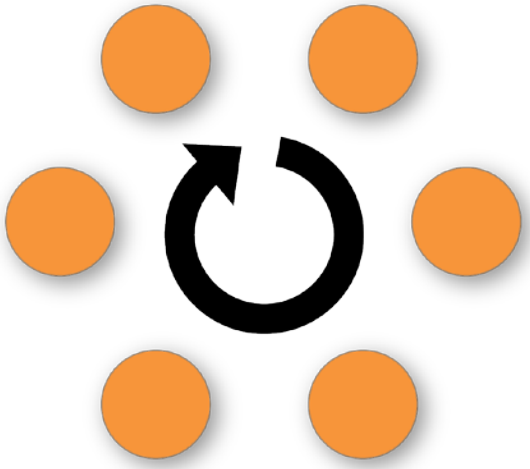
READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

Advent 1 – Epiphany 2

November 29, 2020 - January 17, 2021



Volume 28, Issue 1
Revised Common Lectionary

Reading Between The Lines ~ Volume 28

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Managing Editor: Melissa Thomas

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Advisory Council:
William L. Dols, Ph.D. is an author and the founding editor of The Bible Workbench (now *Reading Between The Lines*). Bill created The Bible Workbench in the 1990s (LIFETEXT) while Executive Director of The Educational Center. As an Episcopal priest he served congregations in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina for over twenty-five years. Before retiring, Bill also served as Minister of Education at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC.

Jerry Drino, D.D. has been involved in different capacities with the Center for many years. He is currently Canon Theologian for the Episcopal Church in Navajoland and previously served as rector of the multicultural parish of St. Philip's in San Jose. He is the Founder and Director of Hope with South Sudan and was an Associate Leader of the Guild for Psychological Studies.

Al Ledford holds a M.Div. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Long-term contributor to *Reading Between The Lines,* he is also a monthly contributor to our youth resource *TeenText.*

Bill Lindeman earned his D. Min. from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. Bill has been a contributor and associate editor for *RBTL.* He is a Transition Ministry Specialist in Presbyterian PC (USA).

Gail Rogers is a Licensed Professional Counselor, (MA) practicing psychotherapy in Lexington, NC for 19 years. She is a long-term contributor to *Reading Between The Lines* and a training leader for The Educational Center. Gail is also a Buddhist Dharma and meditation teacher.

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Contributors: Contributors vary by week and issue. The Educational Center expresses gratitude to our many contributors over the twenty-eight plus years of publishing *Reading Between The Lines* (formerly LIFETEXT, The Bible Workbench and BibleWorkbench). If you have any questions or would like information on a particular weekly lesson or a contributor please contact the Center (see below).

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Melissa Thomas, Managing Editor, The Educational Center, PO Box 11892 Charlotte, NC 28220
Tel: 704.375.1161 ~ info@educationalcenter.org **~** www.educationalcenter.org

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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

Volume 28.2

Date	Selection
Jan 24	Mark 1:14-20
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
Mar 28	Mark 15:1-39 [40-47]
Apr 4	Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
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
May 9	Acts 10:44-48
May 16	Luke 24:44-53

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Date	Selection
May 23	John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15
May 30	Isaiah 6:1-8
Jun 6	Mark 3:20-35
Jun 13	1 Samuel 15:—16:13
Jun 20	Mark 4:35-41
Jun 27	Mark 5:21-43
Jul 4	Mark 6:1-13
Jul 11	2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Jul 18	Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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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
Aug 29	Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Sep 5	Psalm 125
Sep 12	Wisdom of Solomon 7:26—8:1
Sep 19	Mark 9:30-37

Volume 28.6

Date	Selection
Sep 26	Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
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

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B

Alternative texts:

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

ENTERING THE STORY

What Mark 13 tells a frightened and desperate humanity at the beginning of a new millennium is that things may not get better, but worse. Elsewhere, Jesus holds out hope to his people. Mark 13 is the picture of what happens if the vision of a new reality is rejected. Apocalypse, he warns, may overtake eschatology. The Reign of God is not the climax of a long evolution toward goodness, but the radical negation of an inhumane, colossal, and entrenched system. Despite all attempts to change it for the better, if that system simply proliferates blindly, heedless of the human or environmental cost, social collapse is predictable. Thus Jesus warned Jerusalem of its unavoidable collision with Rome unless it radically changed course (Matt. 23:37-39 // Luke 13:34-35). Any system that allows evil to become established, institutional, and habitual will inevitably implode. As James Douglass observes, the moral logic of violence is ultimate destruction, leading to the end of life itself.

In a lightning insight, whose implications are still far beyond us, Jesus sensed the connections between the violence done to the poor, the outcast, and the rebellious in a colonized first-century Judea and a violent end of the world—his world and any world in which the logic of violence is followed.

The "Little Apocalypse" (as Mark 13 is affectionately known) describes the carnage and suffering that overtake societies when human beings abandon their humanity altogether.

It is at such a time that "the son of the man" comes, wrapped in clouds, with great power and glory, surrounded by angels, to rescue God's own from this intolerable situation.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. The lectionary text continues the story in the 13th chapter of Mark. Take a few moments to review Mark 13:1-23. What has been happening? Where is Jesus? Who is with him? What are they doing?

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. What are those days? What might that suffering be? What cosmic events might these be?

Imagine what it might be like for the sun to be darkened, the moon not to give its light, and the stars to be falling. What feelings come up within you? What fears or anxieties? What excitements or hopes?

1 Walter Wink, *The Human Being* (Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

> *Then they will see *the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.* What expectations might the hearers have when they hear these words?

Walter Wink (see ENTERING THE STORY and EXPLORING FURTHER) notes that the Greek phrase translated as "Son of Man" here, which is not capitalized in the Greek text, could also be translated "the son of the man." Is it a specific individual? A function that can be carried by anyone? Consider the possible translations. What difference might it make to say: they will see "*the Son of Man coming in clouds*"? Or *they will see "the son of man coming in clouds"*?

> *From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.* What predictions might one make about the future based on observing natural processes—the turning of the seasons, the coming of the rain, or the severity of winter? What "signs" do you read in the sky, the smell of the earth, the budding of trees? What expectations do you carry in response to these "signs"?
>
> *But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* What difference might it make that no one knows about that day or hour? What might be known from the lesson of the fig tree? What is not known?
>
> *Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.* What does Jesus tell the hearers to do? The word translated here as "Beware" is translated elsewhere in Mark as "look," or "see." What do the servants know? What do they not know?

2. Where in the world around you—in political campaigns, at religious gatherings, on the TV news or social media, among your friends, your family, or your co-workers—do you see people watching for "signs"? What are they looking for? What expectations do they have? What do they know about what they anticipate? What do they not know? What do they deeply wish they knew?

3. What do you know in your own life of a time of anticipation—of waiting expectantly for something to happen and yet not knowing when? What is/was your hope in waiting? What, if anything, makes/made it worthwhile? What is/was the cost of waiting? How do/did you "keep awake" in the waiting?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Give some thought to the "The Day of Judgment" by Ian McEwan in EXPLORING FURTHER. Consider the full extent of what the apocalypse and day of judgment have signified. McEwan is the author of several novels and you may be familiar with his work. Read one of his novels or watch the film adaptation of *Atonement* and think about how these media echo the end time speculations of The Guardian article and the text from Mark. What does McEwan, someone outside the institutional church, know about Mark's images of sun, moon, and stars; the

necessity of staying awake; and the possibility of new revelation happening between and within us all the time? Let the Bible, newspaper, novel, and even film, intermingle, and listen for songs of hope as well as judgment.

- It is widely acknowledged that the Gospel of Mark was written on the cusp of an apocalyptic event—the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Romans as the finale of the Jewish-Roman War. It was the end of the world as they knew it. The walls came down—all that was left was what is now called the "Wailing Wall"; the inhabitants were put to the sword; their homes were burned; the temple destroyed and its treasures carried off by Titus back to Rome. A very dark time. Think of apocalypse in your own history as the inner equivalent of the end of the world. What form has that taken in your life? What walls came down? What mourning ensued? What died? What was incinerated? What temple destroyed? What treasures looted? And what emerged on the other side of all that darkness?

- Consider the “signs”. What are the signs you read in your life that fill you with fear and dread? What other signs fill you with hope for life, for second comings and second chances at living in a Kingdom of God? How might evidence of suffering, darkness, and shaking actually signal that the Son of Man is coming with great power and glory into your life?

- On a personal level each of us has seen signs of our own end time, the time when we will have no more days or hours to correct our mistakes or to do those things which we ought to have done. What might it take for these signs really to capture our attention, to make us alert, to awaken us? What is it within that lures us to say with Scarlett O'Hara, "I'll think about that tomorrow"? Right now, in this first week of Advent, might be a good time to write down signs you have seen, heard, or felt pointing to the imminence of your own last days. What within you resists writing or could lead you to set aside your list? What might lead you to take it seriously and then to judge and meet that standard in your life? How might it change your way of looking at the world and your actions in it if you carried this list around with you as you engage in your daily life while waiting for Jesus' birth?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *The Human Being* by Walter Wink

We who have witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Communism and the transformation of South Africa can scarcely deny the reality of miracles. But the miracle fades. Those areas are now beset by epidemic crime, corruption, and economic collapse, so that some people long for the "good old days" of tyranny, when at least it was safe to walk the streets. "Apocalyptic" periods of history have so far turned out to be, not the end of time, but short transitional crises when we can see no way through.

Mark 13 depicts "the son of the man... coming in clouds with great power and glory." The quotation marks In the NRSV around "the son of the man coming in clouds" point to Dan. 7:13, indicating that Daniel's prophecy has now been fulfilled. But in Daniel, the Human Being comes to the divine throne to receive sovereignty. In Matthew and Mark, the movement has been reversed; the "son of the man" comes from heaven to earth. The number of reports in world religions about heroes and holy ones who return to earth to save their people indicates that we are dealing with a prominent archetype. Not content to leave the Human Being at the right hand of God, as Luke does in 22:69 (though not in 21:27), the early church anticipated the Human Being's return. It was not enough for the Human Being to have entered the realm of the divine; it needs to be coming toward us, coming to meet us, moving in our direction. The Human Being wants to happen in and among us. It wants to be lived in our reality. There is something dynamic in that movement, but rather than see that dynamism within, the church placed it outside the Self in the historical future. Thus the "delay" of the coming of the son of the man, which after

two thousand years can be considered not a delay but a faded and misplaced hope. The second coming is like a runner preserved in glass. The runner is running, but it is going nowhere.

Has not the Human Being already come? Why this "second coming"? That first coming was in obscurity. The second will be "seen" by everyone. The church identifies this figure as Jesus, but it is not the Jesus we know from the gospel story. This Jesus comes in Roman "triumph," gathering the elect, judging the wrongdoers, avenging God's honor, vindicating his execution. This figure is more like John the Baptist's "Coming One," who separates wheat from chaff and burns the latter with unquenchable fire.

“The Second Coming” by WB Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

From "The Day of Judgment" by Ian McEwan in *The Guardian*

We should add to the mix more recent secular apocalyptic beliefs—the certainty that the world is inevitably doomed through nuclear exchange, viral epidemics, meteorites, population growth or environmental degradation. Where these calamities are posed as mere possibilities in an open-ended future that might be headed off by wise human agency, we cannot consider them as apocalyptic. They are minatory, they are calls to action. But when they are presented as unavoidable outcomes driven by ineluctable forces of history or innate human failings, they share much with their religious counterparts—though they lack the demonising, cleansing, redemptive aspects, and are without the kind of supervision of a supernatural entity that might give benign meaning and purpose to a mass extinction. Clearly, fatalism is common to both camps, and both, reasonably enough, are much concerned with a nuclear holocaust, which to the prophetic believers illuminates in retrospect biblical passages that once seemed obscure. […]

Thirty years ago, we might have been able to convince ourselves that contemporary religious apocalyptic thought was a harmless remnant of a more credulous, superstitious, pre-scientific age, now safely behind us. But today prophecy belief, particularly within the Christian and Islamic traditions, is a force in our contemporary history, a medieval engine driving our modern moral, geopolitical, and military concerns. The various jealous sky-gods—and they are certainly not one and the same god—who in the past directly addressed Abraham, Paul, or Mohammed, among others, now indirectly address us through the daily television news. These different gods have wound themselves inextricably around our politics and our political differences.

Our secular and scientific culture has not replaced or even challenged these mutually incompatible, supernatural thought systems. Scientific method, scepticism, or rationality in general, has yet to find an overarching narrative of sufficient power, simplicity, and wide appeal to compete with the old stories that give meaning to people's lives. Natural selection is a powerful, elegant, and economic explicator of life on earth in all its diversity, and perhaps it contains the seeds of a rival creation myth that would have the added power of being true—but it awaits its inspired synthesiser, its poet, its Milton. The great American biologist EO Wilson has suggested an ethics divorced from religion, and derived instead from what he calls biophilia, our innate and profound connection to our natural environment—but one man alone cannot make a moral system. Science may speak of probable rising sea levels and global temperatures, with figures that it constantly refines in line with new data, but on the human future it cannot compete with the luridness and, above all, with the meaningfulness of the prophecies in the Book of Daniel or Revelation. Reason and myth remain uneasy bedfellows. Rather than resenting a challenge, science has in obvious ways strengthened apocalyptic thinking. It has provided us with the means to destroy ourselves and our civilisation completely in less than a couple of hours, or to spread a fatal virus around the globe in a couple of days. And our spiralling technologies of destruction and their ever-greater availability have raised the possibility that true believers, with all their unworldly passion, their prayerful longing for the end times to begin, could help nudge the ancient prophecies towards fulfilment.

From "The Impulse for the 'Ideal' Time" in *When Religion Becomes Evil* by Charles Kimball

On the positive side, the impulse behind the desire for a more hopeful future is normal and good. It is linked to one of the basic presuppositions informing all religious traditions, namely: something is badly awry. Every tradition is predicated on the notion that something is wrong. We are not living in the "ideal" time. The nature of the human predicament varies: pride and human sinfulness led to expulsion from the Garden of Eden; ignorance about the nature of reality ensnares Hindus and Buddhists in this illusory, phenomenal world; born with the knowledge of God, Muslims lament human forgetfulness and pride, which draw attention away from the source of life to the mundane. Similarly, the religious traditions identify various paths toward both short-term and ultimate goals. Often these are connected to understandings about life in society. The challenge becomes one of identifying the ideal and how one should strive for it, if at all.

There are many variations of the notion of an ideal time. Some religious traditions view the world with limited expectations for what is possible to achieve. The ultimate goal is often lodged in a version of an otherworldly hope: heaven, nirvana, moksha, and the like. In the meantime, one must find ways to live faithfully in this world. For some people in almost every tradition, this may require some type of communal life segregated from mainstream society. Different monastic groups, the Amish, and Orthodox Jews living in defined neighborhoods in Brooklyn or Jerusalem illustrate the point.

Some religious communities place a great deal of emphasis on a this-worldly hope. They may look back to a time when the ideal was achieved and yearn to recapture those circumstances. Whether or not the perceived ideal ever really existed is of little consequence. Others, as seen above, suggest the ideal is yet to come here on earth. When the hoped-for ideal is tied to a particular religious worldview and those who wish to implement their vision become convinced that they know what God wants for them and everyone else, you have a prescription for disaster.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.
A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it
together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.
Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

ENTERING THE STORY

The book of Isaiah is long—sixty-six chapters in all. But no serious reader can mistake a certain change in tone and content that occurs at the start of the fortieth chapter. Much of the previous thirty-nine chapters could properly be described as words of condemnation and reproach. Chapters 13-23 in particular are focused on various enemies of Israel—Babylonians, Assyrians and Philistines, Moabites, Syrians, and Egyptians, Nubians, Edomites, and Tyrians. Isaiah announces God's judgment against these nations—such "oracles against the nations" were a standard sort of prophetic speech. Isaiah also has some scathing words for his fellow Judahites, as well as the Israelites to his north (chapters 28-29). Starting in chapter 40, however, all this harshness is forgotten. The tone is one of comfort and reconciliation—in fact, those are the very first notes sounded in that chapter; "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Isa. 40:1).[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* Mark's gospel (1:3) recalls this Isaiah text and is copied faithfully by Matthew (3:3) and Luke (3:4): *A voice cries out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD, make his paths straight...* Compare Isaiah and Mark. What cries out in both? Where does it cry? What does it announce in each? How does Mark's version of Isaiah 40:3 differ from the text in Hebrew Scripture? Where is the way found or promised in each?

What is a wilderness? What do you find in such a place? What would you not discover there? What is attractive about wilderness? Why do some avoid such places? What might the wilderness in Isaiah's world well be?

1 James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (Simon & Schuster: Free Press, 2007), p. 558.

What may have been the fate of the cities of Judah over the past fifty years or so? What may have been happening in those places while so many of the Israelites have been in exile in Babylon? What has become of the communities there? The temple has been left in ruins. What has become of their religious life among the rubble?

Why might Isaiah or anyone else with a message of *good tidings* hesitate to go there as a herald? What might someone who is taking words of good news to people who have been left behind or who are now heading home as vassals of the Persian king Cyrus? What kind of reception do you suppose could await them? What is the heart of the *good tidings* that a *voice* proclaims?

> *See, the Lord* GOD *comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.* How might this promise be experienced by those born in Babylonia and those who are going home for the first time, as well as by those who are returning to a ravaged but familiar homeland? As best you can, turn the metaphors of God's presence into the routine, ordinary ways by which people in the villages and in Jerusalem might know that the Lord is in their wilderness:

2. As you watch the news, read the front page of your newspaper or scroll through social media where do you find the places of wilderness in our world today? What is the wilderness you sense across the planet in China and Burma, Zimbabwe and South Africa, on Capitol Hill and Wall Street, in homeless shelters and gated communities, and in schools and churches?

What might it be like to go up a high mountain, lift up your voice with strength and speak of good news to those in that wilderness? What is the fear that might grip you? How might people in those wilderness places respond to the news that "*Here is your God!*"? What might they say to you? What might they do to you?

> How might those hidden in the wilderness places in your world experience the promise of God gathering them in his arms? In what routine, ordinary ways might the people around you, in the halls of Congress and the White House, in the corridors of power in church and state, in homeless shelters and soup kitchens know that the Lord is in their wilderness?

3. What is the wilderness part of your life? How do you experience wilderness around you, and between you and those who matter to you? What do you know of such a place, state, or condition within? What is the wilderness in your dreams that awakens and takes you to the kitchen at 3 a.m.? Where have you been in exile during your life? When have you left behind, been driven, or carried away from your true home? How have you experienced exile in relationships that have demanded that you leave behind parts of yourself that define who you are? What would it take for you to return to the place where you started and own what you left behind in the ruins and rubble? What is the fear of going there?

4. What do you know of hearing a voice cry out in the wilderness with a promise that something new might happen somewhere else? Where, other than your wilderness places, do you seek comfort and strength, search for recompense and reward, and try to find eternal as well as mortal arms? How might your life be different were you to honestly believe that you have served your term, can leave exile behind, and begin again in a home awaiting you in your wilderness?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *A Voice was saying "Speak up", but I said "What shall I say?" Humanity is only grass*... What voice in you right now cries "Speak up"? About what shall you speak? What needs to be voiced? And what part of you says, "What shall I say? I'm only human and only grass." What do you know of not speaking when something in you says "speak"? When have you been silent when you needed to speak? What is the cost of such silence? What do you know of finding that voice, that speaking up? What needs to be spoken in you right now? Say it, out loud. What is moving in you as you speak?

- What would comfort look like for you today? Like a release from exile, from a place that is not your own? Would it look like a super-highway that could speed the arrival of your dreams? Would it look like a shepherd to take care of you? What would be your own picture of comfort? You might like to take some minutes with color and paper to create an image of what would really bring you comfort. Then put it where you'll see it often these weeks before Christmas—next to the bathroom mirror, over the stove, on top of the computer. As you reflect on your image of what would comfort you and on the promise in Isaiah, how are the two alike? Unalike? You may find that there are changes you'd like to make in your image of comfort. It's yours to make them as you proceed on this journey.

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "There have always been people who, not satisfied with the dominants of conscious life, set forth—under cover and by devious paths, to their destruction or salvation—to seek direct experience of the eternal roots, and, following the lure of the restless unconscious psyche, find themselves in the wilderness." —*C. G. Jung*

> We all come from some place—a place and a people. And it seems we spend enormous energy both hating and loving these places and people, both running away from and longing for these homes. Inside each of them exists an impenetrable wilderness, yet everything outside of them can feel so foreign. Home is the place where we are known the best, but understood the least. It is where we are the most loved, but also the most guilty.
>
> For the Jews of the Babylonian exile between 586 and 538 BCE, home must have seemed a long, long way and a lifetime ago. Indeed, given the lifespan of the time, one can imagine most of these Jews had never even seen "home." Yet the prophet says that God is indeed calling them there; that Israel's long term has been served and her penalty paid. Now is the time for comfort. Like a disobedient child, Israel has been spanked, sent to her room for what feels like forever and is now being snuggled in the arms of a loving father who whispers "let's head down the stairs for supper." The problem is that Israel takes her "bad girl" self back home with her. And God's forgiveness only extends until he loses his patience again.
>
> Families are like this. And as much as I'd like to believe that my term has been served and my penalty paid, I know my reprieve is temporary. I may be called home, but will be in exile again. I may be forgiven for the moment, but I will break the rules again. I will leave the yard, or talk back or spend too much time on the phone talking to my friends. Brokenness. Forgiveness. Brokenness. This is the rhythm of family life. And, if there is any comfort, it is to be found in that acknowledgment.—*Kathie Collins*

From *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* by James Kugel

Considering all such differences [found in the Book of Isaiah], many scholars began to consider the possibility that chapters 40-66 had actually been written some two hundred years after the eighth-century Isaiah—they must

have been written by an anonymous Jew who lived precisely in the time of Cyrus, when the Babylonian exile was just coming to a close and when Israel's religion was fast becoming one of unequivocal monotheism. Of course, this idea was found to be disturbing to traditional Christian belief, since, as we have seen, passages from those chapters had played a crucial role in the New Testament and other early Christian writings; they seemed to offer no less than a way of interpreting Jesus' life and crucifixion as the fulfillment of a divine plan. If the author of chapters 40-66 was not the real Isaiah, the one who had been called on high to God's heavenly throne, but some unknown writer two centuries later whose prophetic credentials were thus a matter of speculation, what authority did his words have?

From "The Talk of the Town" by Dorothy Wickenden in *The New Yorker*

And even the most flagrant sinners can repent. In 1991, Lee Atwater apologized for what he had done to Dukakis and other Democratic "enemies." Dying from a brain tumor, he published an extended mea culpa in Life. "Long before I was struck with cancer, I felt something stirring in American society," he wrote. "It was a sense among the people of the country—Republicans and Democrats alike—that something was missing from their lives, something crucial. I was trying to position the Republican Party to take advantage of it. But I wasn't exactly sure what 'it' was. My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood." With forgivable grandiosity, he called for the leaders of the nineties to "speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul." Atwater's vision is unfulfilled, but it looks a lot like what these candidates claim they want for the country.

From "A Tribute to Stanley Kunitz" by Marie Howe in *Interviews and Encounters with Stanley Kunitz*

He taught us to love the places we had come from, places many of us were trying to forget, Pittsburgh or Rochester or the streets of New York, the very meadows and backyards we had struggled to get out of once and for all. He taught us to love that geography, the "testing-trees" of our own childhood, the original dirt and water and matter of our first lives.

And In that way he taught us to love our own stories, what we had hidden, what we had been ashamed of. He taught us to turn into those obsessions that haunted us and hurt us, to turn into their "deeper dark." And we looked at his own work and saw that he had done so, and that he had made of those turnings, poetry. And we took courage and tried.

He said, "My struggle is to use the life in order to transcend it, to convert it to legend." And, believing him, we allowed our own small stories to take on the power of myth, the primitive, intimate struggles of parents and children, men and women, friend and friend, the dead and the living. And we learned that myth is not atrophied, but embedded in this world, living and luminous, and it healed us and helped.

He said, "The heart breaks and breaks and lives by breaking."

From "Lowest Common Denominator" in *Why Good People Do Bad Things: Understanding our Darker Selves* by James Hollis

So, too, we suffer the worldwide militancy of fundamentalist faithful who are incapable of sustaining even a modicum of ambiguity through their faith, and insist on being validated at the expense of open inquiry and respect for the differing views of others. Not only do they become suicide bombers, but they are the ones who insist on being on the local school boards and committees that select textbooks for the state, for their archaic fear of ambiguity drives them to reject the accumulated findings of scholars and scientists over the last thousand years,

preferring the simplistic, archaic world-pictures of their tribal histories. Sadly, it is virtually impossible to get such worthies to genuine dialogue, let alone to examine the Shadow issue of fear, for who wishes to seriously look at what scares them? One simply has to realize that their fear constricts all of us in the name of "religion," and then vote them out of those positions of power.

In all such turbulent relationships, whether in marriage or the tumult of political discord, the unexamined child within is frightened and starving, and reflexively brings the adult powers to bear in service to its infantile agenda. Such a child is in all of us, and most of us struggle, imperfectly, to contain that child's insistent agenda out of our respect and affection for the other. But no relationship is wholly free of such occasional outbreaks of narcissistic self-interest. None of us has reached such a stage of individuation, of virtual Buddhahood, as to transcend our archaic needs. Thus, the Shadow of narcissism haunts all relationships, even the most evolved, and constitutes the ethical challenge of relationship, namely, "to what degree can I truly love the Other by keeping my own needs from dominating them?" We repeatedly ask them for what we have not learned to give ourselves, or find for ourselves. As we mature, we learn more and more that we are responsible for meeting our needs, not the Other upon whom we would impose this task. The more we can take on this project, the more we can live with ambiguity—as individuals and as a society—the freer and more worthy of the name of love the relationship becomes.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

[9-18 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.]

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the LORD,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

ENTERING THE STORY

[V]erses 6-8 in the first chapter of John's Gospel are believed to be later insertions into the original text designed to make it clear from the beginning that the central figure is Jesus and not John. Scholars believe that there was a powerful cult of followers of John the Baptist and that his followers may have resisted following Jesus because of their admiration for John. It is thought that John the Baptist's cult centered at Ephesus because the Book of Acts tells the story of Paul as going to Ephesus and finding that the disciples there had been baptized only with the baptism of John. There is also the account of Apollos, a learned and eloquent teacher of the way of the Lord, who had experienced only John's baptism (Acts 19:1-7 and 18:24-28). The Fourth Gospel also refers to a group of John's disciples in John 3:25.

The Greek helps us out a bit in ascertaining the importance of John the Baptist. In 1:7 we read, "A man came, sent by God." The preposition translated "by" could have been expressed in Greek in three ways. The preposition ek could have been used; this word denotes the idea of "out of" or "out from." Or the preposition apo might have been used; this word denotes the idea of "away from" or "separation from." The preposition chosen by our author, however, is the word para, which denotes "from as with regard to source or origin." Thus the text emphasizes that while John the Baptist is subordinate in importance to Jesus, nevertheless the source of his mission, power, and authority was God.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. John tells us that *the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem*. What do you know of the priests and their role in the Jerusalem temple? Levites, you will recall, originally members of the tribe of Levi, were important temple personnel who over the centuries performed liturgical and administrative functions. Why might the Jews send these people to the wilderness to ask of John: "*Who are you*?" Who might they hope or fear John is or is not? What is so important about getting a definitive answer? "*Who are you*?" Hearing the question, how might

1 John Sanford, *Mystical Christianity* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), p. 37.

John be feeling and what might he be wondering? For him, what might be the importance of the question and the need to be clear and careful in his response?

> *He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."* Messiah in Hebrew refers to one who is anointed a king, priest, or sometimes a prophet. The title designates no form of divinity. In the Hebrew tradition it becomes a yearning and longing for one like David to come and restore the Kingdom of Israel. Messiah, when translated into Greek, is Christos or Christ. By the time of John's gospel (around 100 CE), the name of Jesus and Christ will be linked together as if two parts of his name. John brings up the title of Messiah, not the priests and Levites. What do you make of the form of his denial? Repeat John's response aloud several times. Whisper, speak, and then shout it. What is the emotion you sense behind the denial? Why might it be so important for John the Baptist to be clear with the Jerusalem people that he has no claim to being Messiah?
>
> *And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not*." What do you know about Elijah? Recall that he was transported into heaven without dying (2 Kings 2:11), and many Jews expected his return as prelude to a messianic age. The priests and Levites bring up Elijah. Why might it be important for them to have an answer to this question? What is the urgency of John to deny it?
>
> "*Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No*." It is thought that the prophet is a title in the tradition referring to Moses. Why might it be important for those from Jerusalem to get an answer to this question? Why does John need to be clear about his denial? How would you describe what is happening between John and the Jerusalem visitors? What might the priests and Levites be feeling and thinking? What do you suppose is going on for John?

What is John telling them about himself? What has he said? Left unsaid? What do you suppose the priests and Levites will tell those in Jerusalem when they return? What will John's responses reveal to them? Keep hidden? How will they clarify or confuse?

2. Who do you ever recall asking you: "Who are you?" What did they really want to know? What do you remember telling them? How has this occurred, perhaps more than once, at different stages of your life? When those in authority have asked, "Who are you?" what did you answer? Remember the occasion and recall the stakes. Where did your answers lead?

> Who are those today who ask, sometimes in words and sometimes in other ways, whether or not you are the "Messiah"—an anointed one who is come to usher in a new age—one who can bring in a kingdom of justice and peace in your community, office, church, home, and even within yourself? What do you know of temptations to own such a title? What happens when you accept it or deny it?

3. In what sense might you be a voice crying out in the wilderness making a straight way for Life and what is True? What is a wilderness in which you find yourself publicly and privately? What is your voice? Is it vocal, written, danced, sung, painted, prayed, wrestled, run, walked, yelled, wept, whispered, or preached? What is your cry? What is dying to cry out from within you in your wilderness? What would it cost you to cry out? What does it continue to cost you to remain silent? When you ask yourself: "Who are you?" What do you answer?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- At the beginning of Elie Wiesel's novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*, some townspeople are looking out through their windows as the Nazis assemble their Jewish neighbors in the town square below, preparing to deport them to the death camps. The narrator remarks that, as one of the Jewish victims, he could understand them. Also, to a lesser extent, he understood the Nazi perpetrators. But he cannot understand the onlookers, who stand, and watch, and do nothing. How is an onlooker different from a witness? What responsibilities and risks come with being a witness? What do you know of being an onlooker to something and wishing to remain silent and inactive?

- Ponder the role of the witness and how it's different from that of the actor, the one whom the witness sees and may tell about. What is it like to be a witness? What are the witness' duties and responsibilities? How may a witness be rewarded, and how might one be at risk? What might a person hope for who has witnessed an event or is bearing witness to an idea? What might such a witness fear? Where within me is the desire to shout out some piece of news or some newly discovered fact? What might make me hesitate or distance myself a bit from what I have seen or known? Why might I find it easier to be the actor in an event than to be the witness to the action?

- *WHO* are you? Who *ARE* you? Who are *YOU*? Different questions. All hard. Answer them for today, trying not to remember how you have answered them in the past. And don't worry too much about what those answers might look like tomorrow. Right now, who are you? Who are you not? In this passage, John began by looking at who (or what) he was not. To what expectations of others have you found yourself saying "no"? John's answer to this question found him saying what he bears witness to. In Greek, the word witness is marturia, root of our English "martyr," which has the sense of one who sees or experiences, and who lives (and dies) out of that experience. Right now, to what do you bear witness?

EXPLORING FURTHER

Recently I had my picture taken with a group at the end of a week-long Thai Yoga Massage training in Montreal. The week was intense, physically and emotionally. Though the work was familiar to me, spending so many hours a day with it was very unusual. And, being without my family in this very old, very large, very French city was a little like visiting some parallel universe. After taking the photo, my classmate handed my digital camera back to me, and I looked down at the screen. There was the group. But where was I? I couldn't find myself —that is, I didn't recognize that person sitting on the front row wearing my clothes, arms wrapped around new friends and beaming for the camera. A brief moment's panic surged through me. "Who was I? Where was I?"

The moment passed, however, and it wasn't until I was by myself that evening in my room that I pulled out the camera again to look for myself. In picture after picture taken at home, some good, some not so good, I saw the person I thought I was. But when I got back to this picture taken that day, I had to struggle to pull the features together in a way that made sense. Experimenting, I held the camera out, turned it around and snapped another picture. There was this strange person again. Had I changed that much in a week? Had my outer body morphed to match a different "Montreal" me? Or had my inner self changed so much that it could no longer recognize the outer body? And just who was thinking these weird thoughts anyway?

No longer panicked, but still curious, I took a few more photos, gradually adjusting my awareness by focusing on my eyes. There they were. The windows of my soul. I stared into them for a long time asking, "Who are you?" Until at last I saw past my aging face... past my various roles, relationships and achievements…past a scared little girl… and then beyond even a name or race or gender. Astonished, I realized that my concept of myself, even at its most well-developed stage, was way, way too small. That perhaps sometimes, maybe even all the time, I am a part of everyone and everything. And they are a part of me. —*Kathie Collins*

From *Mystical Christianity* by John Sanford

The writers of the New Testament are steeped in, and very much aware of, the Old Testament. They wish to show that the prophecies and intimations of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ. If they can demonstrate this to be the case, the message of and about Christ will be more acceptable to the Jews, but more than that, if it can be shown that Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in Christ, it also shows that God's overall plan of salvation is being completed. A distinguishing feature of the religion and faith of Judaism and Christianity is its linear dimension. There is telos, that is, a goal, toward which all creation is moving. This goal is nothing other than the fulfillment of God's plan. This teleological (goal-seeking) aspect of Judaism/Christianity is one of the features that distinguishes it from virtually all of the other religious faiths with which it competed. We find nothing like it, for instance, in the Greek-originated paganism of the day, nor in ancient Egyptian or Babylonian religion. Only Zoroastrianism—with its cosmic struggle between the forces of darkness (Ahriman) and those of light (Ahura-Mazda) that one day would culminate in a conclusive cosmic battle, shared something of this teleological aspect. The author of the Fourth Gospel is anxious not only to show the supremacy of Jesus over John and not only to show that Old Testament prophecy is being fulfilled, but also to show that what transpired in Christ is the fulfillment of a divine intention, only dimly perceived by people of old, but now made clear in Christ.

The psychology of individuation also has a teleological aspect. It points out that the life in us is striving toward a goal that is usually unseen and unrecognized by consciousness but is known somewhere in the unconscious. The increasing recognition by consciousness that such a goal exists and the increasing cooperation of the ego with the fulfillment of this goal make up an important part of psychological development. The fact that the achievement of such a psychological goal seems to be intrinsically important fortifies the faith that there is an overall purpose to life. Philosophically this kind of thinking, rooted in the Old Testament and the New Testament, flowered in the ancient world in the thinking of a man such as Origen and in modern times in the thinking of Teilhard de Chardin. Psychologically it finds expression in the thinking of C. G. Jung and Fritz Kunkel.

From "Gene Robinson Takes on More Risky Ventures" by John Dart in the *Christian Century*

> [***Ed. Note:*** When Gene Robinson was elected bishop in the Diocese of New Hampshire in 2003, he became the first openly gay man to become a bishop in the Episcopal Church and the larger Anglican Church. His consecration was so controversial it threatened to split the Anglican Church and some church leaders left in protest. Bishop Robinson faced ongoing death threats during his tenure. He retired at the age of 65 in 2013. He is an author of *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk About Gay Marriage*.]

The death threats have lessened over the five years since Episcopalians affirmed V. Gene Robinson's election as their church's first openly gay bishop. But the man who symbolizes, for many, a defiance of a traditional understanding of scripture and sexual morality will soon be in a risky spotlight again.

His first book is out this month, he will tie the civil-union knot with his male partner in June under a new state law, and he will be an uninvited bishop hanging "around the edges" this July in England during the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops.

"Going to Lambeth, though not as a participant, puts me in a certain amount of danger," Robinson said in an interview. Robinson and his partner, Mark Andrews, wore bullet-proof vests at the bishop's consecration in November 2003, and they had security protection for a few months before and after that event.

Since January 1, [2008] New Hampshire has allowed same-gender civil unions that carry many of the legal, financial and insurance benefits that accompany traditional marriage in the state.

"I'm certainly not going to put myself at physical risk without providing my partner with the protections that civil law provides," he said. "That's no more and no less than any husband or wife would want to do for his or her spouse."

On the steps of the state capitol in Concord, the couple's lawyer will solemnize the union. "Then we will go across the street to St. Paul's Church for prayers of thanksgiving and blessing for our union," Robinson wrote in his book, In the Eye of the Storm (Seabury).

The couple considered omitting the blessing and simply taking part in a eucharistic service, but decided that even that would be taken by opponents as "an intentional affront" to the worldwide Anglican Communion. "And because the blessing of [same-sex] unions has gone on in the Diocese of New Hampshire since 1996 (seven years before my election), why should the bishop not be entitled to the same pastoral care offered to other people in the diocese?" […]

Robinson said he hopes that readers of his book will find out "how theologically conservative I am." Many conservative Episcopalians, he said, have told him they see the church's relaxed stance on gay and lesbian people "as a precursor to the deconstruction of virtually everything that we believe." Some critics, he said, may be thinking of John Shelby Spong, the former bishop of Newark, New Jersey, an early advocate of gay and lesbian inclusion in church life. "Either he evolved, or devolved, depending on your perspective, into serious questioning of the bodily resurrection, the virgin birth and the divinity of Christ," Robinson said.

"There are still people who write asking me to relinquish my office, but I say that I could be hit and killed by a bus this afternoon and this issue would simply not go away." He said he has no interest in being a martyr. Frankly, because of the resurrection and my faith, I don't go into this fearfully. It has to do with what God is doing in the world with God's gay and lesbian children."

“Wanderer" by Sheila Moon in *Collected Poems: 1972-1985*

I am a divine dereliction! I
am a tatterdemalion peasant, a fool
guileless as any Parsifal before those
steeded silver warriors riding proud!
They shine above my seeking, have no care
for balm unfound in Hadean labyrinths.
They fare them well! I do not. Even so,
there are times like a delicate music
heard from the mist-blurred sea,
all out of focus yet known as sweet
by my head lifted and my deepened breath;
and times when a treble trumpet of light
vaults above toothed snow and above ponds
starched and pleated with cold. Such times
my wilderness resolves into uncertain fields
where lambs, fear-footed, trot on frost, bleat the dark,
then come to comfort of lanterned barn and straw
for cradling lonely births and wanderers,
for cradling us, for cradling me.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.

[12-14a When your days are fulfilled and you he down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.]

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

ENTERING THE STORY

In biblical references the ark is often associated with a tent shrine. Although the shrine at Shiloh is referred to as a temple (1 Sam 1:9; 3:3), Ps 78:60-61 refers to the capture of the ark by noting, "He abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mortals." In denying David the right to build a temple, Nathan is emphatic in delivering God's word, "I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from until this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle" (2 Sam 7:6).

When the Temple is built, Solomon brings both ark and tent of meeting in procession into the sanctuary of the Temple (1 Kgs 8:4; 2 Chr 5:5). Many believe that references indicate a tent sheltering the ark within the Temple, much as the ark in the priestly traditions of the tabernacle also is hidden by veils and coverings, the exact nature of which is difficult to determine (Exod 30:6; 40:3, 21; Num 4:5). Josephus describes the wings of the cherubim as a tent or dome covering the ark (Ant.7.103-4). Second Maccabees 2:4-8 indicates that ark and tent were removed from the Temple in the destruction of Jerusalem, and Heb 9:4 states that the ark stood behind the second curtain in the Temple within a tent called the Holy of Holies.

The ark's cultic significance within these holy structures (tent and temple) has much to do with its role as a repository for sacred objects, most notably the tablets of the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai.[1]

Samuel recounts the history of Israel following the death of Saul in battle with the Philistines. It continues by describing a struggle for the throne: There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; [2 Sam 3:1a]. The house is a recurring theme; from the beginning of the book through today's reading, the word "house" (Hebrew: beth) appears 33 times.

1 Bruce Birch, “Ark of the Covenant” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon Press, 2006).

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Take a moment to consider the use of the word house in 2 Samuel. What is a house? What attributes does it have? How is it regarded?

Circle the word house every time it appears in today's text. What are the different ways that the word is used? What are the qualities of a house? What kind of a house does David want to build for the Lord? Why might David think that the Lord needs a house? What might move David to want to build the house? What would be the cost of building such a house? What might be the promise of building the house?

What response does God make to David's intentions? What reasons does God give for David not to build a house?

> *I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.* The tent and tabernacle were temporary structures where the ark of the Lord or ark of the covenant was kept (see ENTERING THE STORY). *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.* [2 Sam 6:17].
>
> What is the advantage of *moving about in a tent and a tabernacle* rather than living in a *house*? What is lost in building a house? What is the advantage of living in a *house*, rather than *moving about in a tent and a tabernacle*? What is lost?

What promises does God make to David? How do you imagine David felt on hearing this? Is it good news? Bad news? What kind of house might David's *offspring build for my name*?

2. What do you know of building a house? In the world around you, where do you see people building a house? What is their purpose? What keeps them going? What kinds of planning and purposefulness are required? What strategies are needed? What permissions or alliances are essential? Who or what has been displaced by the new house? What have the builders gained in building? What have they lost?

3. What do you know about building a house of the Lord in your own depths? How do/did you clear space for it? What effort do/did you put forth to shape it? What does/did it include? What does/did it exclude?

> What do you know of being challenged in how you build the house? Who brings the challenge? What do they challenge? How does/did it feel to be challenged? What is the cost of rising above the challenge? What is the promise?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- The "House of David" is a title representing a people with a past, present and future—a lineage in which its members share not only blood, but religion, cultic practices, physical traits, mannerisms, customs, habits, memories, hopes, curses, and blessings. There are other famous houses, the "House of Atreus" and the "House of Tudor" among them. What other famous houses, mythic or historic, come to mind? What glue links these houses from generation to generation? What courage, curse, or tragic flaw? What is the house you were born into? What themes are carried through the generations of your family? What is the color and texture and

temperature of the blood that flows through your veins? How do you fit and not fit into the house of your ancestors? Which strengths do you plan to carry forward? Which weaknesses would you just as soon leave behind? What within your house is the holy of holies? What ark goes before you and your clan as you move about and march into battle? How does the nature of its holiness change when you are settled in your own dwelling place?

- In *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (Continuum 2007), Jonathan Sacks reminds us that 1 Chronicles 28:3 attributes the building of the temple by Solomon (rather than his father David) to the fact that David was a warrior and that a temple must be built by a man of peace. But that is not the issue here. In this text the core question is about movement from tabernacle to temple—from the mobile and temporary to the stationary and fixed. The Lord God asks David: "Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Read and then read this verse again out loud. See how many different intonations you can give to the question. What is between the lines? If every question has a statement behind it, what is the Lord God telling David? What do you know of a style of life that is "tabernacle" and one that is "temple"? How does one's world-view reflect "tabernacle" or "temple"? Do you consider yourself a "tabernacle" or "temple" kind of person? How might you be both? How does such a window determine what you see and bias the choices you make?

- Imagine your own inner life, your soul, as a house. Walk through its rooms. Walk through your garden to the front door. What does your facade communicate about you? What might that be about? Walk through all the rooms of your house. What happens in each room? Who is present? Who is missing? With all these inner spaces, is there a room for the great mystery of your life? What might it look like? And lastly, who owns your house? And where does the owner live?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From "Development of the Royal Zion Theology" in *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* by J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes

Nathan's oracle in II Sam. 7:8-17, the psalm attributed to David in II Sam. 23:1-7, Solomon's prayer in I Kings 8:46-53 with Yahweh's response in 9:2-9, and a number of the psalms in the book of Psalms (such as Ps. 89 and 132) reflect what may be referred to as "royal Zion theology." The essence of this theology was the related claims (1) that Yahweh chose Jerusalem as the place of his own special presence and as the chief city of his people and (2) that Yahweh designated David and David's descendants to rule from Jerusalem in perpetuity. Secondary elements included (3) the cultic centrality of the Jerusalem Temple, (4) the special intermediary role of the Davidic king between Yahweh and the people, and (5) the qualification that Yahweh's protection of Jerusalem and the continuance of the Davidic dynasty depended on the faithfulness of the king and people to Yahweh.

Several of the psalms depict Jerusalem, particularly the Temple Mount, as a cosmic mountain where Yahweh himself actually reigned as king over all of his created order. Thus in a very special way he protected his city against its enemies. […]

While this royal Zion theology may have already begun to emerge under David, the elaborated form… will have developed over time. Probably it was under Solomon that this royal theology received its first clear and strong articulation. […] Solomon was the first of the Davidic kings whose claim to the throne was based purely on the dynastic principle. David was crowned by the people of Judah and Israel in ceremonies that involved covenant arrangements and he claimed Jerusalem by conquest. But Solomon's claim to authority over the land was in effect the royal Zion theology. Yahweh had chosen David and his descendants to rule, and David had chosen

Solomon to be his successor. The Jerusalem Temple, built by Solomon, is a prominent element in the Zion theology.

From *Julian* by Gore Vidal

The priestess entered from the temple. She looked at neither priest nor visitor. According to Oribasius, she was immensely old and shrunken and toothless.

"She is now pure," whispered the priest. "She has just bathed in the Kastalian spring." The Pythoness threw a number of laurel leaves and barley meal on a brazier; the room filled with an acrid smoke. "Now she is making the air pure," said the priest. Then Oribasius, eyes streaming with tears from the smoke, followed the Pythoness into the inner cell where, for a thousand years, Apollo has spoken to man. Just beside the omphalos was a tripod, on which the Pythoness sat, cross-legged, her face bent over the steam as it escaped from the earth below her. She muttered incantations.

"All right," whispered the priest. "She is ready to hear you."

In a loud voice Oribasius said: "I come from Flavius Claudius Julianus, Augustus and Pontifex Maximus. He does homage to the god Apollo, and to all the true gods."

The Pythoness sang softly to herself during this, her attention fixed on the steam at the foot of the tripod. "The Augustus wishes guidance from the god Apollo. He will do whatever he is commanded."

"The question?" The old voice was thin and indistinct.

"Shall the Emperor restore the holy temple of Delphi?"

For a long moment the only sound in the shrine was the faint hissing noise steam makes escaping rock. That sound is possibly the origin of the legend that the earth goddess Ge had a son who was a serpent called Python. The serpent controlled the oracle until Apollo killed him and threw the body down a crevice. The steam is supposed to come from the corpse. The hissing sound is the serpent's dying voice.

At last the Pythoness stirred. She took several deep breaths of steam. She gasped; she coughed; she rolled her eyes; she clung with claw-like hands to the top of the tripod, rocking back and forth. Then she was motionless. When she finally spoke, her voice was firm and distinct despite the absence of teeth.

"Tell the King: on earth has fallen the glorious dwelling, and the water-springs that spoke are still. Nothing is left the god, no roof, no shelter, and in his hand the prophet laurel flowers no more."

That was all. The Pythoness shut her eyes. She seemed to sleep. Oribasius and the priest departed. The priest was distraught. "I don't believe it," he said. "Of course Apollo wants his temple rebuilt. I can't think what got into her. Of course these messages are always open to interpretation. Sometimes they are deliberately perverse, and obscure..." But it was no good.

I asked Oribasius what Julian said when he was told the oracle. "Nothing," said Oribasius. "Except to ask me to mention it to no one."

From "Real Estate: Greenwich Cottage with Amenities—Pool, Ice Rink, Zamboni" in *Richistan: A Journey through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich* by Robert L. Frank

In the late 19th century, the richest Americans started building homes that aspired to the great chateaus of Europe. They were rambling, neoclassical monuments to aristocracy, carved from stone and brick, and tucked at the end of mile-long driveways hidden from public view. They dotted the shores of eastern Long Island, Connecticut and Rhode Island, as well as the rolling farmland of Pennsylvania's Main Line and great plantations of the South.

The grandest was the Biltmore Estate, the French Renaissance-style estate near Asheville, North Carolina, which, with its 255 rooms over 175,000 square feet, remains the largest private home built in America.

Yet Richistanis are catching up. The number of homes built in 2005 larger than 5,000 square feet soared to 30,000—more than five times the number in 1995. These homes now represent more than 2 percent of the total housing starts, up from one-half of a percent a decade ago. In high-end communities like Greenwich, Palm Beach and Atherton, 10,000 square feet is the new normal.[…]

Price increases for megamansions have far outpaced the broader market. On the West Side of Los Angeles, there were more than a dozen homes in 2006 on the market for $30 million or more—up from about two in 2001. In 2004, billionaire Ronald Perelman sold his beach house and adjoining land in Palm Beach for $90 million, the highest price ever paid for a residential home in the United States. Even as the housing market cooled in 2006, demand at the top remained strong. The headlines from a single Sunday in late 2006 featured the Manhattan sales of a $46 million mansion, an $18 million condo and $15 million home.

As of early 2007, there were three vacation homes on the market priced at $100 million or more. The cheapest, for $ 100 million, is an estate near Lake Tahoe named Tranquility, built by a cofounder of Tommy Hilfiger and boasting a private lake, conservatory, boathouse, stable, gymnasium and garage space for 17 cars. The home's staircase is a replica of the 55 Titanic's, and the marble flooring in the entryway is patterned after the New York Public Library's. Donald Trump is selling a 68,000-square-foot estate in Palm Beach for $125 million, though it's languished on the market for over a year. The new record breaker in real estate is the 95-acre Starwood Ranch in Aspen, built and owned by Saudi Arabia's Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and on sale for $135 million. The estate has a 56,000-square-foot mansion—bigger than the White House—with 15 bedrooms and an elevator. Bandar says he's selling the place because he doesn't get to the mountains much anymore. Yet he won't be homeless in Aspen: He recently built a 15,000-square-foot guesthouse on the property along with a replica of a British pub, which a spokesman said Bandar will probably keep.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Isaiah 61:10—62:3
Psalm 148
Galatians 4:4-7

[21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.]

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

ENTERING THE STORY

The inclusion of women in the story, through the prominent role given to Mary and the lesser roles given to Elizabeth and Anna, would be an indication to the Lukan audience that women are important in their community. They may be called to special service in fulfilling God's will, including the role of prophet. The aged also have a prominent role as interpreters of the unfolding events (see Elizabeth, Zechariah, Anna, and probably Simeon). In traditional societies that rely less on writing (and electronic media) than on oral communication, the elderly are the repositories of community memory and wisdom. The elderly persons in the infancy narrative represent that communal wisdom and also represent Israel's long wait for its Messiah. In the infancy narrative, however, the youthful Mary also shares in celebrating and interpreting God's work.[1]

The setting in today's text is the temple in Jerusalem. The time, eight days after Jesus' birth. The occasion, the circumcision of the baby and the purification of his mother. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph have brought Jesus to the temple to do "everything required by the law of the Lord."

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon*...What does Luke tell you about him? How might you describe Simeon were you to meet him during a visit to the Jerusalem temple?

What do you learn here about the family from Nazareth and their infant son? What do you suppose Simeon tells Mary and Joseph about their son that they do not already know? What is it that amazes them?

1 Robert Tannehill, *Luke: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Abingdon Press, 1996).

Simeon blesses them both and then speaks to Mary. What might it mean that the child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel? Who might be the ones to fall? Who to rise? In what ways might he become a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed? Who do you imagine the many includes?

> How can it be that a sword will pierce [Mary's] soul too? Who could be the too? What might be the sword?

With the benefit of knowing the rest of the story how do you recall Simeon's words happening? Who in the gospel accounts will rise and who will fall? In what ways does the opposition to Jesus lead to the inner thoughts of many being revealed? What is the sword and what of the piercing?

2. There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Luke tells you what about her? How might you describe Anna were you to meet her during a visit to the Jerusalem temple? She speaks to whom? Tells them what about the child? What is redemption? How is a place redeemed? What might she have in mind in terms of the redemption of Jerusalem?

> What might Luke want to be sure you understand about Jesus by offering this prelude to Jesus' life and ministry?

3. Imagine Simeon and Anna as inner soul figures within you—mysterious parts of you at the heart and core of who you are. What does your inner Simeon know about you that even now would amaze your father and mother? What does Simeon know about you even all these years later that would amaze your parents who perhaps thought they knew who you are and what your life is about?

What does/did your mother ever know about how you participated in the "rising" and the "falling" of many? What idea did she have of the opposition you have faced that has led to the revelation of the inner thoughts of many? How did she experience a "sword" that pierced her soul because of you?

What questions does the text raise about your relationship with your parents? Suggest what about who they are/were as well as about who you were and have become? What secret and mysterious places does the story touch in you?

> Consider writing a letter to your mother and father about what comes to you through this story. Living or dead, take seriously the opportunity to tell them some things that might even now amaze them about you. Mail it or not, write it, read and treasure it for them.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Anna and Simeon know something about who Jesus is, and what he will become. The *amazing* revelations come to Mary and Joseph during the ritual time of circumcision and the naming of the child. Consider what you know about circumcision—the knife, the infant, the pain, the community gathered. What is sacrificed? What is the new thing? Consider your own name, and the ritual naming you may have gone through. What is your name? What history and hope comes with your name? What expectation? What do these two rituals have to say to each other? To you? What revelations might be given here?

- *Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word…*" What is it about this encounter that convinces Simeon that he is, at last, dismissed? What has he been waiting for? What is the word that assured him through these days, months, years? What might he do tomorrow? Will there be a new task, a new commission?

- *There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.* This is the only place in the New Testament that this prophet is mentioned. Her father's name, Phanuel, means Face of God. If you were to encounter Anna today—in the 21st century—and had never heard of her or met her before, where, almost 2,000 years later, would you be meeting her for the first time? And how would you describe her to others? What about her and what she says might make her words and prophesy believable to others? And to you?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"Whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether or not I am lost."—*Vaclav Havel*

From *Luke: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* by Robert Tannehill

After the hymn of celebration, Simeon delivers an oracle to Mary, and the mood of this second statement contrasts sharply with the first. The "falling and rising of many in Israel" indicates social upheaval, and a "sign that will be opposed" anticipates the opposition that Jesus will encounter in Galilee and Jerusalem. The falling and rising can be understood in two different ways. Either some will fall and others will rise (as with the powerful and lowly in 1:52-53), or the same group will fall and then rise. In itself the text is ambiguous; it does not compel us to read it one way or the other. The pervasive influence of Isaiah on this passage provides some evidence that we should not exclude the possibility that those who fail (the Jewish opponents) might later rise... […]

Simeon's hymn and oracle to Mary provide Luke's audience with an important preview of, and guide to, the following narrative. The audience can now anticipate that the story concerns God's comprehensive saving purpose as it encounters human resistance. [. . .]

The time between the presentation in the temple and the next episode in Luke's story is bridged by a summary statement of growth in verse 40. This resembles the statement about John in 1:80, but the additional note about Jesus' wisdom prepares for the demonstration of precocious wisdom in the following scene.

Gentiles in the Lukan audience may be gratified that their share in God's salvation is affirmed in Simeon's hymn. They have had to wait until the end of the infancy narrative for inclusion in the story. Even now Simeon's words make clear (to those who know scripture) that inclusion of the Gentiles does not mean a break with Judaism, for it fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. Nevertheless, the Jews and Gentiles in the Lukan community would surely recognize that it is not easy for Jews and Gentiles to form one community and that large numbers of Jews reject the Christian movement because its unrestricted welcome of Gentiles is a threat to Jewish identity. Some Christian Jews may share these concerns. For them the provocative "sign" continues, now represented by Jesus' inclusive community. Thus the tensions may be internal as well as external, as the community faces the challenge of welcoming all, while respecting diversity. (See the accusation of Judean believers against Paul that his teaching is undermining the traditions of Christian Jews [Acts21:20-21].)

The Lukan audience may rightly wonder how to balance the two statements of Simeon. Do the somber words about the falling and rising of many in Israel and about Jesus as a provocative sign negate the joyful words about Jesus as salvation and glory for Israel? This interpretive issue relates to the larger issue of what to think of Israel in light of widespread resistance to the gospel concerning Jesus.



Presentation of Christ in the Temple (1460-1464) by Giovanni Bellini, located in Pinacoteca Querini Stampalia, Venice, Italy

"This Only" by Czeslaw Milosz

He returns years later, has no demands.
He wants only one, most precious thing:
To see, purely and simply, without name,
Without expectations, fears, or hopes.
At the edge where there is no I or not-I.

Read the entire poem here:
https://poems4peace.wordpress.com/2013/10/21/this-only-by-czeslaw-milosz/

From "Now I Become Myself" by May Sarton from *Collected Poems 1930-1993*

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"Hurry, you will be dead before—"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!



Read the entire poem here: https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/683-may-sarton

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 147: 12-20
Ephesians 1:3-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

ENTERING THE STORY

The elaborate and poetic introduction to the Gospel of John introduces the reader to the logos, the Word.

One can see how the meaning of the Prologue could be similar to the significance of the Logos in Stoic thought, how it relates to the concept of Word of God in the Hebrew scriptures, and how "word" might be a translation of "wisdom" as it was conceived in Jewish thought. Whatever its specific roots, the author intends Logos to have a rich and varied meaning. He or she may have wanted its specific precedents to be elusive so that both Jewish and Gentile readers could resonate with its implied meanings. […]

The heart of the prologue as it now stands in the Gospel—the famous verse 14, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." The expression of divine being takes up abode in a single human creature and lives among other humans for a time. The expressive side of God's being is physically present. It is made sensual so that it can be touched, seen, heard, and felt. This "sensual Logos" is, of course, for the Fourth Evangelist the man, Jesus of Nazareth. This statement constitutes the normative affirmation of incarnational Christology for Christianity. It has been claimed that the Logos is God and now Logos has become human person.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What is John's role, according to the text? What qualities are attributed to him? What quality is specifically not attributed to him? What might be the relationship of the *Word* and *John*?

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. The true light in contrast to what? What is the quality of the true light?

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. What is the relationship between the Word and the world? Why might his own people...not accept him? What might be the relationship between the world and the man sent from God, whose name was John?

1 Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Westminster, John Knox Press, 1993).

And the Word became flesh and lived among us… The Greek word translated as "flesh" is sarx, and is used to refer to "flesh," "physical body," and "human nature." What qualities does the author now attribute to the Word? How might the Word be changed by becoming flesh? How might flesh be changed by holding the Word? How might the relationship of the Word and the world be changed by becoming flesh?

2. *He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.* Where do you see those whose own people do not accept them? Among the homeless or CEOs, homemakers or activists, soldiers or civilians, native people or immigrants?

What reasons or explanations are given for not accepting? What do those who do not accept gain from their attitude? What is the price they pay for not accepting? What is the impact on those who are not accepted? What price do they pay?

What benefit might there be in not being accepted? What justification, freedom, or other promise might there be?

3. What do you know of some part of your inner self (your own person) that you have not accepted—rejected, ignored, denied, or failed to recognize? Where is the John you meet it in your dreams, when you behave in ways that surprise or upset you, or in the reactions of other people towards you?

What reasons or explanations do you give for not accepting? What do you gain by not accepting this part of yourself? What price do you pay for not accepting it?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *In the beginning was the Word...*Think for a minute about the words that are a part of beginning for you. Make a list of such words. What word needs to be spoken as you begin today's new thing? Why is it important to speak of beginnings? When is it important not to speak of them? Look at yourself in the mirror, and ask yourself what word of beginning needs to be spoken right now, today. What is that word? Speak it, out loud.

- What in the minds and hearts of *his own people* might have kept them from knowing the incarnate word or accepting him? How may our own hearts and minds prevent us from accepting him? What that is part of us might we have to kill in order to receive him, to become *Children of God*? How might we go about such a killing?

- Just as today's passage from the Gospel of John tells us that "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,*" so too the Old Testament (Proverbs 8:22-31) tells us that the Wisdom of God "*was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth*." The Greek term for Word here is Logos, a masculine noun meaning word and speech, conveying logic and reason. According to Thomas Schipflinger in his book Sophia-Maria, it "signifies a thinking, perceiving and volitional spirit." Logos is the "first cause" and the "bearer of ideas." Sophia is the Greek word for Wisdom. It is a feminine word and comes from the adjective sophos which means "wise, reasonable, adept, intelligent, and artful." According to Schipflinger, Sophia also became known as the "World Soul" and, as such, contains the ideas from which the cosmos is formed. What similarities and differences do you see between these ideas of Logos and Sophia? What kind of power does each manifest? How might they work in concert? What symbols represent Logos in the world today? Sophia? A marriage of the two? Which of the two tends to dominate in the world? In the church? In your home? What

evidence do you see of Logos and Sophia within yourself? Which of them tends to dominate there? What happens when one of them rules without the other?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From "Exploring Likenesses to the Prologue in My Own Soul" in *Word and Soul* by Michael Willett Newheart

The Johannine prological images and rhythms find many likenesses in African-American poetic images and rhythms. The soul of the prologue emerges in the soul of African-American poetry. But in what ways does it emerge in my own soul? Only a word—an enfleshed word—must suffice. In a word, I am a man of the word; I am a minister, teacher, and scholar: I preach, teach, read, and write words. Occasionally I, as well as my hearers and readers, succumb to the fantasy that my words come from above, either through divine revelation or scholarly research. My word, though, rises up from my flesh—my white, male, heterosexual, middle-aged, Midwestern, well-fed, well-clothed, highly educated flesh, which has been shaped by the white, patriarchal, religiously affiliated, wealthy communities of flesh of which I have been part. Though I am flesh from their flesh, these fleshly communities have not always received my fleshly word. I think of my parents, who often did not know how to receive my intellectually curious and emotion-laden words, and Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board executives, who did not accept my historical critical words. Though such words had brought me much light, others perceived them as darkness. My own people did not accept me and my fleshly word.

Now my wordy white flesh is found among black flesh, as I live, work, and worship among African-Americans. While my word (and thus flesh) has often been rejected by my world, their flesh (and thus word) has been rejected by the larger white world (flesh of my flesh). How does my participation in this community of world-rejected flesh (and word) shape my world-rejected word (and flesh)? How does my white-among-black fleshly word reject and/or accept their black in-the-presence-of-white wordy flesh? How does my flesh become word?

From *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley

For a moment Morgaine was inclined to protest. She had sworn when last she left Arthur's court that she would never again enter any Christian church; but this girl was so much like one of her own young priestesses that she would not profane the name by which the girl knew her God. She let the girl lead her inside the church.
In that other world, she thought, that church where the ancient Christians worship must stand on this very spot; some holiness from Avalon must surely come through the worlds, through the mists…she did not kneel or cross herself, but she bent her head before the high altar of the church; and then the girl tugged gently at her hand. "Come," she said. "The high altar is of God and I am a little afraid here always ... but you have not seen our chapel—the sisters' chapel... come, Mother."

Morgaine followed the young girl into the small side chapel. There were flowers here, armfuls of apple blossom, before a statue of a veiled woman crowned with a halo of light; and in her arms she bore a child. Morgaine drew a shaking breath and bowed her head before the Goddess.

The girl said, "Here we have the Mother of Christ, Mary the Sinless. God is so great and terrible I am always afraid before his altar, but here in the chapel of Mary, we who are her avowed virgins may come to her as our Mother, too. And look, here we have little statues of our saints, Mary who loved Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair, and Martha who cooked dinner for him and scolded her sister when she would not cook with her—I like to think of Jesus when he was a real man who would do something for his mother, when he changed the water into wine at that wedding, so she wouldn't be unhappy because there wasn't enough wine for everyone. And here is a very old statue that our bishop gave us, from his native country…one of their saints, her name is Brigid …"

Morgaine looked at the statue of Brigid, and she could feel the power coming from it in great waves that permeated the chapel. She bowed her head.

But Brigid is not a Christian saint, she thought, even if Patricius thinks so. That is the Goddess as she is worshipped in Ireland. And I know it, and even if they think otherwise, these women know the power of the Immortal. Exile her as they may, she will prevail. The Goddess will never withdraw herself from mankind.

And Morgaine bowed her head and whispered the first sincere prayer she had ever spoken in any Christian church.

"Before the Light" from *Everything is Waiting for You* by David Whyte

I awoke just before light
reached this corner of the world.

Not a glimmer in the quiet cabin,
only the sound of embers settling back
into the first and original light
from which they came, the nugget red glow
of their interior worlds untouched as yet,
still smoored by ashes and the lees
of yesterday's heat.

One touch of that delicate web of coals
with the smith-black poker set against the wall
would disturb the night and all it holds,
break the dark fragile ripening heat
inside everything.

Set me to work too early before the
night has cast its full shadow.

Not to stir then until the tide turns,
not to wake until something parallel wakes,
belonging to me yet beyond me,
not to move until the indefinable
patient fisherman shadowing my life
rises and scents the morning run,
not to cast until the river is imagined
starred with fish and new rain,
not to rise until the body wakes involuntary
sun or no sun, without effort,
without will.

My hand on the latch
the door swinging
open to something real.
The first cold gleaming sliver
of moon
ripened from a full dark.

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1. Genesis 1:1-5 38
2. Entering the Story 38
3. Exploring the Story 38
4. Between the Lines 39
5. Exploring Further 39

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

ENTERING THE STORY

Scholars generally agree that the Genesis creation stories, while reflecting ancient cosmologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia, date to the 6th century BCE at the time of the exile of the Hebrew people in Babylonia. They are thought to be theological, mythic, and pastoral statements addressed to a real historical situation.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. The Babylonian captivity of Israel is far from Jerusalem home and cut off from the temple there. Exiled from what has been called "the navel of the universe" for the Jew, imagine what it might mean to be denied the holy place, the sacrificial offerings at the temple altar by the priests, and the comfort of the Holy of Holies, God's abode, in the temple sanctuary. What are some words and phrases that describe for you what the exiled Jews in Babylon might be experiencing? What might their life be like? What anxieties and fears might haunt them? What hopes shattered and dreams broken?

What might their experience be suggesting to them about the Lord God who brought them out of Egypt and led them into a promised and now lost land? What has become of the covenant relationship that has favored them as chosen people? Where is God now? What is to become of them?

What might the text say to those in exile? What is being said to them about

nothingness and chaos?

Yahweh's presence and absence?

Yahweh's relationship to the gods of Babylon?

darkness and light?

day and night?

evening and morning?

separation, isolation, and presence?

In the opening verse describing the beginning, the Hebrew can be translated in at least two ways:

when God created the heavens and earth

and

when God began to create the heavens and earth

What strikes you as the difference between the two? Which appeals or sounds right to you? Which do you prefer? How do you imagine the alternatives are heard by the exiles in Babylon? Which of the two do you suppose spoke to them?

2. What do you know about exile in the world today? Where are those that are far from home and distant from places and people who mattered to them? Who has been carried away into a strange land by people and events over which they have little or no control? What do you know of exile geographically?

3. What do you know of exile in your home town, your church, even in your family with those who love you the most? What have you known or do you live with now as a sense in which the God you worship and in whom you trust has been defeated, overwhelmed, and is helpless any longer to protect or comfort you? How has exile in your life broken the connection with the people and powers that you count and depend upon the most?

4. Mindful of your wounds and scars from exiles past or painfully aware of an exile that may determine your life today, hear as an exile the Genesis words of our text. In your exile what do you hear in these words as good news? How does the text claim the chaos and darkness, emptiness and formlessness that your life may be? What of the promise of a first day that will be different?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Remember a time when you created something, anything as simple as a meal or as elaborate as an artistic endeavor. Consider what parts of yourself you used in doing this. Name them. Think of what was actually necessary in order for you to create. How were you able to put that part of yourself into action? What part might conception and formation play? What or where was the very origin of it all? When was it begun and when, if it was, did it finish or end?

- Wonder about this Genesis text as lectionary choice for the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany. The traditional Epiphany story from the gospels is the journey of the magi, the three wise men, in search of the newborn king. The word is often translated as "manifestation" or "showing forth" or "revelation." Why might this creation text be appropriate to usher in such a season? How does it speak to you about revelation in the world around you? Within yourself?

- Diana Eck in her book *Encountering God* writes: "Our concept of God is not simply given; we learn it, for better or worse. We develop the operative concept with which we live, inheriting God, as it were, from our historical religious tradition as it is taught to us. Learning something of God from our families and teachers, from personal friends and public figures, we develop an impression of what this word 'God' means." How does the image of God in the Genesis text reflect what you have been taught by family, society, and the church? How might this image be changing for you? What influences any changes that have happened or are in process? Perhaps your image of God has not changed. What influences you in preserving that image of God from your past? Eck goes on to say: "We need to acknowledge our own responsibility for the image of God that we are content to believe in." How might you acknowledge the source of your image of God? How are you tempted, instead, to blame it on others?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> “With division begins alienation, conflict, and yet, paradoxically, a new notion of divine sovereignty. In this new perspective, God is recognized as King only as that being who is most radically separated from him. Man,

created on the sixth day, is foreshadowed by the splittings and differentiations of matter that begin on the second day; his freedom to perceive and to act is founded on those primal disintegrations."

—Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

From "In God's Image" in *Talking about Genesis* by Renita J Weems

In our Western way of thinking, two stories mean that one is truth and the other isn't. We have a tough time with one coexisting next to the other. It creates a whole host of problems for us because we expect the Bible to be free of these kinds of contradictions.

I remember looking at these two stories on my own for the first time and thinking, "How could I have missed that?" But, you know, when I stop seeing them as actual accounts of what happened I feel better. I am more at ease. Even now, I can't see Genesis 1 and 2 as accounts of exactly what happened at creation. They are attempts at telling us what happened from the beginning, not in the beginning. They are about the friction between men and women, about the labor and pain in childbirth, about discord in the family. They are about the suffering and hardship and toil that define so much of our lives. These stories, together, tell us of a world created by God that is also full of imperfections.

I think the most interesting question with the two stories of creation is why would someone sit down and include two competing stories in the Bible? It's something that many of us would find inconceivable. Is it an attempt to concede to two different ways of understanding God and creation? This is a nation-building document, maybe it was a way to make peace about competing visions of creation.

It also touches on the inscrutability of God and existence. But that is where language trips us up continuously because a man and a woman are both created in the image of God, and yet God is more than male or female. Our language portrays a masculine God and yet that first story insists that male and female were both created in the image of God and no doubt God is even more than that. Even femaleness and maleness are shadows of the divine being, the divine presence.

But, you know, we spend so much time on the image of God that we lost God's relationship to the image of human-kind. It may well be that creation pulls something out of God. Maybe these stories tell us more about ourselves and what it means to be created, to be dependent on God.

From *Fidelity* by Wendell Berry

But even the unknown past is present in us, its silence as persistent as a ringing in the ears. When I stand in the road that passes through Port William, I am standing on the strata of my history that go down through the known past into the unknown: the blacktop rests on state gravel, which rests on county gravel, which rests on the creek rock and cinders laid down by the town when it was still mostly beyond the reach of the county; and under the creek rock and cinders is the dirt track of the town's beginning, the buffalo trace that was the way we came. You work your way down, or not so much down as within, into the interior of the present, until finally you come to that beginning in which all things, the world and the light itself, at a word welled up into being out of their absence. And nothing is here that we are beyond the reach of merely because we do not know about it. It is always the first morning of Creation and always the last day, always the now that is in time and the now that is not, that has filled time with reminders of itself.

When my grandfather was dying, 1 was not thinking about the past. My grandfather was still a man I knew, but as he subsided day by day he was ceasing to be the man I had known. I was experiencing consciously for the first time that transformation in which the living, by dying, pass into the living, and I was full of grief and love and wonder.

From "The Whole Account" in *Sloan-Kettering* by Abba Kovner

[***Ed. Note:*** Abba Kovner wrote this collection of poems during his last days, as he lay dying of cancer in Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Kovner was a famed Jewish resistance fighter who led the Vilna ghetto uprising during World War II.]

> You began to love in times of disgust.
> Close at hand there was no tree, no sign
> of a living stem or flower, and when there was no reason to sing
> it was your laughter, jubilant, rousing, saying: There is someone here
> alive—joyful!

From *On a Journey* by Tom Ehrich

I pull onto my street and see two familiar figures. I stop, and we chat a minute. My wife is taking the dog for a long walk in the rain, to clear her head after a challenging day of teaching. […]

We are chatting in the kitchen when the door opens, a laundry basket drops on the floor, and our college son bounces in. Before long, he and I are engaged in cribbage and banter.

These shafts of light didn't just happen. They have a history. Not a preordained history, of the sort that people often ascribe to God, but a wandering history, much of it in the wilderness, when life presented a thousand small decisions, many of them ambiguous.[…]

This is the stuff of which life is made. Not grand gestures, life-or-death decisions, but small uncertainties, small forks in unexceptional roads, where acts of kindness go unnoticed but have impact—and the same with small acts of selfishness and cruelty.

We build our lives one day at a time. We nurture or corrode our relationships, strengthen or weaken our character, affirm or ignore our neighbor, serve or stifle, give or take—one decision at a time. The good news is that a journey of many steps can be redirected by making the next decision more faithfully. The hard news is that the decisions never stop coming, the consequences of past decisions don't just vanish, and the way back can be lost.

Just as people try to portray Jesus as larger-than-life hero, they try to make their salvation an epic contest between good and evil. On that grandiose stage, Big Decisions and Important Moments occur, and lives squandered in self-serving can be reclaimed by Grand Gestures. This is the world of deathbed conversions, extravagant charity after years of hoarding, taking the family on a Perfect Vacation to rescue love lost, and sudden immersion in good works.

These are pleasing delusions. To the offender, they say: Live any way you want, and in the last scene, make it all right. To the aggrieved, they say: Cling to your grievances, don't let the scoundrel free, wave that scorecard.

Jesus, however, walked a small stage, where life proceeded in small and specific decisions. Touch this leper or not. Teach Mary or not. Go to Lazarus immediately or not. Turn aside for this wounded traveler, speak honestly, confront the darkness—or not. Evil wasn't a fire-breathing dragon poised for an epic fight scene, but a quiet offer of an easy way out.

When Jesus said we must "take up our cross and follow," I think he meant the cross of living as faithfully as we can in the small stuff of daily life. I think he meant small acts of self- denial, small decisions to be kind, unnoticed charity, gifts of time that no Day-Timer will record. I think he meant small choices to forgive, small admissions of one's own culpability, and that humbling and weeping which occur far from applause, where consequences wait patiently to be seen.

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1. John 1:43-51 44
2. Entering the Story 44
3. Exploring the Story 44
4. Between the Lines 45
5. Exploring Further 45

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

ENTERING THE STORY

Following its cosmic introduction of the Word, the first chapter of the gospel of John begins its story of Jesus with a series of scenes taking place over several days, each one introduced by the phrase the next day.

On the first day, John explains his identity and mission to priests and Levites from Jerusalem. He denies that he is the Messiah or Elijah or a prophet, and announces that one is coming whom they do not know.

The next day, we meet Jesus. John's gospel does not describe Jesus' baptism. We find out about him at second hand, as John the Baptist declares to those around him that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The next day… "John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). [35-42] This brings us at last to today's reading.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *The next day*… What, if anything, does it add to the story for John to open each scene by saying *the next day*? What might the writer want the readers to understand about Jesus? About the events he is describing?

Take a moment to go through the passages above and circle the names of the people mentioned:

How does each individual get connected to Jesus?

Where do they come from?

Whom does Jesus seek out?

Who talks to someone else about Jesus?

What response does each one make?

Allow yourself to imagine what might go on between the lines of the story. What might the two disciples see when they remain with him that day? What could motivate Andrew to seek out his brother Simon? What else does Jesus say to Philip so that he seeks out Nathanael?

2. Where around you do you notice a shared interest or common cause that arises out of connections between people? Whether it is organizing a club or political movement, developing "buzz" about a new book or movie, clicking the "Like" button on Facebook, sharing a photo on Instagram, bringing together a group at your church, or finding volunteers for a service project, how do those connections begin, grow stronger, and spread wider?

How much is dependent on the intention and instigation of an individual? How much "just seems to happen"? Do "insiders" actively seek to share with others, or do "outsiders" have to find their own way into the group?

What motivates people to share about the project or group? With whom do they share?

How do "outsiders" evaluate what they are told? What might make them more likely to become interested? What might inhibit their interest?

3. Deep within, do you recognize how you might relate in different ways to potentially life-giving relationships? What in you actively seeks out time and space for connecting with your deepest self? What in you may have heard about a possibility, but waits for it to come and find you? What in you bubbles over with excitement at what you have discovered and wants to share it?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "Where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see."* Wonder how this story from John might reflect part of your own story. Who first told you something about Jesus? Parents, Sunday school teacher, minister, or even seminary professor? What do you recall them saying to you? What was it that led you to follow after Jesus? Had Jesus turned to you as he does to the two disciples and asked "What are you looking for?" what might you have answered? As a child, teenager, young adult? What are you looking for today as you follow Jesus? Hoping to find, discover, learn, and become what? How has Jesus told you to "Come and see"? Where has following Jesus led you to go? What have you seen? John speaks of Jesus as "the lamb of God." From where you have been and with what you have seen how do you now describe Jesus? How did you follow him today? Where did you find him staying? What did you see?

- Where do you find the life-giving connections in your life? The readings suggest, at the very least, that our need for community, and our willingness to sacrifice for it, are biologically encoded. What community, if any, do you have for which you would sacrifice your own life? What do you know of a community that has deep meaning for you? Reflect on your own struggle to find the "right" community. To what have you been called? What calls you right now? Who are those people you would die for?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* by Michael Grant

Then Jesus, at the age of about thirty, came from Galilee and was baptized by John. Their relation to one another is a difficult subject because the evangelists minimize the Baptist's importance for the greater glory of Jesus. This they do first by making the Baptist pay Jesus deference which sounds unauthentic—'I am not fit to unfasten his

shoes' —and, secondly, by insisting that Jesus mingled his respectful utterances about John with pejorative phrases—'the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he.' This lukewarm attitude to the Baptist displayed by the evangelists was caused by an awkward historical fact: as his reverent birth legends hint, his cult, entirely independent of Jesus, continued not only, as Mark shows, in their lifetimes, and not only, as we know from the Acts of the Apostles, shortly after their deaths, but for whole centuries to come.

Furthermore, there has slipped into John's Gospel a disclosure that in the early days the two sets of disciples were at odds with one another. For this reason Jesus' alleged criticisms of the Baptist, mentioned above, might possibly be genuine. As for the Baptist, he does not seem to have been nearly as reverential to Jesus as the Gospels frequently suggest. For another item which they have not been able to erase from the record indicates the contrary. When the Baptist was in prison, he sent messengers to Jesus questioning his credentials: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect some other?' In form this is an enquiry, but in substance it contradicts the evangelists' earlier assertions that the Baptist had recognized Jesus as the agent of salvation from the outset. Certainly, the Baptist knew himself to be a forerunner in this as in other respects, inviting comparison with the prophet Elijah, who was to be sent back into the world 'before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes'. But there is no good reason to suppose that the Baptist believed Jesus to be the personage he was awaiting. On the contrary he could not understand how Jesus could claim to be introducing the Kingdom when no sign whatever of the Final Day had so far made its appearance. […]

Jewish parallels for such teams of disciples are not altogether lacking. As so often in Jesus' history, he was following a tradition of the Jews and yet differing from it. For their scribes and teachers too (and here we are justified in generalizing from known later practice) were accustomed to attract around them groups of followers who memorized the instruction of their master and acted as his representatives, for example in the winning over of proselytes. 'A man's shaliach [accredited envoy] was regarded as himself' And that is just what Jesus told his own adherents: 'whoever listens to you, listens to me; whoever rejects you, rejects me.' Yet a Jewish teacher's disciples were attached not so much to his own person as to the Torah; whereas the disciples of Jesus were bound to him personally; he even comes near to calling them his slaves (douloi).

From *War* by Sebastian Junger

In the early 1990s, an English anthropologist named Robin Dunbar theorized that the maximum size for any group of primates was determined by brain size-specifically, the size of the neocortex. The larger the neocortex, he reasoned, the more individuals with whom you could maintain personal relationships. Dunbar then compared primate brains to human brains and used the differential to predict the ideal size for a group of humans. The number he came up with was 147.8 people. Rounded up to 150, it became known as the Dunbar number, and it happened to pop up everywhere. A survey of ethnographic data found that pre-contact hunter-gatherers around the world lived in shifting communities that ranged from 90 to 221 people, with an average of 148. Neolithic villages in Mesopotamia were thought to have had around 150 people. The Roman army of the classical period used a formation of 130 men—called a maniple, or a double century—in combat. Hutterite communities in South Dakota split after reaching 150 people because, in their opinion, anything larger cannot be controlled by peer pressure alone.

Dunbar also found that the size of human hunter-gatherer communities was not spread evenly along a spectrum but tended to clump around certain numbers. The first group size that kept coming up in ethnographic data was thirty to fifty people-essentially a platoon. (Unlike hunter-gatherer communities, platoons are obviously single-sex, but the group identification may still function the same way.) Those communities were highly mobile but kept in close contact with three or four other communities for social and defensive purposes. The larger these groups were, the better they could defend themselves, up until the point where they got so big that they started to fracture and divide. Many such groups formed a tribe, and tribes either fought each other or formed confederacies against other tribes. The basic dichotomy of "us" versus "them" happened at the tribal level and was reinforced by differences in language and culture.

The parallels with military structure are almost exact. Battle Company had around 150 men, and every man in the company knew every other man by face and by name. The molten core of the group bond was the platoon, however. A platoon-with a headquarters element, a radio operator, a medic, and a forward observer for calling in airstrikes—is the smallest self-contained unit in the regular army. Inserted into enemy territory and resupplied by air, a platoon could function more or less indefinitely. When I asked the men about their allegiance to one another, they said they would unhesitatingly risk their lives for anyone in the platoon or company, but that the sentiment dropped off pretty quickly after that. By the time you got to brigade level-three or four thousand men-any sense of common goals or identity was pretty much theoretical.[…]

Self-sacrifice in defense of one's community is virtually universal among humans, extolled in myths and legends all over the world, and undoubtedly ancient. No community can protect itself unless a certain portion of its youth decide they are willing to risk their lives in its defense.

From "The Rise of N-Fluence Networks" in *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* by Don Tapscott

Today, the Internet and social networking technologies shatter [Robin] Dunbar's supposed limits. The Net Geners use communications networks that are orders of magnitude larger, more complex, and much more efficient than those that were possible when their parents were young. When I was [young], I could maintain only a handful of friends because I had to keep up with them through face-to-face contact. Phone calls were expensive; flights were out of the question. But now, many young people participate in larger and more complex social networks than we would have imagined possible 10 years ago. Geography and time zones no longer get in the way. Members of social networks can contact other people far more quickly and easily than they once could.

Say good-bye to the six degrees of separation too. The line came from the wonderful play by John Guare, but it was based on a famous study of the late 1960s by Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist from Harvard. He wanted to see how many contacts separated two random individuals, so he set up an ingenious experiment. He distributed envelopes to people living in Nebraska and Kansas and gave them the name and address of a stockbroker in Boston. Their mission was to mail the envelope to someone they knew-a friend or acquaintance-who might know the stockbroker, or someone who actually knew him. Most of the letters didn't make it, but those that reached the stockbroker via snail mail usually got there after six steps.

When that experiment was conducted, the Internet was in its early days and e-mail hadn't been invented. […] So is it now two degrees of separation? Three? One of the researchers studying the small-world phenomenon is Carnegie Mellon University's Jure Leskovec. In 2007, he coauthored a study called "Planetary Scale Views on a Large Instant Messaging Network," which looked at a planetary population sample that is 4 million times larger than Milgram's U.S. study. The study, done in June 2006, covered an astounding 30 billion conversations via instant messaging networks among 240 million people around the world.

The finding: there are 6.6 degrees of separation between any two random people in this immense instant messaging universe. But Leskovec wasn't just looking at the distance between someone in Wichita and Boston. He was looking at two people on the entire planet: "And they're still less than seven people apart! As networks grow, they shrink," says Leskovec. "It's counterintuitive, but as people accumulate more friends, the distances shrink." […]

This new interconnectedness means that the N-Fluencers have unprecedented power that comes with scale. They have a larger number of friends they can influence. They can reach more people in fewer steps. And if the conditions are right, they can spread the word (be it negative or positive) about a political cause or a consumer product or service, like wildfire.

"Although they will eventually learn that some of the world is only fiction, it is specific characters and specific events which will be rejected; the recurrent patterns of values, the stable expectations about the roles and relationships which are part of their culture will remain. It is these underlying patterns, not witches and giants which give them concrete form, which make the stories an important agent of socialization."

—*Michael Applebee*

"We are tougher than we seem. We are tougher than we think. Our stories will outlive us. Let's make them good." —*Neil Gaiman*



Listen to Neil Gaiman muse on fragility during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020: https://twitter.com/tedtalks/status/1253461058213167104?lang=en

"*At KillingTheBuddha.com*, an online magazine of religion, culture and politics, Kelly Baker writes about "the apocalypse, zombies, gender, popular culture, and higher education" (an odd, if somehow understandable conglomeration) and draws on apocalyptic imagery to ponder what it means to "Look for the signs" in our time. She says "Apocalypse tales teach us to fear the wrong things. Their emphasis on signs all around us overlooks the selectivity of the sign. The signs are limited by what we imagine a sign can be." We are looking for the big signs, the unavoidable signs, the cosmic signs. Perhaps amid the zombies and vampires there is something more subtle that we fail to see because we do not have the eyes to see it or the ears to hear it. What signs do you see? What signs do you refuse to acknowledge? The narratives of the end times fail us because they ignore the reality of violence, trauma, and death in our worlds. These stories don't take into account what bodies we harm, maim, and kill and what bodies we do not. Bodies pile up, but we won't see that they are a sign of racism, corruption, and violence in policing. This is the evidence we look at. If we don't look, can we pretend it doesn't exist?"—*Andy Kille*

"The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories?" by Frank Rose in *Wired Magazine*

What is it about stories, anyway? Anthropologists tell us that storytelling is central to human existence. That it's common to every known culture. That it involves a symbiotic exchange between teller and listener—an exchange we learn to negotiate in infancy.

Just as the brain detects patterns in the visual forms of nature—a face, a figure, a flower—and in sound, so too it detects patterns in information. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns we find meaning. We use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise.

So powerful is our impulse to detect story patterns that we see them even when they're not there. In a landmark 1944 study, 34 humans—Massachusetts college students actually, though subsequent research suggests they could have been just about anyone—were shown a short film and asked what was happening in it. The film showed two triangles and a circle moving across a two-dimensional surface. The only other object onscreen was a stationary rectangle, partially open on one side. Only one of the test subjects saw this scene for what it was: geometric shapes moving across a plane. Everyone else came up with elaborate narratives to explain what the movements were about. Typically, the participants viewed the triangles as two men fighting and the circle as a woman trying to escape the bigger, bullying triangle. Instead of registering inanimate shapes, they imagined humans with vivid inner lives. The circle was "worried." The circle and the little triangle were "innocent young things." The big triangle was "blinded by rage and frustration.

But if stories themselves are universal, the way we tell them changes with the technology at hand. Every new medium has given rise to a new form of narrative. […] The invention of the printing press and movable type around 1450 led to the emergence of periodicals and the novel. The invention of the motion picture camera

around 1890 set off an era of feverish experimentation that led to the development of feature films by 1910. Television, invented around 1925, gave rise a quarter-century later to […] the highly stylized form of comedy that became known as the sitcom.

As each of these media achieved production and distribution on an industrial scale, we saw the emergence of 20th-century mass media: newspapers, magazines, movies, music, TV. And with that, there was no role left for the consumer except to consume.

Just as we'd gotten used to consuming sequential narratives in a carefully prescribed, point-by-point fashion, came the internet. Under its influence, a new type of narrative is emerging, one that's told through many media at once in a way that's nonlinear, participatory and above all, immersive.

"An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one, is forming," David Shields writes in *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto:* "What are its key components?" Shields names several: randomness, spontaneity and emotional urgency; reader/viewer participation and involvement; anthropological autobiography; a thirst for authenticity coupled with a love of artifice; "a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real."

We stand now at the intersection of lure and blur.



Read the entire article here: https://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/

"An Experience of Issue-Centered Education for Adults" by William L Dols, adapted and excerpted from *Awakening the Fire Within*

Bible stories, like all stories, are both fragile and durable at the same time. Stories are also vulnerable and resilient. Stories, biblical and otherwise are malleable. They are subject to manipulation but they are also stubborn. They are brittle and can be broken but they also have the power to regenerate and reconstitute themselves.

A story is fragile: No one hears a story objectively. Just as we cannot view a painting, read a novel, or listen to a piece of music objectively, we cannot listen to a story in a neutral way. We perceive from the only place we can be—which is where we are. Sometimes we forget the fragility of a story. It is tempting to think we can perceive the one meaning, that we can comprehend the true story and overcome its elusiveness to contain and hold what it is all about. But we cannot.

A story is durable: Given the opportunity, a story pried loose from any family prison, cultural context, or ecclesiastical bondage, can be heard anew. If we resist putting the story on a shelf as if we know what it means, we can return to it again and again. We can meet it with a new energy and a new truth each time we read or hear it. The words may be the same but we never are.

A story is vulnerable: Stories can be captured by a culture or exiled by a religion. A story can become encased or contained with another story: A Jesus parable may be explained in a way that turns it into a maxim or object lesson. A parable may be exiled when turned into an allegory in which each character or thing stands for something else. A story can be manipulated to make a point, tell a truth, or state a fact. Theology, philosophy and psychology can exile stories by using them to illustrate what has already been determined to be true.

A story can be broken: A story may be broken if only one part of the story is told or heard. In the Christian world it would be like telling the story of Jesus' birth without also telling of his crucifixion. We may break these stories in an attempt to make than manageable, understandable or acceptable.

A story is resilient and can reconstitute itself: A story can find its way home if given the chance. The story not only lives on the page and in the air, but in the soul. Stories are how we describe what is real for us. The disguises and incarnations of such truths are boundless. Basic truths—elementary ideas or elemental patterns of being human—are not. Stories in the end have their own way. If one version is exiled another will emerge. Stories are told as needed in the moment and they are heard in the ways that reflect the struggles going on within and around us.

Bibliography & Credits

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.

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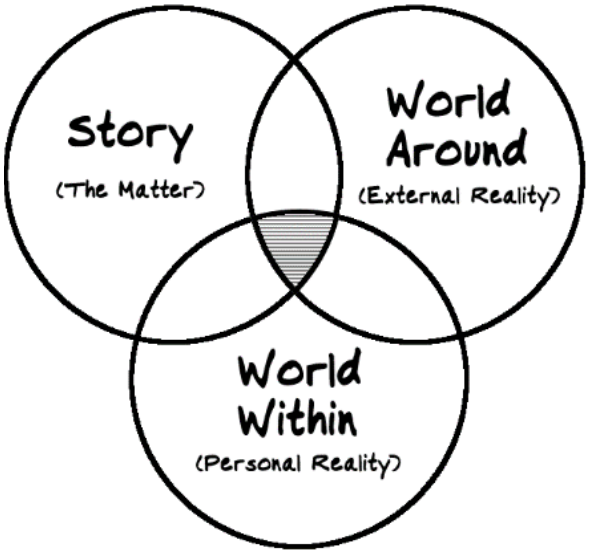
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WHAT IS READING BETWEEN THE LINES?

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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