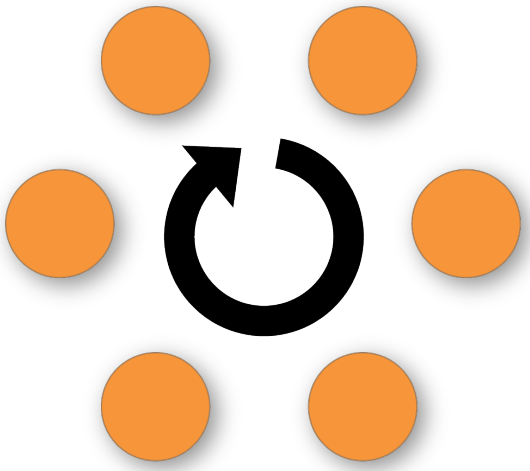
READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

Day of Pentecost – Proper 11

May 23 – July 18, 2021



Volume 28, Issue 4
Revised Common Lectionary

In Memoriam of The Rev. Dr. William L. Dols, Jr.

Reading Between The Lines ~ Volume 28

Publisher: The Educational Center
Founding Editor: William L. Dols
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The Educational Center ~ Publisher of *Reading Between The Lines* and *TeenText:* Committed to fostering spiritual growth, psychological development, personal transformation and social renewal since the 1800's, our unique educational approach helps participants come to know sacred stories as their own stories through guided discussions that bring texts to life. For more information on our resources please contact us or visit our website.

Reading Between The Lines (BibleWorkbench © ISSN: 1071-3611) is published six times annually by The Educational Center, a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization.

Subscription Rates: Single issue print: $30.00/ Single issue electronic $25; Half year print or electronic (3 consecutive issues): $75.00; One year print (52 weeks 6 issues): $130.00/One year electronic: $100. One year print and electronic combination: $150. Domestic shipping and handling included.

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READING BETWEEN THE LINES ~ Lectionary Selections for Year B ~ 2020-2021

Note: Selections are chosen from the *Revised Common Lectionary* , Augsburg Fortress © 1992. Bible passages are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford University Press, © 1989, unless otherwise indicated.

Volume 28.1

Date	Selection
Nov 29	Mark 13:24-37
Dec 6	Isaiah 40:1-11
Dec 13	John 1:6-8, 19-28
Dec 20	2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Dec 27	Luke 2:22-40
Jan 3	John 1: [1-9] 10-18
Jan 10	Genesis 1:1-5
Jan 17	John 1:43-51

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Date	Selection
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Jan 31	Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Feb 7	Mark 1:29-39
Feb 14	2 Kings 2:1-12
Feb 21	Mark 1:9-15
Feb 28	Mark 9:2-9
Mar 7	John 2:13-22
Mar 14	Numbers 21:4-9
Mar 21	Psalm 51:1-12

Volume 28.3

Date	Selection
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Apr 11	Acts 4:32-35
Apr 18	1 John 3:1-7
Apr 25	John 10:11-18
May 2	John 15:1-8
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Jun 20	Mark 4:35-41
Jun 27	Mark 5:21-43
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Jul 25	John 6:1-12
Aug 1	2 Samuel 11:26—12:13a
Aug 8	John 6:35, 41-51
Aug 15	Proverbs 9:1-6
Aug 22	1 Kings 8:[1,6,10-11] 22-30, 41-43
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Sep 5	Psalm 125
Sep 12	Wisdom of Solomon 7:26—8:1
Sep 19	Mark 9:30-37

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Date	Selection
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Oct 3	Mark 10:2-16
Oct 10	Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Oct 17	Isaiah 53:4-12
Oct 24	Mark 10:46-52
Oct 31	Mark 12:28-34
Nov 7	Mark 12:38-44
Nov 14	Mark 13:1-8
Nov 21	Revelation 1:4b-18

This issue is dedicated in memoriam of The Rev. Dr. William L. Dols, Jr. who passed away March 24, 2021. Bill was an Episcopal priest who served churches in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. In the early years of his parish ministry Bill was drawn to the gospel of Jesus which he saw as the heart of interpersonal relationships and the root of the discovery of one's inner soul. Working with the Middle Atlantic Training Institute and Kanuga Conference Center he developed programs that centered around education and authentic ways to discover life in groups and within church congregations. While serving historic St. James Church in Wilmington North Carolina, Bill's ministry was deeply affected by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. This experience shaped his life-long dedication to social justice.

In the early 1970s Bill served as rector for Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill in Alexandria Virginia. It was while in service to Immanuel that Bill discovered The Guild for Psychological Studies (where he later became a seminar leader) and the works of Carl Jung, the father of analytical psychology. In 1984, after 25 years of parish ministry, Bill and his wife Shirley moved to Berkeley California so he could begin graduate studies in the intersection of biblical studies and psychology at The Graduate Theological Union and the University of California.

Four years and one PhD later Bill accepted the position of Executive Director for The Educational Center, then located in St. Louis. He remained the director until 1995 when he moved to Charlotte North Carolina to serve as Minister of Education for Myers Park Baptist Church. Bill retired from Myers Park Baptist in 2001. Bill then moved back to Virginia and the Center moved to Charlotte in 2009.

In addition to serving as The Educational Center's Executive Director, Bill was also the founding editor of *Reading Between The Lines.* He was a contributor to this resource through several name changes and for almost three decades. In later years while he continued on as a contributor, he also served as an associate editor and was a member of the RBTL Advisory Council.

Following Bill's death, Jerry Drino, another RBTL contributor and Advisory Council member, sent me these words: "A great and humble man has passed. Let us make room." These words really resonated. They called to mind 2 Kings 4:10: "Let us make a small room on the roof with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there."

Bill often encouraged everyone to "make room" in their lives. Make room for the questions, make room for the journey, make room for Jesus' teachings. And most importantly, make room for the Jesus who lives within. In this issue, which was compiled well before Bill's death, the excerpted sermon in FURTHER EXPLORATION is by Bill. One of the themes of this sermon is the importance of "making room" for controversy and conflict. Making room for conflict is a central teaching of The Educational Center. Our maieutic method asks you to hold the tension (conflict) of the cost and the promise aloft in your life. To "be" in that tension which is sometimes controversial. As Bill explains:

> *"A decision to follow [rather than worship] Jesus promises a different kind of peace marked by controversy and conflict. Following Jesus means going through dark valleys and sitting down with enemies, dangerous, and daring, political rather than pious."*

Bill Dols was himself a study in conflict. As Jerry noted, Bill was both a great and humble man. Remarkably, he was able to hold fast the conflict of being both great and humble at the same time. Bill was not only a revered spiritual leader, noted biblical scholar, published author of four books (see Ed. Note in BIBLIOGRAPHY & CREDITS) and a talented artist (watercolors, oils and photography) he was exceedingly humble about his talents and the powerful meaningful messages he shared with us all.

Because Bill was so humble, most folks are not aware that he preached the very first sermon to the newly installed president, Gerald Ford, in 1974. Like Bill, Ford was an Alexandria Virginia resident. Ford took the oath of office the day after the resignation of Richard Nixon and two days later, President and First Lady Ford attended a service at Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill where Bill Dols' sermon addressed the need to "pick up the broken pieces" of Nixon's presidency.

Brokenness was a theme that Bill often addressed. He was a big fan of Leonard Cohen and believed that although Cohen made his name as a musician he was at heart, a poet. Cohen's song "Anthem" was one he liked to quote. Thanks to Bill, I keep these lines on the office inspiration board:

> Ring the bells that still can ring
> Forget your perfect offering
> There is a crack, a crack in everything
> That's how the light gets in…

Bill embraced the "cracks" not only within himself but in all of us. The cracks that surround us in our daily lives. Bill lived a large part of his life exploring the written word; literally "reading between the lines" and exploring the cracks of a story. He shared "must read" books and interesting articles from varied sources that you might have missed. When he lost the vision in his left eye in 2018 I could not imagine how he could go on without the ability to read with ease. But in true Bill Dols' form, he used that experience to once again confront the concept of brokenness. To quote Bill "as the poet Roethke says in a poem that I have quoted often in RBTL, 'in a dark time the eye begins to see, I meet my shadow in the deepening shade.' There are some things that you don't see with two eyes. It takes being blind and seeing through only one."

Bill did adjust to this way of seeing with one eye and he was a voracious reader and sharer of knowledge right up until the end of his life. I still have the last item he sent me, an article from the *New York Times Sunday Review*. And as always, it was a piece that made me think, made me question, and made me aware of something that had not previously been on my radar.

The poet Mary Oliver was another favorite of Bill's. He appreciated that she used the imagery of nature to express her feelings about the human condition; that she used simple words to explore complex themes. Bill particularly liked her poem "In Blackwater Woods". To honor Bill, RBTL contributor and Advisory Council member Gail Rogers shared these stanzas of the poem with her RBTL group:

> To live in this world
> you must be able
> to do three things:
> to love what is mortal;
> to hold it
> against your bones knowing
> your own life depends on it;
> and, when the time comes to let it go,
> to let it go.

Although we will miss him in this world, we can all still make room for him. We can let go of him, but still hold on to the memory of him. We can embrace how he lived his life in the questions. We can use his written words to comfort us, to make us challenge the status quo, to stand up for the lesser among us, and to embrace the conflict and tension in our own lives. We can explore the cost and the promise of each day. It is what he would want for us. —*Melissa Thomas*

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b
Romans 8:22-27

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

[16:1-4a "I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.]

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

ENTERING THE STORY

The Gospel of John can be divided into three parts. First is the introduction and description of the life and ministry of Jesus (1:1-12:50). Second is the farewell meal and the farewell discourses. Third comes the arrest, passion and resurrection appearances (18:1-21:25).

Today's text is part of the second section of John's gospel. It includes (1) the final meal and foot washing (13:1-11), (2) the farewell discourses (14:1-16:33), and (3) the farewell prayer (17:1-26).

Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John's Jesus explains the context and reasons for his death on the cross. As well as a deep personal loss, the crucifixion of Jesus was a serious theological crisis for his Jewish followers. A "messiah" in the tradition of Israel was thought to be followed but never killed. In the farewell discourses, we learn that Jesus wanted his mourning disciples to know that his leaving them was an advantage since only then the Advocate, Counselor or Holy Spirit would come upon them. It is this event that is recounted (Acts 2) and celebrated on Pentecost.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."* What do you suppose the disciples listening to Jesus might be thinking and feeling as they hear these words? What questions and concerns might it raise for them? What hopes as well as fears might they be experiencing?

One of the disciples hearing this might turn to his friends and say:

To which the friend might respond:

What might be among the *many things* that Jesus has yet to say to his disciples? Why do you suppose they *cannot bear them now*?

How do you imagine the listeners might reconcile or make sense of Jesus' assertion that *the Spirit of truth* has not yet come, but will do so in the future? What could the *all truth* be to which *the Spirit of truth* will guide them that they do not know already from Jesus? They are told the *Spirit of truth...will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears.* What might be the source of the Spirit's authority? Who is yet to be heard?

What might the listeners imagine to be *the things that are to come*? What do you suppose might be their deepest hopes and greatest fears about the future?

2. How do subsequent new truths challenge or affirm what we had only partially known at the start of our history? What have we as a people had to let go of, sacrifice or even lose in order to hear what the Spirit of truth has said?

And what of the future? What do you hear the Spirit of truth saying to us as a people about what is ahead? What are your deepest hopes and greatest fears about what is yet to be revealed to us?

3. In your own religious or spiritual journey through the years—within or outside the church—what are the kinds of things that you did not know at the beginning that have become clearer as the years have passed? In the early times what was it you did not yet know because you could not bear it? What is one thing that you were not able to hear but that a Spirit of truth has since revealed to you?

What has been the cost and promise of such continuing revelation? What have you had to let go of, sacrifice or even lose in order to hear what the Spirit of truth has said to you?

What might the Spirit of truth have yet to say to you in the future? What continues as some of your unanswered religious questions and unsettled spiritual concerns?

4. What can you say of your beliefs and convictions about yourself that you once found satisfying, adequate, obvious and essential? What has the Spirit of truth revealed to you about yourself as time has passed that you could not bear earlier? What about yourself has had to be rethought, reassessed, and re-evaluated as you heard the later things?

What might be some of the precious, most important, and treasured attitudes and convictions about yourself that you may have to let go of, sacrifice and lose if the new truth in your future is to be heard? What would be the hardest belief or notion about yourself for you to leave behind were a Spirit of truth to require it in your future?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.* What do you recall of a time in your life when someone has been an advocate for you? Who was it? Why did they come to your assistance? What did they do on your behalf? What truth did

they speak? To whom did they speak that truth? How did you feel about them doing this? When have you been called upon to advocate for another? At school, at work, in the church, at home? How did you act as an advocate? What motivated you to do so? What were you able to bring to the situation that otherwise might have been missing? What do you know of an advocate within yourself? On whose behalf does he or she speak? How do you respond to the advocate? When or how do you accept their advocacy? When or how do you choose to ignore your inner advocate? What are the consequences for choosing to listen or not?

- *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*…The Paraclete, the Advocate is the Spirit of truth, guiding into all the truth. What do you think of when you think of truth? The word "truth" in Greek is aletheia, which Sanford ably explains. What I might also add is that aletheia is a word which combines a (the negation of what follows, non- or un-) and lethe, which means "forgotten." So, the "truth", in Greek anyway, is "unforgotten." The idea, as Plato explains it, is that when we come to know the truth, we remember what we had previously forgotten. We knew it somehow, deeply; and when we come to know the truth, we also come to know that we always knew it. We recognize it as real and true because it has always been within us. We had forgotten. What do you know, right now, of a truth you have remembered that had been lost or forgotten? What have you forgotten that you need to remember? Why might we need the help or advocacy of Spirit in order to remember it? What is the truth about yourself that you need to remember?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "This is not to say that Christianity is finished. I am, on the contrary, convinced that it is not Christianity, but our conception and interpretation of it, that has become antiquated in face of the present world situation. The Christian symbol is a living thing that carries in itself the seeds of further development. It can go on developing; it depends only on us, whether we can make up our minds to meditate again, and more thoroughly on the Christian premises."—CG Jung

From *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* by John A. Sanford

The functions of the Holy Spirit are psychologically identifiable: wherever the truth prevails or is seeking to prevail, the Holy Spirit is there. There is a reality at work within us, even though we are often unaware of it, that seeks to bring us to the truth: the truth about our world, the truth about ourselves, the truth about God and life's purpose. It is indeed the opposite of that archetypal propensity toward evil that also seems to be an element in the human psyche: a tendency toward evil with which the ego, in its egocentricity, sides. This polarity of energies within our psyche is like the two masters of Matthew 6:24, both of whom we cannot serve. [. . .]

Fritz Kunkel has an interesting perspective on this portion of John's Gospel. If Jesus had not left the disciples, he notes, they would have been left in a state of idolatry. You will recall that Kunkel regarded idolatry as occurring when the Center is projected onto another human being. As long as the disciples had Jesus with them they could project the Center onto him, but when Jesus left them they had to find the Center within themselves. Put in religious language, as long as the Christ was with them in the body the disciples would not discover the greater mystery: that the Holy Spirit within them would lead them to the Christ who dwells within the soul, from whom they could never be separated. The tribulation and distress the disciples had to endure when Christ did leave them at the time of the crucifixion was, Kunkel believed, an absolutely essential part of their growth into consciousness.

We might note in passing that something like this often occurs in psychotherapy or spiritual direction. When the client first comes to therapy he frequently projects the Center onto the therapist. This becomes part of the transference, as discussed earlier. Eventually, however, this projection must be withdrawn so the client can discover the Center in himself. The therapist usually assists in this transformation both wittingly and unwittingly.

Consciously the therapist tries, at the right point in the therapy, to make it clear that she is not the Center. Unconsciously the therapist may also make blunders, or reveal painfully her own areas of unconsciousness. The client may then realize that this therapist is, after all, only human, and that the true Center lies within himself.

From "Daily Meditation: The Good News According to Luke" by Richard Rohr

All of Jesus' rules of ministry, his "tips for the road," are very interpersonal. They are based on putting people in touch with people. Person-to-person is the way the gospel was originally communicated. Person-in-love-with-person, person-respecting-person, person-forgiving-person, person-touching-person, person-crying-with-person, person-hugging-person: that's where the Spirit is so beautifully present. The challenge is to preach a gospel that is livable, believable, and life-giving. Perhaps that is the most simple criterion by which we can discern Jesus' teaching. It is always a call to death but is always life-giving in the long run. When you see life being created between people and within people, you see God. Where you see God, you will always see freedom. Restraint and passion—that is the paradoxical experience of the Holy. It takes time to learn. You grow into the ability to love another in a way that totally gives yourself and entrusts yourself and yet respects that person and stands back.

From *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr

The good news is that there is a guide, a kind of medical advocate, an inner compass—and it resides within each of us. "Included inside the box," as the ads always say. As the Scriptures put it, "The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). In another place we are promised, "You will not be left orphaned" (John 14:18) without a mother or home. This is probably one of the many reasons the Holy Spirit was usually considered feminine.

This Holy Spirit guiding all of us from home and toward home is also described in John's Gospel as an "advocate" ("a defense attorney," as paraclete literally means, John 14:16), who will "teach us" and "remind us," as if some part of us already knew but still needed an inner buzz or alarm clock to wake us up. The Holy Spirit is always entirely for us, more than we are for ourselves, it seems. She speaks in our favor against the negative voices that judge and condemn us. This gives us all such hope -now we do not have to do life all by ourselves, or even do life perfectly "right." Our life will be "done unto us," just as happened to Mary (Luke 1:38). Although on another level we are doing it too. Both are equally true.

This mystery has been called the conspiracy ("co- breathing") of God, and is still one of the most profound ways to understand what is happening between God and the soul. True spirituality is always a deep "cooperating" (Romans 8:28) between two. True spirituality is a kind of synergy in which both parties give and both parties receive to create one shared truth and joy.

The ancients rightly called this internal longing for wholeness "fate" or "destiny," the "inner voice" or the "call of the gods." It has an inevitability, authority, and finality to it, and was at the heart of almost all mythology. Almost all heroes heard an inner voice that spoke to them. In fact, their heroism was in their ability to hear that voice and to risk following it -wherever! Sadly, such inner comfort is the very thing we lack today at almost all levels. Our problem now is that we seriously doubt that there is any vital reality to the spiritual world, so we hear no life changing voices-true even for many who go to church, temple or mosque.

For postmodern people, the universe is not inherently enchanted as it was for the ancients. We have to do all the "enchanting" ourselves. This leaves us alone, confused, and doubtful. There is no meaning already in place for our discovery and enjoyment. We have to create all meaning by ourselves in such an inert and empty world, and most of us do not seem to succeed very well. This is the burden of living in our heady and lonely time, when we think it is all up to us.

From "For The Time Of Necessary Decision" in *To Bless the Space Between Us* by John O'Donohue

Perhaps the work we do has lost its soul
Or the love where we once belonged
Calls nothing alive in us anymore.

We drift through this gray, increasing nowhere
Until we stand before a threshold we know
We have to cross to come alive once more.

Read the entire poem here:
https://just.thinkofit.com/john-odonohue-for-the-time-of-necessary-decision/

From *The Submission* by Amy Waldman

His original idea for the dolls, presented to the one-time art restorer from Moscow he had found to do the work, was for little Penelope to sit within William, who would sit within Claire, who would sit within Cal. But when William asked why Daddy got to be the biggest doll, Cal ordered three more sets in which each of them got to be the biggest once. Claire now could create a matryoshka of just herself—Claire within Claire within Claire within Claire. During the hearing, all these different Claires, who just happened to look alike, seemed to rest inside her, so that every argument, no matter how contradictory, found sympathy. Each time she thought she had reached the last Claire, the true and solid one, she was proved wrong. She couldn't find her own core.



Pentecost by Titan, 1545
Located at: Santa Maria della Salute in
Venice, Italy

To enlarge and view the image in detail:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tiziano_Pentecost%C3%A9s.jpg

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Psalm 29
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

[9-13 And he said, "Go and say to this people:
'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'
Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."
Then I said, "How long, O LORD?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant, and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
until the LORD sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.]

ENTERING THE STORY

The text for this week can be addressed as five acts in a divine-human drama. The passage moves from (1) a vision of the holy to (2) the woes of human inadequacy to (3) restoration and cleansing to (4) readiness to hear and dispatch a message to (5) the message. The drama may be the personal story of a prophet named Isaiah or perhaps a testimony of the people Israel. Assuming it is an ancient story that is also our story, the text may suggest a familiar pattern of life out of death, a saga both tragic and victorious.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Act 1 in the drama is Isaiah 6:1-3. What is being described here? What are the sounds, colors, textures, smells, images and icons? Close your eyes and let your body posture respond to what is said here. Take a deep breath and experience this sense of holiness as your body moves.

Act 2 is Isaiah 6:4-5. Imagine being Isaiah at this stage. What is happening to the foundation of the temple? What is to become of the house of the Lord? Isaiah moves from what feeling in Act 1 to what feeling in Act 2? How is he now feeling about the Lord? The holiness of the temple? About himself?

Act 3 is found in Isaiah 6:6-7. What is happening now? What is going on between one of the seraphs and Isaiah? Close your eyes and imagine such an experience. In your mind's eye see the seraph holding a live coal from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph approaches you, touches your lips with the coals, announces that *your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.* With eyes closed, see it happen.

How would you describe what you have experienced through these first three acts of the drama? What do you know that you did not know before? How are you different as Act 3 ends?

Act 4 is Isaiah 6:8. What is being asked? What are the feelings inside as the call comes? What might be the risk of saying YES? Of saying NO? What do you know of what is to be expected? Hear the question. Answer out loud: "Here am I; send me." Whisper it. Say it somewhat louder. Respond again in a loud and firm voice. Yell it. Shout your YES.

Act 5 in Isaiah 6:9-13 is the message you are now to carry. The people to whom you are to give the message might be who? Say: "*Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand; Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.*" What does the Lord want of the people? What does the Lord not want? What is happening to listening and looking? What is the fate of their mind, ears, and eyes? All for what purpose? How do you respond to the desire of the Lord that the people may not turn?

The question: "*Then I said, "How long, O LORD?*" And he said: "*Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled*." In your own words, what is being described here?

Read what you have written. Take a walk around the church or in the garden or down the street, reading your version of the *Until*.

> *The holy seed is its stump.* What is a stump? A seed? A holy seed? What might spring from or grow out of a holy seed? How might a holy seed be found in its stump? By implication where is the holy seed not?

Wonder about the entire drama, all five acts. What is Isaiah saying to the people of Judah and Jerusalem?

2. How do you observe these five acts unfolding in the world around you? Where do you find them on the front page of your newspaper, see them on the evening news, or on your social media feed?

> Where do you sense a movement from (1) times and places of abundance and glory to (2) an awareness of restlessness, disquietude, guilt and despair leading to (3) a sense of renewal and hope that usher in (4) a call to go, step out, stand up and to speak (5) of a kind of devastation and loss with echoes of "How long?" What do you know of such a drama that is "until" when the holy seed can be found in its stump?

3. Where does this drama take place in your personal life? Growing up, adolescence, striving, success, relationships that matter? In struggles with career, family, self and God? Where is this drama of seeking to hold onto all as a way of losing it and the experience of finding it through losing it?

How have you experienced glory to darkness to new hope? What have you known of listening and looking yet being unable to comprehend or understand? Of your mind turning dull and your ears stopped and your eyes shut and longing to turn but unable, dying to be healed?

What have you known of "*How long, O LORD?*" screamed as you drive around your town or into the faces of your children or across the desk to a boss or poured out to a therapist or prayed to a priest or cried into the embrace of a lover? And what was the "until" that you heard or sensed or the world shouted and that broke your heart?

And if you are in Act 5 or have ever been there, what do you know about a stump with its holy seed? What happened when you finally got there? As the drama ended and before it began again, what did you know about yourself you could have learned in no other way? Know about the others? Your world? God?

Again, wonder about the entire drama, all five acts. What is the text saying to you today?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Walter Brueggemann writes of Isaiah's words about God's seeming to will the people not to comprehend, understand, or turn to be healed: "If they turn they will be healed. But the intent of the government of God is negative: Not to notice and so not to turn; not to turn and so not to be healed! The intention of the decree of Yahweh is that Judah and Jerusalem should be narcoticized so that they will not be healed. God wills an unhealed people!" What do you make of such an assertion about God in scripture and by scholar? What is being said about God? How does it sit with you? How does it speak to your experience? Brueggemann calls it "a counter-message, countering official religious assumptions that God always wills good." How do Isaiah's words counter assumptions you make about God? How do they counter what you hear in church in liturgy and in sermons? What feelings do the words touch in you? What questions do they raise? What confusion? What clarity?

- Recall Jesus with the disciples in Mark 4:10-11: And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." Compare Jesus' words with those of Isaiah in today's text. What of the Jesus sayings is similar or different from the prophet? Do you assume he is quoting Isaiah? If it is Mark's idea, what does he want his reader to know?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"There are some defeats more triumphant than victories." —*Michael Podesta*

From *Meet the Prophets* by John W. Miller

Isaiah's prophetic career was an unusually long one. Called to be a prophet (as just noted) in the death year of King Uzziah (6:1), about 740, he was still active some forty years later. What in general was happening in Jerusalem—Judah during these four decades and how did Isaiah relate to it?

From our study of Amos and Hosea we have already become acutely aware of the threat posed to the petty nations of this region by Assyria. This threat had now become even more imminent. From Assyrian records we learn that King Uzziah himself, just prior to his death, had been desperately engaged in forming a coalition to stop Assyria's now seemingly unstoppable westward movement. It would be difficult to exaggerate the terror that the Assyrians inspired among the populations of this region. The technological sophistication and discipline of their armies was awesome. […]

Isaiah's prophetic activities were closely intertwined with momentous political and religious events. He began his prophetic career in the death-year of Uzziah; he was especially active during the Syro-Ephraimitic War; he became active again some twenty years later at the time of the Ashdod insurrection, and again during the Sennacherib invasion. He may have also gone public, for a brief time, just prior to the fall of the north.

As a resident of Jerusalem Isaiah was confident that his city was unique. Had not Yahweh promised to be present there, with temple and king, forever? And yet, in a moment of searing insight, he had seen as well that his city was endangered. Its leading elite was deplorably "unclean." Terrible consequences would soon be resulting from this. A devastating invasion was imminent from which only a few would escape.

It was these shocking revelations, "in the year of King Uzziah's death," that transformed him and compelled him to enter upon his prophetic mission.

From *Dark Harbor* by Mark Strand

[***Ed. Note:*** Mark Strand was named the US poet laureate in 1990. His career spanned five decades, and in 1999 he was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his collection *Blizzard of One*. He died in late 2014 at the age of 80. *Dark Harbor* (1993) is a single long poem divided into 55 unique sections.]

It is a dreadful cry that raises up,
Hoping to be heard, that comes to you
As you wake, so your day will be spent

In the futile correction of a distant longing.
All those voices calling from the depths of elsewhere,
From the abyss of an August night, from the misery

Of a northern winter, from a ship going down in the Baltic,
From heartache, from wherever you wish, calling to be saved.
And you have no choice but to follow their prompting,

Saving something of that sound, urging the harsh syllables
Of disaster into music. You stare out the window,
Watching the build-up of clouds, and the wind whipping

The branches of a willow, sending a rain of leaves
To the ground. How do you turn pain
Into its own memorial, how do you write it down,

Turning it into itself as witnessed
Through pleasure, so it can be known, even loved,
As it lives in what it could not be.

From *Unless* by Carol Shields

I've often talked to Tom about the graffiti found in public bathrooms; we've compared notes. The words women write on walls are so touchingly sweet, so innocent. Tom can hardly believe it. "Tomorrow is cancelled," I saw once. And another time, "Saskatchewan Libre!" Once a little poem. "If you sprinkle / when you tinkle / Please be a

sweetie / and wipe the seatie." I love especially the slightly off witticisms, the thoughts that seemed unable to complete themselves except in their whittled-down elliptical, impermanent forms.

I'd never before felt an urge to add to the literature of washroom walls, but that night, at the Frontier Bar, I picked up the piece of chalk without a moment's hesitation, my head a ringing vessel of pain, and my words ready.

First, though, I wiped the little slate clean with a dampened paper towel, obliterating "Hi, Mom" and "Lori farts" and leaving myself a clear space. "My heart is broken," I wrote in block letters, moved by an impulse I would later recognize as dramatic, childish, indulgent, grandiose, and powerful. Then, a whimsical afterthought: I drew a little heart in the corner and put a jagged line through it, acutely aware of the facile quality of the draftsmanship.

At once I felt a release of pressure around my ribs. Something not unlike jubilation rubbed against me, just for a moment, half a moment, as though under some enchantment I was allowed to be receptor and transmitter both, not a dead thing but a live link in the storage of what would become an unendurable grief. I believed at that instant in my own gusto, that I'd set down words of revealing truth, inscribing the most private and alarming of visions instead of the whining melodramatic scrawl it really was, and that this unscrolling of sorrow in a toilet cubicle had all along been my most deeply held ambition.

I went to join the others gathered on the pavement outside the bar. They hadn't noticed I'd been away so long, and perhaps it really had been only a moment or two. Everyone was topped up with good wine and bad food and they were chattering about Toronto and how strange that such campy curiosities as the Frontier Bar continued to exist. Tom slid an arm around my waist, oh so sweetly that I half believed I'd left my poison behind. The night air was bitingly cold, close to freezing, but for the first time in weeks I was able to take a deep breath. My Heart Is Broken. My mouth closed on the words, and then I swallowed.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
1 Samuel 8:4-11, [12-15], 16-20, [11:14-15]
Psalm 138
2 Corinthians 4:13—5: 1

[Then he went home;] and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

ENTERING THE STORY

Mark 3:22-27 follows the form of a pronouncement story. The accusations of the scribes from Jerusalem set up Jesus' response, which contains Jesus' first reference to the parables in the Gospel of Mark. Joachim Jeremias contended that Jesus often used parables in order to respond to his accusers. Parables are ideally suited for this purpose because they leave it to the hearer to infer the meaning of the parable and to see how it relates to them. Mark uses the term parabolē here in its broad sense, which can include proverbs and riddles, like the Hebrew maŝal.

Jesus' response confirms that Beelzebul and "the ruler of the demons" are references to Satan. His question traps his accusers: how can he be empowered by Satan if exorcisms are a casting out of Satan? Jesus' challenge understands the conflict between good and evil in personal and corporate terms. The powers are communities in conflict. Neither a kingdom (today we would say "a country") nor a family will be able to withstand an attack from the outside if inside it is divided against itself.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Just before today's reading, Mark tells of Jesus' naming twelve men as "apostles," a word that has its root in the Greek word "one who is sent." In Mark's words in **Mark 3:13-15:** He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. After choosing this group, Mark tells us, Jesus *went home*. What does he encounter there? How do you imagine this *crowd*? What is it that people are saying? What in Jesus' words or actions might lead them to conclude that Jesus *"has gone out of his mind*?

How do the scribes characterize what Jesus is doing? What motivations might they have in accusing him of having *Beelzebul*? What might be the implications of such an association? What is Jesus' response to these allegations? Write down in your own words what Jesus is saying to the scribes:

From what you know about parables, how might Jesus' saying be considered speaking *in parables*?

1 R. Allen Culpepper, "Mark" in *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary.*

When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind" …Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. What do you imagine that Jesus' family heard about what was happening? What are they intending to do? What might lead them to decide to *restrain him*? What might they desire to gain in doing so? What might it cost them? What might they gain by not taking action? What might it cost them? How does Jesus respond to hearing that his *mother* and his *brothers and sisters are outside*? What might someone in the crowd hear Jesus saying in his reply? What might someone in Jesus' family hear in his words?

2. What do you know of a family (perhaps even your own) for whom the actions or words of one member raise issues or cause concern involving the family? How do members in the family respond to the situation? What concerns them—the health and reputation of the individual, the status and reputation of the family, both, or . . . ? What action do members of the family take to seek to resolve the tension that has arisen due to a member's words or actions?

How have you seen people in a family (or business, or school, or church) set up obstacles against someone whose actions, attitudes, or manner are seen as being a problem? What opposition would you describe as coming out of an attitude of hostility toward the person? What opposition would you describe as coming from an attitude of caring about the person? What are the opponents trying to preserve? To avoid?

3. When, if ever, have you felt that some part of your inner self has "gone out of its mind"? What is it that leads you to think that? Which part of yourself is coming to that conclusion? On what grounds does it believe that? What is the judging part of yourself seeking to defend? What does it fear to lose?

Imagine a conversation between your inner family and the one who is "out of its mind." What might each want to say to the other? What might each learn from the other? How might each discover what they most need while staying in relationship with each other?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- The film *A Dangerous Method* tells a story of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud along with a psychiatric patient named Sabina Spielrein. In the course of her successful treatment, Sabina has an affair with Jung that changes both their lives. The charges of adultery and unethical practice are part of the scandal that includes Emma Jung who countenances her husband's behavior and stays with the marriage. The closing scene of the film shows Sabina leaving Jung for her journey to Vienna to work with Freud. Jung sits alone and says to himself: "Sometimes you have to do something unforgivable to go on living." What do you know of someone who has broken a law, transgressed a taboo or crossed a boundary—done the unforgivable—and thereby found life? What was the price they paid? What might they have gained for self and others? The question is not simply about sexual matters. Imagine the other thousand and one ways in which we deny ourselves and others life for the sake of purity or virtue, orthodox belief or honorable example, a blameless reputation or saintly persona. What is the life that you have denied yourself because of what you have considered to be the unforgivable sin? Or, on the other hand, what has been your unforgivable sin? What is the life you found by committing it?

- *"Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."* Who is your mother? Who are your brothers and sisters? Reflect a bit on how your family of origin think of you?

How are you defined or labeled within your family? Take a few moments and some art materials and create an image of how your mother or your brothers and sisters imagine you. Sit with this image for a little while. What price have you paid in living with this picture of yourself? What burdens, what gifts, what obligations, what advantages, come as a result? How might you conceive of a family that defines you differently? What might it look like to have a family that does the will of God? What might it mean to you to find yourself outside your blood-relations? What would it cost you? What might it promise? How would such a family relate to each other? How, within such a "family", would you determine what the will of God might be? What support might you find for actually doing that?

- Re-read the healing stories in Mark 2 and the portion of Mark 3 that lead up to today's passage. After those experiences, what, in your estimation, prods Jesus to go home again instead of elsewhere? What might he hope to affirm, discover, uncover, recover, reject or do in his hometown? If you were to write your own explanation of this passage or try to unpack it for a neighbor knowing little or nothing about Jesus, what would you say about his use of the parables? Additionally, what would you say about the focus on demons during this early stage of his ministry. And the often confusing/controversial statement about his relatives?

EXPLORING FURTHER

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

[***Ed. Note:*** Beelzebul translates as "Lord of the Flies," a derisive name given by the Israelites to the god of the Philistines, as described in 2 Kings.]

2 Kings 1:1-4, 13-17

After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel. Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay injured; so he sent messengers, telling them, "Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury." But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, "Get up, go to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?' Now therefore thus says the LORD, "You shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die.'" So Elijah went.

Again the king sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty. So the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and entreated him, "O man of God, please let my life, and the life of these fifty servants of yours, be precious in your sight. Look, fire came down from heaven and consumed the two former captains of fifty men with their fifties; but now let my life be precious in your sight." Then the angel of the LORD said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So he set out and went down with him to the king, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, —is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word?—therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die."

So he died according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken.

From "Mark" by R. Allen Culpepper in *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*

The question then is what is meant by "binding the strong man." On this point, the Gospel is not clear. The decisive binding of Satan is undoubtedly related to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and eventually to the

triumphal coming of Jesus as the Son of Man to judge the nations and raise the dead. In the immediate context, however, with reference to the exorcisms of Jesus during his ministry, the binding of Satan may be assumed to have occurred either in connection with the baptism of Jesus and his wrestling with Satan during the forty days of temptation in the wilderness (1:12-13),14 or more generally in the inauguration of the kingdom through Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist's witness was true: Jesus' exorcisms demonstrate that he is indeed "the stronger one" (1:8).

Like others of Jesus' sayings (the good Samaritan or the unjust steward), the riddle of the strong man involves a scandalous association. Jesus casts himself in the role of a thief plundering another's house. On further reflection, the metaphor invites contemplation of God's role as liberator. At the exodus, God's paradigmatic redemptive act, God bound Pharaoh and liberated the children of Israel. The ministry of Jesus, therefore, marks a new exodus, the liberation of the people of God.

Having turned aside the charge that his exorcisms were the work of Satan and having clarified his own role as rescuer or liberator, Jesus takes the offensive. He charges that by accusing him of being in league with Satan his accusers are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and therefore show that it is they who are doing the work of Satan. Both the language and the substance of the argument are thoroughly Semitic. The solemn formula, "Amen," normally occurred at the end of a prayer or priestly pronouncement as the response of the assembly, meaning, "let it be so. Only in rare instances is it found at the beginning of a statement (1 Kg. 1:36; Jer 11:5; 28:6; m. Sotah 2.5), and in none of these instances does the speaker dare to say, "Amen, I say to you ...." To begin a statement with this formula was tantamount to claiming divine authority. The formula never occurs in the Jewish literature, and is found only on the lips of Jesus in the New Testament. Because no Jewish rabbi would speak in such a way, Joachim Jeremias identified the "Amen" formula as one of the distinguishing characteristics of Jesus' speech. The opposing absolute declarations of Jesus are also Semitic in style: literally, "all things will be forgiven the sons of men... , but whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness ...."

The scribes had earlier accused Jesus of blasphemy (2:7). Jesus now turns the charge back on the scribes who had come from Jerusalem. The seriousness of the offense is set off by Jesus' initial declaration that all sinful activity and all blasphemy could be forgiven. His declaration of forgiveness is again reminiscent of his pronouncing the sins of the paralytic forgiven (2:6-10), continuing Mark's emphasis on the authority of Jesus.

From *The Quest for the Historical Satan* by Miguel De La Torre and Albert Hernandez

Our quest for the historical Satan cannot rest content with an overview of the satanic origins of Judeo-Christian demonology, or by merely compiling another summary of how Satan has been presented in the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures, or with another academic analysis of the medieval witch-craze and the injustices of the Spanish Inquisition. If we are to be honest, then our search for the origins of Satan must also take on the larger and perhaps more ancient question about the origins of evil and the degree to which many of our images of evil were derived from popular culture and Christianity's struggle against rival religious beliefs and philosophical ideals. Just as important is the unsettling historical reality that greater atrocities have been committed in defense against various conceptions of the forces of evil personified in Satan and his demonic servants. Declaring the "Other" as Satanic or demonic has been effective for both religious and political leaders. Identifying the Other as a tool of Satan differentiates them from their political adversaries (those representing the evil in the world). . . .

For some religious leaders, whether dealing with Christianity or Islam (or any other faith tradition for that matter), the Other is either the personification of evil or demon possessed. It cannot be denied that evil was, and continues to be, committed throughout the world by men and women of all religious orientations. But to reduce the Other to an ultimate representative or personification of evil justifies cruelties and atrocities committed by those engaged in the battle to save humans from Satan's corruption. No evil ever dreamed-up by Satan can outdo the atrocities committed by good, decent people attempting to purge such evil forces from this world. Any "crusade to rid the world of evil," once and for all, is a misguided endeavor fraught with deep peril for both the self-appointed warriors of goodness, as well as for the alleged evildoers who will be on the receiving end of these projections.

Some of the most diabolical actions, enough to make the very demons of Hell cringe in shame, are committed by those who consider themselves to be God's righteous chosen ones in the spiritual battle against the forces of evil. David Frankfurter states it best, "historically verifiable atrocities take place not in the ceremonies of some evil realm or as expressions of some ontological evil force, but rather in the course of purging evil and its alleged devotees from the world".

To paraphrase the immortal words of the cartoon character Pogo the Possum: "We have met Satan, and he is us!"

“The Mother's Son” by Rudyard Kipling

I have a dream, a dreadful dream,
A dream that is never done.
I watch a man go out of his mind,
And he is My Mother's Son.
They pushed him into a Mental Home,
And that is like the grave:
For they do not let you sleep upstairs,
And you aren't allowed to shave.
And it was not disease or crime
Which got him landed there,
But because They laid on My Mother's Son
More than a man could bear.
What with noise, and fear of death,
Waking, and wounds and cold,
They filled the Cup for My Mother's Son
Fuller than it could hold.
They broke his body and his mind
And yet They made him live,
And They asked more of My Mother's Son
Than any man could give.
For, just because he had not died,
Nor been discharged nor sick,
They dragged it out with My Mother's Son
Longer than he could stick....
And no one knows when he'll get well,
So, there he'll have to be:
And, 'spite of the beard in the looking-glass,
I know that man is me!

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 20
2 Corinthians 5:6-10 [11-13] 14-17
Mark 4:26-34

Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

ENTERING THE STORY

The lectionary text given for today is a snippet from the lengthy saga told in the first and second books of Samuel about the establishment of Israel's monarchy, and specifically of the reigns of Saul and David. The prophet Samuel, divinely appointed as priest, judge, and leader of the Israelites, loses the good will of the people in his old age. His sons, corrupt and unfaithful, are unsuitable to inherit his position and the Israelites demand that the Lord provide a king to rule over them. Although the Lord perceives this demand to be disobedient, he eventually acquiesces and instructs Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's first king. Saul rules for an unknown number of years, with Samuel continuing in his role as Saul's advisor and as interpreter of God's will.

Just prior to this portion of the story, Samuel informs Saul that the Lord has rejected his continuing kingship because he has disobeyed the Lord's instruction to attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have. The Lord specifically demands that no one be spared: kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey [15:3]. Instead, Saul and his people spare Agag, king of the Amelekites, and keep the best of Amalek's livestock to sacrifice to the Lord.

In the following verses, 15:22-23, Samuel describes for Saul the Lord's point of view:

> Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than, sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.

Distraught, Saul then begs Samuel not to abandon him, but to allow him to repent before the Lord. Samuel relents, worships with Saul, and then himself *hew[s] Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal* [15:33]. Today's reading picks up as Samuel and Saul go their separate ways, Samuel knowing that Saul's days as King of Israel are numbered.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Imagine the relationship between Samuel and Saul that has developed over the years of Saul's reign as King of Israel. If time permits, read or re-read 1 Samuel in order to gain an understanding of the struggles they faced. What might it have been like for these two men, Samuel and Saul, to work together in order to bring about God's will for Israel? What power struggles between them do you imagine? Likewise, what love and friendship for one another might they have developed? Describe the relationship each might have had with the Lord. What words and actions demonstrate those relationships?

> *Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.* Why does Samuel grieve over Saul? Why might the Lord be sorry that he had made Saul king? Describe what you understand to be the similarities and differences between Samuel's grief and the Lord's sorrow?
>
> *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out…"* Close your eyes and say to yourself these words as you imagine the Lord says them to Samuel. What tone of voice do you hear? Is it harsh? Exasperated? Gentle? Consoling? How might the tone of voice you imagine the Lord using reflect your understanding of Samuel's grief and the Lord's sorrow? Then repeat the exercise allowing yourself to hear another tone in the Lord's voice. What more does such a change in tone enable you to understand about Samuel's grief and the Lord's sorrow?
>
> *"I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."* The king the Lord has provided for himself is of course David, although Samuel does not yet know this. David will not come to power immediately, however. Indeed, in reading the remaining chapters of I Samuel, you will notice that David appears to earn the kingship as much through human fidelity and bravery in battle as through devotion to the Lord. Furthermore, Samuel dies long before David is crowned.

Why, then, might the Lord demand that Samuel go to Bethlehem to secretly anoint the young David? What purpose do you imagine the Lord believes this symbolic act holds for David? For Samuel? For Israel?

> *Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me."* Saul must understand the implication of Samuel's anointing of a new king since he himself became king by Samuel's anointing. But Samuel seems to believe that, if he learns of it, Saul will now fight the Lord's decision, by killing Samuel if necessary. What circumstances and dynamics might have made Saul capable of murdering the man—priest, prophet, and friend—who set him as king over his people? What circumstances and dynamics cause Samuel to fear dying by Saul's hand?

2. Where in your community and in the larger world do you find leaders like Samuel who grieve the passing of an order they have been instrumental in establishing? How might the situation that causes them so much grief also make God "sorry"? What do you perceive is at the heart of such grief and sorrow?

> What do you see or imagine is the new order God may be urging them toward? Who within this community or world is emerging as the "new king," the David, who might bring about a "golden age"?
>
> What is the death the Samuels of this world fear a usurped Saul may exact?

3. What is the order in your own life, one you felt called by God to establish, that failed (or is now failing)? How have you, like Saul, disobeyed or made a mistake—whether unintentionally, through greed or selfishness, or even because you chose to show mercy—that has changed the course of the future? What is the grief onto which, like Samuel, you continue to hold? What might you need in order to complete your grieving and move on?

> Where might you now turn or travel to find a "new king," a basis for a new order, on which you can build the future?

4. Who is the Saul of your inner world who has betrayed a divine command? What has your inner Saul elected to hold onto rather than utterly destroy? Why does he cling to it? Wonder about the reasons your Saul has disobeyed divine will. Who in your inner world is, like Samuel, charged with setting things straight yet again? Why does he grieve the passing of Saul's reign? For how long has he grieved? What must he do to move on? What ritual expression of grief might enable that movement?

> What does your inner Samuel fear will happen should your inner Saul find out that he has decided to anoint a new king? Allow your inner Samuel to express these fears to God and allow God to respond to them by writing an imaginary dialogue between the two.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Put a small amount of olive oil in a small bowl or container. Spend a little time with it; look at it, touch it, smell it, taste it. How do olives become oil? What do you know of who was anointed in the ancient world? When in our own world do we speak of someone being "anointed"? What does the oil represent? Why might oil be used in this way? Who is the anointer? What object or ritual in your own life might be imagined to serve this purpose? What in your own life right now needs to be anointed? What needs to pass away? What transition needs to be acknowledged? What young royal potential needs to be affirmed?

- Sadly, these days, many people are quick to criticize the "violence" which is supposedly integral to the Qur'an. What are we to make of similar texts within our own Bible? The reason given for God's rejection of Saul is that he disobeyed God's command: "*Now go and attack Am'alek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey*." [1Sam 15:3]. Saul is rejected for failing to carry out genocide. How do we deal with stories like this in our day? Some suggest that we need to understand that morality was different "back then," others that Jesus taught us better and those Old Testament people hadn't yet gotten the message. And yet, we keep those texts in a book we call "the word of God." The passage is not included in the Revised Common Lectionary, so we can perhaps ignore that fact that it is there. But what kind of sacred text is this? What kind of God is this? And where is this violent God all too alive in me and the people I meet?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From "The Myth of Biblical Monotheism," by Christine Downing from *Varieties of Mythic Experience: Essays on Religion, Psyche and Culture*

Thus, because there is nothing that can be seen beforehand, the Hebrew prophets are not predictors; they offer poetic visions not futuristic prophecies. Their emphasis falls on the present as a time of decision, of choice; they call for a turning, re-turning. Though I have focused on the mythic aspects of the narrative parts of the Hebrew Bible, a look at the prophetic literature reveals a complex process of demythization (many of the prophets seem

as aware as Marx of how myths can be used to bolster political power and oppression) and remythization (as they try to recover the dynamic inherent in the inherited metaphors, particularly exodus and covenant.) To read the Hebrew prophets is to see the mythic imagination at work. Of course, the prophets do not experience themselves as engaged in a deliberate, conscious reimagining of the tradition; within the myth the understanding is that what happens is that God speaks to and through them—a divine voice gives them a message to be shared with their community. Not that they are just microphones; they may resist, they may plead with god, they may persuade him; the relationship is once again dialogical—not mystical; it is not an experience of unitive ecstasy or merging. God is other, he is You; the prophets (to use Buber's phrases once again) are participants in the myth of the I and the Thou, the caller and the called, the self and the other. Out of this dialogical relationship between God and the prophets new images, new myths emerge . . .

The prophets announce that there are real alternatives and that what will happen in the future depends on us, on how we respond to now. God has a goal, a vision, for us: that we might learn to live together in peaceful and just ways. But its fulfillment depends on us. The hoped-for consummation is to take place in history and through history, that is through human doing, by way of the human response to God's calling. The past is over, done with, irretrievable. The present is a time of decision, of choice, response-ability. The future is genuinely open, is the realm of possibility. Time moves forward from a discrete beginning point, through an interim period (the period in which Abraham and Moses and we live), towards a goal, a culmination. What happens in the interim period is crucial; how we respond to the events and persons we encounter will determine whether and when that goal is reached.

From "A Religion of Tests" by Yehoshua November from *God's Optimism*

Yet, once, at the Sabbath afternoon services,
I saw a man praying.
His hair was combed perfectly,
but his heart was broken.
A month earlier his son had jumped
from the city's tallest building.
I saw him rocking back and forth in prayer
like a flame.
The synagogue's lights reflected off his forehead,
and everyone who was there knew
he was very close to God.

 **This poem is written in three sections. Listen to a recitation and read the entire poem here: https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/1550142/jewish/Religion-of-Tests.htm**

From *God: A Biography* by Jack Miles

Saul's downfall comes about when he fails to execute properly the Lord's sworn judgment. At Exodus 17:14, many years before Saul's birth, the Lord said to Moses, in a passage we have already quoted: "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!" Blotting out the remembrance, we noted when we first considered that incident, means extermination, and in I Samuel 15, it falls belatedly to Saul to wreak the Lord's bloody revenge. The Lord warns him not to show any mercy. […]

But when the moment comes, Saul invites the Kenites, a clan living with the Amalekites, to flee: “Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt” (15:6). True enough: Moses’ wife and father-in-law were Kenites, and the tribe did assist the Israelites. But mercy for the Kenite sucklings was not among the Lord’s instructions to Saul. Worse, Saul takes the Amalekite king captive rather than kill him, and worst of all, he takes the best of the sheep and cattle as battle spoils rather than destroy them. For these actions, and greatly to the grief of Samuel, the Lord turns against Saul. Saul is not innocent, then, but the disproportion between his sin and his suffering is so extreme that he takes on some of the pathos of a Greek tragic hero, and his downfall produces in the reader or hearer of something like the catharsis of Greek tragedy. By the same token, God’s destructive power, by being linked so tenuously to ethical considerations, approaches the blind, autonomic character of Greek Ananke*.

[***Ed. Note***: *In ancient Greek religion, Ananke (/əˈnæŋkiː/; Greek: Ἀνάγκη, from the common noun ἀνάγκη, "force, constraint, necessity") is the personification of inevitability, compulsion and necessity.]

From “The Passing of Arthur” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson from I*dylls of the King*

Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:
"Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead,
When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world,
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds."

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
But now farewell. I am going a long way
With these thou seëst—if indeed I go
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)—
To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail
Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,
Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere
Revolving many memories, till the hull
Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,
And on the mere the wailing died away.

But when that moan had past for evermore,
The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn
Amazed him, and he groan'd, The King is gone."
And therewithal came on him the weird rhyme,
"From the great deep to the great deep he goes."

To read the entire poem:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45325/idylls-of-the-king-the-passing-of-arthur

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
1 Samuel 17: [1a, 4-11, 1923] 32-49
Psalm 9:9-20
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

ENTERING THE STORY

A new phase of Jesus' ministry is opened in the following narrative segment as gradations of the authority of the New Human Being are disclosed by a series of four momentous events. The first and also the most threatening, the storm on the Sea of Galilee, is encountered as a result of his determination to expand his ministry. "Let's cross over to the other side," he urges his followers. Since he has been teaching from "the boat," they simply "take him as he was in the boat" and set out for the opposite shore. "And other boats were with him," probably filled with "the ones around him" of 4:10, both women and men, while the twelve representatives of the new Israel accompany him in the boat. Soon after they are under way "a great storm of wind" arises which covers Jesus' boat with waves, and most likely the others as well. It is as though the furies of chaos mean to destroy Jesus and the new Israel, which he has constituted, in the same way they wrecked "the boat of Jacob," as narrated in the Testament of the patriarch Naphtali.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *On that day*. In Mark's version that day seems to begin with Jesus at home. Such crowds gather that they could hardly even eat [Mark 3:19-20]. Towards evening of that day it is easy to imagine Jesus exhausted by the crowds, his family concerns, all the parable teaching to his followers, and time spent alone with his disciples.

   On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And then the *great windstorm*. Jesus is in the stern asleep. Close your eyes and imagine being in the boat. As the wind picks up, you begin to struggle with staying steady. With the storm upon you, you realize the boat is being swamped. Wake Jesus. Say to him, "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*" Jesus awakens, rebukes the wind, and says to the sea, "*Peace! Be still!*" Now, with eyes still closed, feel the winds cease. Be in the dead calm. Feel the dead calm in your muscles and bones. Jesus asks you why you are yet afraid and have no faith. Turn to one another. Ask the people around you in your own words, "*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him*?" Take time to write what it was like being the story. What were you feeling and thinking? What did you discover? What questions?

   "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*" What do you make of the question? What does it give away about how they see Jesus? What does it reveal about their relationship? What does Jesus say or do in response to the question?

   "*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*" What might Jesus believe they fear? What could be the faith that he senses they still lack? How might the story have been different had they not been afraid and instead possessed the faith he implies they lack? What do they say or do in response to Jesus' question?

1 Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power* (Augsburg Fortress, 1989) p. 110.

"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Rather than answer Jesus' question directed to them, they ask a question of one another. What do you suppose is going on between them and Jesus? Among them? Why might they be more interested in talking about Jesus than about the fear they have and faith they do not have?

What do you suppose were some of the storms facing Jesus, his disciples, his followers and others living in that time? What could you say about the boat in which each may have been riding out a great windstorm with waves beating the sides and arousing their fear of being swamped? Whom might these people have called upon for help? What happened for them when the wind became silent and still and the storm ceased?

2. What are the storms people endure today? What storms threaten the boat? What are the waves beating against the boat that are described on the evening news, reflected in lost job reports, demonstrated by conflict in churches over what to believe and how to behave, or expressed in racial and ethnic tensions? What of the waves of illness, global poverty and climate change?

3. What is a storm that threatens you today or is on the horizon? What do you know from your experience about how, when the storm winds end, a dead calm often arrives? How have you lived through a dead calm after a divorce, death, job loss, surgery, empty nest, chemo sessions, war, election, or retirement? What happened "the next day" when the storm was over and your world was a dead calm?

What kind of fear awaits you when the storm is over and the dead calm arrives? What is the faith needed to get through and move on? Whom or what do you count on, when you arrive safely on the distant shore, to see you through the days that follow?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *"Do you not care that we are perishing?"* Fear and faith. Faith and fear. Where indeed can one turn when panic takes over the soul and body? Is it faith that makes the disciples waken Jesus? Are they anxious at bothering him? Angry at having to do so? How often do we expect someone to who we are close to know what's wrong before we tell them about it? Just what more, or what difference, does Jesus demand of his friends other than having the faith to reach out to him? Does he expect the same of us?

- "*Let us go across to the other side*." Mark speaks often of Jesus' going to the other side. On the other side, Jesus and his followers encounter a madman who lives among the tombs (Mk 5:1), a cry for help from Jairus and a bleeding woman hidden in the crowd (5:21). Jesus seeks respite from misunderstanding and argument (8:13). The crossing itself can be eerily eventful—Jesus stills a storm (4:35) and seems to walk on the water (6:45). Where is the other side for you? What makes it the other side? How do you find it? What might you experience there? When might you need to go across to the other side?

- *But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion…He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!*" What happens in this story when Jesus falls asleep on the cushion, hand (as Waetjen suggests) on the tiller? What happens in your life when you are "asleep at the wheel"? What storms have ensued, and continue to ensue, when that inner "pilot" falls asleep? How hard is it to wake him/her up? It's a good question—perhaps only answerable in retrospect, after the storm is over. Those who have never (yet) been through the

storm might find it unimaginable. Does having been through a storm or two help with the next one? What shape does your current storm take?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From "Gradations of the Authority of the New Human Being" in *A Reordering of Power* by Herman C. Waetjen

Since he [Jesus] is building a new moral order in which relationships are family-like and power and privilege are shared, he must be expecting his disciples to appropriate and exercise the authority of royalty that is rightfully theirs. At least they could have assumed responsibility for the boat, gripped the tiller, and weathered the storm. Perhaps his rebuke that they have no faith also insinuates that they might have confronted the forces of chaos as he did and, in their self-understanding as members of the new Israel, exercised their sovereignty to reprimand the wind and calm the sea. But they are too overcome by their awe to grasp the scope of the reordering of power in which they too may participate as members of his community. Instead, they begin to ask the christological question for the first time: "Who then is this, for even the wind and the sea obey him?" Although they may not be aware of it, their sudden realization that they do not after all know who he is simultaneously throws their own identity into question. For the self-understanding that they had been developing as his disciples does not appear to have the limits and boundaries they had fixed, either for him or for themselves. As they enter into this new crisis and confront the chaos inside them, they are deluged by fear.

From "Doubt, A Parable" by John P. Shanley

> [***Ed. Note:*** *Doubt, A Parable* is a play by John Patrick Shanley. The play won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Tony Award for Best Play and was made into a film (*Doubt*) in 2008. Father Flynn is a priest at St. Nicholas Church and School whose history as a sexual abuser has been thinly veiled by powerful figures in the Catholic Church.]

FLYNN: What do you do when you're not sure? That's the topic of my sermon today. You look for God's direction and can't find it. Last year when President Kennedy was assassinated, who among us did not experience the most profound disorientation? Despair. "What now? Which way? What do I say to my kids? What do I tell myself?" It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness. But think of that! Your bond with your fellow beings was your despair. It was a public experience, shared by everyone in our society. It was awful, but we were in it together! How much worse is it then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity? "No one knows I'm sick. No one knows I've lost my last real friend. No one knows I've done something wrong." Imagine the isolation. You see the world as through a window. On the one side of the glass: happy, untroubled people. On the other side: you. Something has happened, you have to carry it, and it's incommunicable. For those so afflicted, only God knows their pain. Their secret. The secret of their alienating sorrow. And when such a person, as they must, howls to the sky, to God: "Help me!" What if no answer comes? Silence. I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship sank and all her crew was drowned. Only this one sailor survived. He made a raft of some spars and, being of a nautical discipline, turned his eyes to the Heavens and read the stars. He set a course for his home, and, exhausted, fell asleep. Clouds rolled in and blanketed the sky. For the next twenty nights, as he floated on the vast ocean, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course but there was no way to be certain. As the days rolled on, and he wasted away with fevers, thirst and starvation, he began to have doubts. Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know. The message of the constellations—had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen Truth once, and now had to hold on to it

without further reassurance? That was his dilemma on a voyage without apparent end. There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. I want to say to you: Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

From *The Conviction of Richard Nixon: The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews* by James Reston Jr.

"Well, what would you express?" said Nixon, gesturing with the blade of his hand to Frost.

Every American journalist I have ever known would shrivel at this plea for help, hiding with terror behind the pose of the uninvolved, "objective" interviewer. The question was worthy of Socrates: Frost must lead Nixon to truth and enlightenment. He took up the challenge, haltingly, even inarticulately at first. "My goodness," was his initial, overwhelmed utterance at this "heart-stopping question." Nixon tried to help.

"I've qualified mistakes. I've tried to say how bad they were. I'm trying to forget the difference between mistake and a crime." (The difference was hard to forget, I granted him. One goes to jail for the latter.)

Groping about for a moment, Frost finally locked onto the categories. One, there were more than mistakes. "There was wrongdoing, whether it was a crime or not. Yes, it may have been a crime, too. Two, the power of the presidency was abused. The oath of office was not fulfilled. And, three, the American people were put through two years of agony, and .. . I apologize. I know how difficult it is for anyone, and most of all you, and I think the American people need to hear it. I think that unless you say it, you're going to be haunted for the rest of your life..." The threat at the end seemed unnecessary.

The apology that followed did not come quietly or succinctly, but when it came, it was electrifying. It began characteristically, with a warm-up: telling speechwriter Ray Price to include the President's own resignation along with Haldeman's and Ehrlichman's in the draft of the presidential statement for April 30, 1973.. ."if you think I ought to." (One had the distinct suspicion that had Price included Nixon's name, the final draft would have announced the resignations of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Price.) It proceeded to the customary preamble of the "good things" he had done from April 30 to August 1974. He owed it to history to point them out first, he said grandiosely. He made a halfhearted stab at things he did not do, but dropped that tack quickly. He vented some bitterness (but not much) on his accusers, speaking of a "five-front war," but mentioning only three fronts: the press, and the partisan staffs of the Judiciary Committee and the special prosecutor. He said most of his statements were fundamentally true. He clung to his legal position that he did not commit a crime because he did not have the requisite corrupt motive for the commission of a crime. All this was preamble, aside, caveat, warm-up—statements in which his character and training forced him to wrap the now inexorable confession. We had come to the Yeatsian epiphany: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold... Surely some revelation is at hand..."

From *Across the Threshold, Into the Questions* by Caren Goldman and Ted Voorhees

The truth and its consequences have a special way of shredding our egos and putting us in our place. For years I wrote for national magazines and daily newspapers about holistic health, complementary medicine, and what people should do to gain a degree of self-control when they were ill and feeling out of control. I was so good at it that I even wrote a book on the subject for a famous doctor. However, now all those wise words and years of experience felt foreign. My world was that strange, out-of-control one, and I didn't know where I could find sparkling red shoes to click together three times, a magic wand, forgiveness for any specific sins that caused cancer, or whatever else that could get me back to where I was before getting a life-threatening weather report.[…]

The winds of change did come—later, much, much later. Not with every one of my doctors' forecasts of sunny days ahead. Not with the first, second, third, or even fourth annual report that the days of turbulence and devastation were history and I was cancer free. Not with the statistics that said my cure rate was as good as it gets with breast cancer. No, the change came in its own unpredictable way, just like the blessed calm after many a major storm. It came gradually. It came as one ray of sun after another began to peek through lingering black clouds. It came as those little setting-sun pale rainbows called sun dogs that frame dark clouds. And at last it became the realization that when I found the lump, reported it, and decided not to let my doubts render me powerless, I could at last take a leap of faith that would carry me to the other side of my darkest hours and worst fears. A leap of faith that still feels like a miracle.



Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee (1633) by Rembrandt; Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA. Rembrandt's only seascape, this painting was stolen from the Gardner Museum in 1990 and has never been recovered.

To enlarge and see the painting in detail: https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/10953

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
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2 Samuel 1:1-1, 17-27
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

ENTERING THE STORY

This passage weaves together two different stories: 1) a story of a leader of the synagogue named Jairus who comes to Jesus to beg him to make his daughter well, and 2) a story of a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years and comes to Jesus to touch his clothes so that she may be made well.

Each of these stories could easily have stood by itself and been totally understandable, but all three synoptic gospel writers have transmitted them to us as a single unit. Perhaps by encountering them together we will learn some things that we can't learn from them separately. As you work through the text today, consider what difference it makes to read the two stories together.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Sketch out each of the characters in this passage:

   Jairus: What do you know about him? What is his social standing? What does he want? What does he do?

   A woman: What do you know about her? What is her social standing? What does she want? What does she do?

   People from the leader's house: What do you know about them? What do they want? What do they do?

   People at the house: What do you know about them? What do they want? What do they do?

Little daughter: What do you know about her? What does she do?

Jesus (at this point in the Gospel of Mark): What do you know about him? What does he want? What does he do?

Imagine yourself as Jairus, begging Jesus to heal your daughter. Approach Jesus; you may even fall at his feet, you cry out to Jesus several times. Imagine him agreeing to come. How are you feeling? What hopes and/or fears come up within you as you approach Jesus? How does it feel that Jesus agrees to come?

Imagine yourself as the woman. Imagine what it would be like to suffer a flow of blood for twelve years. What have you lost? How are you feeling? Imagine Jesus passing by, and make your way through the crowd to touch Jesus' cloak. How does your body feel to be healed of disease? Imagine Jesus stopping and asking who touched my clothes? Step up to him, fall at his feet, and tell him your story. How are you feeling? What hopes and/or fears come up within you as you approach Jesus secretly? What is it like to be healed? What hopes and/or fears come up within you as Jesus seeks you out? As you approach him openly?

Jesus says to the woman, *Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease*, and to Jairus, *Do not fear, only believe.* The noun faith and the verb believe are from the same root in Greek, and each might be translated "trust." How does Jairus give evidence of his trust? How does the woman demonstrate her trust? Trust in what? What might account for their trust? How might fear negate trust? What fears need to be overcome in order to trust?

2. What do you know about someone or something in your world—your family, your neighborhood, your city, your nation—that is at the point of death? Who cries out or reaches out for healing? Who or what might make it well so that it will live again? What fears threaten to overwhelm their faith?

What do you know of the blood that has flowed out of those around you for the last "twelve years"?

Ponder again that moment when the woman, who has reached out from the anonymity of the crowd to be healed, is now standing with Jesus as he receives news of the death of Jairus' daughter. What a tension of joy and regret—the joy of being healed and the realization, simultaneously, that your healing has kept another from being healed. What do you know of that tension in your life? Where have your best intentions and desires been clouded by a difficult outcome you would not have chosen? When have you said to yourself, "If I had only known…"?

3. Imagine this story as a drama being played out within your own depths. Who or what within you would play the part of:

Jairus: community leader and father of a dying daughter?

A woman: suffering a long illness and reaching out in the crowd?

People from the leader's house: announcing a daughter's death?

People at the house: mourning and scoffing?

Little daughter: at the point of death?

Jesus: a healer?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.*" Notice that she does not touch him, but his garment. Matthew and Luke who copy the story from Mark even add "the fringe of" his garment. Scholars suggest that this element in the story reflects the assumption that touching leads to contamination. One of the woman's fears is that by touching Jesus she would infect him—not with her affliction but with the sin everyone believes causes it. What is the risk she is taking in approaching Jesus? In the other story Jesus goes into the house of Jairus and touches the hand of the child. What do you know of anything in your life like the fear of the woman—that by touching the source of hope and healing you will infect, taint, or sully the other? How does such anxiety protect the other? How does it keep your illness safe and intact?

- What does the bleeding woman risk? What do you imagine the woman thought when Jesus asked, *Who touched me?* What do you imagine she felt? What do you think she wanted to do at this moment? What did she do? What in her life may have made her want to slip away in the crowd? What may have caused her to come forward and tell all? How have you experienced similar feelings? What could be important enough in your life for you to take the risks this woman did in going out in public, touching Jesus's clothes, and finally stepping forward to tell Jesus all about it? What in your life may urgently need healing—in your body, in a relationship, in your interior life? What might you have to risk or spend in order to gain healing? Make a list of the possible costs of healing for you. Now list the possible benefits. As each hour goes by, are you choosing to risk the costs of healing, or are you clinging to illness?

- Blood. A lot of blood. The woman in this story had been bleeding for twelve years. She spent all she had on physicians, and was no better, but grew worse. Still, she seeks out the healer Jesus and touched his cloak, for she said "*If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well*." If the woman in the story has spent all she had on physicians, what does she have now? What difference might this make? Where are you bleeding, right now? Hemorrhaging? What physicians have you sought who made you worse, not better? Who have you trusted that sapped your strength and resources but didn't help? Where have you spent all you have? Who might be the healer that you now trust to make you well? What might it mean to touch his/her cloak? What might be your part of the healing process? What is the faith that heals this woman? What faith, hope, or trust might be part of the healing of your own lost vitality, life-force, passion, or sense of wholeness?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Provoking the Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller's Commentary, Year B* by Richard W. Swanson

This scene, like so many others in Mark's story, wrestles with life and death, the heart of ritual practice. The scene begins with Jairus's daughter at the point of death, at the point of becoming a corpse, at the point of becoming the physical embodiment of the inexorable, the mysterious, the unclean. Near the end of the scene she is a corpse, which introduces a complication into the scene beyond that merely of her death. She has died because Jesus has delayed too long in the crowd, but that is not the only problem here. She now embodies all that ritual exists to

manage and hold back. When Jesus grasps her hand, he absorbs uncleanness normally shared only by family members at the time of a death. This sharing of the mystery of death marks him, though it is unclear what happens to that mark when the little girl rises and walks around. If the border between the realms of life and death is the place where ritual dances to regulate and protect, what exactly has happened here? The retrieval of a little girl from beyond the border will disturb things all along this fortified line. What ritual accomplishes this?

And before Jesus arrives at the border between life and death, between breath and stillness, a woman touches him in a crowd. This touch, like the one that follows it in the house of Jairus, is loaded with ritual power. The touch is from behind and can only be read as one touch among hundreds: the disciples note that the crowd is crushing Jesus. The touch is from a woman who is bleeding, perhaps it is menstrual bleeding, perhaps it is not. Nothing in the text helps us decide this matter definitively. Whatever sort of blood is involved, the scene is ritually the same. Blood is the mysterious stuff of life, the place that God's first breath is understood to inhabit in a human being, the place also from which we give life back. That it is a powerful mystery comes clear when Jesus, crushed by the crowd, suddenly stops and asks who touched him. In this story world, the rituals that dance around the mystery of life are so powerful that they do not require a person to consciously participate in them. Jesus' back is turned, and still he feels the ritual power go out of him. […]

Is this a scene in which healing flows? Indeed it is. Is this a scene in which potency is drained from Jesus? It is more than possible. What is clear is that contact with the mystery of blood will have caused the metaphorical fluid of uncleanness to flow into Jesus and be absorbed.

From "Let Something Essential Happen to Me" in *Guerillas of Grace* by Ted Loder

O God,
let something essential happen to me,
something more than interesting
or entertaining,
or thoughtful.
O God,
let something essential happen to me,
something awesome,
something real.
Speak to my condition, Lord,
and change me somewhere inside where it matters,
a change that will burn and tremble and heal
and explode me into tears
or laughter or love that throbs or screams
or keeps its terrible, cleansing silence
and dares the dangerous deeds.
Let something happen in me which is my real self, God.

Read the entire poem of prayer here:
https://soulpatch.net/2013/10/04/let-something-essential-happen-to-me-ted-loder/



Jesus heals the bleeding woman by Alexandre Biden (circa 1850)

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2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10
Psalm 48
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

ENTERING THE STORY

This reading includes two passages: first, the end of Jesus' successful healing journeys and rejection back home (6:1–6), followed by a new section in which Jesus extends his mission by sending his disciples (6:7–13), culminating in Peter's messianic confession (8:27–33). Together the passages link the limited perspectives on Jesus by people who should know him best with the unlimited potential of his new inner circle, even though up to now they too have misunderstood the meaning of Jesus' ministry. […]

Mark ends with a summary statement that indicates the disciples do in fact go out, preach, and cast out demons. People repent as John the Baptist (1:4) and Jesus (1:15) before them said they should. In addition, the traditional healing balm of oil is used to relieve "many sick people" of their infirmities.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.* Wonder what it might be about that place that gives rise to Jesus deciding to leave that place and come to his hometown. What might Jesus be thinking or feeling as he starts this journey? How far do you imagine the trip is? How long does it take? What might he be wondering? Expecting to find? What might he be thinking about his family or friends or others as he starts this journey to his hometown?

And the disciples—what might they be thinking or feeling as they follow him to his hometown? What are they wondering? Expecting?

On the Sabbath, he began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. Imagine how much time elapsed between Jesus' coming to his hometown and his teaching on the Sabbath? Was it minutes? Days? Weeks? Might there be a connection between how long he stays in his hometown and how they see him? How he sees himself?

Where might he stay in *his hometown*? With any of his family? With the disciples? What difference might it make where he stays?

1 Efrain Agosto, "Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press).

In response to all of this, Jesus feels what? Amazed at what? What might be the relationship between their unbelief and Jesus' inability to do any deed of power there?

What or who might those who hear him in the synagogue be expecting as Jesus begins teaching? What questions are they asking? What do their questions presume about Jesus and their expectations of him?

Imagine being there when Jesus comes to his hometown. Take whatever time you need to choose a character in the story. Are you one of the many who were astounded? Are you one of" they" who asks questions? Are you one of Jesus' brothers? One of his sisters? His mother?

What might it be like to see Jesus grow up in the same town or in the same family? As you choose a character, imagine: How long have you known Jesus? Years? Decades? Your whole life? Not at all? What memories, if any, stand out for you?

> Embody this character and then hear Jesus teach in the synagogue. Hear his words. Hear also the pull between what your ears are hearing what you expect to hear. What might be the difference, if any, between this Jesus who is speaking now and the Jesus you remember? What is going on within you as you listen and watch? Where in your body do you feel this pull? Write down your feelings, sensations, thoughts, and perceptions. What more do you know now?

2. Where in the world around you do you see others who have left some place and are seeking to go to their hometown? What represents a "hometown" for them? Where in your work place or school or Bible study group or town hall meeting do you see those who are amazed and then take offense at those who have returned?

What do you know of going to a place that is your own hometown and seeing those who say you are "the carpenter" or "Mary's son" instead of who you see yourself to be?

What connection might there be between your belief about yourself and their unbelief? Why does it matter?

3. What do you know about returning to an inner "hometown," a place where you have been formed or shaped? Who or what are those within that express "unbelief"? How are your potential deeds of power affected by their unbelief? What do you know of those voices within you who do not hear you and refuse to welcome you? Is the dust still on your feet?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.* How do you suppose the disciples react to these instructions? How might they be feeling about such orders? What might they hate to leave at home? What do you imagine they will miss most? Why do you suppose Jesus tells them to take nothing but their staff and wear sandals and not take an extra tunic? How might such instructions be related to their mission, task or their now having authority over the unclean spirits? When you look at our 21st century disciples what do you see them taking on their "journey"? What has the church as an institution left at home or given up for the sake of the work? When you observe others in the pews on Sunday what do you imagine they are carrying along that Jesus might have wished them to leave

behind? What is your excess baggage? What are you carrying through life—things or attitudes or hopes/fear or affections or aspirations or principles or prejudices—that impede your use of your authority over unclean spirits? What is one such piece of extra luggage that you might leave behind today? What do you lose or gain by holding onto it? What might you lose or gain by walking away from it?

- Recall, if you can, the first time you went back to your hometown as an adult. Take a moment and just remember. Try to give some form to those memories in art. What was small? Large? Who did you see? What did you have to say to each other? Were there things you didn't say? Why not? What else was going on for you? Can we ever really leave home? Can we ever really go back? Why might it be important when you leave home, to *take nothing for (your) journey except a staff*…?

- *He left that place and came to his hometown*…What do you imagine Jesus "saw" when he went back to his hometown? And at this point in his journey to Jerusalem, what might he know or not know and say to others or just himself about how far he had already gone?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "There are things you just can't do in life. You can't beat the phone company, you can't make a waiter see you until he's ready to see you, and you can't go home again."—*Bill Bryson*

> "When I worked on an Indian reservation they had a saying: Sometimes you have to go back just to see how far you have gone." —*Doug Hepler*

> "you are searching everywhere
> you want the sun
> find your home
> between your eyes" —*Žiga Stanovnik*

My carpenter father built me a doll's house for my eighth birthday—a gorgeous two-story colonial with real siding painted Williamsburg blue and floors finished with walnut stain. It was far more elegant than any house our family had ever lived in, very grown-up too. Indeed, there was nothing "little girl" about it. Two months later, Dad left my mother and our house, moved into his parents' home, and later into a series of houses and apartments. For many years, my sisters and I spent every weekend with him. He picked us up late on Friday afternoons, loading our suitcases and my doll's house into his red Ford Econoline van, unloading it again at the door of whatever rental we called home. My little house never had much furniture, mostly just some scraps of wood from Dad's shop, bits of fabric from worn-out clothes. I don't even remember playing very often with it in a traditional way. But somehow it held my worlds together, provided a structure for my dreams. When I tired of being who others said I was, I disappeared inside that house, shut the doors behind me, and told myself my truth. Inside, free from my assigned roles, I gestated the woman I would become. Each empty room was a blank page onto which I wrote the lives I would someday lead. Some of those lives were lives my parents and siblings expected of me. But others were not. And still are not. Indeed, in many ways, I am not who I was supposed to be. None of us are. But I believe God shines most fully in those aspects of us that make our relatives scratch their heads in wonder, worry, and, sometimes, even astonishment. After many years in Dad's attic, my little house has come home to me—

reminding me that, although going home to a family that doesn't seem to "get" me is often difficult, coming home to myself is what really matters. Somehow, Dad must understand that. —*Kathie Collins*

From "Exegetical Perspective" by Efrain Agosto in *Feasting on the Word*

Instructions for the Journey: All three Synoptic Gospels include instructions to the disciples about what to wear, what not to take, and how to react to their receptions. Mark includes the bare minimum: take just a staff to help you walk and ward off wild animals, wear sandals and one tunic, but not two (v. 8). In other words, itinerant preachers in the Jesus movement depend on the hospitality of settled believers in the various communities to which they travel. Moreover, when they come to one place, they are to stay in the first home that receives them (v. 10). There should be no appearance of looking for the best meals or the most comfortable bed in town! However, should their message be rejected at a home or by an entire town, they should exercise the practice of "shaking the dust from one's feet" (v. 11). Rabbis in later traditions talked of this symbolic way of returning from Gentile lands to one's sacred spaces. Followers of Jesus perhaps used the practice to symbolize judgment on unrepentant places. However, the shaking off of dust could be a hopeful sign if such people and places would thereby see the seriousness of the matter and mend their ways.

From "*Prophets at Home" by George C. Heider in *The Christian Century

The villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus, and they thought him to be nothing special. […]

Those whom Jesus began to teach in the synagogue in Nazareth had known him all of his life. Their reaction is therefore telling: they were "astounded" (exeplessonto), which according to its New Testament usage could be a good or a bad thing. The words with which they expressed their astonishment are similarly open to interpretation: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are done by his hands!" Yet their final words reveal that they smelled something fishy (besides several of his disciples): "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Finally we are told explicitly: "They took offense at him."

New Testament scholars inform us that the problem here is one of culture: in an honor/shame society, it was an act of sheer arrogance for someone of Jesus' lowly origins to speak out publicly. The villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus, and they thought him to be nothing special. His mother and siblings lived among them and they were ordinary folk. Jesus was a journeyman carpenter at best, not a sage or dignitary, and his apparent ability to perform "deeds of power" like healings simply didn't add up. So "they took offense at him."

In fact, Mark tells us, their unbelief worked a negative miracle of sorts (captured in what certainly is the most puzzling line in the reading): "He could do no deed of power there." (Well, Mark concedes, he slipped in a few random healings, but nothing like what all the shouting was about three verses earlier.) It was Jesus' turn to be astounded: "He was amazed (ethaumazen) at their unbelief."[…]

Wherein lies hope and a way forward? One option is suggested as the Gospel reading continues: Jesus turned his focus to equipping others and enabling them to do what he could not accomplish at home. Those exorcised and otherwise cured could hardly complain if they received healing at the hands of a disciple rather than from the Master himself.

But there may be another point too—subtle yet present. Three additional times in Mark's Gospel there are references to "Jesus of Nazareth." They come at pivotal points in the narrative: the segue to his entry into Jerusalem, the contexts of his trial and the empty tomb. One could say that these are merely conventional references from a time when surnames were not used by peasants. Or just maybe they are reminders that Jesus retained a special affection for those who knew him best, despite the incident in Mark 6, in that he remained identified with them. We don't know if he ever saw the people of Nazareth again. But surely he never forgot them,

and it can be no accident that he promises to return to the vicinity of his hometown for any postresurrection reunions.

From a letter in the "Readers Write" section of the *Sun Magazine*

My daughter Michelle was enrolled at the North Carolina School of the Arts, one of the top high-school art academies in the country. She had high SAT scores and a great academic record, but she didn't want to go to college. She was adamant. She wanted to dance.

I told her there was no real future in dance, that she should get a degree first. She told me she didn't care about the money, and if she was ever going to do this, she had to do it now. "Don't you believe in me?" she asked. "Don't you believe in art?"

I began to realize that if I didn't support Michelle's dream, she was going to chase it without me. That summer, instead of taking her to tour college campuses, I went with her to audition after audition at dance studios around the country. It still didn't make sense to me: even professional dancers barely get by. But Michelle persisted, and after graduation she got an offer—a small offer, but it was a start. She packed up her belongings and traveled to Orlando, Florida, to become a ballet dancer. She was not a lead or soloist (they, at least, make a living) but one of the secondary members of the company, who worked sixty hours a week and earned well below minimum wage.

At the company's fall opening, I watched my daughter dance with joy on her face, and I finally understood that to be an artist requires faith. People who paint in garrets, rehearse in walk-ups, write poetry in parks, and practice en pointe until their toes bleed do it because they believe in art. They believe that their passion for it will sustain them. And somehow it does.

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Psalm 24
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

[6-12a When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day. David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?" So David was unwilling to take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God."]

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

[20-23 David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, 'How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!' David said to Michal, 'It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD, that I have danced before the LORD. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes ; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor.' And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.]

ENTERING THE STORY

Constructed during the Israelites' wanderings in the desert and used until the destruction of the First Temple, the Ark of the Covenant was the most important symbol of the Jewish faith, and served as the only physical manifestation of God on earth. The construction of the Ark is commanded by God to Moses while the Jews were still camped at Sinai (Ex. 25:10-22; 37:1-9).[1]

King David is bringing the Ark of the Covenant to his city, Jerusalem. The ark in the city tells the world that the Holy Presence has moved to the City of David. Placed upon a new cart it moves in procession to the sounds of song and lyre, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. As they reach the city of David an ox and fatling are sacrificed. Amidst the shouting and sounds of trumpet David dances.

1 https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-ark-of-the-convenant

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What do you know about the ark? Where does it come from and why such celebration? Were you to ask several of those who dance with David what the ark means to them, they might say to you:

Were you to ask David what he is thinking and feeling about the occasion he might tell you:

He might tell you the ark is important to him because:

Michal is David's wife. What do you learn of her from the text?

Imagine being David. Take a deep breath and be David. See the ark being carried on a cart into Jerusalem. Hear the music of lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. Dressed in your linen ephod leap and dance with all of your might as the trumpet sounds. Make leaping and dancing noises. Look up to a window as you pass and see the face of your wife Michal.

Now imagine being Michal. Look down from your window upon David dressed in ephod leaping and dancing with all his might. Let your body move with feelings of despising. Make noises of a heart that despises him.

What might Michal from the window want to yell down to David in the road below:

And David might yell back:

2. Who are people you know, read about, see on the evening TV news or on your social media feed who "*dance before the LORD with all their might*"? Who are the ones who are celebrating with abandon a new beginning or victory or special blessing or success or presence of God in their lives? What does their "leaping and dancing" look like? Sound like? Who sees the dancing?

What do you know of a Michal in your world who, seeing the "*leaping and dancing*" David, looks upon the dancing and "despised him in her heart"? How are they making clear their dislike and loathing of what David is doing?

3. When have you, like David celebrated with an exuberance like "*leaping and dancing*"? When have you ever expressed your pleasure and excitement in ways that led to others taking offense and even despising you? When might you have been about to leap and dance but when seeing a Michal at the window watching stopped?

When have you been the Michal looking on when another close to you yearned to leap and dance with joy? What did your condemning look do to their urge to celebrate?

4. What do you know of such a David and Michal within your soul or psyche? What do you hear yourself saying and see yourself doing that tells you there is an exuberant David within you who yearns to leap and dance with all his might? And what stirs and calls out from within you that tells you of the presence of a Michal within who can feel anger and disdain in her heart when she senses or sees your David ready to dance to the music?

What for you is the promise of leaping and dancing in the street, celebrating for all the world to see? What is the cost of you demonstrating the joy and excitement in your heart? What is the cost of stopping the dance, sitting still rather than leaping? What is the promise of heeding your inner Michal and walking into the new city in silence or lock step, passive and expressionless?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *David returned to bless his household.* Who was David blessing just before this? By doing what? How might David understand blessing? How might the whole multitude of Israel experience blessing? How might Michal see blessing? Imagine you are with David and he tells you what he intends when he gets home. What do you hear him saying? What might that hoped-for blessing look like? What happens to it when he gets home? When you next return to your home, what blessing might you give to your household? What might that blessing depend on in order to occur?

- *They carried the ark of God on a new cart.* Where today do you see special objects displayed with great public celebration and pomp? Maybe the Commissioners' Trophy for the World Series, or the Stanley Cup, tanks or other military vehicles, floats or statues of saints. How would you describe the feelings of people along the roadside seeing the procession pass? What are the organizers of the display seeking to affirm, reinforce, or celebrate? How do you feel when you see such a parade? What kinds of emotions rise up within? What is it that you would want to carry in "on a new cart"? To celebrate what? To proclaim what?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"In many shamanic societies, if you came to a medicine person complaining of being disheartened, dispirited, or depressed, they would ask one of four questions: "When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? When did you stop being comforted by the sweet territory of silence?"—*Gabrielle Roth*

"Michal"

Michal is the daughter of Saul, the first King of Israel. The book of Samuel tells us that …Michal loved David. Saul was told, and the thing pleased him [1Sam 18:20]." The King is not pleased at the match, but at the opportunity to exploit this relationship by demanding a grotesque bride-price: a hundred foreskins from the Philistines, Israel's ongoing enemy. David, who by now is a rival for the kingship, will likely be killed. David, however, takes his men on a raiding party and brings back the required evidence, and Saul is forced to allow Michal and David to marry [18:21-30]. Later on Michal enables David to escape from another plot by Saul to kill him, lowering him out the window and dressing up an idol to look like David in his bed. When the trick is discovered, she tells her father that David made her do it on threat of death [19:11-17].

As the split between Saul and David becomes deeper, Saul marries Michal to Palti, son of Laish. After Saul is killed battling the Philistines, David and Saul's descendants are locked in a struggle for the kingdom. David makes a deal with Saul's son Ishbaal (Michal's half-brother) to return her to him [2Sam 3:12-16]. But her husband went with her, weeping as he walked behind her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him "Go back home!" So he went back [16].

It is after all this that the story of David dancing and Michal despising him takes place, ending with the sad words: and Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.—*Andy Kille*

From *First and Second Samuel* by Eugene H. Peterson

David's primary orientation is to God, and his primary influence in history has been in worship. His work as king was soon over and his political (though not his theological) influence at an end. But his work in worship continued and flourished. The example he set and the psalms that he composed and modeled have a huge heritage and flourish still. Aside from Jesus, David is the single most important influence on worship in Judaism and the church. David has influenced far more people by his worship than he ever did by his politics.

As this story, David bringing the ark to Jerusalem, has entered the life of Israel and church, it has given structure and insight and warning to the worshiping people of God. Christians sometimes pick up an echo of this leaping and dancing David story in Luke's account of the embryonic John leaping in Elizabeth's womb in the presence of Mary, newly pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:41).

From *1 & 2 Samuel: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* by Tony Cartledge

The traditions recorded in the Pentateuch say that Yahweh instructed Moses to have the ark constructed while Israel was still in the wilderness. Whenever the people were encamped for a period, the ark was to be enclosed in a special room far in the back of the portable tabernacle, a room called the "holy of holies." Whenever the people journeyed, the ark went first, carried by the Levitical priests who led the way.

The ark had a rich and colorful history in ancient Israel. It played significant roles in Israel's crossing of the Jordan as the people entered the promised land (Josh 3), and in the battle of Jericho, their first major obstacle west of the Jordan (Josh 6). The ark is crucial to the narrative in the Books of Samuel. It was lost through presumption at the battle of Aphek-ebenezer (1 Sam 4); it caused great loss to the conquering Philistines (1 Sam 5); and it found its own way back to Israel, wreaking havoc at Beth-shemesh before coming to rest at Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam 6).

The Dance" by C.K. Williams from *Repair*

drawing him to her with such a firm, compelling warmth, and
moving him with effortless grace
into the union she's instantly established with the not at all
rhythmically solid music in this second rate cafe,
that something in the rest of us, some doubt about ourselves, some
sad conjecture, seems to be allayed

 **Read the entire poem here:**
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/537265430525514639/

From "King Lear" by William Shakespeare

Scene III [The British Camp near Dover.] Enter in conquest with drum and colours EDMUND, LEAR and CORDELIA, prisoners; Officers, Soldiers, etc.

Edmund: Some officers take them away: good guard, Until their greater pleasures first be known That are to censure them.

Cordelia: We are not the first Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst. For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down; Myself could else out-frown false Fortune's frown. Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

Lear: No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison; We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage: When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live, And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too, Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out; And take upon's the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out, In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones That ebb and flow by th' moon.



The Ark of the Covenant Brought into the Temple by the unknown illustrator of Henry Davenport Northrop's *Treasures of the Bible*, 1894

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
2 Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

ENTERING THE STORY

Like any skilled storyteller, Mark often interlaces individual scenes and actions into his larger drama, and by so doing presenting a more complex and wide-ranging picture. Today's lectionary reading pulls a thread out of the elaborate tapestry. Other stories within this range will stand alone elsewhere in the lectionary cycle. It is as if today we are looking closely at the thread on which a necklace of encounters has been strung. An earlier portion of this thread appears in the beginning of the chapter, which describes Jesus commission of the twelve: He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits… So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. [6:7, 12-13]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.* Imagine this scene. What is happening as the apostles gather? What is the general feeling in the group? Who is speaking? What kinds of things might they be saying about all they had done and taught?

Why might Jesus suggest that they come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while? What happens in a deserted place? What doesn't happen? What kind of rest might the apostles need after their experiences or in the midst of the current activity? What else might they all need?

And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. What is it like to travel by boat? What might they anticipate as they make the journey? What hopes or expectations might they have about their arrival in the deserted place?

What do they find when they arrive? How might they feel upon seeing the great crowd? What choices might they have about what to do?

How does Jesus react to the great crowd? What do you imagine the apostles were feeling?

The omitted verses (35-52) from this week's lectionary text describe Jesus feeding the crowd in the *deserted place,* and then making his disciples *go on ahead to the other side*, while he goes *up on the mountain to pray*. Then he rejoins them in the boat, after walking on the sea. Finally…*When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.* Using whatever art materials you have handy, draw a representation of the journey of Jesus and the apostles. What is their crossing like? What do they encounter on each side? How would you characterize their travels?

What is the cost of living this way? What does it require of Jesus and the apostles? What choices must they make? What must they give up? What is the promise in living this way? What opportunities, creative possibilities, personal satisfactions might Jesus and the apostles find?

What danger might lie in not being able to find a deserted place?

2. As you look around your world at your friends, co-workers, or family members, where do you see people struggling with finding a balance point between the need for activity and rest? Between being available to others and finding time for oneself? Between seeking solitude and rest and serving the needs that surround them?

In what ways do you see these people make choices about how to spend their time and energy? What must they give up to find rest and renewal? What do they gain? What is required of them to be engaged in the tasks around them? What reward do they receive by doing so?

3. What do you know of being pulled in different directions by demands, needs, and opportunities that surround you? How do you decide when to act and when to withdraw? When has it felt like you have made the right decision? When has it felt like a sacrifice or shirking?

Where is "the other side" for you—the place or attitude or approach that calls you to cross over to something new?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- "*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile*…" Try to notice today how much of your day you spend alone, and how much with others. How much talking are you doing? How much listening to others? How much listening to yourself? The question for me in today's reading and in O'Connor's musings is that of how to live in a community with a sense of integrity and honesty. Many of my contemporaries and friends have left communities—churches, fellowships, political organizations—because they feel themselves to be "outside" the norms of the group, and are attempting to have a spiritual life of some sort outside it. Generally speaking, it isn't working so well. What do you know in your own life of the pull to be engaged in good work, a calling, a vocation that makes a difference in the world? How does it make you feel? What's going on inside you when you are so engaged? What is its voice? What do you know in your own life of going to a deserted place all by yourself, of a place of rest? How does it make you feel? What's going on inside you when you are in that place? What is its voice? What might these two voices have to say to each other? What difference might this conversation make, in the rest of your life?

- …*and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed*. Mark's description of the fringe of Jesus' cloak makes clear he is writing about a man serious about his Jewish faith. Such a cloak fringe is required in the Moses tradition, from Deuteronomy 22:12: "you shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself." In Numbers 15:37-39: "The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments and do them..." Is it significant that the sick reach out to touch the fringe of his cloak rather than Jesus himself? Is the healing power in the man, or in the tradition, or in the faith the man carries or bear? What for people in your world serve as reminders of who they are and the symbolic world they inhabit?

What do you know of people today wearing or carrying an amulet, totem, charm, or talisman that has special power or meaning for them? And for you? Your fringe reminder of where you come from and who you are?

- *…they were like sheep without a shepherd*. If you were a dictionary, how would you define the word "compassion" without using any synonyms? Now add synonyms into the mix and wonder about a time when you felt like a shepherd-less sheep. Did someone come along who showed you compassion? If so, what difference did it make in the moment and for a lifetime? If not, what difference might their attention, teachings, sympathy and empathy have made?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Provoking the Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller's Commentary Year B* by Richard W. Swanson

In the longer scene the disciples have calloused hearts. They have already seen Jesus control the wind and sea, and still they are afraid and amazed. They have just seen Jesus feed more than five thousand people on little food, and still their hearts are calloused. The scene as cut pays attention to the powerful swirl around Jesus. He tries to retreat from the crowds and they follow him. He tries to cross over the lake, and they recognize him. He walks, people touch him and are healed. There is no escape. And still the disciples' hearts are calloused. The scene as cut continues the theme that Mark has played from the beginning of the story: the world swirls to Jesus, even more than it did to John the Baptist. Jesus is instantly recognized, and the benefits he offers are instantly perceived. But those people who follow Jesus most closely are given scene after scene in which they act out incomprehension.

What is going on here? It may be that Mark uses the disciples to explore incomprehension because such tensions require characters that the audience knows better, characters with a little more depth. Perhaps incomprehension is harder to portray clearly, so Mark needs the core of his cast to do it adequately. Or it may be that incomprehension is such an important theme that Mark needs continuing characters to develop it thoroughly. If it were played only by hit-and-run outsiders, it would not have the same impact as it does when played again and again by insiders. Or it may be that making it a major theme and portraying it only with outsiders would defeat the whole notion that the world swirls to Jesus. Insiders could easily play comprehension, but if it became a repeated motif that outsiders do not get it, a major drive of the story would be lost.

Or it may be that there is something about being an insider that is very like being an outsider. There may be something about this movement that follows a crucified messiah that puzzles insiders more than outsiders. To commit to a faith that has its roots in the renewal of creation in the midst of a world that is insistently not renewed, insistently resistant to themes of new life and freedom may require the telling of stories about insider incomprehension. Outsiders and immature insiders may believe that Christian faith immediately smoothes all roads and raises all deeply shadowed valleys. Insiders who have seen a little more know that this is not true. It may be that the theme of insider incomprehension is a storytelling strategy through which Mark's story works out what it means to tell stories about resurrection in a world where everyone dies. And that may go a long way toward explaining the odd way that Mark tells the story of Jesus' resurrection.

From *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* by Elizabeth O'Connor

To the extent that a community has a continuing life together we are going to be challenged at the point of our illusions about the kind of people we are. This does not mean that we intentionally seek to break the images of others. The task is always to change ourselves-to deal with that in us which prevents our going forth to meet the other. It is when we are locked in a permanent kind of relationship, however, that the conflicts arise which confront us with ourselves. Peace is not the object of Christian fellowship, though we have thought it was and have

maintained "good" relationships at the terrible expense of not being real with each other. When this happens, we forego being a people on a pilgrimage together.[…]

As we will be severely tempted away from an engagement with God and an engagement with self, so will we be tempted away from an engagement with others. The temptation to withdraw will be at the crisis points in our relationships-at times of real confrontation, and at times when we see nothing happening. And, of course, it will come always at the point of a Rachmilevitch.* We will rationalize that it is unprofitable to stick with this particular grouping when there are more congenial people and more congenial circumstances in other places—"people who think the way I think and feel like I feel"—all of which, when you reflect on it, is rather dull, and in the second place probably a fiction, since a sure fact about the next group one joins is that one person there is certain to be the same—saying the same things, doing the same things, and evoking the same kind of response. But of course, we can always move on again when we have settled in enough for the rough edges of another person to rub against our own rough edges. We might even be able to withdraw and maintain the illusion that we still belong to Christ and to his mystical Body, but it will remain an unconfirmed opinion. The New Testament does not know very much about this mystical Body. It is concerned with twelve who have a life together. It talks always about the church at Corinth or the church at Rome. The answer that is often made to this is that the Church is wherever two or three gather in His name. But this does not only mean the choosing of a few kindred friends with whom to pray. We gather in that Name when with other faltering, estranged persons we agree to live a life in depth, which means learning something about forgiveness and what it means to be forgiven. It means staying locked in a concrete, given web of relationships until we come to know ourselves as belonging to one another and belonging to the Body of Jesus Christ.

[***Ed. Note:*** *Rachmilevitch was a student, troublemaker and great source of irritation to others at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man founded by Georges Gurdjieff. He complained constantly and often threatened to leave. When he finally did, Gurdjieff tried to persuade him to return. Gurdjieff explained that he needed Rachmilevitch to stir up the others in the community.]

From *Spirit Matters* by Michael Lerner

Most of the people I met in intellectual, academic, or liberal circles seemed to feel that religion and spirituality were for people who were culturally and intellectually retarded, for people who couldn't handle the world and hence "needed that sort of thing." The very idea of "needing" was seen as a sign of being weak, undeveloped, retarded, because, of course, people who are cool can stand alone without "need" of anything or anyone. It was these "ordinary people," I was taught, who were such jerks that they got duped by right-wing fascists; adopted racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies; and clung to religion and spirituality because thinking in a clear and rational way was beyond their capacities and scared them too much.

It was with this elitist attitude that I first conceptualized my role as a psychologist when I began to do research on "working-class consciousness." I wanted to understand why working people were leaving their traditional roots in the liberal and progressive world and becoming more responsive to right-wing politics. I assumed that this could only be some form of pathology and I wanted to learn about it.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered that "ordinary people" (the term itself now sounds elitist to me) were far more aware and complicated than most intellectuals had allowed themselves to notice. I had looked for pathology, but what I found instead was a deep and significant yearning for spiritual purpose in life. Working with middle-income people whose jobs were not high-paying or "fancy," I learned the following: Most people have a real need for meaning and purpose in their lives, a meaning and purpose that could transcend the selfishness and materialism of the competitive marketplace and root them in something with transcendent significance. That need is so great that people will seek to fulfill it in whatever way they can.

This astounded me because I had bought into the notion that "middle America" was governed by a narrow materialism. In fact, the leaders of the labor movement itself claimed that all "their" workers cared about was money-and that explained why workers only came to meetings during contract negotiations.

But what I discovered was something quite different, namely, that ordinary working people in America, the ones who went to the mall and who sat in front of their television sets, were just as concerned with meaning as anyone else, including any of us who consider ourselves intellectuals or agents of social change.

Connection to Spirit is as essential as oxygen. It's a basic need.

Yet, we have taught ourselves to see people as a bunch of isolated machines driven by the need for food, sex, and power. We have acted as though we could cut ourselves off from our Divine essence as manifestations of Spirit. We have built social and economic institutions and have raised children as though we did not know that we are part of the spiritual order of the universe and that our hunger for spiritual connection is every bit as urgent as our hunger for food.

"I am a poet, a seeker, and a confessor, obligated to truth and sincerity. I have a charge, albeit small and confined: to help other seekers to understand and cope with the world, if only by assuring them that they are not alone." —*Herman Hesse*

"The knowledge which comes first to people and which remains most deeply ingrained is not knowledge of 'how to do'; it is the fundamental categories upon which we learn increasingly to make sense of anything in the universe and in human experience."—*Kieran Egan*

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." —*William Butler Yeats*

"Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing." — *August Wilson*

From "David Brooks' Conversion Story" by Benjamin Wallace Wells in *The New Yorker*

In 2013, the [New York]Times columnist David Brooks, then in his early fifties, divorced his wife of twenty-seven years, Sarah, and moved into an apartment in Washington, D.C. The personal crisis that ensued overlapped with a spiritual one. He was writing a book called "The Road to Character," offering guidance, through biographical case studies, for how a person might engage in moral self-improvement, and two of the chapters made examples of Christian lives: St. Augustine's and Dorothy Day's. His correspondence with a young research assistant, a Christian woman named Anne Snyder, grew intense. Brooks was a practicing Jew, if one on the downslope of belief—his wife had converted and then become more Orthodox than he—and Snyder, in elegant memos and correspondence, worked to persuade him that his account of Day's sense of Christian grace missed the sublime core. "The foundational fact," Snyder reminded Brooks, "is you cannot earn your way into a state of grace—this denies grace's power, and subverts its very definition." For Brooks, this carried the clarity of revelation. […]

One morning, passing through Penn Station at rush hour, Brooks was overcome by the feeling that he was moving in a sea of souls—not the hair and legs and sneakers but the moral part. "It was like suddenly everything was illuminated, and I became aware of an infinite depth on each of these thousands of people. They were living souls," Brooks writes in his new book, "The Second Mountain." "Suddenly it seemed like the most vivid part of reality was this: Souls waking up in the morning. Souls riding the train to work. Souls yearning for goodness. Souls wounded by earlier traumas. With that came a feeling that I was connected by radio waves to all of them—some underlying soul of which we were all a piece."

Brooks' spiritual momentum was quickening. While attending the Aspen Ideas Festival, he hiked to the edge of American Lake, pulled out a book of Puritan prayers, and had a transcendent experience buttressed by the appearance of a "little brown creature who looked like a badger." He eventually realized that he was in love with Snyder and confessed his love to her. (Eventually, they married; this, presumably, is what Alexander Portnoy's parents so feared.) In the last third of the book, Brooks describes an interesting and irregular progress toward New Testament ideals, and, by the end, he sounds like a Christian, even if he isn't quite ready to describe himself as one. […]

He relates the moment in Penn Station when he suddenly saw all the commuters as souls, and the one in Aspen, when he felt a sensation "like the sound of a really nice car door gently closing." It's "fair to ask, Did I convert?" Brooks writes. Not exactly. His religious awakening made him "feel more Jewish than ever before," the

cultural feeling now undergirded by a spiritual one. But, "On the other hand, I can't unread Matthew." […] Brooks writes, "Jesus is the person who shows us what giving yourself away looks like."



Read more here: https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/david-brooks-conversion-story

Adapted from "The Promise of Controversy" a sermon by Rev. William L Dols

A fundamental question before church-going people is whether to choose to worship Jesus or follow Jesus. A decision to worship Jesus promises a kind of peace characterized as perfect; one that is usually passive, religious and spiritual, serene and holy. A decision to follow Jesus promises a different kind of peace marked by controversy and conflict. Following Jesus means going through dark valleys and sitting down with enemies, dangerous, and daring, political rather than pious.

Let's explore the story of Herod and John the Baptist (Luke 3:15-22). Herod hears of John's preaching of repentance and shuts him away in prison. Herod opts for a peace guaranteed by high walls. He shuts John up. Later he will cut off his head.

When confronted by such a story, the important question to ask is not whether it happened but whether it is happening today. Where does this divine drama described by Luke continue? Who are the Herods of our world? Where does the Herod within reside?

Herod is about staying in power and maintaining his idea of peace—of shutting up the dissident voice and eliminating the controversy (in this case John). Herod likes to say that our disagreement is really semantics. Herod says "don't rock the boat" and "let sleeping dogs lie" and "leave well enough alone."

Unless you are going to say something nice, Herod does not want to hear it. He knows how to turn up the noise, change the subject or find something else to distract. Herod is seductive. Herod knows that thoughtful gifts and kind words can postpone an inevitable conversation forever. Herod believes forgiveness and peace can be bought or bullied, and he is often right.

Nobody wants a controversy. Nobody wants to disagree and argue. Most people want peace on their own terms but the Herods of the world obtain peace by purchase. They buy it by putting the Johns of the world into prison and by shutting them up. And we are the poorer for it.

Jesus knows about the Herods around us and the Herod within us. He knows how manipulative and winsome the one who sits on our throne can be. The Jesus within us knows the high cost of controversy—the price of letting the intensity show and of letting the allegiance out—how vulnerable passion can make us and how devastating the threat of being ignored, not listened to, or of being left out can be. Jesus knows the price of peace for some is too high. A peace that numbs our feelings, poisons our souls, and compromises all possibilities if just too expensive.

Jesus knows that life includes dark valleys, facing fire, sitting down with enemies, risking sanity and security for the sake of a new life. That means accepting and even welcoming controversy around the issues that concern us and the questions that divide us. Restrain Herod. Hear John the Baptist. Follow Jesus into those dark valleys and sit down with your enemies.

Bibliography & Credits include excerpts reprinted in the EXPLORING FURTHER section of each weekly lesson and appearing in FURTHER EXPLORATION at the end of each issue. Excerpts reprinted or referenced in ENTERING THE STORY are footnoted at the end of that section and do not appear here. All excerpts are reprinted as educational and critical commentary for the weekly lectionary and are for classroom use. Images are attributed through the Creative Commons License (U.S.A) and noted adjacent to the image. All links are live at the time of publication. If you have difficulty with a link, type the subject matter into your search browser for alternative access to a source. Please contact the Center directly (see contact information displayed in odd page footers) with any questions or for further information.

Ed. Note: This issue is dedicated in honor and memory of William L. Dols, Jr., *Reading Between The Lines* founding editor and long-time contributor and supporter. Bill wrote for RBTL for almost three decades: as editor, associate editor and weekly lesson writer. In 2020, the Center published a three volume anthology of Bill's weekly lessons containing three years of his questions, insights and teachings. Additionally, Bill authored four books:

Awakening the Fire Within: A Primer for Issue-Centered Education

The Three Dimensional Man

Just Because It Didn't Happen: Sermons and Prayers as Story

Finding Jesus, Discovering Self: Passages to Healing and Wholeness co-authored with Caren Goldman

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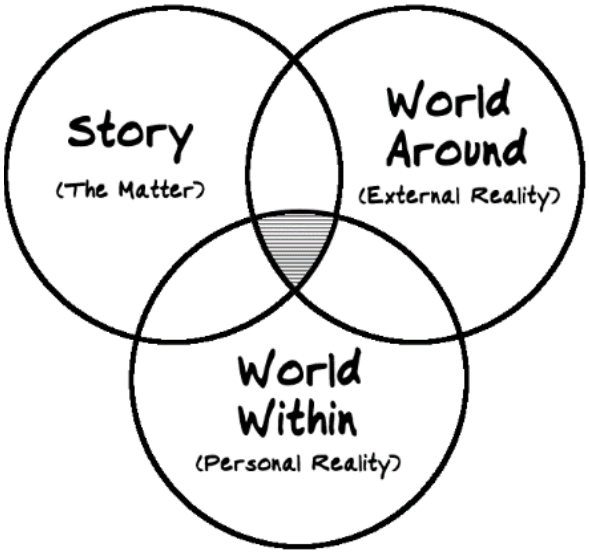
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WHAT IS READING BETWEEN THE LINES?

Stories have the power to ignite the imagination and to evoke symbols that teach us something about who we are. That's why our philosophy of spiritual education is grounded in story. Stories—the Bible, the Gnostic gospels, the mythologies of culture, the poetry of Rumi, the works of Shakespeare, the films of Spielberg, the paintings of Chagall—whether derived from religious or literary texts, the media culture, or the narratives of our own lives, can awaken universal patterns that can enliven and inform our choices. We acknowledge that powerful stories often create tensions that make us uncomfortable, but it is out of that tension that vital questions arise: *Who am I? Who are you? How are we connected? Why are we here? What waits for us around the corner?* The resources we create provide a context for conscious involvement in the never-ending search for meaning in our lives.

The Bible is full of stories. *Reading Between The Lines* offers a different way to engage these stories, to connect them with the world around us, and to explore the resonances those stories stir in our inmost depths. *Reading Between The Lines* invites you to use your imagination as well as your intellect, your intuition and your reason. Our assumption is that the biblical text and story is not *about* you, but it *is* you.



Group Guidelines: Over years of practical experience, we have developed a set of guidelines for using this resource in a group setting:

- **Focus on the *text*:** *Reading Between The Lines* is an invitation to enter into the story. It is not a group for exegesis, theology, discussion, or therapy. If the focus begins to wander, come back to the text.
- **"I statements" are encouraged:** The goal is to explore how *you* respond to the text. This is not to discount tradition and the scholars; but to say that here it is how you hear, feel, think about, and react to the text that is of primary importance.
- **Pauses between responses are important:** A subtle reminder that we are not in a discussion group. The aim is to engage the text rather than one another. What we hear others say can be crucial. Why they say what they do is a conversation that can take place over coffee later.
- **The goal is not consensus, agreement, or a right answer:** The richness and value of the experience may depend upon the very opposite.
- **There is no expectation that you explain, justify, or defend anything you say:** This may be hard to remember; even if you are working through *Reading Between The Lines* alone.
- **Silence is part of the process/ silence can be pregnant:** Alone this may simply be about taking your time and allowing some in-between spaces. In the silence there is a chance not only to ponder what others have said, but to hear the echo of your own voice.
- **Allow space for others to speak:** The richness of the discussion depends on hearing different voices and different perspectives, not just one.
- **You can change your mind as often as you like:** "How do I know what I think until I hear myself say it?" In this process, once you hear your words feel free to change your mind not once but over and over again.
- **Honestly try the nonverbal exercises:** This is not an art or theater competition. Silence your inner critic and be prepared to be amazed and enlightened.
- **What is said in the *RBTL* group stays in the group**: In the group, we touch sacred ground in ourselves and each other. Have the respect for the group and yourself to honor that confidentiality.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

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