That's almost not fair. None of us are in favor of torture. If you pray over that envelope you have to write a check.

We're usually careful when praying about international events. It's easy to say: "The situation in Zimbabwe is really



complicated. I don't know what we should do." But if we start praying about it, then God quickly reminds us that there are children whose lives have been destroyed and that the people who are helping need money. If we pray about it, we realize that there are things we could do that we haven't done.

There's no end to the situations in which we avoid praying. You're at a party and a huge, angry-looking man with bulging biceps tells a crude sexist joke. You know how evil that is and you wish someone would point it out to him, but do you really want to pray, "God, what should I do? Should I challenge this bully who might not take kindly to my helpful words of correction?" Sometimes we're sure we don't want God's guidance on what we should do.

We almost always avoid praying about things that we don't want to change. It's frightening to pray about our careers. Does the senior pre-law major about to graduate want to pray about whether God would like for her to be a

social worker? Does the successful businessperson want to ask God if a lower paying job might make more of a contribution to the world? Like many of you, I like my job. If I prayed with openness to changing occupations, God might tell me to keep doing what I do, but that's not a chance I'm very willing to take.

We're careful about praying for the big stuff. We know it would be dangerous to pray for children who need to be adopted. We're careful about praying for small stuff. You're planning on going to a movie with some friends when a child asks you to spend time with her. If you pray about it you may miss the movie.

We're especially careful about praying for people we don't like. Think of your nemesis—the person whose presence bothers you the most, who gets on your nerves and probably always will. It might be a family member from whom you are estranged or someone at work whose transfer you would be happy to recommend. For most of us our nemesis is the last person for whom we want to pray. When Jesus said "Pray for your enemies" he was inviting us to pray the kind of prayer that will change our attitudes and our actions and may lead us to say something kind that we don't want to say.

Most of the time we're afraid of what we could be and do. In so many ways, we choose a life given to comfort over a life given in prayer. It's easier to live by the same rules everyone else follows and strive for the same version of the good life that everyone else wants. We like what we have—including the vices we've gotten used to and the enemies we've chosen. We don't avoid praying because our prayers go unanswered. We're afraid our prayers will be answered. We try not to see our potential, because we know far more grace than we share.

We've learned to pray: "God, make me a better person, but not so much better that I'll have to change the way I live." James Forbes, the pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, recently confessed: "If I don't stop just talking about helping the poor and start doing something to help the poor I'm going to be embarrassed to meet God." Prayer is hard because we don't want to start doing what God invites us to do or stop doing what we've gotten used to doing.

King David went a long time without really praying. One afternoon a look turned into lust and David didn't pray about it. The lust turned into manipulation and David acted in ways that he never would have considered if he'd had the courage to pray. David was able to keep from admitting what he had done or what he needed to do for a long time. He didn't pray, because he didn't want to face up to the harsh realities.

Psalms 51 is the cry of a person who had to struggle to find the courage to pray. The amazing thing about this Psalm

is that for all of its agony, there's also a sense of relief. What David has ignored for so long is finally brought out into the open. It couldn't have been any easier for David to tell the truth about himself than it is for any of us. There is no

painless way to stop protecting your easy life and be honest to God. And yet this prayer leads to joy.

When Paul writes to the church at Ephesus and tells them to put on the whole armor, the shield, the helmet, and the sword, he ends the letter by writing that they can only do all this with prayer. Prayer is the battlefield

Psalm 51 in Song

Lynn Parks

Create in Me
 Create in me a clean heart and wash away all the guilt of my sin
 Give to me, Lord, a new start and let me sense your Spirit again. For
 I have been faithless, I've been un-true, I've sought to please myself in-
 stead of pleasing you. No other sa-cri-fice will
 Change who I am wash me white as snow in the blood of the Lamb
 o-pen my lips to sing your praise from all my guilt let
 us find re-lease. Make me a witness to your grace fill all my heart with
 your joy and peace.

—Lynn Parks chairs the English department at the Texas State Technical College in Lacy-Lakeview, Texas. He also pastors a small church in Peoria, Texas.

How long has it been since you prayed with courage? When was the last time you prayed about anything that makes you uncomfortable?

on which we fight our fears. Paul writes this letter from prison. He's there because he has been brave enough to pray, and brave enough to do what he knew was right.

When you think about the most courageous Christians you know, the ones who make sacrifices for their faith, do you feel sorry for them, or is it clear that they have something we should want? People who pray don't have easy lives, but they have abundant lives. God has dreams for us that we've been afraid to imagine. We have undiscovered talents and untapped resources.

So what would be the result if we prayed for hurting people, for the victims of tragedies, and for our enemies? What would happen if we made a searching and fearless inventory of how much more we could be if we asked God for the courage to take some chances?

Who's to say exactly what would happen, but we might: know when we've eaten enough and stop; take a bag to a food pantry every week; open our home to someone who needs help; write a check to help refugees; stand with someone who's always being put down; see our enemy with compassion; hear God inviting us to a different job or a different life; end up a little less comfortable and a little more saintly.

How long has it been since you prayed with courage? When was the last time you prayed about anything that makes you uncomfortable? What would happen if we asked God right now, "What should we do?"

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas and a frequent contributor to Seeds worship resources. Quotes in this sermon are from Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

Spirits Collide:

A Conversation With Isaiah 35

a reading for a people in exile

by Ken Sehested

FIRST READER: O God, I am frightened. Anxious are my waking hours and fretful is my sleep. Even as I pray I sense that desert sands in remote places are readied, eager to bleach the bones of mothers' sons, fathers' daughters, children of us all. The corrupt, lustful glory of vain rulers now erupts across parched land. Hear our prayer, O Lord.

SECOND READER: *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.*

FIRST READER: O Lord, if only my hands were powerful enough to shape a new future. If only my legs could run, run and tell, tell of mercy, of kindness. My heart trembles within me, shaking my flesh, shaking the earth. Is no one to hear, to rescue, to avert this bloodletting? Have hearts so hardened, more brittle than crusts of bread?

THIRD READER: *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. The Lord will come and save you."*

FIRST READER: God come! Come and see. Come and hear!! None see. None hear. Blindness rages like a wounded lion; deafness sears shut the mouths of ancients. No music swells, except that of rhythmic cannon. No water flows for parched bodies, souls. All laughter is of ravenous jackals. All life is grass.

FOURTH READER: *Then the eyes of the blind shall open, and the ears of the deaf be unstopped; then shall the*

lame leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

FIRST READER: Fools are confirmed: there is no God. None but the vengeful escape. Holy Ways and Holy Days are crushed to gravel. Ransom comes as human flesh, bargained for gold (or oil). Joy is mocked; gladness, a sneer. Sorrow, sadness is all I hear. Those who know say Zion is won only by the barrel of a gun. Is it really so? Tell me, if you can, if you will, if you know: What road is this?

SECOND READER: *And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

FIRST READER: Tell me, if you can, if you will, if you know: What road is this?

THIRD READER: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

ALL READERS: Hear our prayer, O Lord. Incline thine ear to us, and grant us thy peace. Amen.

Ken Sehested is a minister in Clyde, North Carolina. This meditation was originally printed in the Spring 1991 issue of Baptist Peacemaker.

Things to Do During Lent

a sermon for the first Sunday in Lent

by Ken Sehested

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

Today's text—Matthew's account of Jesus' sojourn in the desert, being tempted by the "devil," "Satan," more comprehensively referred to as the "Deceiver"—is laden with drama not obvious to the casual reader.

This story comes immediately after the account of Jesus' immersion by John the Baptizer. The two are blood relations, since Mary, Jesus' mom, and Elizabeth, John's mom, were related. Maybe second cousins. But the two men knew each other, maybe played together as children. And now their relationship was entering a new and profoundly different chapter.

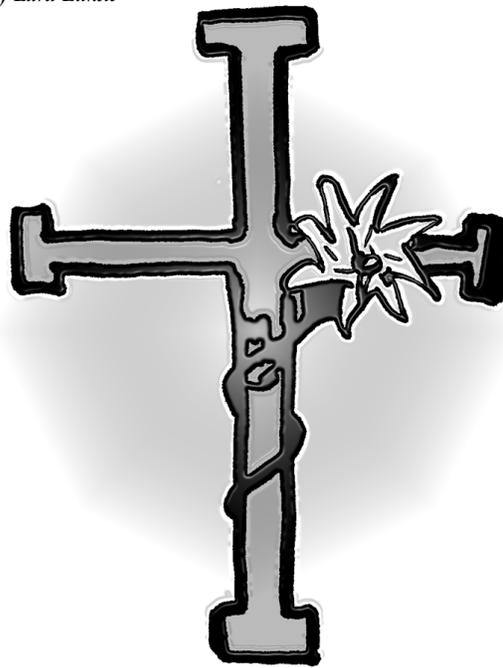
At his baptism, the text records that the Spirit of God from heaven descended like a dove, very much like the dove which appeared to those survivors on the ark who, after the flood waters began to recede, found evidence of dry land. A new beginning; starting over. The ascent of the dove also reminds me of the warning from Clarence Jordan: "The dove doesn't roost on a person who is scared to get hurt. If you want to share the life of Christ, you should be prepared for the suffering of Christ."

And then a voice from heaven proclaims: "This is my Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased." Embedded in that announcement is language recalling God's statement on the original Sabbath day, when creation was finished. "And God said, 'It is good.'" The promise of God's goodness infecting creation are reasserted.

Among the more significant details in today's text, however, is the conversation between Jesus and the Deceiver. What we tend to miss is the fact that the assertions which the Deceiver makes in his temptations are actually quotes from Hebrew Scripture, which we Christians call the older testament. Satan is quoting the Bible to Jesus! Which only goes to show that there are times when the words of the Bible are not the Word of God.

Then there's the reference to 40 days in the desert. For ancient people, numbers weren't simply functional tools for counting but rather rhetorical devices for assigning significance. This story of Jesus' wandering in the desert draws forward the drama of the ancient Hebrews' 40 years of stumbling between Pharaoh's brick yards and the promised land of milk and honey. Life starting over, as with Noah, as with Hebrew slaves.

art by Lara Luksis



The traditional emphases and disciplines of Lent are intensely personal but not merely private. The depths of our hearts are connected with the depths of the world. The brokenness of our personal lives is profoundly bound up with the brokenness of creation itself.

And it all happens in some kind of desert, whether of sand and rock or of water, a place where illusions are stripped bare, where the powers of disorientation force us to recognize that our petty systems of security, of conceited self-confidence in building our own future, come under withering attack. And we realize that, in order to receive the Gift of new life that is promised, we must relinquish the impulse to control—which is, in fact, the impulse to violence, to shaping reality in our own image.

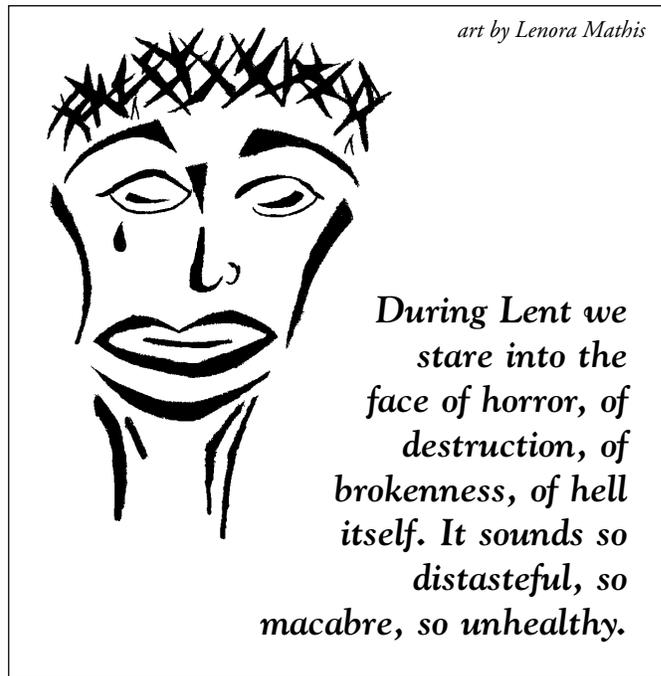
Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, which inaugurates the season. Many Christians throughout the world have their foreheads smudged with ashes in the form of a cross as a ritual reminder of what is to come for Jesus—and for all of us, in larger or smaller ways, who follow him. The Lenten season continues on to Holy Week when, on “Good Friday,” we commemorate Jesus’ final confrontation with the powers, a confrontation which led to his imprisonment, torture and crucifixion—a form of execution reserved by Roman law for political subversives.

Lent is a time to empathize with Jesus and the disciples, as their world shatters and their dreams become nightmares. Lent is a time to peer into the dark recesses of our own souls:

- to become aware of how utterly dependent we are;
- to see how meager are our resources for survival;
- to realize how quickly our ordered and secure lives could become disordered and insecure;
- to ponder the option of relaxing our grip on self-sufficiency, on all that seems so necessary to life and liberty in such a way that our hands are freed, able to accept the promise of new life, abundant life, life not subject to threat from any quarter. Life in the Spirit.

The traditional emphases and disciplines of Lent are intensely personal but not merely private. The depths of our hearts are connected with the depths of the world. The brokenness of our personal lives is profoundly bound up with the brokenness of creation itself. The logic of focused attention to personal repentance is not private holiness but the healing of “the earth and all who dwell therein.”

During Lent we stare into the face of horror, of destruction, of brokenness, of hell itself. It sounds so distasteful, so macabre, so unhealthy. Is Lent about self-torture? About masochism? Is it is time to frighten children with tales of God’s stern expectations? A time to encourage anxiety? Could God be such a monstrous prison warden who takes pleasure in our punishment?



art by Lenora Mathis

During Lent we stare into the face of horror, of destruction, of brokenness, of hell itself. It sounds so distasteful, so macabre, so unhealthy.

No. Lent is a time:

- to remember that God is present at the breaking points, that “the way of the cross leads home,” that death itself will one day be undone just as Jesus was resurrected as the first-fruits and pioneer of God’s redemptive drama;
- to clarify vision and clear ears in order to see and hear the sights and sounds of the Spirit’s work amid the ashes of this present Order;
- to engage the disciplines of readiness, of emptying hands of “every weight and sin that clings closely” so that we might be able to “run with perseverance the race set before us”;
- to ready ourselves so that—when the time comes, in modest or ambitious ways—we are available to practice resurrection wherever we are located.

—Ken Sebested is a minister who lives and works in Clyde, North Carolina.

Bookmark



Giving Away Our Lives
 Giving our lives away may mean:
 turning the other cheek; standing
 with the people who are losing;
 doing good that will receive no
 applause; sitting in a home where
 someone has died; treating
 discarded people as children of
 God; shopping for someone else’s
 groceries; baking cookies that we
 won’t eat; reading stories to
 someone else’s children; taking
 flowers to someone who’s not our
 type; visiting someone else’s mother
 in the nursing home; walking
 someone else’s dog; watering
 someone else’s plants; washing
 dishes we didn’t dirty; discussing
 current events that don’t interest us;
 sending cards when we don’t know
 what to write; talking about faith
 when we would rather be silent;
 doing good for people who will do
 no good to us in return; weeping
 when others weep; praying not for
 an easier life, but for strength to
 give our lives away; discovering that
 if there’s nothing for which we
 would die, then we don’t have
 enough for which to live.

—Brett Younger

Extreme Followers

a litany for early Lent

LEADER: Was not Jesus an extremist in love?

PEOPLE: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you."

LEADER: Was not Amos an extremist for justice?

PEOPLE: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

LEADER: Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ?

PEOPLE: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

LEADER: Was not Martin Luther an extremist?

PEOPLE: "Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me."

LEADER: Was not John Bunyan an extremist?

PEOPLE: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience."

LEADER: Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist?

PEOPLE: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free."

LEADER: Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist?

PEOPLE: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all humans are created equal."

LEADER: So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be.

PEOPLE: Will we be extremists for hate—or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for cause of justice?

LEADER: God help us to be what we need to be.

—adapted from a passage found in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Prayer to an Outrageous God

by Matthew Schobert

Dear God, you are outrageous. You do the inexplicable—you forgive us our sins. You ask of us the unimaginable—to be a confessing community in eager anticipation of the coming of your kingdom. As we embark on the adventure of worship, continue doing the unexpected among us and through us. Jostle us, O Lord, into being a people who dare to take seriously the implications of life in the Realm of God.

May we be extreme in our love for you and for our neighbors, wherever and whomever they may be; may we be extreme in our efforts to pursue justice for victims and those who suffer, both from the things we have done and the things we have left undone; and may the Holy Spirit sustain us with the most revolutionary hope of all, a hope that is at once both terrifying and joyous, the coming of Christ and the re-creation of all things, whether on the earth or in the heavens.

In the Name of the One who came, who reigns, and who is to come again, Amen.

—Matthew Schobert is the associate director for Baylor University's Center for Christian Ethics.

art by Lara Luksis



Quotes, Poems, & Pithy sayings

Cross Words

be not my distraction
rather
my attraction
my comfort.

hold me to you
as i follow this path.

creak and groan
as the pain of truth
pierces my heart
and hands
and feet.

wood that i embrace you
as you have me
you are here
you are there
where i am.

—Deborah Lynn

art by Nancy Cagle

Alongside Babylon's rivers
we sat on the banks; we cried and cried,
remembering the
good old days in Zion.

Alongside the quaking Aspens
we stacked our unplayed harps;
That's where our captors demanded songs,
sarcastic and mocking:
"Sing us a happy Zion song!"
Oh, how could we ever sing God's song
in this wasteland?
—*Psalm 137:1-4*, The Message

By the waters of luxury
we sat and tried to sing again;
Hung our harps on the traffic signs
Because the music would not come.
In our capital captivity

Heated and cooled by central air
In an alien land that we made for ourselves
We tried to remember home.

Did we really forget so soon
We were strangers in a foreign land
Sent as insurgents by the Prince of Peace
To work for Kingdom come?
Were we seduced by the enemy
And taught to play in the oppressor's band?
And did the wrangling and the jangling drown
The sound of the songs of home?
—*Ken Medema*, Kingdom in the Streets

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."
—*Mohandas K. Gandhi*

We must be wise not to fall into the negative flow that can be poetically worded to entice us into sinister plots. It is not ours to dominate or be dominated. Ours is to love others—but we cannot do it until we have learned to love ourselves.
—*Joyce Sequichie Hifler*, A Cherokee Book of Days

The message of the Bible is...that into the confusion of [the human] world, with its divisions and hatred, has come a message of transforming power, and those who believe it will experience within themselves the power that makes for reconciliation and peace on earth...
—*Thomas Merton*

I have a dream that one day, in the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood... This is our hope. This is our faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.
—*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

art by Lara Luksis

The dawn breaks. Day lies ahead. One thinks on a journey of those things past, and what the future might become. Between the places—coming from and going to—lies a peaceful hope. Not a longing but a quiet hour. Thinking of the faces that make the journey soft, the winter becomes simply a moment of transition waiting for the deliverance of spring.

—*Marc Ellis*, A Year at the Catholic Worker



Is Anything Worth Dying For?

Thoughts for Holy Week

by Brett Younger

I've forgotten which war they were protesting, but I remember the words on the sign: "Nothing is worth dying for." The person carrying the placard was cynical, honest, and representative of prevailing sentiments. Death has an increasingly bad reputation. Woody Allen spoke for most when he said: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying."

Death is considered the greatest enemy. If asked, "Is there any idea for which you would die?" wouldn't you guess that fewer people would answer "yes" today than fifty years ago? When we say that someone has a "martyr complex" we mean that he or she has an unhealthy attitude toward life. The implication is that people who are willing to die must be mentally unbalanced, because the ultimate value for healthy people is their own life.

This season is given to the remembrance of a person who believed there was something of more value than his own life. Jesus died for the sake of truth. He held onto his vision of God as a loving parent—even at the cost of his own life.

Lent ends with an execution. People gather at the feet of the victim to ask the hard questions raised by his death: Is anything worth dying for? Are there people for whom we would die? Would we die for a belief or a hope? If we were going to die tomorrow, then what would we do today? If we had only one truth for which to give our lives what would it be? How should the certainty of our death lead us to live?

The root meaning of the word *martyr* is "witness." The implication is that when people die for what they



believe, they've said something important that we need to hear. Many of those who listened at the cross believed that they heard that the best they could do was give their lives to the God of hope, no matter what the cost.

In a strange way, believing that there are values greater than our own life and coming to terms with our impending death helps us live. It's okay to be afraid of dying, but we should be even more frightened by an incomplete life.

Our day-to-day decisions aren't likely to lead to martyrdom, but each day we have to decide if we will give away our time and attention. Giving our lives away may mean: turning the other cheek; standing with the people who are losing; doing good that will receive no applause; sitting in a home

where someone has died; treating discarded people as children of God; shopping for someone else's groceries; baking cookies that we won't eat; reading stories to someone else's children; taking flowers to someone who's not our type; visiting someone else's mother in the nursing home; walking someone else's dog; watering someone else's plants; washing dishes we didn't dirty; discussing current events that don't interest us; sending cards when we don't know what to write; talking about faith when we would rather be silent; doing

good for people who will do no good to us in return; weeping when others weep; praying not for an easier life, but for strength to give our lives away; discovering that if there's nothing for which we would die, then we don't have enough for which to live.

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas and a frequent contributor to *Seeds worship resources*.

Is anything worth dying for? Are there people for whom we would die? Would we die for a belief or a hope? If we were going to die tomorrow, then what would we do today? If we had only one truth for which to give our lives what would it be? How should the certainty of our death lead us to

Three Monologues for Children

Note: In our 2000 Lenten/Eastertide packet, we printed instructions and suggested monologues for what we called an Easter Walk for children. In this activity, the children were given empty baskets and led to different locations on the church property. In each location they heard an account of someone who saw what Jesus did and were given a small token to remind them of the story. In each case, they had “just missed” Jesus. The speakers included a boy whose donkey the followers took for the entry into Jerusalem, a woman who saw the cleansing of the temple, a servant who observed the last supper, a woman in the Garden of Gethsemane, Pilate’s scribe, Barabbas, and three women at entrance to the empty tomb. (Contact us for a complete copy of the 2000 Easter Walk instructions and scripts.) Below we offer, with the help of Mark McClintock, three new monologues that can be used with an Easter Walk or separately. They are especially written for children to hear, but they can be adapted to wider audiences.

Mary of Nazareth and John the Apostle

JOHN: Did you guys see what just happened? Did you see them force Jesus up the hill to be crucified? No? Well, the story must be told.

It was awful. After the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to be crucified, they made Jesus join two other criminals—thieves, someone told us—who were also to be executed and they made him carry this big wooden cross up to a hill they call “The Place of the Skull.” Sounds scary, doesn’t it? It is! Once they arrived, they put Jesus on the wooden beams, in the middle between the two criminals.

MARY: John and I were standing nearby and heard Jesus say, “Forgive them, Father, for they don’t know what they’re doing. Even as they were killing him, my son prayed for his enemies.

JOHN: While he was hanging there, the soldiers were throwing dice, dividing his clothes between them. People were pointing and laughing at Jesus, telling him that if he was the Son of God, he could save himself and other things like that. It was hard to listen to that.

I also heard Jesus talking to the criminals beside him. One made fun of Jesus, and he said, “If you really are the Messiah, save us all!” But the other one said to him, “We have been punished properly for what we have done wrong. But this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Please don’t forget me when you enter your kingdom.” Then Jesus turned to him and said, “Today you will be in Paradise with me.” That was pretty amazing.

What happened next was very strange. It was only twelve noon and the entire sky turned black for three whole hours. Right in the middle of the day! When the sun came back out, Jesus looked up to the heavens and said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That was the first time I ever saw Jesus question God. That was really frightening for me.

MARY: Do you know what the last thing he said to me was? He looked at me and John, who was standing next to me, and said to me, “Woman, here is your son.” Then Jesus said to John, the one he loved, “Here is your mother.” I believe Jesus wants us to take care of each other, but he especially wants John to take care of me. He was worried about me, even through all his pain.

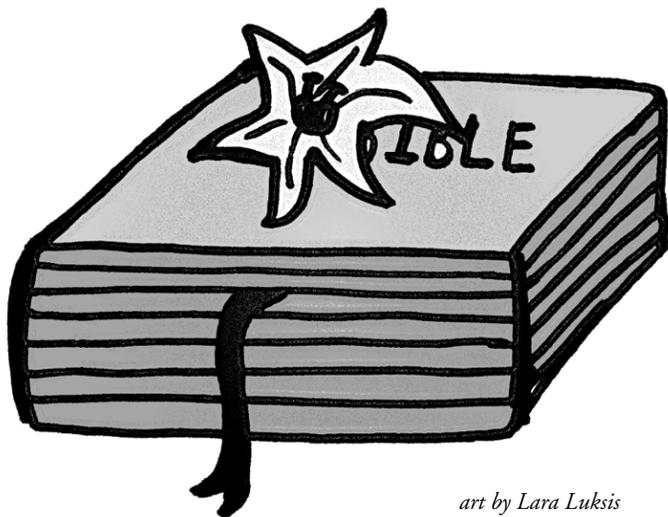
JOHN: After Jesus said that, we heard him say he was thirsty. A soldier soaked a sponge in some sour wine, poured it over Jesus’ head and he drank it. Jesus’ last words were, “It is finished,” then he bowed his head and died.

Right as he died, the curtain that hung at the top of the temple tore in half. The earth shook, like an earthquake, and like a huge storm at the same time.

I guess I’ll take Mary home now. This is a very sad time for us. I don’t understand why this had to happen. *(You might give the children cinnamon-stick crosses to help them remember your story.)*

Mary of Bethany

My name is Mary, and I live in Bethany—that’s a small town right outside Jerusalem—with my sister Martha and my brother Lazarus. You may remember stories about how my brother died and Jesus brought him back to life. Really!! And there was another time that I was listening to Jesus teach and my sister got mad at me for not doing the housework. But Jesus took up for me. But I bet you all



art by Lara Luksis

want to hear about the night Jesus and his disciples came to dinner at our house. Yes? I knew it! Everyone wants to hear about it, especially since I poured a really expensive jar of perfume on his head and feet, and everyone thought I was crazy. But I'm not crazy....I just had a really strong feeling that it was the right thing to do. And I still think it was right.

About six days before Passover, I was helping Martha prepare for dinner one night when there was a knock at the door; and who do you think it was? It was Jesus and the disciples! We had heard that Jesus had been in Jerusalem, so we were hoping that he would come to our house. Fortunately we had made plenty of food, so we helped them wash their hands and put the food on the table.

As they started to eat, I thought to myself, "This is Jesus—the teacher whom I loved, and who everybody was saying was the Messiah—eating at our table! Surely there is something special I can do for him." I got up and ran into my bedroom as fast as I could and got an alabaster jar filled with an expensive ointment my father had given to me as a little girl. I was so pleased with my idea that I ran up behind him, broke the alabaster bottle of ointment, and poured the perfume all over his head and his feet.

While I was washing his feet with my hair—that's how someone like me shows how much we love someone—I could hear some of the disciples complaining. Judas was getting angry at me for not selling the perfume and giving the money to the poor. I guess I could have done that; I know Jesus said to do all we could for the poor.

But you know what? Jesus defended me. Me! He said, "Leave her alone; why are you giving her a hard time? She is performing a good service for me. There will always be poor men and women around you can give money to, but I will not always be around. This woman, Mary, has done all she can, she has anointed me in preparation for my death. Whenever my story is told, let her story be told as well in remembrance of her."

Can you believe that? He stood up to his own disciples for me. He took up for me—again. I didn't like what he was saying about dying, but I really didn't understand all of that at the time.

(You might give the children small perfumed bath oil balls to help them remember your story.)

Pilate's wife

I don't know exactly how to begin to tell you what just happened here.

A few hours ago, the chief priests and Jewish police brought a man named Jesus of Nazareth to my husband, the governor, Pontius Pilate. They wanted my husband to convict Jesus of some sort of crime and have him sentenced to death.

Pontius took Jesus into another room and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and all Jesus said was, "That's what you say." Pontius couldn't believe that the Jews actually wanted this man killed simply because he called himself the King of the Jews!

Pontius went back out to the police and told them, "I have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him." Then he sent him to Herod, the Jewish prince who had charge over Galilee, where this Jesus was from. Pretty soon, though, he was back in our courtyard. Herod had sent him back; I'm not sure why.

My husband was frustrated; he didn't know what to do. I heard him say to the crowd, "This man has done nothing to deserve death. I will have him beaten with whips and then release him." The priests and police did not like this at all; it wasn't enough.

There were several prisoners waiting to be crucified that day—many of them were Jewish. Pontius went out to the crowd and announced that he would release one of the prisoners because it was Passover, a Jewish holiday. He assumed that the crowd would choose this Jesus to be released—we thought the common people loved him. But to his surprise, they asked for a murderer name Barabbas. A murderer!

I don't know why, but they wanted Jesus crucified. They began to get very angry and their voices got louder and louder. Pontius kept asking them, "Why? What evil has he done?" But the crowd continued to chant, "Crucify him!" I think the priests had bribed the people to say that. Poor Pontius sat in his judgment chair with his head in his hands. He didn't know what to do.

I was watching and listening from inside our house, and I was TERRIFIED. You see, I had a dream last night about that very same man. I knew that there was something special about him, and I didn't want my husband to have anything to do him. I sent him a note, hoping my words would convince him to let the man go. The note said: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man. I had a dream about him, and I am very, very frightened."

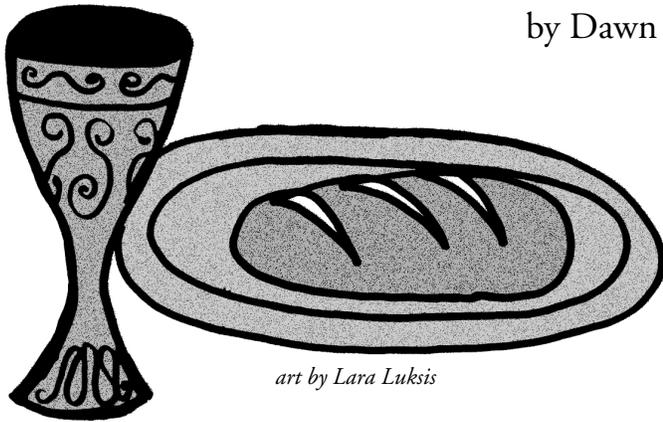
When Pontius finally realized he had to do what the crowd asked or else there would be a riot, he took some water and washed his hands in front of the crowd—see there? That's the bowl he used. (Picks up the towel) And this is where he wiped his hands. He said, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And the crowd responded with, "Let his blood be on our hands!" So Pontius sentenced Jesus to be crucified.

I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know much about this man, but I feel so sad and frightened about him going to his death like that. I know he didn't deserve it. *(You might give the children squares of flannel cloth to help them remember your story.)*

Practicing Resurrection

a service of word and table for Eastertide

by Dawn M. Ripley



art by Lara Luksis

Prelude

“Amazing Grace” in Navaho and Sioux,
from Primeaux and Mike’s *Walking in Beauty*

Invitation to Worship

(Ringing of a Tibetan singing bowl)

Call to Worship from the Four Corners

Four women read this poem dramatically from their stations at the four corners of the chapel to represent the four corners of the earth, after the Native American tradition.

FIRST WOMAN: Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

SECOND WOMAN: So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.

THIRD WOMAN: Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what we
have not encountered we have not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.

FOURTH WOMAN: Call that profit.
Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion—put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

ALL READERS: Practice resurrection.

*(from “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”
by Wendell Berry, farmer/poet)*

Hymn of Praise

“For the Beauty of Meadows”

Antiphonal Prayer of Praise

LEFT: “The Earth is a sparkling blue and white jewel laced
with slowly swirling veils of white like a small pearl in a
thick sea of black mystery.” (Edgar Mitchell, U.S. astronaut)
ALL: “All creation is a song of praise to God.” (Hildegard of
Bingen, Christian mystic)

RIGHT: “O moving force of Wisdom, you encircle the
wheel of the cosmos, you encompass all that is, all that has
life, in one vast circle.” (Hildegard)

ALL: “All creation is a song of praise to God.”

LEFT: “It could be that God has not absconded but spread,
as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread,
to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, powerful
in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem.”
(Annie Dillard)

ALL: “All creation is a song of praise to God.”

RIGHT: “Stardust is not just fairy-tale magic; it is what we
are really made of. . . .” (Elisabeth Sahtouris, ecofeminist)

ALL: “All creation is a song of praise to God.”

LEFT: “Great Spirit, give me the strength to walk the soft
earth, a relative to all that is! All over the earth the faces of
living things are all alike. This is my prayer; hear me!” (Black

Elk, Oglala Sioux)

ALL: "All creation is a song of praise to God."

RIGHT: "There is not anything new to be born. It has been within you from the beginningless beginning. It has only to be awakened, to become aware of itself in you." (Zen aphorism)

ALL: "All creation is a song of praise to God."

LEFT: "...for in God we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17: 28)

ALL: "All creation is a song of praise to God."

Call to Confession and Assurance of Pardon

ALL: I lack the peace of wild things.

I am never wholly in place.

I find no peace or grace.

We sell the world to buy fire,

our way lighted by burning men,

and that has bent my mind

and made me think of darkness

and wish for the dumb life of roots.

(from "The Want of Peace" by Wendell Berry)

LEADER: When despair for the world grows in me

And I wake in the night at the least sound

In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,

I go and lie down where the wood drake

rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things

Who do not tax their lives with forethought

of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars

Waiting with their light. For a time

I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

(from "The Peace of Wild Things" by Wendell Berry)

Hear the good news:

"Christ died for us while we were yet sinners: that proves God's love toward us." In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

ALL: Glory be to God. Amen.

A Reading from the Old Testament

Isaiah 35: 1-7

A Reading from the New Testament

John 20: 11-16

Homily

"Practicing Resurrection"

Invitation to the Table

Offering of the Elements

Prayer of Thanksgiving

(unison): An Iroquois Prayer

We return thanks to our mother, the earth,
which sustains us.

We return thanks to the rivers and streams,
which supply us with water.

We return thanks to the corn, and to her sisters,
the beans and the squashes, which give us life.

We return thanks to the moon and stars,
which have given to us their light when the sun was gone.

We return thanks to the sun, that has looked
upon the earth with a beneficent eye.

Lastly, we return thanks to the Great Spirit, in whom is
embodied all goodness, and who directs all things for the
good of her children. Amen.

Receiving the Bread and the Cup

Closing Hymn

"God of the Fertile Fields"

Benediction

So heavy
is the long-necked, long-bodied heron,
always it is a surprise
when her smoke-colored wings

open
and she turns
from the thick water,
from the black sticks

of the summer pond,
and slowly
rises into the air
and is gone.

Then, not for the first or the last time,
I take the deep breath of happiness, and I think
how unlikely it is

that death is a hole in the ground,
how improbable
that ascension is not possible,
though everything seems so inert, so nailed

back into itself—
the muskrat and his lumpy lodge,
the turtle,
the fallen gate.

(from "Heron Rises from the Dark, Summer Pond" by Mary Oliver)

Postlude

Allende," from The Roche Sisters' *Zero Church*

—Dawn Ripley cares for an 80-acre spot of land called Holdfast Farm, near Albany, Indiana, where she is working to create a retreat and sanctuary for spiritual pilgrims. This service was first presented at Covenant Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Author's note: the antiphonal prayer of praise is taken from webofcreation.org.

Practicing Resurrection¹

a sermon for Eastertide

by Dawn M. Ripley

Let me tell you a story:
One afternoon, before anything was made, God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit sat around in the unity of the Godhead discussing one of the Creator's fixations. From all eternity, it seems God the Creator had had this thing about being. God would keep thinking up all kinds of unnecessary things—new ways of being and new kinds of beings to be. And as they talked, God the Redeemer suddenly said, "Really, this is absolutely great stuff. Why don't I go out and mix us up a batch?" And God the Holy Spirit said, "Terrific! I'll help you." So they all pitched in, and

to think of the idea, and how kind of God the Redeemer to go to all that trouble putting it together, and how considerate of God the Holy Spirit to spend so much time directing and choreographing. And forever and ever they told old jokes, and the Creator and the Redeemer drank their wine in *unitate Spiritus Sancti*, and they all threw ripe olives and picked mushrooms at each other per *omnia saecula saeculorum*. Amen.²

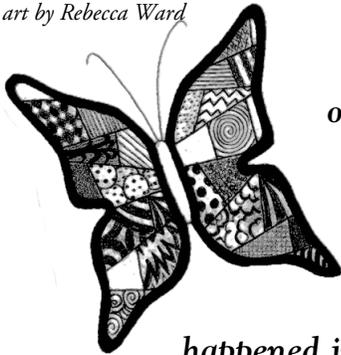
This is Robert Capon's wild vision of the creation as an outrageous stunt gone Hollywood—can't you just see this on film? Like the soundtrack of the latest action/adventure flick, the SurroundSound would probably make your ears bleed, and I can only imagine what all those olives apoppin' would look like in 3D.

But the best stories dance just along the edge of the outrageous, along the border of the holy, and use poetry's subtle economy to do it. For the most outrageous tale of all, we're given one of the quietest of stories, told not by a physician or a tax collector but by a poet:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). [John 20:11-16, NRSV]

Indulge me, if you will, if I suggest that it's no small thing that Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Granted, it's bound to have been fairly grungy in that tomb, and a linen shroud can't be the easiest of outfits to keep clean. But has it ever struck you as a bit odd that, for a carpenter, Jesus told surprisingly few stories about building and construction? Is Mary's mistake something more than

art by Rebecca Ward



The very idea of resurrection is outrageous, is what it is, and yet with Native American storytellers I boldly claim, "I don't know if it happened just this way, but I know it's true"—because I've seen it right here in God's garden.

after supper that night, God the Redeemer and God the Holy Spirit put on this tremendous show of being for God the Creator. It was full of water and light and frogs; pine cones kept dropping all over the place and crazy fish swam around in the wineglasses. There were mushrooms and grapes, horseradishes and tigers—and men and women everywhere to taste them, to juggle them, to join them and to love them. And God the Creator looked at the whole wild party and said, "Wonderful! Just what I had in mind! Good, good, good!" And all God the Redeemer and God the Holy Spirit could think of to say was the same thing, "Good, good, good!" and they laughed for ages and ages, saying things like how great it was for beings to be, and how clever of God the Creator

just not being able to see through the tears of her grief?

What if the better part of this business about resurrection turns on this too-often-overlooked but absolutely critical detail? If we're going to learn how to recognize the risen Christ, we'll need to come back to our senses, to practice being at home again in our bodies, to become native to our ground. We'll need to learn how to practice resurrection, and I don't know many folks better qualified than gardeners to teach us. Gardeners know without a doubt that we ought to throw off our shoes and run barefoot, for all of this ground is holy; they've nurtured the life that springs from death in this stuff others callously dismiss as dirt. They know better.

We'll learn what Jesus the gardener knew: that "the Creator is divided in Creation for the joys of recognition,"³ because we will have seen God in turkey vultures catching autumn thermals and heard God in the sound of spring rain on a tin roof and smelled God in the heady aroma of compost and tasted God in summer's first tomato and touched God every time we've cradled one of God's creatures in our arms.

And then perhaps we'll be able to consider the truly outrageous possibility that this *a-dám*, this red clay, the "ground of our being," is no mere theological construct or metaphor. Sallie McFague suggests it is, rather, the very body of God.⁴

Author's note: At this point in the homily I handed out a paten (made of pottery roughly finished in brown, with "This is My Body" engraved around the edges) filled with fresh compost. I invited the congregation to feel it and to smell it. The last person to do so then placed the paten on the altar, alongside the other elements.

Can you imagine what the world might look like if we put down roots in the ground of that assumption? (Is this Indiana? Yes. Is this heaven? Yes. Is this home? Oh, my—YES.⁵) What does it mean to put down roots, to become native to a place, to dwell? It's one of the oldest of our words, with a Germanic root that's also the same root for neighbor; not surprisingly, it's also the same root for "to build." To build, to make a home in the world, comes from the same ancient root as "to dwell—to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, even more specifically, to till the soil and cultivate the vine." To build, to dwell, is to garden.⁶ Perhaps Jesus was both a carpenter and a gardener after all.

Isn't this kind of neighborliness God's wild vision for the world, the Creator's *shalom*? Where justice might literally roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; where the trees of the field might clap their hands for joy; and where all of God's good creatures might in their own creaturely ways rise up to shout, Yes!

Like incarnation, like *shalom*, the very idea of resurrection is outrageous, is what it is, and yet with Native American storytellers I boldly claim, "I don't know if it happened just

this way, but I know it's true"—because I've seen it right here in God's garden. Paul argued that if Christ has not been resurrected, then all of our preaching is in vain, and so is the willing suspension of disbelief we call faith. With every leaf that falls, with every bit of humus that comes of it, with every handful of compost, with every plant that springs from that new soil, I know it's true. And because I've recognized Jesus the gardener, I recognize Jesus the Christ, the incarnation of that First Gardener, the Creator for whom matter matters.

All of creation is practicing resurrection, over and over and over again, and is teaching us to do the same. It's how we'll come to our senses and recognize this simple bread

All of creation is practicing resurrection, over and over and over again, and is teaching us to do the same.

and this unassuming cup for what they are: earth-sprung, fire-baked, water-become-wine elements of God's good creation, sacramental because—like stories and poetry and the entirety of creation—they point to a Mystery beyond our wildest imagining.

So come to the table, if you dare, and come to your senses. Come to the table, and find your way home. Come to the table, and practice resurrection.

—Dawn Ripley cares for an 80-acre spot of land called Holdfast Farm, near Albany, Indiana, where she is working to create a retreat and sanctuary for spiritual pilgrims. This sermon was first presented at Covenant Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Notes

1. Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (from *Collected Poems: 1957-1982*, published by San Francisco's North Point Press in 1985) was read as the call to worship; the idea of "practicing resurrection" is from his poem.
2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Third Peacock: The Problem of God and Evil* (Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 9-10.
3. Wendell Berry, from "Elegy," in *Collected Poems*, p. 240.
4. See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
5. During an earlier plenary session of the retreat, Terri Jump made reference to the scene from the movie "Field of Dreams" where one of the characters asks, "Is this heaven?" and he's told, "No, this is Iowa."
6. See "Building Dwelling Thinking" in Martin Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), especially pp. 146-147.

Keeping Our Eyes Open

a sermon for Eastertide

by Dawn M. Ripley

Enter the courts of God your eyes unwashed with dreams and you will see nothing.
—Calvin Miller, The Singer

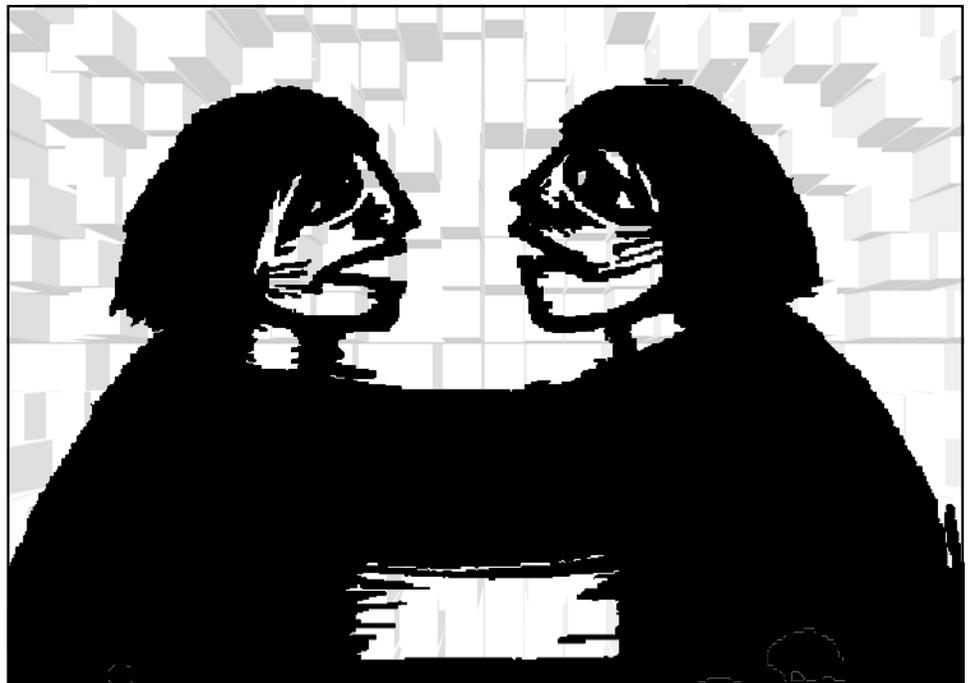
For weeks now we've been working our way through the Lenten season, and here we are at the final chapter of the book of Luke, looking for the end of the story. Luke's been kind enough to not leave us with a tearful ending, but instead hands us the outrageous surprise of resurrection, belief in which Paul later argues is absolutely central to Christian faith. But lest you think me foolish enough to attempt theological handspings, let me loosely decline the verb "to theologize": I am not a theologian, I have never been a theologian, I will never be a theologian. Never in my wildest dreams. So if you've come for theological answers to fuel a debate about resurrection, I suspect you may be disappointed.

On the other hand, perhaps a wild dream is precisely the best place to attempt theology, to find some *logos* about *theos*, to tell you a story. So here's a wild one, full of abandoned graves and incredulity and ghosts who appear and then disappear, a story better suited for Halloween or one of Shakespeare's tragedies than a homily for Eastertide. Or is it?

Why do you suppose that the world has gone gaga over Harry Potter? Why do we love the magical realism of "Like Water for Chocolate," where anything can happen—and does? Why do you suppose that most of us here had rather read a good novel or watch a great science fiction movie than read some philosophical tome? Why do you suppose that what we call The Good Book is a collection of outrageous stories rather than merely a set of theological treatises? And why, oh why, didn't God just come straight

out and tell us what God meant rather than pull a stunt like resurrection?

Because, I think, theology without story is a skeleton without its flesh, disemboweled and disembodied, an insubstantial ghost. It's mere analysis, an attempt to provide all of the questions with logical, rational answers. Story, on the other hand, leaves you with more questions than answers. Theology runs the risk of putting God in a box; story blows the box apart at its seams. Theology, at its worst, can be reductionistic; story points to Mystery, to God. Story, at its best, relies upon what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "a willing suspension of disbelief," an intentional refusal to think too much. Theology asks, "Why?" Story asks, "Why not?"



So here's a wild story, full of abandoned graves and incredulity and ghosts who appear and then disappear, a story better suited for Halloween or one of Shakespeare's tragedies than a homily for Eastertide. Or is it?

The book of Luke is full of stories, mostly not-getting-it stories. Stories about being blind, not hearing, not listening, not seeing. The nineteenth-century poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God; it will flame out, like shook foil.” But we don’t see it. Henry David Thoreau said that most of the folks he knew were stumbling through their lives asleep; in fact, he claimed that he would be afraid to look a fully awake person straight in the eyes. Annie Dillard, though, says it’s just a matter of keeping our eyes open:

...[N]ature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair. A fish flashes, then dissolves in the water before my eyes like so much salt. Deer apparently ascend bodily into heaven; the brightest oriole fades into leaves. These disappearances stun me into stillness and concentration; they say of nature that it conceals with a grand nonchalance, and they say of vision that it is a deliberate gift, the revelation of a dancer who for my eyes only flings away her seven veils. For nature does reveal as well as conceal: now-you-don't-see-it, now-you-do. For a week last September migrating red-winged blackbirds were feeding heavily down by the creek at the back of the house. One day I went out to investigate the racket; I walked up to a tree, an Osage orange, and a hundred birds flew away. They simply materialized out of the tree. I saw a tree, then a whisk of color, then a tree again. I walked closer and another hundred blackbirds took flight. Not a branch, not a twig budged: the birds were apparently weightless as well as invisible. Or, it was as if the leaves of the Osage orange had been freed from a spell in the form of red-winged blackbirds; they flew from the tree, caught my eye in the sky, and vanished. When I looked again at the tree the leaves had reassembled as if nothing had happened. Finally I walked directly to the trunk of the tree and a final hundred, the real diehards, appeared, spread, and vanished. How could so many hide in the tree without my seeing them? The Osage orange, unruffled, looked just as it had looked from the house, when three hundred red-winged blackbirds cried from its crown. I looked downstream where they flew, and they were gone. Searching, I couldn't spot one. I wandered downstream to force them to play their hand, but they'd crossed the creek and scattered. One show to a customer¹

No sooner do Cleopas and his unnamed companion recognize Jesus than—poof!—he’s gone, better than any magic act. Did Jesus disappear, or did they simply lose sight of him? Once they had recognized him, could they

really have gazed into the eyes of a man who was fully awake without being blinded?

And that’s only the beginning of the questions: Who is Cleopas? And why does Jesus join him on the road to Emmaus? Why is it not one of the disciples? Why not the women who waited at the foot of the cross? Why not John,

Story...leaves you with more questions than answers. Theology runs the risk of putting God in a box; story blows the box apart at its seams.

the beloved? And why couldn’t the writers of the four gospels agree on the details of the end of the story? Why on earth rely upon as ludicrous a story device, as preposterous a stretch of the imagination, as bringing Jesus back from the dead?

I wouldn’t dare attempt to offer you definitive answers. I could read you what the commentaries and the theologians have to say, but I suspect the questions themselves point more to story than to history. It’s Myth with a capital M, these moments when *kairos* breaks *chronos* wide open, and light floods in. Some of the best Native American stories start with, “I’m not sure that it happened precisely this way, but I know that it’s true.” What’s important, I think, about the truth of the resurrection is not whether or not it happened, but that it could have. What matters is that Jesus joins us on our journeys, patiently listening and offering insight while we’re learning to recognize him. What matters is that God’s grand dream for all our journeys isn’t going to end in a cul-de-sac, a dead end.

What matters, more than anything, is that the faith we claim, in our better moments, is an embodied faith, incarnate; the church is the body of Christ, resurrected. What’s true is the Christ I see in your eyes, when I dare to look deeply into them. What matters is the suffering of Christ crucified in you and in me, and the joy of Christ resurrected in all of us. The poet Wendell Berry, in one of his elegies, writes that “the Creator is divided among creation for the joy of recognition.” We should indeed practice resurrection, forever “on the lookout for revelation, keen to discern the epiphanies of God amid the commonplace...we should tiptoe to see the glory which shines now and then in the soul of a nobody.”² And we are all nobodies, aren’t we?

Rubem Alves wrote:

Nobody eats a meal alone. There is a breaking, a distributing, hands that touch, eyes that meet. And, in all this, a sensation as if it were conspiracy.

Conspiracy, lovely word of forgotten origins. Conspire, inspire-with, breathe with someone, together. Conspirators: they breathe the same air. Jesus and his disciples, eating the bread and drinking the wine, breathe the same air; bodies there, glued to one another; and also the desire and love—principally their desire and love. The meal is eaten, the magic appears, the invisible thread of longing remembrance and of hopeful waiting are cast forth, and, beginning from there, men and women who have in their eyes that sad-happy mark of longing remembrance and of hope clasp each others' hands. Just as it should be with anyone who loves and is far away and has nothing to hold except the dried flower, the poem, the memories, a word. That's how it is with the community of Christians, this thing that is called church: together, conspiring, hands joined, they eat the bread, drink the wine, and feel a longing remembrance/hope that has no end.³

**It's Myth with a capital M,
these moments when kairos
breaks chronos wide open,
and light floods in.**

Don't go looking for The Risen One among the dead, only to discover an empty tomb. Come to his table; let us break bread together, and see Jesus.

Amen, and amen.

—Dawn Ripley cares for an 80-acre spot of land called Holdfast Farm, near Albany, Indiana, where she is working to create a retreat and sanctuary for spiritual pilgrims. This sermon was first presented at Covenant Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Notes:

1. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), pp. 17-18.

2. Samuel Miller, from the second of his sermons delivered

during the Mullins Lectures in the Alumni Chapel at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, March 5-8, 1963.

3. Rubem Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 14.



art by Lara Luksis

Journeying with Jesus also means to be in a community, to become part of the alternative community of Jesus.

Discipleship is not an individual path, but a journey in a company of disciples.

It is the road less traveled, yet discipleship involves being in a community that remembers and

celebrates Jesus. Though that is not the

only role of the church, it is its primary role. To use John

Shea's very apt description of the church,

***'Gather the folks, tell the stories,
break the bread.'***

—Marcus Borg