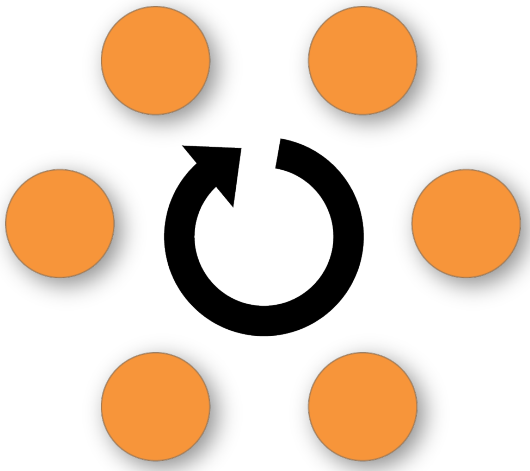
READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

Palm/Passion Sunday – Ascension

March 28 – May 16, 2021



Volume 28, Issue 3
Revised Common Lectionary

Reading Between The Lines ~ Volume 28

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

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

Volume 28.1

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

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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

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Apr 11	Acts 4:32-35
Apr 18	1 John 3:1-7
Apr 25	John 10:11-18
May 2	John 15:1-8
May 9	Acts 10:44-48
May 16	Luke 24:44-53

Volume 28.4

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May 23	John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15
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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
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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
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Sep 5	Psalm 125
Sep 12	Wisdom of Solomon 7:26—8:1
Sep 19	Mark 9:30-37

Volume 28.6

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

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

ENTERING THE STORY

As his [Mark's] story of Good Friday reports, he sees Jesus's death as an execution by the authorities because of his challenge to the domination system. The decision of the temple authorities to take action against him was made after his disruptive act in the temple. These local collaborators handed him over to imperial authority, which then crucified him on a charge that was simultaneously and indissolubly political and religious: "King of the Jews."

As such, Mark understands Jesus's death as a judgment on the authorities and the temple. The "chief priests, elders, and scribes" have killed him, just as Jesus said they would. Judgment is indicated by the fact that, as Jesus dies, darkness comes over the city and land, and the great curtain in the temple is torn in two. And a Roman centurion pronounces judgment against his own empire, which has just killed Jesus: "Truly this man—and not the emperor—is God's Son."[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. This piece of the story is filled with people who face choices of what to do, who to be. The chief priests, elders, and scribes can choose to do what? Or instead they can do what? What in their situation, lives, background, or worldview might have drawn them to act as they do? What could draw them to choose a different course of action? How might they later justify their choice? Might they regret it?

Pilate can choose to do what? Or instead he can do what? What in Pilate's situation, life, background, or worldview may have drawn him to do as he does? What could draw him to choose a different course of action? How might he later justify his choice? Might he regret it?

In his meeting with Pilate, Jesus can choose to do what? Or to instead he can do what? What in Jesus' situation, life, background, or worldview may have caused him to act as he does in Pilate's presence? How might Jesus, justify his decision to behave as he did? What might make regret it? What might urge him to act differently?

The people (or a person) in the crowd can choose to do what? Or instead they can do what? What in their situation, lives, background, or worldview may have pulled them to behave as they do? How might a member of the crowd later justify their behavior? Why might they regret it? What could draw them to behave differently?

2. How have you seen people in public life having to make decisions similar to those of the chief priests, elders, and scribes? Pilate? Jesus? The people in the crowd?

How do these people defend their decisions? What could make these people regret what they decided?

3. When have you had to make a choice or a decision that involved costs and promises similar to those that faced any one person in this story? What action were you called to take or not take? What was at stake?

For you, what promises may have encouraged you to choose that action? What risks lay in it? What may have caused you to choose a different path or decide not to act at all? What may have been the downside of choosing the other way or of not acting?

1 Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (HarperOne; Reprint edition, 2007).

4. Where within you do you find a chief priest, Pilate, Jesus, or a member of the crowd? Who is the person you most identify with in this story? How do you defend your choice? What regrets—if any—have you experienced? How did your action affect your later life or let you know what kind of person you were? At three in the morning, how are you getting on with whatever other people from this story are alive and kicking within you?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- What if we didn't know how the story ended? What if the last words of the gospel were *then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb*? What difference would that make in how we considered the events of the crucifixion? What do you know of times in your life when you have faced a situation with no guarantee of a good outcome? What did you hold on to? What carried you through?

- *In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."* What do you know of such a drama in your own life? Who are the "chief priests" and "scribes" who have observed that you are able to save, heal, deliver, even rescue others, but cannot do these things for yourself? How might it be an inner narrative in which your own "chief priests" and "scribes" within judge harshly? How might they find wanting the you who has been able to mend, repair, cure, liberate, and restore the brokenness of a friend, spouse, client, lover, son, daughter, or parishioner but cannot do the same for yourself? How do you deal with the pointed fingers and mocking you meet in the mirror on the rare occasion when you own up to having done well for others what you could not do for your own self?

- For whom or what might you now feel—or may you have felt called to give your life? Before definitively answering this question, try taking a few minutes to make a list of people, causes, ideals to or for which you might give your life, or to which you may have given it already. What could be, or what were, the costs to you or others for each item on your list? What might there be of promise? Can you name one single person, cause, or ideal for which you would willingly give your life? Or have you already done so? If so, what has that decision cost you? What has it given you of life?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From the hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation" by James Russell Lowell

Once to ev'ry man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Off'ring each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
'Twixt that darkness and that light.



Listen to the Fountainview Academy Orchestra and singers perform the hymn:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSMqesZz3tU

From *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan

We return to a common Christian understanding of Jesus's death: that it was a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world. As we reflect on the extent to which this is present in Mark, we distinguish between a broad and a more specific meaning of the word "sacrifice."

The broad meaning refers to sacrificing one's life for a cause. It is common to refer to Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Oscar Romero, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as sacrificing their fives for the causes to which they were devoted. Soldiers killed in action are often described as sacrificing their lives for their country. In this sense, one may speak of Jesus sacrificing his life for his passion, namely, for his advocacy of the kingdom of God.

The more specific meaning of sacrifice in relation to Jesus's death speaks of it as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin, a dying for the sins of the world. This understanding is absent from Mark's story of Good Friday; it is not there at all.

Indeed, this understanding may be absent from Mark's gospel as a whole. The three anticipations of Jesus's death in the central section of Mark do not say that Jesus must go to Jerusalem in order to die for the sins of the world. Rather, they refer to Jerusalem as the place of execution by the authorities. […]

Did Good Friday have to happen? As a divine necessity? No. As human inevitability? Virtually. Good Friday is the result of the collision between the passion of Jesus and the domination systems of his time.

It is important to realize that what killed Jesus was nothing unusual. We have no reason to think that the temple authorities were wicked people. Moreover, as empires go, Rome was better than most. There was nothing exceptional or abnormal about it; this is simply the way domination systems behave. So common is this dynamic that, as we suggested early in this book, it can also be called the normalcy of civilization. At a broad level of generalization, Good Friday was the result of the collision between the passion of Jesus and the normalcy of civilization.

This realization generates an additional reflection. According to Mark, Jesus did not die for the sins of the world. The language of substitutionary sacrifice for sin is absent from his story. But in an important sense, he was killed because of the sin of the world. It was the injustice of domination systems that killed him, injustice so routine that it is part of the normalcy of civilization. Though sin means more than this, it includes this. And thus Jesus was crucified because of the sin of the world.

From *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

[***Ed. Note:*** *Saint Antoine is a neighborhood in the city of Paris.]

Headlong, mad and dangerous footsteps to force their way into anybody's life, footsteps not easily made clean again if once stained red, the footsteps raging in Saint Antoine*.

Saint Antoine had been, that morning, a vast dusky mass of scarecrows heaving to and fro, with frequent gleams of light above the billowy heads, where steel blades and bayonets shone in the sun. A tremendous roar arose from the throat of Saint Antoine, and a forest of naked arms struggled in the air like shrivelled branches of trees in a winter wind: all the fingers convulsively clutching at every weapon that was thrown up from the depths below, no matter how far off.

Who gave them out, whence they last came, where they began, through what agency they crookedly quivered and jerked, scores at a time, over the heads of the crowd, like a kind of lightning, no eye in the throng could have told; but, muskets were being distributed—so were cartridges, powder and ball, bars of iron and wood, knives, axes, pikes, every weapon that distracted ingenuity could discover or devise. People who could lay hold of nothing else, set themselves with bleeding hands to force stones and bricks out of their places in walls. Every pulse and heart in Saint Antoine was on high-fever strain and at high-fever heat. Every living creature there held life as of no account, and was demented with a passionate readiness to sacrifice it.

As a whirlpool of boiling waters has a centre point, so, all this raging circled around Defarge's wine-shop, and every human drop in the caldron had a tendency to be sucked towards the vortex where Defarge himself, already begrimed with gunpowder and sweat, issued orders, issued arms, thrust this man back, dragged this man forward, disarmed one to arm another, laboured and strove in the thickest of the uproar.

"Keep near to me, Jacques Three," cried Defarge; "and do you, Jacques One and Two, separate and put yourselves at the head of as many of these patriots as you can. Where is my wife?"

"Eh, well! Here you see me!" said madame, composed as ever, but not knitting to-day. Madame's resolute right hand was occupied with an axe, in place of the usual softer implements, and in her girdle were a pistol and a cruel knife.

"Where do you go, my wife?"

"I go," said madame, "with you at present. You shall see me at the head of the women, by-and-by."

"Come then!" cried Defarge, in a resounding voice. "Patriots and friends, we are ready! The Bastille!"

With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city to that point. Alarm-bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its new beach, the attack began.

From *Snobs* by Julian Fellowes

When she opened her eyes she knew at once that this was the last morning in her life when she would awake as Edith Lavery. Henceforth, that girl would have gone away and whatever might happen in the future she would not be coming back. Edith attempted to question herself as to what exactly she was feeling. Just as when you are forced into a decision it is often the mouthing of one choice that makes you realise you really want the other, so she wondered if her stomach would tell her that she was making a ghastly mistake simply because this was the day when the whole thing became irrevocable. But her stomach did not wish to play the part of a goat's entrails at Delphi and declined to give an opinion. She felt neither elated nor depressed—simply that there was a lot to do. There was a faint knock on her door and her mother came in carrying a cup of tea.

It is no exaggeration to say that Stella Lavery was so happy on this morning she really felt she might burst, that her heart might stop, exhausted by pumping the feverish blood of satisfied ambition. It is not true to say that she would have gladly sacrificed her daughter to a rich marquess's heir if she had thoroughly disliked him, simply that unless he had attacked her with a knife it was not physically possible that she could dislike him. Actually I don't think she had given Charles qua Charles much thought. He was pleasant, well-mannered, not bad-looking. That, to coin a phrase, was all she knew and all she needed to know. That, and the fact that after tomorrow her daughter would be the Countess Broughton. […]

'Morning, Mummy.' Edith was by this time used to the dream-reverie in which her mother seemed to exist. [...] It was one of those moments when she was acutely aware of every movement of her body, even of the muscles of her face. Each word seemed to come from some other source than her own brain. She felt drugged, but in a bright, unsleepy way. No, not drugged, dazed—or even hypnotized. Am I hypnotized? she thought. Have I been mesmerised by all those unquestioned values I have sucked down since I was three? Have I lost myself in other people's ambitions? But then she thought of Charles, who was a nice man who loved her and of whom, by this time, she really was very fond, and, of course, she thought of Broughton and of Feltham, the family's other estate in Norfolk and most of all she thought of the flat in which she was now standing and the job in the estate agent's in Milner Street and the opportunities the one life offered and the exhausted, negligible opportunities of the other, and so thinking she threw back her head and strode towards the bathroom.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Isaiah 25:6-9
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Mark 16:1-18

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!
Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."
The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.
There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."
I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.
The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.
Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.
This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

ENTERING THE STORY

The settings inferred from the types [of Psalms] include occasions that focus on the entire community and those that focus on the life and needs of individuals in the community. Psalms were written for the annual national festivals and their celebration of the Lord's providence in the world and Israel's destiny. The psalms would be used for processions, entrance ceremonies, pilgrimage songs, and liturgical agenda as well as for general praise. They were used also in times of disaster and danger that affected the entire community and brought it together for lament and appeal to God for help. The occasions that focused on the individual included the presentation of appeals to God for help in various kinds of predicaments, ceremonies of thanksgiving for relief from trouble, and confessions of trust and commitment.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. The Psalmist tells of how builders have rejected a stone that has now become the chief cornerstone. What might they be building? Reasons this particular stone is rejected might be? How might the builders feel about rejecting this stone as they build? How might they feel when they discover that the stone they have rejected has become the chief cornerstone? What is a cornerstone? What is a chief cornerstone?

Seeing this surprising turn of events, one builder might say to another:

If the builders themselves have rejected this stone, how do you suppose it has become the chief cornerstone?

2. As you watch the news or read your daily newspaper, scroll through social media, look around your office, stand in line at the convenience store, wait stalled in your daily commute, or sit in your pew, who do you think, in the world at large and the world around you was once rejected by the builders but became—or is becoming—the chief cornerstone of your city, nation, world, church, or family? Name such a person.

3. The Psalmist tells us that *This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.* The following verse is: *This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.* Consider the possibility that what the builders are building is a day—perhaps it's a special day, or maybe it's just any day when the sun comes up. Assuming you

1 James Luther Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation* (John Knox Press, 1994).

are one of the builders of the new day, what are some of the stones you would reject as part of your next twenty-four hours? Consider all the possible stones of the day: the weather; the newspaper headlines; the people in your family, office, classroom, neighborhood, club or gym; the numbers on Wall Street or on your bathroom scale; your health; a task, job or chore awaiting you; or simply something you keep putting off saying or doing, starting or stopping. In the next day of your life, what is the stone you, as the builder, are certain you need to reject? Name it.

How do you go about the rejection? What do you do to make sure that it is not included in the building of this new day? How can you be absolutely certain it does not become part of the cornerstone? Even the chief cornerstone?

What do you know of having made such a decision about the next day in your life only to find, as the hours pass, that the stone you have rejected is not only part of the day being built but that it is the chief cornerstone? What did you think, and how did you feel? What did you do? What did you say to yourself? What was the cost of your rejected stone turning out to be the cornerstone of that day? What did it require or demand of you? How did it ruin, bruise, damage or mess up that day? What was the promise of your rejected stone turning out to be the chief cornerstone of your day? As central to the ongoing day, what was added that turned out to be a bonus, revelation or new beginning?

4. Make a list of the stones you are that you daily reject as you build your day. These could include fears, longings, hopes, disappointments, guilt or anxieties. How might one of these rejected stones be waiting to become the chief cornerstone that the Lord might prize as you build your new day—a day in your life that, even in your eyes, might be marvelous?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- In EXPLORING FURTHER James Luther Mays writes that the Psalms are not historical record as such, and yet, they do have history as religious poetry belonging to the Hebrew community. He finds such poetry to be a means "to identify and continue the faith of that community," adding that these writings address the particularity of the Hebrew people's "predicaments and possibilities" at the time. In what way or ways do you find these verses to be careful observations of the Hebrew community? The word "religion," from the Latin religio, denotes a careful and scrupulous observation of what Rudolph Otto refers to as the "numinous." How might you read this religious poetry within the "predicaments and possibilities" of your own 21st-century life? How might this poetry speak to your life today with regard to your own personal observations of the "numinous"? Having read and worked through the foregoing EXPLORING THE STORY regarding these particular verses in Psalm 118, are you left with any sense of a larger community relative to you and the Hebrew community of faith?

- What event or events in Israel's story might the author be referring to in *The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation? In The right hand of the LORD does valiantly*? *The LORD is my strength and my might. The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death*. When have you known such an escape? What was the severe punishment you suffered? Who or what, outside you or within you, punished you? How did it come about that during or after the punishment you were not given over to death? What reason could you have to sing, "*O give thanks to the LORD...for his steadfast love endures forever*"?

- "*Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.*" Gates are a powerful symbol of the possibility of entering into a new reality. What is the new possibility represented by gates of righteousness? Who can open them? What is required in order to enter? What must be left behind?

Where is there a gate before you, inviting you to enter? If you were to pass through the gate and look back at where you are now, what might change in your perspective?

- "*This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*" How might your day unfold if this verse, as an affirmation, was said at the beginning of the day? It is worth exploring. For the next month or so, during your quiet time or as soon as you arise, repeat this verse as affirmation. Consciously take a deep breath as you repeat the affirmation. Keep a "Gratitude List" and add to it each day. Pay attention, by writing in a journal, to how it feels for you to rejoice and how it feels to be glad. What are you attracting? What are you discovering about yourself? What are you discovering about the Lord? What has changed or stayed the same in your life?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From "The History of the Psalms" in *Psalms: Interpretation* by James Luther Mays

Part of the answer to the question, What is a psalm? lies in the history of the composition, transmission, and collection of the psalms as a book. We must admit right off that precious little is known for certain about the who, when, and why of the composer of particular psalms. Psalms are notoriously difficult to date and at best can be placed in broad eras, like the monarchy or the postexilic period. The use of the psalms down through the ages as Scripture and liturgy shows that we do not have to depend on precise answers to historical questions.

On the other hand, the psalms were in fact written by somebody in Hebrew in circumstances and for purposes that belonged to the history of Israel. They are, in the first instance, the religious poetry of a particular community. They come to us as tradition. They are given to us as a means of standing in identity and continuity with the faith of that community. If we read and use them so as to dissolve them completely into our sensibilities and consciousness, they become merely empty vessels of language that we fill with our own meanings. Their value as tradition is lost. They do not lead us and convert us to think and pray and praise as they do. […]

In kind, the psalms are not history, nor are they directly about history, but they have a history. Attention to what we can reliably infer about their composition and preservation may save us from wrong historical thinking about them and uncover ways of understanding them that are truer to their character and helpful in their use as Scripture and liturgy.

From "Her Own Death Foretold" as appeared in *The Washington Post* translated by Arch Tait

> [***Ed. Note:*** In 2006, Russian journalist, writer and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in the elevator of her apartment in central Moscow. She was known for her opposition to the Chechen conflict and for criticism of Vladimir Putin. She authored several books about the Chechen wars, as well as Putin's Russia, and received numerous international awards for her work. Her murder, believed to be a contract killing, sparked a strong international reaction. Three Chechens were arrested for the murder, but were acquitted. The verdict was overturned by the Supreme Court of Russia and new trials were held. In total, six people were convicted of charges related to her death. (Source: Wikipedia: Assassination of Anna Politkovskaya) She wrote the piece below (excerpted from an essay in the book *Another Sky*) two months before her assassination. It was published by *The Washington Post* on the event of her death before the book was actually published.]

I am a pariah.

That is the result of my journalism throughout the years of the Second Chechen War, and of publishing books abroad about life in Russia and the Chechen War. In Moscow, I am not invited to press conferences or gatherings

that Kremlin officials might attend, in case the organizers are suspected of harboring sympathies toward me. Despite this, all the top officials talk to me, at my request, when I am writing articles or conducting investigations—but only in secret, where they can't be observed, in the open air, in squares, in secret houses that we approach by different routes, like spies.[…]

Some time ago, Vladislav Surkov, Putin's deputy chief of staff, explained that there were people who were enemies but whom you could talk sense into, and there were incorrigible enemies who simply needed to be "cleansed" from the political arena. So they are trying to cleanse it of me and others like me.[…]

If a journalist is "not on our side," however, he or she will be deemed a supporter of the European democracies, of European values, and automatically become a pariah. That is the fate of all who oppose our "sovereign democracy," our "traditional Russian democracy." (What on Earth that is supposed to be, nobody knows; but they swear allegiance to it nevertheless:

"We are for sovereign democracy!") I am not really a political animal. I have never joined any party and would consider it a mistake for a journalist, in Russia at least, to do so. I have never felt the urge to stand for the Duma, although there were years when I was invited to.

So what is the crime that has earned me this label of not being "one of us"? I have merely reported what I have witnessed, no more than that. […]

The Kremlin responds by trying to block my access to information, its ideologists supposing that this is the best way to make my writing ineffectual. It is impossible, however, to stop someone fanatically dedicated to this profession of reporting the world around us. My life can be difficult; more often, humiliating. I am not, after all, that young at 47 to keep encountering rejection and having my own pariah status rubbed in my face. But I can live with it.

I will not go into the other joys of the path I have chosen, the poisoning, the arrests, the threats in letters and over the Internet, the telephoned death threats, the weekly summons to the prosecutor general's office to sign statements about practically every article I write (the first question being, "How and where did you obtain this information?"). Of course I don't like the constant derisive articles about me that appear in other newspapers and on Internet sites presenting me as the madwoman of Moscow. I find it disgusting to live this way. I would like a bit more understanding.

The main thing, however, is to get on with my job, to describe the life I see, to receive visitors every day in our editorial office who have nowhere else to bring their troubles, because the Kremlin finds their stories off-message, so that the only place they can be aired is in our newspaper, Novaya Gazeta.

From *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story* by Timothy B. Tyson

There it should stay, many people seem to think—why dredge this stuff up? Why linger on the past, which we cannot change? We must move toward a brighter future and leave all that horror behind. It's true that we must make a new world. But we can't make it out of whole cloth. We have to weave the future from the fabric of the past, from the patterns of aspiration and belonging—and broken dreams and anguished rejection—that have made us. What the advocates of our dangerous and deepening social amnesia don't understand is how deeply the past holds the future in its grip—even, and perhaps especially, when it remains unacknowledged. We are runaway slaves from our own past, and only by turning to face the hounds can we find our freedom beyond them.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 133
1 John 1:—2:2
John 20:19-31

> *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

ENTERING THE STORY

Luke paints a positive picture of the early community. But it is not a romanticized, idealized portrait. These are real people who are pulled in different directions by the same real tendencies which tug at us. These are real congregations where, on any Sunday, one is apt to meet both faithfulness and foolishness seated beside one another on the third pew from the left. It is important that we follow Luke's realism in our contemporary evaluations of the church. These are real people struggling to be faithful in a world which makes faithfulness problematic. There will be disappointments, unpleasantness, disputes, and some who put their hand to the plow will look back.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.* What might it be like for them to be *of one heart and soul*? What do you suppose it is like for them to live in a community where no one claims any possessions and everything is held in common? How do you suppose being *of one heart and soul* is possible because of the absence of private ownership and everything held in common?

> *There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.* From what you know of first century times who do you imagine are the “needy”? How do you suppose the many who own land or houses feel about selling them, laying the proceeds at the feet of the apostles and this being distributed to each as they have need? What might it be like to be a needy one?

In between these two texts is this single line: *With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* What do you suppose is the *testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus* being described here? What might the words of such testimony sound like? What might the being and acting look like? How might “resurrection” be related to this kind of community of heart and soul and sharing of possessions with the needy? What might giving such testimony with great power look like? What do you suppose they experienced as *great grace* being upon them?

The text continues (though the lectionary does not) with stories about Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira. The accounts are of how the group who believed lived in their community. **Acts 4:36-37:** “They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.” What more do you learn about this early community of Jesus followers in the account of Barnabas?

The story continues with **Acts 5:1-12:** “But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid

1 William Willimon, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, 1988).

it at the apostles' feet. "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things. Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico."

What does the story of Ananias and Sapphira suggest about life in that group of believers who were of one heart and soul? What do these stories suggest about both the cost and the promise of living in such a community?

2. Where today do you find those who own land or houses selling them and then laying the proceeds at the feet of "apostles"? Who are the "apostles" of today? Where are these bounties being distributed to each as they have need? Who are the needy ones? What might it be like to be a needy one today?

3. Make a list of your possessions, things you own, even lands and houses:

How does your ownership of these things contribute to or detract from a sense of "one heart and soul" with those who make up your religious, work or home community? When you have chosen to sell any of your possessions and given the money to those in need how did it change your feelings about your community and even yourself?

Your holding onto or giving away of your possessions is what kind of testimony by you to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus? What power and grace have you ever experienced when you gave up some degree of private ownership and let your treasure be given to others in need?

What do you know of a Barnabas within you? Of an Ananias and Sapphira? If these three of your soul characters were to meet, what do you imagine they would have to say to one another?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Not only does the lectionary omit the story of Ananias and Sapphira on this Sunday, (see EXPLORING THE STORY) it does not include this story anywhere among the readings appointed for any Sunday during the three year cycle. What is there about this story that might lead to a decision to exclude it from the lectionary? What might the story be suggesting about God? About life in the Christian community? About ownership and property? About intention and integrity? How do you react to this story? Are you glad it was left out? Or do you think it should be included? Where do you find yourself in the story?

- Who in your life has given up something precious and laid the proceeds at your feet? What security, hopes, and dreams might he or she have given up in order to participate in the relationship or community of which you serve as an apostle? What are your responsibilities as a leader for now taking care of that gift? How do you manage these proceeds? What are your standards for distributing to each according to their needs? Are there needs you feel you cannot fulfill? What do you do when you believe someone is withholding something he or she has promised? What have you sold or given up, laying the proceeds at the feet of another? Describe the outcome. Has your "apostle" acted responsibly, met your needs adequately? If not, why? Have you ever withheld some portion of yourself from your relationship? If so, why? What happened to the heart and soul of your relationship when that withholding was discovered? What inner part of you serves as "apostle," banker of your interior world? Which parts of you sell everything, trusting the proceeds to the wisdom of this "elder"? How are the needs of your peopled inner world each met? Which parts of you withhold some portion of themselves from the greater good? Why? What might they fear will happen if they give it all away? How has their withholding impacted the heart and soul of your inner world?

- According to scholars Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Brettler, authors of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2011), "Heart and soul are often paired to represent completeness of one's obedience to God (Deut: 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 26:16)." Wikipedia, The Free Online Dictionary, Ask.com and other sources report that completeness means, "an object is complete if nothing needs to be added to it. Having all necessary or normal parts, components, or steps." Explore this relationship through a lens of what "completeness" of one's obedience to God might be, not be, and also require. When one lives in community, is it expected that only the good parts of one's heart and soul are shared with all or is something else required privately and/or publicly? Moreover why, for you, might the mind not be included in the description of those believers who were of one heart and soul?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* by William Willimon

We are not surprised to hear Luke claim that "the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (4:32) because we are accustomed to hearing such pious, often unrealistic claims made about Christian congregations, even within our own day. Preachers sometimes tend toward rosy exaggeration. But when Luke claims that "no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but that they had everything in common" (4:32), our ears perk up. How can this be? Karl Marx claimed that nearly every human attitude and action could be traced to economic sources. Luke was not a Marxist, but he was enough of a realist to know that there is a good chance that where our possessions are our hearts will be also. A surprisingly large amount of the Book of Acts deals with economic issues within the community. Much of Luke's Gospel also deals with matters of money. Consider the parables of the Debtors (Luke 7:41-43), the Good Samaritan (10:29-37), the Rich Fool (12:16-21), the Unjust Steward (16:1-8), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), and the parable of the Pounds (19:11-27)—all but one of these parables are unique to Luke. Wealth is not, for Luke, a sign of divine approval. It is a danger. The rich young man could not part with his money (Luke 18:18-23), and another rich man was declared "thou fool" because of his silly reliance on well-filled barns (Luke 12:15-21).

"Why are we always talking about money in the church?" one of my church's officers asked complainingly. "All we do is talk about money, giving, and the budget. I wish we could get beyond this and talk about the spiritual things that are really important for a church."

His was an understandable but misguided wish for the church. In responding to him I noted that we had discussed all sorts of issues in church board meetings, but none of the issues under discussion were as volatile

and potentially divisive as our congregational arguments about money. At least in this sense Marx was right: There is a kind of economic determinism at work in our lives. Money makes the world go around.

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

From "This is what you shall do" by Walt Whitman from *Leaves of Grass*

This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

From "Another Night in the Ruins" by Galway Kinnell from *Three Books*

How many nights must it take
one such as me to learn
that we aren't, after all, made
from that bird that flies out of its ashes,
that for us
as we go up in flames, our one work
is
to open ourselves, to be
the flames?



Read the entire poem here:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42677/another-night-in-the-ruins

From "Jesus at Occupy Wall Street: I feel like I've been here before" by Lisa Miller at *TheWashingtonPost.com*

[***Ed. Note:*** Occupy Wall Street was a protest movement against economic inequality that began in Zuccotti

Park, located in New York City's Wall Street financial district, in September 2011. It gave rise to the wider Occupy movement in the United States and other countries. The Occupy movement is an international progressive socio-political movement that expresses opposition to social and economic inequality and to the lack of "real democracy" around the world. It aims primarily to advance social and economic justice and new forms of democracy and continues today.]

What would Jesus think of Occupy Wall Street?" I asked myself […] as I wandered the makeshift, blue-tarp village in Manhattan's Zuccotti Park. Born with little means into a first-century world, the historical Jesus might feel right at home with the very aspects of the occupation that so many 21st-century observers consider gross: the tents, the damp sleeping bags, the communal kitchen. Jesus would have sympathy, I think, with the campers' efforts to keep a small space sanitary in the absence of modern plumbing.

It was about 9 in the morning, and some of the park's inhabitants were just waking up. Scruffy, tattooed, abundantly bearded, these protesters looked not at all like the bright, shiny vanguard of a new, idealistic American left. What would Jesus think of the occupiers, who have been derided by their opponents as a ragtag group of tax evaders, interested only in sex, drugs and rock and roll?


Read more here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/jesus-at-occupy-wall-street/2011/10/19/gIQAWzdB0L_story.html

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
Luke 24:36b-48

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

[8-24 Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.]

ENTERING THE STORY

The assurance of answered prayer in 1 John is not necessarily based on one's merit […]. Underlying much of the theology of the epistle is the application of the promises of the new covenant to the Johannine community. That covenant relationship cannot be presumed upon—as the elder may feel his opponents were doing by claiming that their actions no longer mattered (e.g., iniquity, 3:4; closing one's heart to a needy brother, 3:17). The covenant people will receive whatever they ask because they maintain their covenant relationship: they keep his commandments (see the discussion of 2:3-5) and do what is pleasing before him (3:22b; see John 8:29). The elder will return to this theme in 5:14-15, where prayer is again related to the confidence of the faithful.[1]

Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has written of several verses in this text: "the epistolary author is singularly inept in constructing clear sentences, but in these verses he is at his worst." The challenge in this week's exploration is to hold onto one of the many threads in the rich tapestry and let it lead us where it will.

1 Alan R. Culpepper, *Knox Preaching Guides: 1 John 1-24* (John Knox Press, 1985), p.73.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. John writes: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.* What does it mean to be a child? One of a group of children? The relationship of children to their father is what?

In what ways are you aware of being a child of your earthly father-parent? What can you identify as ways in which genes and early childhood have fashioned you, who, for good or ill, is "a chip off the old block"?

What are some ways in which you choose to hold onto and reflect attitudes and sympathies of your father? What are some of the ways you have rejected his influence and work to be your own person rather than a copy of him?

What might it imply to be one of the children of God? Not simply to be called children of God but to be what you are as a child of God?

What is the difference between being called children of God and being what we are as children of God?

What is being said here about those who are not children of God? The author refers to those others as children of the world. What might he have in mind when he speaks of offspring of the kosmos? What might be the difference between the two groups? In terms of what you read in this epistle and your experience what are some qualities or attributes of each group? Make two lists:

CHILDREN OF GOD	CHILDREN OF THE WORLD

2. Consider the relationship between the children of God and the children of the world. As you look around the world at large or around your world at work, church or in your neighborhood, how would you describe this relationship?

John describes it this way: *Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.* Why might the world (kosmos) hate the children of God? "Hate" is the same troublesome word from the Jesus sayings in Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13, miseo, that can be translated as hate, despise, disregard, be indifferent to. What might this hatred look like today? Where do you see this hatred of the world for those who are children of God? What is the reason for the hatred? Why is there despising?

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? *Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* Why might this kind of behavior make the world hate the children of God? Where is this happening in your world?

3. What is your experience of being one of the children of God? How have you ever been hated for loving in truth and action? How do you love in word and speech and manage to avoid being hated by the world?

In what sense are you both one of the children of God and one of the children of the world? What do you know of a tension between the two experienced in your heart and soul as you seek to be on your journey?

What are some of the choices that put these two children of different fathers at odds with one another within you? How do you decide which one to listen to?

What is the cost and the promise of those choices dictated by the children of the world within you? What is the cost and promise of those choices dictated by the children of God within you? How do you manage to stay conscious and be faithful in the relationship between them?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- The exploration of this text uses God the Father in 1 John as the guiding image. An alternative is to substitute Mother in the opening questions and work with the implications of relationship between daughter-mother or even son-mother.

- What do you understand John's sense of hope to be? John's hope is when and where? Rooted in what? From his words and deeds, what do you suppose hope was for Jesus? When, where and how for Jesus? Where and how does hope touch your life?

- In 2003, Tom Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza, committed $200 million for a new Catholic university in Florida. He said "For 25 years, I've felt the need for a school with more spirituality. The reason God created us was to earn heaven, so we could be with him, and my goal is to help more people get to heaven. You can't follow the rules of God unless you know what they are and why they are." How might John react to such an idea? What might be Jesus' response? What is yours?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"A state of mind, not a state of the world…and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizon. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out" —*Vaclav Havel*

From "Assurances to Those Who Know God's Love" by Alan Culpepper in *Knox Preaching Guides*

These verses are likely to pose theological problems for many contemporary Christians. Is righteousness before God really possible? Are not promises of answered prayer hollow? Are they tied to such a high demand—keeping his commands—that we are incapable of attaining them? For just this reason, however, attention should be focused on this section of 1 John. God is greater than both our efforts to be righteous and our sensitive Western consciences, and his greatness is shown in his goodness toward us. Our righteousness, on the other hand, does not depend on our own efforts or on our feelings about ourselves. It comes from the Spirit which God has given us.

From *Walking in the Truth: Perseverers and Deserters* by Gerard S. Sloyan

A few lines from the fifth century BCE Malachi should be noted. God as the Father-Creator of sons and daughters began to appear in postexilic writings such as Deuteronomy 32:6 and Isaiah 43:6; 63:16, peaking perhaps in the anguished cry: 'Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?' (Malachi 2:10). More tender still is the earlier Hosean picture of God as a solicitous parent. It describes Israel as a beloved child, a son called out of Egypt. It was God who

taught Ephraim to walk, healed it and led it, then took this people up into embrace 'like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them' (Hosea 11:1, 3- 4). This is the biblical tenderness that prepares God's chosen in Christ to be called—like all Israel—to be children of God now and unspeakably closer in a time to come.

From *Keeping Faith to Reconcile Killing* by Christopher Hedges in *The New York Times*

> [***Ed. Note:*** After graduating from Virginia Theological Seminary, Bishop George E. Packard served first as a parish priest and then as an Army chaplain. In 1999 he was elected Fifth Bishop Suffragan for the Armed Services, Healthcare and Prison Ministries and served for many years in that capacity. In his retirement he became an activist. In 2011 Bishop Packard attempted to negotiate the movement of the Occupy Wall Street protesters to Duarte Park a temporary park on land owned by Trinity Church. The development had stalled due to the financial crisis of 2008. Bishop Packard used a ladder to scale a fence, along with other Occupy members, and was arrested by New York City Police Department officers. See photo link below]

Bishop George E. Packard has a burden. He carries it with him. There are times in his sleep when it overpowers him and wakes him in agitation. There are days when stress mounts. And in the ticking of the clock, the race toward oblivion that is the fate of all human beings, he seeks atonement in everything he does as a husband, a father and an Episcopal priest.

When he was in his 20's, before he went to seminary and became ordained, Bishop Packard was an Army lieutenant who led a platoon in Vietnam that set up ambushes. He and his men killed in each encounter anywhere from 12 to 15 North Vietnamese, Vietcong and perhaps Chinese mercenaries. They did it clinically and efficiently and then stacked up the bodies. He said he stopped counting how many men, and women, that he killed. "But with about 30 ambushes and firefights you can do the math," he said.

He received the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars for valor. But he returned home disillusioned, "hating the war." He said he joined the seminary in 1971, not so sure that he wanted to be a priest, but "to study the ethical and moral issues that confronted me in Vietnam." It was in seminary that he found the solace and reassurance that he needed.

"I violated the commandment, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill,'" he said. "Nothing will be gained by intellectualizing this. I killed other people. I took lives. It was exactly that. I became in Vietnam a professional killer. I was proud of what I could do. […]

Bishop Packard is not a pacifist. He believes that there are times when war is inevitable, forced upon a nation for survival, or justifiable to stop unjust acts such as the genocide in Rwanda. He said he had spent much of his life since Vietnam reading and studying theories about Just War, searching out the moral maps that permit the use of violence. […]

The commandment, even if broken for a good reason, scars all who must violate it, he said. As an Army chaplain, he has the awful understanding that comes from having been in combat, an understanding that allows him to help shoulder a soldier's burden. He knows the cost. And he finds his greatest solace in faith.
"When my life is all over," he said, "when in those last 30 seconds that I am fighting for breath in some room, I will make a plea to God. I will say that I did the best I could in the oddities life gave me. I will ask to be forgiven."



View a photograph of then retired Bishop George Packard arrested with other Occupy Wall Street protestors in 2011: https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/retired-episcopal-bishop-george-e-packard-along-with-occupy-news-photo/136041932

From *Plays, Prose Writing and Poems* by Oscar Wilde

And when the darkness came over the earth, Joseph of Arimathia, having lighted a torch of pine-wood, passed down from the hill into the valley. For he had business in his own home.

And kneeling on the flint stones of the Valley of Desolation he saw a young man who was naked and weeping. His hair was the colour of honey, and his body was as a white flower; but he had wounded his body with thorns, and on his hair he had set ashes as a crown.

And he who had great possessions said to the young man who was naked: "I do not wonder that your sorrow is great, for surely he was a great man."

And the young man answered: "It is not for him that I am weeping but for myself. I, too, have changed water into wine, and I have healed the leper and given sight to the blind. I have walked upon the waters, and from the dwellers in the tombs I have cast out devils. I have fed the hungry in the desert where there was no food, and I have raised the dead from their narrow houses; and at my bidding, and before a great multitude of people, a barren fig tree withered away. All things that this man has done I have done also. And yet they have not crucified me."

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B

Alternative readings:

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

ENTERING THE STORY

Recall that chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are not part of the original texts but were introduced in the Middle Ages. Today's passage is taken from a sequence in John's gospel which follows the healing of a blind man in what is now chapter 9 and is, in part, a response to the Pharisees: Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see,' your sin remains. [John 9:40-41]

Jesus' response includes several references to sheep and the shepherd. In responding to the Pharisees, John's Jesus says just before today's reading: "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. [10:1-10]

Keep this context in mind as you explore the text.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *"I am the good shepherd."* How does Jesus describe a good shepherd? In contrast to whom? What would you describe as the qualities of the good shepherd?

How does Jesus describe a hired hand? What are the characteristics of a hired hand? Who hires a hired hand? What relationship does the hirer have to the sheep? What is the advantage of hiring on a hired hand? What drawbacks does it involve?

What are the qualities of a wolf? What does a wolf do to the sheep? What choices might a hired hand have in facing a wolf?

How might a hired hand explain to the hirer why he ran away when he saw the wolf coming?

For Jesus' audience, who or what might be a wolf? Who or what might be a hired hand?

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." What might those around him make of Jesus' words? Who might these other sheep be? Why might Jesus be obligated to bring them also? What do all the sheep have in common?

"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." Why does the Father love Jesus, according to John? How might someone lay down their life? What is it to have someone take it from them?

"I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." The word here translated as "power" is the same word in Greek that elsewhere is translated "authority." It can also mean "freedom of choice," "capability," or "ruling power."

What difference, if any, do you see between these possible translations? What more do you know about what Jesus is saying?

Immediately following today's story in **John 10:19** the Gospel writer observes: "Again the Jews were divided because of these words." How might what Jesus has said divide his audience? Who is divided against whom?

2. Where today in the world at large, or closer in around you do you see examples of people who act like the "hired hands" described here? What is the responsibility they have been given for other people, for institutions, for the earth itself? What threat(s) to that responsibility have arisen? How have they responded to the threat? What might they have to risk in order to stand up to the threat? In what ways have they abandoned their trust?

What do you know of people who prove themselves to be "good shepherds" of what has been entrusted to them? How do they "lay down their lives" to protect their trust? What choice do they have in whether to "lay down their life"? How do people respond to them?

In the news, on TV, online, or as you walk down the streets of your neighborhood, where do you see people challenging leaders about whether they are "good shepherds" or "hired hands"? What do they expect of these leaders? What do the leaders expect of themselves?

3. Where in your inmost depths do you find a "good shepherd"? What is in your care? How do you tend to it? What have you been willing to risk for its sake?

Where is there a "hired hand" at work within? What has been placed in your care? What threats have moved you to relinquish that care? How do you explain why you have "run away"?

Take a little while to allow your "good shepherd" and your "hired hand" to talk to one another. What might they say to each other? How might they challenge each other? You might want to write an imaginary dialogue between the two in your journal.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Consider that in your soul or psyche is a "sheep" and "wolf" part. What do you hear yourself saying or see yourself doing that tells you that such characters are alive and well within you? Wonder about how at times your inner sheep—innocent and vulnerable—are at the mercy of your inner wolf—about occasions when your inner

hired hand is careless and unconcerned about those more fragile, insecure and frail parts of yourself. And a good shepherd charged with watching out for, guarding, defending, standing up for yourself. Think about a time recently when one or more of these characters has been obviously present in your dreams, fantasy or meditation. Invite the others into a dialogue and discussion.

- Make a list of all the sheep—loved ones, responsibilities, institutions, ideas, dreams— you are charged with shepherding. Which of these sheep truly belong to your flock? Which have been hired into your hand by others? Who are the masters that assign these foreign sheep into your care? Why do they need or want your help? What is the pay they offer in exchange? What branding or other demarcation enables you to separate your sheep from theirs? When the wolves come at night, as they always do, which sheep do you sacrifice? For which sheep are you willing to lay down your own life? What strategies, if any, do you use to make that determination? When morning finally arrives after those long, dark nights spent on guard against the wolves, and you begin counting the remaining members of your flock, are you surprised by what has survived? Do you find yourself happy and grateful that you've been able to keep the sheep that are dearest to your heart? Or do you find yourself in despair over the terrible loss—grief-stricken, bitter, resentful, and woefully underpaid?

EXPLORING FURTHER

In my two books about Jesus of Nazareth, I have written about the word "authority" and the questions it raises as to how one might be and become the author of one's life. In this passage, the word "power" is a synonym for "authority." As I ponder both words, I wonder where and when in my life did I find myself not only claiming such power but also using it, consciously, to script my story.

What comes to mind is the first time I can remember standing up to my father. He was a strong, powerful man who was verbally abusive. Daily, he would find excuses to rage and spew vindictive and venomous statements at his wife and three daughters. One night during an oppressive tirade aimed at "beating me up," I realized that every time he did this my heart and soul felt as though they were dying. I could feel him aggressively cutting into my body, mind and spirit. Existentially, I would feel dead long after he stopped. I imagined this time would be no different, and I silently prayed for a way to stop the intractable pain. Quite suddenly, I heard a new voice within me and I could feel it coming alive. It was different, powerful, and commanding, and so I trusted it to shepherd me wherever I needed to go to do whatever I needed to do. Moments later, I stopped cowering, stood up straight and began to speak non-anxiously and with authority out loud. Blindsided by my posture, what I said and how I said it, my father backed away—but not before punching a hole in the wall. —*Caren Goldman*

From *Provoking the Gospel of John: A Storyteller's Commentary, Years A, B & C* by Richard Swanson

By the time John's story was told in the form we have it, the First Jewish Revolt against Rome had failed. By the time John's story found its audience, the last rebels holding out at Masada had killed themselves rather than submit to Roman execution. According to Josephus's account, over nine hundred of the last defenders of the fortress Masada, Sicarii, all of them, drew lots and killed each other, men, women, and children, as the Romans finally breached the wall and entered the fortress. To be sure, such death is surely preferable to death by torture. But these deaths are remembered as heroic refusals to submit.

Interpreters will do well, however, to remember also that the Sicarii are recorded in Josephus's account as having made war on both the Romans and on Jewish groups that they judged to be insufficiently radical in their opposition to Rome. According to a story told in the Talmud, it was the Sicarii who destroyed the food stored in Jerusalem in an effort to galvanize resistance against the Roman siege. The result was different: without

adequate food, the city descended into famine and the horrors associated with siege warfare. Josephus tells stories of cannibalism.

Audiences will have remembered these extremists as well when they heard Jesus' words about laying down his own life.

Play the scene interwoven with martyr stories from 4 Maccabees. Listen for the heroic echoes. Play this scene also interwoven with stories of other martyrs in other centuries and circumstances, listening for the echoes. Now play the scene with stories of the Sicarii, the dagger-carrying assassins who mingled in crowds and randomly killed Jews to plant terror in the populace and to punish accommodation to Roman ways.

This will complicate Good Shepherd Sunday a little.

From the *Fourth Book of Maccabees* (RSV)

For when the tyrant [Antiochus Epiphanes] was conspicuously defeated in his first attempt, being unable to compel an aged man to eat defiling foods, then in violent rage he commanded that others of the Hebrew captives be brought, and that any who ate defiling food should be freed after eating, but if any were to refuse, these should be tortured even more cruelly.

When the tyrant had given these orders, seven brothers*—handsome, modest, noble, and accomplished in every way—were brought before him along with their aged mother. When the tyrant saw them, grouped about their mother as if in a chorus, he was pleased with them. And struck by their appearance and nobility, he smiled at them, and summoned them nearer and said, "Young men, I admire each and every one of you in a kindly manner, and greatly respect the beauty and the number of such brothers. Not only do I advise you not to display the same madness as that of the old man who has just been tortured, but I also exhort you to yield to me and enjoy my friendship. Just as I am able to punish those who disobey my orders, so I can be a benefactor to those who obey me. Trust me, then, and you will have positions of authority in my government if you will renounce the ancestral tradition of your national life. And enjoy your youth by adopting the Greek way of life and by changing your manner of living. But if by disobedience you rouse my anger, you will compel me to destroy each and every one of you with dreadful punishments through tortures. Therefore take pity on yourselves. Even I, your enemy, have compassion for your youth and handsome appearance. Will you not consider this, that if you disobey, nothing remains for you but to die on the rack?"

When he had said these things, he ordered the instruments of torture to be brought forward so as to persuade them out of fear to eat the defiling food. And when the guards had placed before them wheels and joint-dislocators, rack and hooks and catapults and caldrons, braziers and thumbscrews and iron claws and wedges and bellows, the tyrant resumed speaking: "Be afraid, young fellows, and whatever justice you revere will be merciful to you when you transgress under compulsion." But when they had heard the inducements and saw the dreadful devices, not only were they not afraid, but they also opposed the tyrant with their own philosophy, and by their right reasoning nullified his tyranny. [4 Maccabees 8:2-15]

[***Ed. Note:*** *All seven brothers are tortured to death]

From *An American Gospel: On Family, History, and the Kingdom of God* by Erik Reece

I have not quite come around to Tolstoy's belief that one must choose which kingdom to believe in—the heavenly kingdom or the kingdom that is right before us. I still cast my lot with the pragmatists and hold that if a belief in a heavenly kingdom causes one to act on the teachings of Jesus in this world, then one has no right to question such a belief. But I have come to understand that the kingdom of the Creation—this world—is where we must first discover evidence of the Creator, the presence of the holy, and I have come to see that the Creation is where we

must first enact the teachings that Thomas Jefferson set before us in his own cut-and-paste gospel. It would seem an uncomfortable reality for many American Christians that, throughout the Gospels of the Bible, Jesus spent so much time talking about the poor and so little time (none, actually) talking about homosexuality, prayer in school, or where to post the Ten Commandments. Yet his concern for the poor remains distressingly relevant in light of recent meteorological research that shows the climate crisis will effect [sic] the world's poorest the most. What's more, it is the abuse of resources in the richest, most avowedly Christian nations that has caused and will continue to cause droughts, fires, famines, floods, and hurricanes in the parts of the world where the people played virtually no role in causing our global warming. […] There is no way we can demand that developing nations curb their use of fossil fuels if we are unwilling to change and do what we Americans seem so stubbornly resistant to—taking responsibility for our actions.

We Americans do not tend to change our behavior simply because we are told that we should. No real political, cultural, or environmental change-the crucial paradigm shift this country needs-will come about without a fundamental change of heart, an inspired, poetic desire to begin inventing the American future that Jefferson, Whitman, and Wright proposed. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells the wealthy woman Salome, "If one is whole, one will be filled with light," and he expresses a very pragmatic view of religion, that it should be a habit of action, when he says, "For no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, nor does one put it in a hidden place." Emerson called this inner light Intuition, as opposed to the tuitions whereby others tell us what to do. Whitman called it the soul. Frank Lloyd Wright called it the "man-light." Under whatever name, I believe it is the same impulse; it comes from the same mysterious but unmistakable source. This internal impulse must also be a force for change. These thinkers point to what is right in front of us, and then show how we might enter into that pure experience, that wholeness of being-the kingdom of God. They return us to what Whitman called "reason's early paradise;" where we were installed by the Creator to care for the natural world, and to affirm, through language and action, its beauty, its stability, its integrity.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:25-31
1 John 4:7-21

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

ENTERING THE STORY

To begin the exploration of this week's text read and consider *The Scholar's Version* of **John 15:1-8**: "I am the authentic vine and my Father does the cultivating. He primes every cane of mine that does not bear fruit, and every cane that does bear fruit he dresses so it will bear even more fruit. You have already been 'dressed up' by the things I have told you. You must stay attached to me, and I (must stay attached) to you. Just as a cane cannot bear fruit in and of itself—if it is detached from the trunk—so you (can't bear fruit) unless you stay attached to me. I am the trunk, you are the canes. Those who stay attached to me—and I to them—produce a lot of fruit; you are not able to achieve anything apart from me. Those who don't remain attached to me are thrown away like dead canes: they are collected, tossed into the fire, and burned. If you stay attached to me and my words lodge in you, ask whatever you want and it will happen to you. My Father's honor consists of this: the great quantity of fruit you produce in being my disciples."

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What is a vine? How does it grow? How is it different from an apple tree, a carrot, a bean plant, or a fig? What is necessary for the vine to flourish? What problems arise in the growing and flourishing of the vine?

   What is a branch? What is the relationship between a vine and its branches?

2. How are you like that vine? What feeds you? Waters you? Prunes you? Weeds you?

   How are you like that branch? What branches bear no fruit? What is it like to have branches with no fruit on them? What happens to those branches that bear no fruit? If they are not pruned, what is the result? If they are pruned, how is that done?

3. Into what vine is your branch grafted? What bigger vine(s) are you a part of? From what source(s) do you get your resources for life?

   Think about all those bigger vines, and consider: where do you produce fruit? And where do you not produce fruit?

4. What functions as the vinegrower for you? What is it that provides sustenance for your vine or your branches? What identifies that part of you that isn't bearing fruit? What is it that prunes? What might a "pruned" life look like? What fruit is the result of such pruning?

What might your "grapes" produce? What does it take to turn your "grapes" into "wine"? And what is your "wine"?

Take some time to consider the vine, the branches, the good fruit that live within…and what they produce.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *I am the true vine*. True in contrast to what? What makes the vine true? What other vines are there? Do they also produce fruit? How does one distinguish a true vine? Is there only one? Is it the same for everyone? In what ways? How might it be different for different people?

- What about the branches that do bear fruit and are pruned so they will have more and bigger bunches of grapes? How may this idea be hard to accept? What in your knowledge or experience can help you understand and accept this pruning of even the fruitful branches? Thinking of the world around you, where can you see organizations, institutions, or even individuals who are fruitful but could use some judicious pruning to be made even more so? You be the gardener: opposite the name of each, list exactly what you would prune to make these groups or people more effective than they are now. Within your own self, what are the fruitful branches? What fruit do they bear? How have they been, or how might they be, trimmed so as to become more productive, greater, or more effective? What pain might such pruning cause? Just how might you discern positive results or growth from it? How willing are you, today, to begin the task of the trimmer of your own vines?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"To abide in the vine is, as John Sanford says in *Mystical Christianity*, to tend my soul and to foster my connection to the center. It is to step into the flow of divine grace that pours forth from the earth, through the branches and vines of life, into the fruit of Selfhood. But it is also to delight in the sweetness of the fruit's juice. It is to dance upon the plump fruits, pressing every ounce of nectar from their fullness. It is to allow it to ferment and become bold. It is to take the cup of joy to my lips and celebrate. The work of the tending I know well. Too well perhaps. For me it is easy to dig and plant and water and prune. It is easy to wipe the sweat from my brow and cry out "dear me." Yet do I know how to abide? How to let life flow through me? How to celebrate my own fullness and the fullness of life? Can I allow myself to be primed and pressed? Can I ripen and mellow? Allow my juice to flow like a sweet tributary of the divine river of grace? Can I become the redness of the wine? Can I become the celebration?" —*Kathie Collins*

From *Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* by James Rowe Adams

Vine, noun. In ancient Israel, the vine was included in images of peace and contentment. The vine, Hebrew gephen, later became a metaphor identifying the people of Israel. Gephen is used as part of the imagery associated with peace and contentment. […]

The early followers of Jesus used the Greek word for vine, ampelos, in describing their relationship to him. They may well have associated the image with what came to them from the Hebrew tradition. They also probably made a connection with the imagery of the Eucharist, which included references to the fruit of the vine. The Gospel according to John makes elaborate use of the ampelos metaphor in words attributed to Jesus. […]

The vine became an important motif in Christian decorative art, but part of the reason may be that the vine has been a universal symbol for fertility and joy. Ecclesiasticus, a book in the apocrypha section of the Bible, represents wisdom by a vine. Devotees of the god Bacchus used grape vines in their devotions. The Green Man

with vines emerging from his mouth, found in the stone carvings of many medieval churches, is pre-Christian in origin.

The vine as a metaphor for Jesus, apart from its other associations, conveys the sense of the church as an organic whole, alive and growing, with each part drawing sustenance from the same source.

From *Mystical Christianity* by John Sanford

Turning now to the imagery of John's Gospel we see the striking image of Christ (v.1) as the vine whose source is the Father. All those branches that remain closely connected to the vine will grow strong and bear fruit, for Christ is the source of their life and strength (v.5). However, those branches that do not bear fruit are cut off from the vine. They then wither and die and are cast into the fire (v.7) for a branch cannot live without its connection to the vine. Those branches that do bear fruit are pruned by God, and this makes them stronger and their fruit more plentiful.

This imagery can be compared to the relationship of the ego to the Center. The ego has little vital life of its own. The course of its vitality and creativity lies in the Center, and as long as it has a connection to this Center it flourishes and brings forth the fruit of a life that is lived significantly. […]

The fruit of the vine that is produced when the vine is healthy is analogous to the fruits of the life of individuation, that is, the life that is lived consciously, with a living connection between ego and the unconscious. The image of the vine can be understood as a portrayal of the positive, joyful side of the individuation process. We often hear about the difficulties of personal growth, of its painful side, of the dark times we must experience, and all of this is true. But there is also the positive and joyful side, for in the long run the fruits of individuation outweigh its difficulties, for from it emerge understanding, creativity, and the capacity to love. This does not mean that life will be easy for us, nor does it mean that the difficulties of life may not be great. A religious faith that believes that God will not let us suffer and that we will be immune to life's difficulties is an immature and egocentric faith.

What it does mean is that even if things are going badly we will have the strength to live through our experience creatively and grow in the process. […]

For this reason we must care for the living process that goes on within us. Like a good gardener who tills the soil of the garden and cares for the plants, so we must till the soil of the soul and tend to the inner life. We are reminded of the three meanings of the word therapeuo, which we have noted before: to heal or cure, to render service to God, and to till the soil. We are called upon to undertake the therapy of the soul, and this involves caring for the soul as a gardener cares for the garden.

From "To Look at Any Thing" by John Moffitt in *Mother Earth, Father Sky: Poems of Our Planet*

To look at this green and say
"I have seen spring in these
Woods," will not do—you must
Be the thing you see

Read the entire poem here:
https://theaccidentalpoet.net/2017/01/09/to-look-at-any-thing/

From "Soybeans" in *Hammers in the Fog* by Thomas Alan Orr

The farmer stared at the man and was quiet, reaching
For the tobacco in the rear pocket of his jeans,
Where he wore his only ring, a threadbare circle rubbed
By working cans of dip and long hours on the backside
Of a hundred acre run. He scooped up a handful
Of small white beans, the pearls of the prairie, saying:
Soybeans look like a foot of water on the field in April
When you're ready to plant and can't get in;
Like three kids at the kitchen table
Eating macaroni and cheese five nights in a row;
Or like a broken part on the combine when
Your credit with the implement dealer is nearly tapped.

 **Read the entire poem here:**
http://www.poemdujour.com/soybeans.orr.html

From "Grape (Vittus)" in *The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*

Of all the fruits grown in America, grapes are the most widely adapted to varying soils and climates. Our first settlers found grapes growing from the coast of Maine to Florida and inland to the Rockies. Besides growing over a wide area, no fruit offers so many different flavors or is more delicious. Grapes are one of nature's oldest and most healthful fruits, and, being easy to grow, should be included in every home planting.

Location: Almost any garden can produce good grapes. Selection of a favorite site for planting is important and the best is one that has a gentle slope to provide good air circulation. Low frosty pockets should be avoided because of the danger of injury from spring frosts. Plant where the vines will receive full sun and away from trees so that they will not have to compete for moisture and other elements necessary for growth. Where growing seasons are very short, ripening can be hastened by planting on the south side of a building and training the vine against it. Heat radiation from reflected sunlight will make the fruit ripen as much as a week earlier than those planted in the open.

Grapes are not particular as to soils. As long as they are well drained and fairly deep, they grow well on both heavy and light soils. A soil of average fertility is best because too rich soils stimulate cane growth causing poorly formed clusters. A slightly acid soil is best but good growth and production are possible on neutral soils.

Since grape roots grow deeply into the soil, they are able to find moisture even in dry weather. The best insurance against a dry soil is a long-range program of nutrients released from manures, mulches and rock phosphate. Waste hay, straw, sawdust, wood chips and other organic materials should be applied every other year.[…]

Pruning: Grapes develop on the growth of the current year. Buds left on the vine at pruning time will produce fruit in summer. Year-old wood is the best yielder of fruit. If you keep these ideas in mind, pruning will be simple. Each fall, cut out the branch that produced fruit last year, thereby leaving a new year-old arm near the main trunk. This cane will provide the fruit for the following year. Cut back the branching vines at every node to about one or two buds. Also leave a vine that has been cut back to one or two buds near the base of the arm. From this vine will grow the cane that will be saved next year for the following season. New vines will begin bearing fruit five to six years after being set.

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1. Acts 10:44-48 38
2. Entering the Story 38
3. Exploring the Story 39
4. Between the Lines 40
5. Exploring Further 40

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 98
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

ENTERING THE STORY

To prepare for today's exploration, take a look at **Acts 10:1-43** to see the foreground of today's text:

"In Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill, and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation, for I have sent them." So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival, Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning

in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What is happening in the text before Peter begins speaking (see above)? Where is he? To whom is he speaking? What's going on? What brings him to this place and to these people today?

> *While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.* How do those who hear Peter speak respond? Why might the circumcised believers who had come with Peter be astounded? What is astounding that the gift is poured out even on the Gentiles? What might their speaking in tongues be like? What might they be saying?
>
> *Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"* Why might one withhold the water for baptism? What might be the cost of withholding the water? What advantages might there be to withholding the water of baptism?

Within the community, what might it mean to be baptized? What might it require for those who came with Peter to Caesarea to include even the Gentiles in the community of the baptized? What would be the cost of including them? What would be the promise? What might they be saying to one another as what Peter is saying sinks in?

2. Looking around our world today, where do you see people deemed "outsiders"? Those who have a vision of a larger world than the one in which they are constrained? Those who are the models of that larger vision for them? What institutions or churches or nations or leaders define acceptable boundaries?

> Who are included? Who are within the inner circle? Who are outside the limits of that circle?
>
> Of who or what are unclean? Of one who speaks in a different language? Or dresses differently? Or worships differently? Where do we need a new vision of what is possible?

3. Where in your family or your neighborhood or in your office are those who are clear about what ought to happen? Who defines the tradition? What are the lines which mark those who are clean from those who are unclean? What rituals of living or working or buying and selling or cooking and eating are laid out for you? What have you always known to be so?

> What vision might challenge or shake those expectations, traditions, or rituals? What do you imagine might be the worst that could happen if those assumptions are challenged? Who in your world, around your table, in your workplace, is the one who challenges them?

What do you know of the one who knows the rules? And the one who is outside them? To whom do you listen?

4. What do you know of those inner voices and that inner conversation between your inner Peter? Your inner Cornelius? Your inner circumcised ones? Even your inner Gentiles?

What do you know of the vision that comes even in the daylight hours? How do you listen? What do you see?

Take a few moments and some art materials, and give some expression to what that vision might entail. Don't think about it too much, let your hands create something out of their own wisdom. Sit with it a bit, and ask your paper or whatever you have made what it might want from you, where it might want you to go.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- …*the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.* How do you imagine the Holy Spirit "falling" on the crowd? Luke (author of the gospel and the book of Acts) uses the same word to refer to fear "falling" on Zechariah (1:12), and the Prodigal's father "falling" on his son's neck as he returns home (15:20). In Acts 8:16 and 17, the Spirit has not yet "fallen," and Peter and John must lay hands on them before they "receive" the Spirit. Paul "falls" on the dead Eutychus in Acts 20:10, and the crowd "falls" on Paul's neck as they bid farewell to him on his way to Rome (20:37). What kind of "falling" is this? Why "falling" and not "descending" or "inspiring" or "arising"? What would the Holy Spirit falling look like? Have you ever experienced a spirit "falling" on a group of people? On an individual? On yourself? How does it manifest itself? What changes? What doesn't?

- "Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'" What do you make of Peter's testimony that these outsiders have already been empowered by God's Holy Spirit without ever having been baptized? What is Peter suggesting about the power and nature of the Holy Spirit? How might one like a Gentile (non-believer or non-member) meet or be filled with the Holy Spirit? What is being suggested here about baptism? What do you suppose Peter might tell you is the purpose of baptism? What do you know of rules and regulations - traditions and historical conventions - that make this division by denying unbaptized people access to community or liturgy, receiving bread and wine at the Eucharist, even ordination? What do you know of unbaptized people you have known who extol and pray to God as well as speak in a holy tongue? What is the cost and promise of high walls and deep divisions along baptismal lines? What might be the cost and promise of crossing over them, welcoming, even being touched by Godly unbaptized hand?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene* by Bart D. Ehrman

Paul's strong statement that Peter's work was restricted to the "circumcised" may stand at some tension with an important narrative found in the book of Acts, a story that Paul never mentions and seems not to know. This is the conversion of the first Gentile to the Christian faith, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, whose acceptance of Peter's proclamation is of such importance to the author of Acts that he takes nearly two entire chapters to narrate it (Acts 10-11). The reason it was important has long been recognized by students of the New Testament. The book of Acts deals with the spread of Christianity from its inauspicious beginnings among a small group of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem to its prevalence throughout the entire Mediterranean world, until the gospel finally

reached, at the very end of the book, the capital of the empire, Rome itself. But Acts is concerned not only with the numerical and geographical spread of the new religion but also with what we might call its ethnic spread. For even though it started out as a movement within Judaism, Christianity soon became a religion for all people, Jew and Gentile alike. As we have seen, one of the major debates in the early church was over whether the followers of Jesus needed to become Jewish or not. After all, he was accepted as the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of Jewish law. And so, naturally, there were those who insisted that to be a follower of Jesus, one had to be Jewish.

Not so for Paul, and Paul's later biographer, Luke, the author of Acts. For them, this movement is for all people, Jew and Gentile, and Gentiles who accept this faith do not need first to become Jewish in order to do so. Acts wants to show that this understanding of Christianity as a religion for all people is not simply a whimsical idea of the relative latecomer to the Christian scene, the apostle Paul, but a view propagated by the earliest disciples of Jesus themselves. In order to make this point, it tells the lengthy story of how the very first Gentile accepts the gospel when it is proclaimed by Jesus' chief apostle, Simon Peter.[…]

This story, as I've indicated, serves as a kind of linchpin in the narrative of Acts. Much of the rest of the book will be about the success of the Christian mission not among Jews but among Gentiles scattered throughout the Roman Empire, especially through the missionary activity of the apostle Paul, the greatest advocate of the view that salvation in Christ does not hinge on the observance of the prescriptions of the Jewish law. For Luke, this wasn't Paul's novel idea. It was the plan of God, as shown to Jesus' hand-chosen chief disciple, Peter himself.

From "Moralists" by Stephen Dunn from *New and Selected Poems*

> Whenever I've been one, I've known the end
> of my thinking in advance, the door shut
> before it's opened wide enough to let in
> the ill wind, the rude, the spectacular visage,
> the simple truth obstructed in a corner.
> Yes, there's an advantage to limitation,
> if one doesn't make a career of it.
> There's an advantage even to good behavior,
> especially after a week, say, of redefining it.
> Sometimes a bad thing has felt so good
> I wouldn't let anyone name it for me
> ever again. And what's moral
> had a new gaiety to it, an exuberance,
> and I walked through the dull streets
> like someone ablaze from the inside,
> as close as I'd ever be, could be, to God.

From *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese

> [***Ed. Note:*** The novel's story is told by the protagonist, Marion Stone. He and his conjoined twin Shiva are born at Mission Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1954. Their mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise was an Indian Carmelite nun and dies during childbirth. Their father, Thomas Stone, the English surgeon at the hospital abandons them and disappears. Abhi Ghosh teaches himself surgery and replaces Dr. Stone. During the changing political environment in Ethiopia, Ghosh participates in an unsuccessful rebellion. Ghosh is imprisoned, then released in the aftermath of the coup, due to his friendship with General Mebratu.]

By eleven o'clock, Ghosh excused himself from the company in the living room and came back with us to our room. Hema followed.

Shiva said, "We haven't slept in this bed since you left."

Ghosh was touched. He lay in the center, and we huddled on either side. Hema sat at the foot of our bed.

"In prison, lights were out by eight o'clock. We'd each tell a story. That was our entertainment. I told stories from the books we read to you in this room. One of my cellmates, a merchant, Tawfiq—he would tell the Abu Kassem story."

It was a tale well known to children all over Africa: Abu Kassem, a miserly Baghdad merchant, had held on to his battered, much repaired pair of slippers even though they were objects of derision. At last, even he couldn't stomach the sight of them. But his every attempt to get rid of his slippers ended in disaster: when he tossed them out of his window they landed on the head of a pregnant woman who miscarried, and Abu Kassem was thrown in jail; when he dropped them in the canal, the slippers choked off the main drain and caused flooding, and off Abu Kassem went to jail…

"One night when Tawfiq finished, another prisoner, a quiet, dignified old man, said, 'Abu Kassem might as well build a special room for his slippers. Why try to lose them? He'll never escape.' The old man laughed, and he seemed happy when he said that. That night the old man died in his sleep.

"The next night, out of respect for the old man, we lay in silence. No story. I could hear men crying in the dark. This was always the low point for me. Ah, boys…I'd pretend you both were against me, just like this, and I would imagine Hema's face before me.

"The following night, we couldn't wait to talk about Abu Kassem. We all saw it the same way. The old man was right. The slippers in the story mean that everything you see and do and touch, every seed you sow, or don't sow, becomes part of your destiny.

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1. Luke 24:(36-43) 44-53 44
2. Entering the Story 44
3. Exploring the Story 44
4. Between the Lines 46
5. Exploring Further 47

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15-23

[36-43 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.]

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

ENTERING THE STORY

Luke's second appearance story (24:36-49) is set on the evening of the same day, so it is still Easter Sunday. Cleopas and his unnamed companion have returned from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell "the eleven and their companions" about their experience. Then Jesus stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." They are terrified and think they are seeing a ghost. The rest of the story unfolds in three main parts.

The first part, in contrasting juxtaposition to the Emmaus story, emphasizes the "physicality" of the risen Jesus. Jesus invited them to touch him: "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and blood as you see that I have." He also shows them the wounds in his hands and feet. Then he eats a piece of broiled fish. The point is that this is not just another ghost story. This is more than a ghost story.

The second part is commissioning and promise. Jesus commissions his followers to be his witnesses and to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations. He promises them they will be "clothed with power from on high," a promise fulfilled by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost in the first chapter of Acts.

In the third part, Jesus leads them to Bethany just east of Jerusalem, blesses them, and ascends to heaven. But in the first chapter of Acts, Luke "dates" the ascension of Jesus forty days later (Acts 1:3). Because he has Jesus ascend twice, once on the evening of Easter Sunday (in Luke's gospel) and once forty days later (in Acts), it is clear that the author is not concerned with "calendar time." In any case, in Luke, Easter has been a long and parabolic day.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. The passage immediately preceding today's text is the story of Jesus' appearance to two followers on the road to Emmaus, which ends by describing how Cleopas and his companion go back to Jerusalem to tell the others what they have experienced: *While they were talking about this…* What is the "this" the group is talking about? Imagine that you are one of the disciples talking about this. Close your eyes, and picture the scene. Describe what is happening. Who is there? What are they saying about what Cleopas and his friend have reported? What is the feeling in the room?

1 Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperCollins, 2006) pp. 200-202.

> *Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.* How do you imagine the response to Jesus' appearance in the midst of the group? What reaction is there to Jesus' saying, "Peace be with you"? What about his appearance might leave the disciples *startled and terrified*?

What is a ghost? The word that Luke uses here is the Greek pneuma, which the New Revised Standard Version translates as "spirit" in every other instance in Luke's gospel. What difference, if any, does it make to the story to speak of a ghost rather than a spirit? What might the writer of this story want us to know by having Jesus say, *"Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."*? What in this encounter with Jesus might evoke the disciples' joy? What might evoke disbelieving? What might evoke wondering?

Take a piece of paper and whatever pens or crayons you might have near you and express what is happening in this story, in this mixture of talking, being startled and terrified, fearing, touching, seeing, being joyful, disbelieving, wondering. What more do you now know about this story?

> *Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."* How do you imagine this opening of their minds? What might it feel like? Look like? Sound like? What is yet to be done? Why might it be beginning from Jerusalem? What is the role of a witness?

Imagine yourself as one of those to whom Jesus is speaking. Why might it be important to stay in the city? Where, else might you want to go? How might you be inclined not to stay, but to go on with other things? What is being promised? What do you imagine it would be like to be clothed with power from on high? As you wait in the city, what are you expecting? Imagining? Hoping for? Fearing?

> *Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.* As you are among those standing there, what is the cost of Jesus' withdrawal for you? What is the promise of that withdrawal for you? What might be the cost of Jesus' staying with you and not withdrawing? The promise?

2. When—if ever—in your daily life, at your workplace, in the family circle, in the political arena, walking down the street or sitting in a cafe, have you been surprised by unexpected, impossible news, news that left you startled, fearful, joyful, disbelieving, wondering? How did that mixture of emotions affect you? How did you respond? What did you do?

> When have you had an encounter that opened your mind? How did you respond? What did you do next?

3. What do you know of a time in your life when you received power from on high only after someone or something that had been essential to your life left or withdrew from you? What do you know of this presence and absence, of this appearing and withdrawing?

What do you know of something or someone present right now in your life whose absence might empower you in some important way?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- We know that the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were originally one book, by the same author. There are two descriptions of Jesus' departure, one in Luke and one in Acts. **Luke 24:50-53**: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” **Acts 1:9-12: “**When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.” Compare the two stories. What is similar? What is different? What might be the experience that lies behind them both? What point is the storyteller trying to make? What aspect of the experience is he highlighting or emphasizing? Think of a time when you have told different people about some experience you have had, or told the same people about it in different settings. How has your telling differed? What changed in your telling because of your audience, your surroundings, your growing understanding of what happened? How does your telling reflect "what really happened"? How is your telling part of "what really happened"?

- *Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."* For Luke and his readers this is a defining moment on the road to Emmaus. It is the afternoon of the third day following Jesus' crucifixion. Luke describes the meeting of the two traveling to Emmaus with Jesus who tells them what about himself? And what does he tell them about the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms? What does he reveal to them about the scriptures that they may have not known before? How is the definition and purpose of the scriptures changing at this moment? How might these two Jews previously have thought of the scriptures—Moses, the prophets, and the psalms? How would you say this "revelation" has defined the scriptures for the Church ever since? For the meaning and mission of Judaism? For the relationship between Jews and Christians? How much of this new interpretation of the scriptures do you suppose is Luke or Jesus or the emerging church in its conversation with Judaism after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE?

- *Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.* Let's remember that these men may have been grounded in the scriptures since infancy) What might having their minds opened be like for these people? What in or about the scriptures as they had known them may they need to set aside, discard, contradict, forget? What in the scriptures may they need to know now, as real events or truths in their own lives? How might it be even harder to take in this new reality of the scriptures than it was to set aside old understandings? Where can we see people in our national life who may need to open their minds to a new reality as they abandon old truisms? What may need to happen for them to truly open their minds?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Eternal Life: A New Vision* by John Shelby Spong

Ask yourself […] just why it was that though the Christian community attached great weight to the resurrection, no two accounts of it were alike? Indeed, there is hardly a detail in any New Testament narrative of Jesus' resurrection that is not actually contradicted in another narrative. The New Testament writers do not agree that there was a tomb to which the women went at dawn on the first day of the week; they do not agree on who the women were that constituted the group of early morning visitors or on whether these women actually saw the raised Jesus on that occasion; they do not agree on where the disciples were when whatever the experience of Easter was first dawned on them or within them as the case might be and they do not agree on who among them was the first of the disciples to "see," whatever it was that "see" meant, when referring to the Easter moment. They do not even agree as to whether the resurrection was a physical thing! The earnest accounts suggest that event was not physical, but it becomes more and more physical with the passing of time. Was the original account of the resurrection of Jesus a narrative seeking to describe the mystical, but real, experience of Jesus being raised into the eternity of God, or was it a narrative in which he was raised back into the life of this world, from which much later he had to be extricated? Since he could not die again, which is the way that people normally get out of this world, his physically resurrected body had to be miraculously lifted from the life of this world into the life of God, who was conceived of as living above the sky. This is what the ascension accomplishes. It is exactly this attempt to use human language to describe a reality that the early followers of Jesus were not able to doubt or dismiss that makes us suspect that all of the resurrection narratives are in fact late additions to the developing tradition. Why were they late? Because the original Easter moment, wherever it was and to whomever it occurred, was so powerful an experience of a living Jesus that no explanation was necessary. Later generations of Christians would be the ones who needed explanations to make sense out of the way they understood God as something other than what they were, something up there or out there. So given the radically contradictory accounts of this solitary, crucial moment in the Jesus story, our task becomes that of going beneath the explanations to try to define the experience. […]

God was now experienced "through the filter of Jesus." Resurrection was an event of inner history at the levels of consciousness where fundamental shifts occur. The disciples, who had localized the God-experience in Jesus, found in his death that this God-experience was no longer localized. The presence of the holy that they had found in Jesus they now discovered in themselves. It was as if they saw that what it was that they had met in Jesus had now taken up residence in their lives and hearts.

From "Ascension" in *Little Girls in Church* by Kathleen Norris

Why do you stand looking up at the sky? —Acts 1:11

It was all of that,
mud and new grass
pushing up through melting snow,
the lilac in bud by my front door
bent low
by last week's ice storm.

Read the entire poem here:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=37759

From "Coleman's Bed" in *River Flow: New and Selected Poems 1984-2007* by David Whyte

Ghost then, to where others
in this place have come before,
under the hazel, by the ruined chapel,
below the cave where Coleman slept,
become the source that makes
the river flow, and then the sea
beyond. Live in this place
as you were meant to and then,
surprised by your abilities,
become the ancestor of it all,
the quiet, robust and blessed Saint
that your future happiness
will always remember.

 **Read the entire poem here:**
https://alifedeveloping.org/2018/12/03/nesting-place/

"I do not believe, I know." —Carl Jung

"First comes *believing*. Second comes *one heart and soul.* And then there follows *living beyond privacy*.

Take a walk on this Easter Sunday and wonder where in your life you know about believing, heart and soul, and of giving yourself away. Ask yourself where you find yourself powerless—where you may feel weak and impotent—where grace is stingy and days are awkward, off-balance, on a slant and tilted toward anger. Explore where self-pity and self-righteousness live.

Then ask yourself where are you trying to maintain yourself by living the role you are supposed to be, while your heart breaks and your soul aches. Where are you hoarding your life? How are you hoarding the truth? Where is the hurt and bruising but also the sense of joy and wonder, foolishness and craziness within?

Ask yourself where you might, on this very day, take the supreme risk by a word, a look, or a touch, breach the walls of privacy that you have painstakingly constructed around yourself and instead give yourself away. Gamble that in the giving away of all you have, you will receive everything you want—that in the 'dying', there is possibility for you now. Reach for what Easter is." —*Bill Dols*

"This life therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not finished, but it is going on; this not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."
—*Martin Luther*

"Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world by coming forward from the future into the present." —*N.T. Wright*

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

How do you tell the story of Jesus' death? Some of the ways that the story is told frighten me. For instance, some of the ways Christians tell the story imply that Jesus' sufferings are greater than any other human suffering has ever been. That is not true, or helpful. Jesus' death is one of thousands of deaths by crucifixion under the Roman Empire. Jesus' death is one among too many millions of Jewish deaths, from the Crusades to the Holocaust and beyond. When Christians tell the story of Jesus' death, they must remember that Christian preachers have used Holy Week texts as an occasion to call for Christians to kill Jews. When Christians reflect on the nailing of Jesus to the cross, they must remember that medieval art sometimes painted the picture of Jesus being nailed down with Jews holding the hammers. This is false to history, but that is the least of its problems. This lie has moved vicious people, some of them Christians, to kill Jews.

Perhaps we ought to tell the story of Jesus' death so that our eyes are lifted to see the faces of other victims of Empire. Perhaps we ought to tell the story of Jesus' cry on the cross so that we hear the death song of the millions of Native Americans who were slaughtered. Perhaps when we tell the story of the death of the one Pilate taunted as "king of the Jews," we ought to hear also the echoes of the deaths of Jews in the battles of the First and Second Jewish Revolts against Rome.

From *Beach Music* by Pat Conroy

She was quick-witted and funny, but she carried within her another side that she hid with bright allusions and irony as finely wrought as lace. She had so mastered the strategies of camouflage that her own history seemed a series of well-placed mirrors that kept her hidden from herself.

From "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come To Nothing" by W. B. Yeats

Now all the truth is out,
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honour bred, with one
Who, were it proved he lies,
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?
Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

From "After the Fall" by Arthur Miller

[***Ed. Note***: Arthur Miller's play "After the Fall" Holga, who has endured the ravages of war in Europe, recalls for Quentin, the agony of it all. She tells of how towards the end of the war, she lost hope and wanted to die. Until the dream entered her consciousness.]

HOLGA: The same dream returned each night, until I dared not go to sleep and grew quite ill. I dreamed I had a child, and even in the dream I saw it was my life, and it was an idiot, and I kept running away from it. But it always crept onto my lap again, clutched at my clothes. Until I thought, if I could kiss it, whatever was my own, perhaps I could sleep. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible, but I kissed it. I think, Quentin, one must finally take one's life in one's arms.

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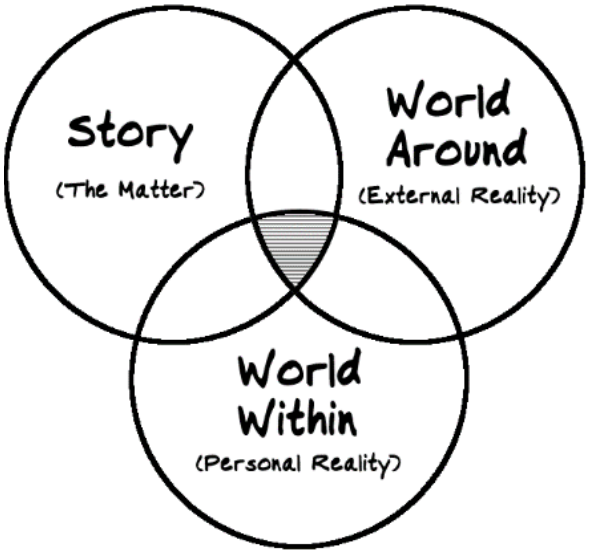
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WHAT IS READING BETWEEN THE LINES?

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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