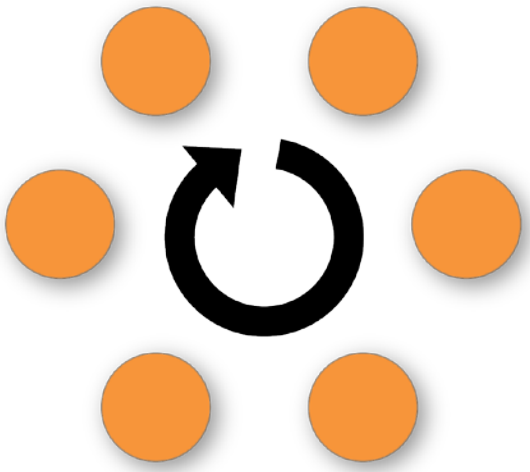
READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

Proper 21 – Reign of Christ

September 27 – November 22, 2020



Volume 27, Issue 6

Formerly BibleWorkbench

Reading Between The Lines ~ Volume 27

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Founding Editor: William L. Dols
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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.

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Dec 1	Matthew 24:36-44
Dec 8	Isaiah 11:1-10
Dec 15	James 5:7-10
Dec 22	Matthew 1:18-25
Dec 29	Isaiah 63:7-9
Jan 5	Jeremiah 31:7-14
Jan 12	Matthew 3:13-17
Jan 19	John 1:29-42

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Jan 26	Matthew 4:12-23
Feb 2	Micah 6:1-8
Feb 9	Matthew 5:13-20
Feb 16	Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Feb 23	Matthew 17:1-9
Mar 1	Matthew 4:1-11
Mar 8	John 3:1-17
Mar 15	John 4:5-42
Mar 22	John 9:1-41

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Mar 29	John 11:1-45
Apr 5	Matthew 27:11-54
Apr 12	Mathew 28:1-10
Apr 19	John 20:19-31
Apr 26	1 Peter 1:17-23
May 3	Acts 2:42-47
May 10	John 14:1-14
May 17	Acts 17:22-31

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Date	Selection
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May 31	John 7:37-39
Jun 7	Genesis 1:1-2:4a
Jun 14	Romans 5:1-8
Jun 21	Jeremiah 20:7-13
Jun 28	Genesis 22:1-14
Jul 5	Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Jul 12	Genesis 25:19-34
Jul 19	Genesis 28:10-19a

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Aug 2	Isaiah 55:1-5
Aug 9	Matthew 14:22-23
Aug 16	Genesis 45:1-15
Aug 23	Exodus 1:8-2:10
Aug 30	Romans 12:9-21
Sep 6	Matthew 18:15-20
Sep 13	Matthew 18:21-35
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Volume 27.6

Date	Selection
Sep 27	Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Oct 4	Isaiah 5:1-7
Oct 11	Matthew 22:1-14
Oct 18	Isaiah 45:1-7
Oct 25	Deuteronomy 34:1-12
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Nov 8	Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Nov 15	Mathew 25:14-30
Nov 22	Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative texts:
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:33-46

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

ENTERING THE STORY

Ezekiel was a priest whose ministry extended from 593 to perhaps 563 BCE. Remember that after the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 many Jews were taken into exile in Babylonia. It is understood that Ezekiel was deported with several thousand others in the first Babylonian reduction of the city in 598. As you read the text, keep in mind that the people Ezekiel is writing to have been carried off to exile in Babylon. Note that the Revised Common Lectionary excludes the verses of 18:5-24.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. The text opens with *"The word of the Lord came to me*." Who is speaking? To whom? The theme of the word being spoken is what? The familiar proverb considered here appears also in Jeremiah 31:29. What is being said about the proverb? What is a proverb? Where do proverbs come from? What do they do?

To the recipients of this writing what might this proverb explain about their situation? What guidance may it provide? How might this proverb be rooted in the Hebrew tradition? How does it reflect Exodus and Mt Sinai? Recall the second commandment in Exodus 20:4-6: *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

Assuming the Lord once spoke these words to Moses, what is the Lord now doing in terms of Ezekiel? What is going on between the Lord and Ezekiel? If the Lord is, why might the Lord be changing his mind?

Look carefully below at the text omitted in the lectionary (18:5-24). Who is speaking? It is an effort to explain or illustrate what? Consider why the lectionary drops 18:5-24. What is gained when these verses are absent? What is gained when they are restored? What might be lost when they are added? Note the parallel to three generations as found in Ezekiel 18:

If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right—if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her

menstrual period, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD.

If he has a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though his father does none of them), who eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, takes advance or accrued interest; shall he then live? He shall not. He has done all these abominable things; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself.

But if this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, who does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no advance or accrued interest, observes my ordinances, and follows my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, he dies for his iniquity.

Yet you say, "Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.

But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, *and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.*

How is iniquity defined? Righteousness? What in the lists is included? What, if anything, is excluded? Who might be the you? A voice in the crowd? Dissenter? Ezekiel? What voice would challenge such a reversal of Moses truth? Who are you to say such a thing? What is the question? The answer? To turn away is about what?

What might it mean to live? To die? How does this happen daily to people while they are still alive as a result of such iniquity and righteousness? What does the Lord remember? Not remember?

Consider the "treasury of demerit and merit" that was popular then and is now for many of us. What is being said about score card theology and the big book in the sky? What is Ezekiel implying about anything like a final judgment or reckoning at death? In life? The Lord tells Ezekiel that one lives or dies on what basis?

How might what Ezekiel is hearing from the Lord be unfair? What is the fairness/unfairness issue here? How might it be related to rewards and punishment? What is being debated? What are the stakes?

The judge concludes what? What is needed? What might a new heart and a new spirit provide?

2. What do you know about people using the proverb about "parents eating sour grapes" and the "children's teeth being set on edge" today? In terms of the world, your community or social circle? The proverb suggests that the reason things are so bad is what? Where today are people made to feel that things are bad because of their behavior or because they are not following the rules?

> Recall again that the people are in exile. They are estranged, angry, even frightened and far from home. Relying on and repeating this proverb does what for them? Where today are people in exile? Who are those today that rely on rules or guidelines when so far from home?

3. What are some of the proverbs you hear or even repeat? Where do these proverbs come from? What purpose do they serve? How do they make sense of your experience and sound as if they are true?

How do you use this week's proverb in your life? How might you use this proverb when you are in exile, trouble, far from home? Whom do you blame? Who ate sour grapes and therefore has set your teeth on edge? What is the result? Where might you get yourself a new heart and a new spirit? Who have you been waiting on to do it for you? What if it is up to you? Why will (do) you choose to die? What might it mean for you to choose to live?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Wonder about "*The way of the Lord is unfair*." Ezekiel tells of the people accusing the Lord of unfairness. In our day-to-day world, what might cause one to think or feel as if they are unfairly treated? Whom do they tend to blame? What does unfair treatment look like? Feel like? How do you recognize what is unfair? What does one have to know before one can feel unfairly treated? How might you describe the way of the Lord?

- *"Get your self a new heart and a new spirit."* Gail Godwin writes in her book *Heart: A Personal Journey through Its Myths and Meanings*: "In the Judaic tradition, heart is the crucible of a person's true essence, whether that essence is noble or wicked or in transformation. And, interestingly, although the Jews were the first people to arrive at an abstract notion of God and thus forbade images of him, he is represented from the very beginning as having a heart like theirs: a central place in him that can be hurt and angered and softened—changed." How does one get a new heart and a new spirit? How is this like a "spiritual transplant"? How might this happen for you? If God, as Godwin implies in the quote, has a heart like ours, how will God get a new heart and a new spirit? How might your image of God change or be transformed as a result of exploring this process?

- What might the world be like were the wicked always to suffer and the righteous always to prosper? In your mind, does the world divide neatly into the wicked and the righteous? Or do you find, as some have said, that the line between good and evil cuts through each human heart? Who in your world do you observe speaking and acting as if there are people who are solely wicked and others who are solely good? Who in your world do you observe speaking and acting differently—believing that the division between good and evil is within themselves and each one of us? How does that belief shape their world view?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "The root of the Hebrew word for compassion is most interesting. That root means womb. Originally, compassion referred to the deep love and empathy a mother has for her children and the accompanying love and empathy experienced by those who have shared the same womb. Jesus replaced the holiness code

admonition, "You must be holy just as God is holy," with the Kingdom code, "You must be compassionate just as your Heavenly Father is compassionate." In Jesus' day, much of society was determined by that holiness orientation, which, of course, led to impatience with those who were not "holy." But where the emphasis on holiness excluded many, Jesus' focus on compassion embraced all: The womb that envelops us is stronger and greater than our sin or even justifiable divine impatience." —*Ron Zorn*

From *Ezekiel/ Interpretation Series: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* by Joseph Blenkinsopp

The general principle—the soul (i.e., the person) that sins shall die—is illustrated by a case history the formulation of which is drawn from the traditional legal repertoire of the priests. The choice of a three-member genealogical sequence, generally the maximum number simultaneously alive and active as moral agents, was no doubt suggested by the old adage about the sins of the fathers being visited on the children to the third and the fourth generation. There is no reason to believe that it contains a cryptic reference to Judean kings (e.g., Hezekiah, Manasseh, or Josiah).

The list of attributes of the righteous person is given in full only for the first generation. In putting together this list, Ezekiel could have drawn on several sources. There are psalms that specify ritual and ethical qualifications for participating in public worship and that have sometimes been described as Torah liturgies (Ps. 15 and 24). These provide an important clue for understanding ethics in Israel by associating moral performance with the holiness of the God who is approached in the act of worship. The point may, incidentally, be somewhat opaque for many Christians today for whom periodic worship is a fairly routine activity with no obvious connection with the moral life. In other psalms (e.g., Ps. 50:16-21), judgment is passed on the wicked in terms similar to Ezekiel's list. Here too we note the insistence on the correlation between ethics and worship. The prophets do not hesitate to condemn the kind of religious observance that manages to coexist with active or even passive collusion with injustice. Indeed, one of the most disturbing aspects of prophetic teaching for the Christian reader should be their attack on contemporary worship (e.g., Amos 5:21-24; Isa. 1:12-17; Micah 6:6-8). Ezekiel's own denunciations may well have been influenced by Jeremiah's one-man picket of the temple (Jer 7:1-8:3), an action that led to his arrest and almost to his death. For a country like the United States, which has the highest statistics for church attendance in the world, the relevance of these prophetic texts should be obvious.

Ezekiel's catalog may also be compared with what is sometimes called "the oath of clearance," in which an accused party dissociates himself under oath from a list of criminal or immoral acts. […] This assurance of life, in the context, means rather more than a promise of survival in the coming holocaust (which would then demand a date before the fall of Jerusalem). It also implies rather less than eternal life in the usual sense of postmortem existence—though that dimension cannot be absolutely excluded at least at the implicit level. Life here has the broader and less precise connotation of association with God, some sense and intimation of which is available for the person who desires it in the act of worship.

From "The Religious Way" in *The Choice is Always Ours* by Gregory Vlastos

There is that in life which makes it necessary that men should find the way of truth, of understanding, of justice, or else destroy themselves and each other. You have not seen it? You cannot move a step but you stumble into it; it is in the structure of your world; you cannot live a day or an hour without saying either yes or no to it, without finding life through it or death without it.

Even a faint glimpse of this reality brings you back to yourself. Whither do you move? With it or without it? The alternatives are simple—terrifyingly simple and clear. To compromise in this matter is to decide. To waver is to decide; to postpone and evade decision is to decide; to hide the matter is to decide. There is no escape. You

must say yes or no. There are a thousand ways of saying no; one way of saying yes; and no way of saying anything else.

From "Apartheid in the Holy Land" an address by Desmond TuTu at the conference *Ending the Occupation* held in Boston, Massachusetts

> [***Ed. Note:*** Desmond TuTu is the former Archbishop of Cape Town and the chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.]

In our struggle against apartheid, the great supporters were Jewish people. They almost instinctively had to be on the side of the disenfranchised, of the voiceless ones, fighting injustice, oppression and evil. I have continued to feel strongly with the Jews. I am patron of a Holocaust centre in South Africa. I believe Israel has a right to secure borders.

What is not so understandable, not justified, is what it did to another people to guarantee its existence. I've been very deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy Land; it reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa. I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at checkpoints and roadblocks, suffering like us when young white police officers prevented us from moving about.[…]

We in South Africa had a relatively peaceful transition. If our madness could end as it did, it must be possible to do the same everywhere else in the world. If peace could come to South Africa, surely it can come to the Holy Land?

My brother Nairn Ateek has said what we used to say: "If peace could come to South and not pro-this people or that. I am pro-justice, pro-free-Africa, surely it can come to dom [sic]. I am anti-injustice, anti-oppression."

But you know as well as I do that, somehow, the Israeli government is placed on a pedestal [in the US], and to criticise it is to be immediately dubbed anti-semitic, as if the Palestinians were not Semitic. I am not even anti-white, despite the madness of that group. And how did it come about that Israel was collaborating with the apartheid government on security measures?

People are scared in this country [the US], to say wrong is wrong because the Jewish lobby is powerful—very powerful. Well, so what? For goodness sake, this is God's world! We live in a moral universe. The apartheid government was very powerful, but today it no longer exists. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pinochet, Milosevic, and Idi Amin were all powerful, but in the end they bit the dust.

Injustice and oppression will never prevail. Those who are powerful have to remember the litmus test that God gives to the powerful: what is your treatment of the poor, the hungry, the voiceless? And on the basis of that, God passes judgment.

We should put out a clarion call to the government of the people of Israel, to the Palestinian people and say: peace is possible, peace based on justice is possible. We will do all we can to assist you to achieve this peace, because it is God's dream, and you will be able to live amicably together as sisters and brothers.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative texts:
Psalm 19
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the LORD *of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*

ENTERING THE STORY

Isaiah 5:1-7 refers to itself as a love song. The book of Isaiah is a composite of two (or maybe three) different bodies of prophetic literature. The first section, chapters 1-39, is attributed to the historical prophet Isaiah, who was active in Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE. The introduction to the book places him in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which would be roughly between 740 and 701 BCE. The kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south have been divided for some two centuries, and the tensions between them increase. Further to the north, the Assyrian empire is rising, and eventually invades Israel and occupies it in 732 BCE. Remember that this part of the Monarchy is destroyed in 722.

The prophet declares judgement on Judah and Jerusalem, pronouncing their leaders to be corrupt and arrogant, and calls on the people to return to their covenant with God. Following the judgement of Zion, those who remain will be cleansed and purified, and God will again reside among them.

Vineyards were a sign of wealth and well-being in the ancient world. The image of Israel as a vineyard tended by God appears several times in Isaiah [3:14-15, 5:1-7, 27:2-6} and Jeremiah [12:10]. It appears again in the Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants [Mt 21:33-41 (the Gospel reading for Proper 22), Mk 12:1-12, Lk 20:9-19].

The last verse of today's section includes a wordplay in Hebrew that does not translate into English. "Justice" in Hebrew is mishpat, while "bloodshed" is mispach; "righteousness" is tzedaqah, while "cry" is tzeaqah.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What is a love song? What is such a song about? Does what? Its purpose? Who sings this love song? To whom is it sung? This love song uses what metaphors and symbols? Write down the verbs in verse 2 describing what the lover has done for the beloved:

The list of things having been done for the beloved ends with what other verb in 5:2b? What does the introduction of expectation tell you about the relationship between this lover and this beloved? What are grapes in contrast to *wild grapes*?

What is being said in 5:3-4? What is the now? What do you make of the refrain about expected appearing again? What significance do you sense in the movement from *I expected it to yield wild grapes* to *why did it yield wild grapes*? Where is the love song moving from and toward?

Now write down the verbs in 5-6:

They describe what?

What more do we learn in 5:7 about the lover's expectations? What more do you know of the difference between grapes and wild grapes?

The lover in the love song had expected what? What is justice? And what is bloodshed? How are the two related? What is the nature of the justice the lover expected? What might it have looked like?

What might righteousness be? What is a cry? How are the two related?

2. Imagine this as a love song or love poem written to you by your lover—a lover who could be God or Life or Creation or Mystery or Wonder or The Source. Return to the verbs in 5:2. What do they suggest about what your lover, be it God or Life or The Holy One, did for you in the beginning?

How were you once a vineyard on a very fertile hill? What may have been the grapes your lover expected from your life? The wild grapes that came?

What more might your lover have done for you? Why has your life yielded wild grapes instead of grapes? What do you know of any experience of what the lover promises in 5:5-6?

How have you known these verbs in your life? How have you as a vineyard been there?

Remember that this love song is written to people in exile. How has your love song come to you in exile times in your life? Instead of the justice you might have been, where have you known bloodshed instead? How the blood of others? How the shedding of your own blood?

In place of righteousness, a cry? What is the cry heard from those around you? From deep within yourself?

3. Read on in chapter 5 through to verse 25:

Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them;
the mountains quaked,
and their corpses were like refuse
in the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.

The verdict that the people are experiencing in the fall of Jerusalem and their exile is what? What is the therefore? The crime? The punishment? Where is the lover now? What might it mean that his hand is stretched out still? What is the cost and promise of the still?

In your life, when the mountains quake and the dead walk in your streets, what do you know about the outstretched hand that has not turned away? Of the still?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Have you ever had a "vision" of what you wanted, hoped for, dreamed of, or expected from a church or community of which you have been a part? How did you feel when what you expected failed, fell apart, and died? What were your hopes and dreams? What happened? What did you say to them? To yourself? What did you do next? What might you have done to influence a different outcome? How do you feel now as you look back? What have you ever known of such an experience in terms of a relationship that mattered? What was the love song you sang? What had you done to make the dream come true? And why didn't it? How did you feel? What did you say to the other? To yourself? What might you have done differently to make the outcome more what you hoped for or expected? How might your expectations have been part of the problem? How do you experience this same hopefulness and disappointment in your relationship to God? What have you learned from being part of a community and surviving a painful relationship that helps you here?

- Have you ever had the experience of birthing and creating something and having it turn out differently than what you expected—perhaps even turning against you in ways you never anticipated. If so, what were your feelings towards your creation? Toward yourself for having the expectations that you did? Toward a world in which this sort of bitter disappointment can take place? What tender and caring feelings yet persist within you towards this creation? What expectations endure? What would have to happen to reawaken that tenderness and those dreams?

- Write a love song that the Lord might sing for the contemporary church in the United States. Put a tune to it if you like. What kind of tune do you imagine: jazz, rock, classical, pop, country, hip-hop? How does your song compare with that in Isaiah 5? What kind of tune would you use for the Isaiah love song?

- As the love song begins the Lord is a lover creating a beautiful vineyard with great care and grand expectations. When the expectations are not met, the Lord is intent on destroying his creation. What do you make of this image of God who is kind, creative, and loving as long as expectations are met? Explore this image of God in your life. How might you know what God expects of you? How do you know if you are meeting those expectations? What do you experience as the cost of not living up to those expectations? In what ways might this image of God be closer to your God image than the God whom Ezekiel describes in last week's text (Ezekiel 18)? What would be required to let go of the one and embrace the other?

- What happens when your expectations do not materialize?. When another does not do what you have in mind? What happens inside you? How have you handled such disappointments? Recall a particular event. How, in actions and not words, have you finished Isaiah's phrase, "now I will tell you what I will do'?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> I thank You God for most this amazing day for
> the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true
> dream of sky; and for everything which is natural
> which is infinite which is yes—*e.e. cummings*

"Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to your neighbors' vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.

All of you together make up one common vineyard, the whole Christian assembly, and you are all united in the vineyard of the mystic body of holy Church from which you draw your life. In this vineyard is planted the vine, which is my only-begotten Son, into whom you must be engrafted. Unless you are engrafted into him you are rebels against holy Church, like members that are cut off from the body and rot."

—Saint Catherine of Siena

[***Ed. Note:*** Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)was a lay member of the Dominican Order who was also a mystic, activist, and author. She had a great influence on Italian literature and the Catholic Church of her time. Catherine was canonized in 1461]

From *Isaiah* by Walter Brueggemann

This extended middle section of chapters 1-12 is complex and intricately woven together. At the outset, the parable of 5:1-7 sets the tone of failure, rejection and judgment. There follows in 5:8-25 a series of woes culminating in 5:25 with the verdict "His anger has not turned away." It is readily noted that the material of 5:8-25 with its woes and the verdict of 5:25 has a counterpart in 9:8-10:4. This later section reiterates the verdict of 5:25 as a refrain in 9:12, 17, 21 and 10:4, and adds an additional woe in 10:1, which brings the total number of woes to seven. Now it may be that 5:8-25 (with the introductory parable of 5:1-7 and an addendum in 5:26-30) together with 9:8-10:4 at one time constituted a single literary unit. If that is so, it is an utterance of uninterrupted negativity.[…]

Although apparently a distinct literary piece, there is no doubt that chapter 5 continues and reiterates the theme of judgment against Jerusalem that we have found massively voiced in 1:3-31 and 3:1-4:1. This long chapter consists of a love poem (w. 1-7), a series of "woe sayings" (vv. 8-23), and an assertion of judgment through a foreign invasion (w. 24-30). These verses quickly articulate a long history between Yahweh and Yahweh's beloved that begins in affection and tenderness (the wondrous memory of Yahweh's initial saving intervention in the life of Israel; w. 1-2) but ends in harshness and trouble (the punishment of exile; w.5-6). The move from wondrous beginning in affection to harsh destruction is made because of the failure of Israel to "produce" (the recalcitrance of the monarchial period during which Israel refused to be obedient to the torah expectations of Yahweh; w.3-4). The poem quickly and in large sweep reviews the entire life of historical Israel in relation to its theological identity.

At the outset we are not told who the speaker is nor what the relationship is between the parties of the love song. Only later, in verse 7, do we learn that Yahweh is the speaker-singer who sings of beloved Israel. The "love song" in fact is sustained only through verses 1-2. Although we expect Yahweh to be the speaker in this poem, in fact someone else, presumably the prophetic poet, sings on behalf of "my beloved" (=Yahweh) concerning "his vine-yard" (=Israel.). The assignment of roles in the poetry is not very clear, but the intention of the prophetic utterance is unmistakable. The landowner (Yahweh as owner of all the land; cf. Exod. 19:5; Lev. 25:23; Psalm 24:1) is deeply devoted to the vineyard and showers upon it rich attentiveness and much hard work, doing all the things necessary to maximize the productivity (i.e., the well-being) of the vineyard. That attentiveness of God for God's people and land is voiced in the verbs "dug, cleared, planted, built, hewed out." The verbs bespeak complete and demanding devotion.

From *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett

In Paris, Simon Thibault had loved his wife, though not always faithfully or with a great deal of attention. They had been married for twenty-five years. There had been two children, a summer month spent every year at the sea with friends, various jobs, various family dogs, large family Christmases that included many elderly relatives. Edith

Thibault was an elegant woman in a city of so many thousands of elegant women that often over the course of years he forgot about her. Entire days would pass when she never once crossed his mind. He did not stop to think what she might be doing or wonder if she was happy, at least not Edith by herself, Edith as his wife.

Then, in a wave of government promises made and retracted, they were sent to this country, which, between the two of them was always referred to as ce pays maudit, "this godforsaken country." Both of them faced the appointment with dread and stoic practicality, but within a matter of days after their arrival a most remarkable thing happened: he found her again, like something he never knew was missing, like a song he had memorized in his youth and had then forgotten. Suddenly, clearly, he could see her, the way he had been able to see her at twenty, not her physical self at twenty, because in every sense she was more beautiful to him now, but he felt that old sensation, the leaping of his heart, the reckless flush of desire. He would find her in the house, cutting fresh paper to line the shelves or lying across their bed on her stomach writing letters to their daughters who were attending university of Paris, and he was breathless. Had she always been like this, had he never known? Had he known and then somehow, carelessly, forgotten? In this country with its dirt roads and yellow rice he discovered he loved her, he was her. Perhaps this would not have been true if he had been the ambassador to Spain. Without these particular circumstances, this specific and horrible place, he might never have realized that the only true love of his life was his wife.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4:1-9

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

ENTERING THE STORY

There are three versions of this parable. The Matthew version is the lectionary text above, there is a version found in Luke 14:15-24 and another version in Thomas 64:1-11 (below). Scholars generally agree Jesus told a story like the one found in all three texts. Each parable reflects the particular writer's purpose.

Matthew's version has often been interpreted allegorically to suggest that the king (God) plans a banquet for his son (Jesus). The invitations are given to his subjects (Judeans). They do not accept the invitations, the king destroys their city (Jerusalem), and the invitations are given to others (Gentiles). This interpretation depicts the Christian version of God dealing with the elect. Thomas' version is relatively simple but has exaggerated the commercial basis for rejecting the invitations. Luke's version seems closer to the style and character of Jesus.

Luke 14:15-24: *One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him; 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, Ihave bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.*

Thomas 64:1-12: *Jesus said, A person was receiving guests. When he had prepared the dinner, he sent his slave to invite the guests. The slave went to the first and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said, "Some merchants owe me money; they are coming to me tonight. I have to go and give them instructions. Please excuse me from dinner." The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master has invited you." That one said to the slave, "I have bought a house, and I have been called away for a day. I shall have no time." The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said to the slave, "My friend is to be married, and I am to arrange the banquet. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me from dinner." The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said to the slave, "I have bought an estate, and I am going to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me." The slave returned and said to his master, "Those whom you invited to dinner have asked to be excused." The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner."*

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Read and compare all three versions in order to get a clearer sense of the parable or perhaps experience the parable with new insight. Take some time to explore the differences and similarities in all three. Make note of what is included and what is omitted:

What do you learn of the host in Matthew?

What do you learn of the host in Luke?

What do you learn of the host in Thomas?

What do you learn of the invited in Matthew's version? Describe the reaction of the invited:

How does the king respond to those invited? What are the reactions of those invited in Luke's version? Make a list of all their excuses:

Consider the four invited ones in Thomas' version. List their excuses:

What do you imagine the king/master/host is intending by inviting guests to dinner and being willing to share his abundance? How might the king/master/host feel when the slave returns to tell him the invited guests are not coming to the dinner he has had prepared? How do you imagine the invited who did not accept the invitation feel? Explore the reactions of the invited in each version.

In Matthew's version:

In Luke's version:

In Thomas' version:

In each version the instructions are given to go out into the streets, lanes, roads to bring back new guests to eat the dinner. What do you imagine are reasons for bringing people from the streets to the dinner? How might the people on the streets respond to the invitation? What do you imagine they think and feel about this invitation to come into the house for dinner?

In what ways has the dinner event changed from the original plans? What do you imagine has happened for the king/master/host as a result of the changes? What of the slave or slaves in each version? What has happened for the one who delivered the invitation?

> In all three versions of this parable, what do you hear Jesus saying? What is Jesus' message between the lines? What is being said about God? What is being said about human beings?

2. How is this story happening in the world around you? Who are the ones preparing a dinner and inviting guests? Who are the invited guests who do not accept the invitation? What excuses are you aware of and hear being made? Who are those in the streets, roads, lanes invited to dinner to take the place of the invited?

3. How is this story an event in your life? What is a dinner you have prepared and no one comes? What do you know of the frustration and embarrassment of inviting guests who do not attend your function? What do you know of the ones who were your first choice?

What do you know of excuses you have used to refuse or avoid an invitation? How are your excuses the same as those in the parable? How are they different? What do you know of the street people who do come? How are your street people changed? How are you changed?

What is an invitation coming to you today? How might you respond?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- What is a wedding? What is a wedding banquet? If you have given such a feast, remember the plans, the decisions, the costs and the promises of putting such an occasion together. If you have not, imagine what such a feast would be like. What food would you serve? Who would be invited? What music, what flowers, what gifts or favors would you provide? What would you wear? What oxen and calves would be slaughtered for the event? What anxieties would be part of the planning of such an event? What hopes would you have for it? Picture such a banquet and feel the resulting disappointment when those who were invited did not come. Imagine the tables, with the uninvited seated there together. What might this tell us about the reign of God? About ourselves?

- *Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find*…Most of us don't spend very much time with people who are not like us. At work, at church, in our communities, we tend to stick close together. Spend some time somewhere where there are people you don't ordinarily encounter—at the mall, at a hospital, at City Hall, at a soup kitchen, in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Imagine inviting everyone you find to dinner. What would it take for you to do that? What fears or anxieties might lead you to be cautious? What possibilities might potentially be opened up? What difference does it make to look at strangers as potential guests?

- What do you know, within yourself, of the king in this parable? What do you know of the disappointment and anger of having people you have counted upon ignore or turn down your invitation to your "party"? On such an occasion who did you invite in their stead, opening your "doors" to any and all rather than to them? When the "others" arrived, what did you experience of suddenly becoming particular about who was in your home or life? At that point in the parable, how was the king feeling? How were you feeling? What is going to happen next at the king's party? At yours?

- *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to…*Let's skip to the part of this comparison in which the king asks the man how he got in without a wedding garment. How was it that this man, of all those "good and bad" people the slaves had gathered in, was the only one accosted for not having a wedding robe? Why may the man have been struck speechless when the king accosted him? What thoughts and feelings may have run through his head and gut? What feelings and thoughts are rising in the king? How have we, rightfully or wrongfully, been in the same spot as the man brought in from the street? Where within us is the one who, despite disappointment, demands that things yet be done correctly? Where is the one who is unable to meet the demands? How can these two, living together in our world or within ourselves, be like the kingdom of heaven? How would you describe a kingdom that promises the banquet but requires participants in the banquet to behave in a certain way, no matter what their circumstances? With what feelings do you look to a kingdom of heaven that might throw you out as the king threw out this unfortunate guest?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan

The Great Supper. There are three versions of this parable. The synoptic tradition is represented by Matthew 22:1-10 and Luke 14:16-24, and there is also a version in Gos. [of] Thom. 64.

(a) The Synoptic Tradition. It is difficult to decide for sure whether Matthew and Luke both found this parable in Q or whether it belongs to their special and independent sources. The main difficulty is that Matthew's version has been considerably changed as compared with Luke's. He has made two major additions. First, he has added on at the end the originally independent parable of the Wedding Garment in 22:11-13 and then made some minor adjustments within the Great Supper in preparation for this appendix. One realizes immediately that this inclusion breaks the logical unity of the parable. The host has just gathered guests off the streets without any warning in 22:9-10 and yet he now expects instant wedding garments and sartorial elegance in 22:11-13.

Second, Matthew has deliberately inserted allusions to the immediately preceding parable of the Wicked Husbandmen from 21:33-46 into the parable of the Great Supper. In this former parable, which will be seen in great detail in the next chapter, the evil tenants killed the owner's servants and even his son so that the owner came and "put those wretches to a miserable death" in 21:41. In the parable of the Great Supper, Matthew drew a parallel to this. The invited guests "seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." It is obvious that 22:6-7, just cited, could not have been part of the original parable: why such violence in declining a dinner invitation, and are we really to imagine the sending of a punitive expedition while the dinner grows cold on the table? Matthew's purpose is clear in all this. He has allegorized the parable into an image of the history of salvation, as he sees it, and by his addition of 22:11-13 he has actualized it in application to the internal tension within the Matthean community. Those originally invited did not come (Israel) and so others (the Gentiles) were brought in to the banquet, but they must still be worthy of this invitation (problem people in Matthew's community). In other words, Matthew combined and collated three independent parables, the Wicked Husbandmen, the Great Supper, and the Wedding Garment into what R.J. Dillon called "the parables of the true Israel," a diptych allegorization of salvation history.

From *Son of Man* by Andrew Harvey

In his daily practice, Jesus rebelled calmly against the deepest rules of his world. He lived his own parable of the Banquet and the injunctions of the master in it: "Go therefore to the thoroughfare and invite to the marriage feast as many as you can find." In the parable, the master's servants "went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found," both bad and good, so the wedding hall was filled with guests. In his daily life, Jesus made a point of sitting down with every kind of person, even outcasts. Jesus' table had the freedom from man-made rules and concepts and differentiations of the Kingdom itself. Just as the table of the Pharisees was a mirror in miniature of the hierarchical world they lived in and strove to keep alive, so Jesus' table—where outcasts ate with unmarried women and tax collectors and apostles all together with Jesus himself—was a mirror of the all-embracing mercy and compassion of the Kingdom, a mirror, in fact, of the supreme feast and Sacred Marriage of matter and spirit, heart and body, heaven and earth to which God was always summoning the whole of humanity.

From *Take This Bread* by Sarah Miles

We unloaded the pallets, set up a ring of tables right around the altar, and turned the rotunda into a big, messy farmers' market, with piles of vegetables and stacks of bread spilling under the icons and next to the silver

crosses. From two until five, we gave out groceries. Most weeks, each visitor could walk out with five pounds of potatoes, some onions, a bag of oranges, pears, grapes, squash, tofu, lettuce, rice, beans, a box of cereal, a box of cookies, two loaves of bread, and some pasta. Often there were extras: milk or cottage cheese; bagels still warm from a wholesaler; even, once, an eight-foot tower of boxed trumpet mushrooms, fragrant and wild-smelling.

We set up a table outside, to greet people and check them in, entering their names in a big book. "There's always this look," said Susan Kellerman, one of our volunteers, "when I tell newcomers they don't need ID, I just want to know their name." She'd hand each person a number, in random order, and a snack; another volunteer would call out numbers, and, ten at a time, people would come in to pick out their food. We lit candles and put an icon at the door, serving everyone who came without exception, just as we did during the Eucharist.

It was a different set of "everyone" than I saw at church on Sundays. The first week, we had thirty-five; the next, fifty; and within three months, we had close to two hundred people walk through our doors each time we held the pantry. […]

A long line would form on Fridays in front of the church, beginning hours before we opened. […] Here was the city I lived in, at last. The pantry wasn't hushed and pious; it was loud and holy. As the whores and cripples, widows and foreigners and thieves and little children gathered outside, it took on an almost biblical atmosphere.

There were a lot of extended Latino families, with fussed-over chubby babies wrapped in pink acrylic blankets. There were black grandmothers from the projects nearby and a beautiful deaf woman with her three kids. There were homeless crackheads and street kids and a couple of schizophrenics; a bunch of old Moldavian ladies in head scarves; Russians with gold teeth; chain-smoking Chinese men in jackets. There was a hyper, skinny black man who danced compulsively to the music on his headphones, whirling around on the sidewalk, shouting out "Love ya! Love ya!" over and over. There was a very sick prostitute and her faithful friend, who'd sit on the steps sharing cigarettes. There was Phil, the speed freak; and Michael, the big scruffy British guy; and Nirmala, the radiantly calm Chilean woman—all three of whom would later become volunteers themselves. Nirmala chatted easily with me. She lived serenely in a single-room-occupancy hotel, over a bar, on disability. "I'm not happy," she told me, "but I'm content. Content is deep."

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him-- and the gates shall not be closed:

I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron,

I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me,

so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.

I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things.

ENTERING THE STORY

Distinct from the earlier Isaiah of Chapter 5 which we considered two weeks earlier in Proper 22 and who lived in the 8th century BCE, this Second Isaiah comes from the time of exile in Babylonia in the 6th century. This text is from 530 BCE more or less at the cusp of the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. Isaiah speaks about who will liberate, save, deliver the people and lead them home.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What do you know about the exile of the Jews in Babylonia? What might it have been like? What is exile? What might it have been for them? Exiled from what? To what? Who is speaking? Who is being addressed?

What do you know about Cyrus? What about the Persians and Babylonians?

What is the Lord saying to Cyrus? What is he to do? Become? The Lord calls Cyrus what?

The word translated here from the Hebrew word for "messiah" is anointed. Remember that in the Hebrew tradition anointing was done to kings, priests and prophets. Though it designated a call and some sense of being set apart, it never signified divinity. This was also true into New Testament times. The later Greek texts of the gospels translate the Hebrew "messiah" or anointed as "Christ." One might thus speak of King David as a Hebrew messiah or Jewish Christ just as some people do when they refer to Jesus as being a son of messiah David. Cyrus the Persian is the only non-Jew in scripture referred to as anointed, messiah, or Christ. Why might God choose one such as Cyrus to lead the Hebrew people home? Why Cyrus rather than to raise up another Moses or David from within the Jewish people?

How do you suppose those in exile in Babylonia felt about being liberated, delivered, and even saved by a messiah, anointed one, or Christ?

If the disturbing aspect of such a novel choice is difficult to grasp, turn to the story in Luke 10:30-35 and read about the man left to die in a ditch who is rescued by one of the hated Samaritans after the priest and Levite have passed him by. The dissonance may feel similar. Wonder how the world tilts for both parable listener and liberated Jew heading home from Babylon.

What are we learning here about Cyrus? About the Lord God?

2. What do you know about exile in our world? Who are the exiles and where are they exiled to? What kinds of exiles are there? How might one be in exile in one's own country or church or family?

How might one be exiled from or even within oneself? Where or what is the "Babylon" that holds people captive? Alienated, estranged and separated from people, places and things that matter; stuck far from the "home" where one is meant to be with others and even self? Who might be the Cyrus in our world today? Who might be the one called, named, armed to set us free?

3. Who might be the Cyrus in your world, down the street, in your office or sitting on the last pew? Whom might be the one you call "evil," whom God means to bring you safely home? Who may be the outsider, enemy, or the marginal other who is the last person in the world you would think God would ever arm to set you free?

4. What do you know of that part of yourself that you keep at arm's length or deny or would ignore, discount, and am embarrassed by that is the one destined to break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron that hold you captive?

What is your Babylon? Who is your Cyrus? What is the cost and the promise of following him or her home?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- The Lord gives treasures of darkness and riches in order for Cyrus to recognize who is calling him. How might you be able to recognize when the Lord calls you? How might you understand in a new way the things and events speaking to people like us? Can you see what might be called the treasures that are laid out? How might you see things and events in your life in such a new way?

- Imagine what it might be like to be Cyrus—chosen by one you do not know (who yet knows you) to serve a purpose that is not your own! Do you suppose the people of Israel saw Cyrus as God's deliverer? If not, what might have blocked their vision? If so, what must it have been like to be delivered by a foreigner, stranger, one who did not know their God? Looking back over your life, do you see instances in which you were delivered by a foreigner, a stranger, a completely unexpected source? Might God have been acting through that unexpected one? How does it look to you now? How did it look to you then?

- Make a list of some of the ways in which people are in exile today: held hostage by the awful fears of terrorism, angry about being robbed by those who were once respected as leading the corporate world, irked by continued threats of a baseball strike driven once again by greed, dismayed by a church shamed by abuse, grieving over pensions and college funds and hopes for the future evaporating on Wall Street. Who is Cyrus the enemy hidden in all that darkness? What about the terrifying possibility that those hated and distrusted the most might be our savior if we are ever to be liberated and led home?

- Make a list of other words for light and dark, weal and woe. Consider giving expression of these words in art or collage. Put your additional words and creative expressions in front of you and ponder what kind of God creates such opposites. How do you know the pull and tension of living in these opposites in your life? What deeper knowing of yourself might be gained from consciously living in the tension of the opposites rather than removing any ambiguity and living instead in a black and white world? What is happening in this exploration to your image of God? What new questions are arising?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Isaiah* by Walter Brueggemann

These verses exhibit Yahweh addressing Cyrus, summoning him to do the geopolitical work intended by Yahweh in behalf of Israel. Such a mode of address is a "royal decree" wherein God addresses a king in order to authorize, empower, legitimate, and instruct. Scholars suggest that the closest biblical parallel is Psalm 2, wherein Yahweh addresses David as king, a psalm incidentally used often in the New Testament for God's authorization of Jesus as "king" (messiah) and "Son" (Matt. 3:17, 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 3:22, 9:25). The first words of verse 1 are among the most remarkable in the Bible, first because Cyrus, the coming leader of the coming superpower, is named by Yahweh, and second, because the name Cyrus is linked to the Jewish title "Messiah." The NRSV translation "anointed" is a rendering of the noun "anointed one," that is, "Messiah," which translated into Greek is "Christ." That is, in Old Testament parlance, this Gentile is "the Christ," the royal designee to enact the salvific intention of Yahweh. What a mouthful! Some scholars believe, moreover, that in this utterance Cyrus the Persian received and takes over the claims of the Davidic dynasty, so that he is now the bearer of Davidic promises. The breathtaking affirmation is that Israel will be saved by a non-Jew. Isaiah in exile thinks very large about God's future in the world and is not contained by Israel's conventional categories of faith and hope. Rescue by such an agent is scarcely acceptable in the community of exiles (see w. 9-11). When this affirmation is pushed into the New Testament, moreover, the church is confronted by the same scandal when it is confessed that God's work is done by Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is an uncredentialed nobody who comes from a no-place (Nazareth; see John 1:46). On the other hand, it is not only Jesus of Nazareth but it is "him crucified," the staggering affirmation that God's power is enacted in Friday weakness. The early church (and the subsequent church) faced the same scandal as did the exiles, only more completely so in the claim that Jesus is "the Word enfleshed."

Beyond Cyrus and Jesus, moreover, we may observe that the same gospel reality continues to operate wherever God's purposes for the future are carried by "unacceptable" human agents: so Marx and Freud may be prophets in their time and place, and all sorts of conventionally unacceptable people—like minorities, women, the poor, homosexuals—may turn out to be bearers of God's possibilities in the world. In our text it is clear that God's future for Israel is not to be enacted in the way the Jews either expected or preferred.

“Blessed Are You” a prayer by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock:
you who yield only to force, you who cause us to work if we
would eat.
Blessed be you, perilous matter, violent sea, untamable passion:
you, who, unless we fetter you, will devour us.
Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution,
reality ever new-born; you who, by constantly sharing
our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further
in our pursuit of the truth.
Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable time,
boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and generations:
you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards
or measurements reveal to us the dimensions of God.
Blessed be you, impenetrable matter: you who, interposed
between our minds and the world of essences, cause us to languish
with the desire to pierce through the seamless veil of phenomena.

Blessed be you, mortal matter: you who one day will undergo
the process of dissolution within us and will thereby take us
forcibly into the very heart of that which exists.

You who batter us and then dress our wounds,
you who resist and yield to us,
you who wreck and build,
you who shackle and liberate,
the sap of our souls,
the hand of God,
the flesh of Christ:
it is you, matter, that I bless.

[***Ed. Note:*** Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ (1881–1955) was a French philosopher and Jesuit priest who was also a paleontologist and geologist. He participated in the discovery of the Peking Man (homoerectus fossils) in 1923-27 in China. He conceived the idea of the "Omega Point" and believed the universe was constantly evolving. He also developed Vladimir Vernadsky's concept of noosphere (the sphere of reason). He received a monitum (an errant clergy warning) from the Church but was posthumously praised by Pope Benedict XVI and his teachings were cited by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, "Laudato si"'.]

From *The World Below* by Sue Miller

I was talking about my deepening sense of my grandmother's life, in particular everything that I had come to understand about tuberculosis and the shame and fascination of the san [sanitorium], and what a revelation that was to me. "That's what the task of the historian must be—is it? To explain how life felt as it went by. Not just what happened, but how differently it signified: what happened."

"Yes, that's apt," he said. "I've often thought of it as like anthropology. Like explaining the rules of another culture, another country. Which it seems to me the past is, in some sense."[…] "I'm sure there are countless other things that would be as revelatory if you knew of them. If you were looking for them. They'd change the ground under the story."[…]Let's use my wife as an example. She was a believer. Religious. And that was always present in her life in a way I sometimes lost track of, since I'm not. Or at least not in the way she was. For her it was, I would say, the central invisible fact of her life. And yet you could write her life's story without including it if you didn't know specifically about it. It was simply underneath everything else. As it may well have been for your grandmother. Probably was, in point of fact."

"Do you think so?"

"I can't know, really. But she was a churchgoer till the last. I remember that. We used to see her there every Sunday in the summers we were up before she died, in one or another of her hats. Many hats." He smiled at me. "You will remember them" […] "Now maybe she went for the sociability, or just because she'd always gone. But maybe, just maybe, she was a believer. A true believer. And then, if that was so, it would raise other questions. You'd have to know, for instance, what kind of a believer. Did she see each moment of her life as given by God: here, a test to rise to, there, a moment of grace? Or did she just assume him as a' beneficent presence? Somehow, maybe even casually, in charge of everything."

"I see," I said. "Yeah. Well, all that would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

"It would. But it's not something she's likely to have written about explicitly."

"No," I said. "No, I don't think I've come across it. Explicitly." […] Now, because he was silent, I looked at him. He was watching me, frowning.

"What?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry. I was just wondering, I suppose. What you would say the central fact of your life is. The one that I can't see."

"Maybe you see it all," I said.

He laughed and shook his head.

"No, really. I'm a thoroughly modern woman, after all. Maybe what you see" — I raised my arms — "is exactly what you get."

As he set his mug down, he said, "Now that is something I very much doubt."



Hand of God (1123) Fresco detail from the vault of the apse of Saint Climent de Taull. Located in the Museu Nacional d'Art Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain
(Source: Commons.Wikimedia.org)

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A

Alternative readings:

Psalm 90

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain – that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees – as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua, son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

ENTERING THE STORY

This final pericope in the book of Deuteronomy closes the Pentateuch, what has become formally known now as the Torah. The current passage can be broken up into four main sections. In section 1 Moses ascends Mount Nebo and is shown, by YHWH, the Promised Land (vv.1-4). In section 2 Moses dies and is buried at the command of YHWH (vv. 5-7). In section 3 the Israelites mourn for Moses and Joshua arises as the new leader who was previously ordained by Moses (vv. 8-9). Finally, section 4 is Moses' eulogy (vv. 10-12).

An interesting detail in Genesis 6:3 serves to provide a link between the beginning of the Torah, in Genesis, and the end of the Torah here in Deuteronomy 34:1-12. In Genesis 6:3 God tells Noah after the flood that God's spirit shall not remain in human beings forever, for they are flesh and their days shall be 120 years. Scholars have noted that this particular age-limit given to human beings (120 years) does not occur until (nor does it occur in the Hebrew Bible after) Moses. This detail helps us picture the arc or envelope of the Torah, and the particular emphasis within, upon the character and leadership of Moses.

While the passage reads as a kind of eulogy for Moses, more likely it was intended to do more than provide such a eulogy. Its strong claims to Moses' authority and his incomparability to others that would arise after him (34:10-12) indicate an ideological nuance on behalf of the authors. The writers of Deuteronomy, who were either responsible for editing, creating, or finding the book of the Torah (that is, Deuteronomy) wanted to make it clear that the instructions given by Moses, set during Israel's time in the wilderness before entering the promised land, were not to be seceded by any others who should come after him.

The emphasis within these twelve verses on the verbs "to see" with one's "eyes" (34:1-4, 7-8, 11-12) and "to know" (34:5-6, 9-10) indicates the intimacy and therefore the weight of the relationship between Moses and YHWH. This weight furthers the claims to the legitimacy and authority of the book of the Torah, and more specifically Deuteronomy, to a community on the cusp of establishing (or re-establishing if constructed and read by Israelites during postexilic times) their way of living together. To state that Moses was known by YHWH face-to-face the author directly counters the proclamation in Exodus 33:18-23 where it is written that YHWH said to Moses, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live… my face shall not be seen." The author(s) of Deuteronomy are making an important claim about the uniqueness of Moses and paralleling Moses' uniqueness to that of YHWH. YHWH, and therefore Moses are to be regarded as the sole authority over Israel no matter the circumstances that lie ahead.

We can read this passage from the perspective of Moses, the Lord, the Israelites and Joshua. Take some time to read this passage from each of these varying points of view and see what emerges from the text.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. First read this passage from the perspective of Moses. What is this experience like, being brought up out of your people who are standing in the valley of Moab, to the top of Mount Pisgah? What is it like to have the Lord show you the vastness of the land your people are about to enter—the fulfillment of an age-old promise to the ancestors? What do you imagine Moses feels as he beholds the promise with his eyes but knows he will not be crossing over? What might the experience of death be when one dies with *his sight unimpaired and his vigor unabated*?

Have you ever had an experience where you helped to prepare and guide a group of people, an organization, a community, or your family, to a particular moment but were unable to see them through the transition? What kind of leadership does it take to prepare and lead toward a vision? What kind of leadership might it take to implement that vision? How are these two kinds of leadership similar? How are they different?

Sometimes throughout life we condition ourselves to lead in a particular way. We lead from a place of strength informed by our dominant mode of living, a mode that seems more natural because it is more comfortable or perhaps more acceptable to others or to ourselves. Have you ever had an experience where you have had to die to this dominant mode of living or particular way of leading? Who is the Moses in you that has had to let go or die to this comfortable or dominant way of leading?

2. Reading this passage from the perspective of the Lord, what is it like to know Moses face-to-face? What do you think knowing someone face-to-face entails? How do you imagine the relationship between Moses and the Lord? How might it feel, from the perspective of the Lord, to know this is the last moment you will have, in this particular way, with the leader chosen by you to lead your people? What do you imagine the death and burial ritual between Moses and the Lord is like, alone on the mountain in view of the Promised Land?

When have you had to lay something to rest, something that you lived in close communion with for a very long time? Perhaps, in private, you have had to lay to rest a relationship with another person, or long-term project, an idea, or a personal conviction. What is felt in the privacy of this inner experience?

3. Reading this passage from the perspective of the people, what is it like to wait in the plains of Moab while your leader traverses the mountain on the cusp of entering into the long-awaited land? What is it like to experience the death of your leader who was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel (Deut. 34:11-12)?

What might your time of mourning in the plains of Moab entail? What kinds of rituals might you imagine would be beneficial during this kind of momentous transition? What would it be like not to have a body to bury?

Have you ever experienced this kind of loss? The loss of a great leader without due warning and without having the chance to see or touch the body one last time? Have you experienced this kind of transition in your own life? How about in the life of your church? What are some ways you or your community or church could commemorate such transitional moments? What kind of preparation do you imagine is necessary during these kinds of transitions?

In what ways are you the people of Israel mourning what was as you await what is to come? What practices might you inhabit as a way of honoring your old habits of living, your own pass through the desert before taking up a new position, perspective or way of living?

4. Finally, how might it feel to be Joshua during this moment of transition? What do you imagine Joshua's experience is like during this time of mourning? What would it be like to be the next leader after Moses?

Have you ever had to follow in the footsteps of a great leader? What was that like? What was challenging? Rewarding? What did it bring up for you?

Who or what is the Joshua in you? Is there a new way of seeing? Is there another aspect of your personality ready to start leading? What is that new perspective arising in you? How do you feel it will be to allow the Joshua in you to take lead?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Carl Jung proposed that our unconscious includes archetypal images of living and being that can present an individual with an entirely other perspective. These can feel threatening as they challenge our dominant mode of being, what Jung calls our ruling principle. These others within bring to consciousness our own inferior function, those aspects of our personality that have laid in the shadows too long and therefore have not been able to grow, have not had a voice in our daily living. Engaging with these other perspectives within can feel like a kind of death to the ego, to one's former way of leading. What are the dominant ways in which you live, act and lead in the world? What might it be like to let another perspective take leadership for a while? What would this other perspective be like?

- What kind of eulogy would you imagine would be written about you regarding your time lived on this earth? Take some time in silence. Pick up some paper and a pen or pencil and write your own eulogy. First, write your eulogy how you imagine others in your life might write it. Next, write your eulogy from your own perspective. How do the two eulogies differ? What was it like to imagine your own eulogy? What did this exercise bring up for you?

- *Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah…and the Lord showed him the whole land…*Take some art materials and give some expression to where you have come from. Give some form to Egypt and the court, to whatever burning bushes you have encountered in your life, to your callings and your Red Seas, to the wilderness wanderings, and the visions of where you have been led, and what might be there for those who are following you. Take some time to form your journey, your encounters with the holy, and the insights given in those moments. Reflect, as you encounter your life, on what has been holy ground. Reflect on the cost, and the promise, of what you have known face-to-face on this journey.

EXPLORING FURTHER

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now—because I've been to the mountaintop. I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live… but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will, and God's allowed me to go to the mountain. I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want to know tonight that we

as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." —*Martin Luther King Jr., 1968*

"The essence of wandering in the wilderness. A person, who as leader of his people goes this way, with a remnant (more is unthinkable) of consciousness about what is happening. He is on the trail of Canaan for his entire life; that he should see the land only just before his death is incredible. This last prospect could only have the purpose of demonstrating how incomplete a moment human life is, incomplete because this kind of life could go on endlessly and yet would result in nothing other than a moment. Not because his life was too short does Moses not reach Canaan, but because it was a human life."—*Franz Kafka* (Diaries 1914-1923)

It always felt to me—a wrong
To that Old Moses—done—
To let him see—the Canaan—
Without the entering—

And tho' in soberer moments—
No Moses there can be
I'm satisfied—the Romance
In point of injury—

The fault—was doubtless Israel's—
Myself- had banned the Tribes-
And ushered Grand Old Moses
In Pentateuchal Robes

Upon the Broad Possession
'Twas little—But titled Him—to see—
Old Man of Nebo! Late as this—
My justice bleeds—for Thee
—*Emily Dickinson*

From *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* by Ilana Pardes

When Moses goes up to Mount Nebo, he goes alone, "solitary as he has always been, more solitary than he has ever been before," but his final vision is meant to be seen by all. From Mount Nebo, Moses can see the power and limits of his dreams, the power and limits of national dreams. He will not cross the Jordan River – death is an aborted rite of passage—but the land of promise (all of it) is right there before his eyes, with its tribal divisions, awaiting the crossing of the new generation. The Bible does not offer the consolation of afterlife but rather a story of national continuity under the vigilance of God. The death of Moses and his generation is not the end of the story. Their dreams are to be pursued by those who follow them, much as they followed in the footsteps of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the land of Canaan.

From Mount Nebo, Moses can see the tremendous journey the nation has made. What a road, what a fate, lie between the times in which the Hebrew slaves were crushed by Pharaonic bondage and the euphoric national revelation of Mount Sinai, between the persecution of the nation by another's law, by Pharaoh's decrees, and the foundation of an independent legal apparatus, between the ongoing thirst and hunger in the wilderness and the discovery of a new promising landscape beyond the desert.

But Mount Nebo provides not only a hopeful glimpse of the nation's future. It marks the unmistakable fissure that lies between revolutionary dreams—dreams of a just society in a bountiful landscape—and their realization. If Moses' "eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deut. 34:7) at the moment of his death, it is because he can now see not only the fulfillment of his national dreams but also their shortcomings.

Moses is a member of the desert generation, and its critique of national premises is not entirely foreign to him. He realizes, with the ten rebellious spies, that the land of milk and honey may devour its inhabitants, that the fruitful land has its snares, that settling down in Canaan may turn out to be something of a curse rather than a blessing. He realizes, with the other giants of the desert generation, that a land that is "not sown" leaves more room for dreaming than a tilled land whose boundaries are determined via horrifying wars and bloodshed.

From "The Real Work" in *The Illuminated Rumi* by Coleman Barks and Michael Green

There is one thing in this world that you must never forget to do. If you forget everything else and not this, there's nothing to worry about; but if you remember everything else and forget this, then you will have done nothing in your life.

It's as if a king has sent you to some country to do a task, and you perform a hundred other services, but not the one he sent you to do. So human beings come to this world to do particular work. That work is the purpose, and each is specific to the person. If you don't do it, it's as though a priceless Indian sword were used to slice rotten meat. It's a golden bowl being used to cook turnips, when one filing from the bowl could buy a hundred suitable pots. It's a knife of the finest tempering nailed into a wall to hang things on.

You say, "But look, I'm using the dagger. It's not lying idle." Do you hear how ludicrous that sounds? For a penny, an iron nail could be bought to serve the purpose. You say, "But I spend my energies on lofty enterprises. I study jurisprudence and philosophy and logic and astronomy and medicine and all the rest." But consider why you do those things. They are all branches of yourself.

Remember the deep root of your being, the presence of your lord. Give your life to the one who already owns your breath and your moments. If you don't, you will be exactly like the man who takes a precious dagger and hammers it into his kitchen wall for a peg to hold his gourd. You'll be wasting valuable keenness and foolishly ignoring your dignity and your purpose.

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*This year we are using the Lectionary for All Saints Day, November 1, 2020.

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Joshua 3:7-17
Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 23:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so people persecuted the prophets who were before you."

ENTERING THE STORY

Closely akin to this simpler form of apocalyptic saying are blessings and woes. They convey a similar type of dualistic message, but expressed more bluntly, either as a positive reward or as a threat of punishment in eschatological terms. Here too there is often a status-reversal element. Although this type of saying is not as common in the Gospels, it is among the most famous, especially in the Matthean form of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12).[…]

They are sometimes called makarisms, from the Greek word makarismos (here translated "blessed") at the beginning of each statement; the Latin equivalent is beati, from which we get the term "beatitude." In part because they are only formulated as positive statements, they are often assumed to refer primarily to one's spiritual life; however, a social dimension is also present.

These sayings occur in slightly different form in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and thus derive from Q tradition. Their formulation in the Lukan version, while structurally similar, conveys a much sharper tone:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (6:20-23)

The Lukan version has a much stronger sense of status reversal between the now and the future, but couched in explicitly socioeconomic terms. Poverty, hunger, and sorrow here are real social ills. This social aspect of the Lukan version comes through especially in the following verses, where—in sharp contrast to the Matthean version—the "blessings" are paralleled by corresponding "woes":

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. (6:24-26)

Hence, even though the Matthean and Lukan versions of these sayings clearly seem to derive from a common oral tradition, their tone and meaning change dramatically based on different subtle shifts in wording by each of these two Gospel authors. Both versions are based in apocalyptic ideas, but the one in Matthew has been taken in the direction of moral guidelines that are understood to govern one's whole life. The Lukan version seems to be more about correcting particular ills of society. Which of the two versions is more likely to have come from Jesus himself is thus a matter of some debate, but most scholars tend to view the Lukan form as the more original. The Matthean form has been adapted to a new social and literary context.[1]

1 L. Michael White, *From Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* HarperCollins2010), pp. 200-201.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.* Both the setting and the audience for these famous teachings are provided by the author of the gospel of Matthew. Why might the author have chosen such a place and these people? Where does Jesus teach? To whom is this sermon preached? What might *the mountain* have meant to those who were listening to the story about this sermon?

> *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven…*What does it mean to say something is blessed? What kinds of experiences do we expect when we hear that someone is blessed?

Luke's version of the sermon is different (see ENTERING THE STORY above). What might be the difference between saying "*blessed are you who are poor*" (as in Luke's version) and "*blessed are the poor*..."? What might Matthew want us to know by expressing the blessing in this way? What might a disciple have assumed about the source of a blessing? Who or what blesses according to the text?

What might be difficult to hear or understand in these particular blessings? What might being poor in spirit be about? Who are the poor in spirit? How does one become poor in spirit? What is the blessing? What might happen with those who are not poor in spirit? What would not being poor in spirit look like? How might such a person not be blessed?

2. Who are those in your life at work or at home, at church or on the road that bless those around them? List some:

How do they bless? What qualities of mind or heart do they have? How are they blessed?

3. What do you know within yourself, at home, at work, on the road, that hears a blessing? Make a list of at least five things, people, qualities, or experiences that you have experienced as a blessing.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

What needs a blessing? What do you know of a part of yourself that can bless? Who or what do you bless? What might you bless today?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Take just one of the groups Jesus names and ponder for a little how being, say, one of the *meek* might play out in your life. What costs might you experience? Some could be that your work is undervalued, you could lose respect in your community, could lose out in climbing "the slippery pole" of professional advancement, or miss your train in the five o'clock crush in the subway. What might be the promises? What is it to be blessed? To know inside that you have behaved rightly? To feel closer to God? To sense that by setting your own agenda aside you

may have helped another? You might choose just one of these beatitudes and play with it. Ask how would this work in my life. What might I risk if I made this beatitude a consistent rule for my life? What blessing might befall me if I did, and what might it look like?

- As noted above, what Jesus says about hunger and thirst in Matthew differs from Luke's version. In Matthew we read: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*" But Luke reads: "*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*" How do you read any differences between the two? What are some differing kinds of hunger? How do people then and now get hungry? What kind of hunger do you suppose Matthew had in mind? How do you therefore assume Matthew's hearers or readers are hungry? And what kind of hunger might Luke have in mind? His audience includes what kind of folk? If Jesus said either, which version of the teaching might he have said? What kind of hunger do you sense in your world? Who are the hungry ones on TV news, riding with you on the bus, at your gym or day care center, in your office, or around your dining room table? Such people are yearning to be fed what by whom? For what are you hungry? When you brave being the most honest, what is it for which you hunger? What are some of the ways you are trying to satisfy your hunger? How are you starving yourself to death?

- It's tempting to read the beatitudes as a list of desired qualities, like the Scout's Law: "trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent." Do these things and you will be blessed. Looking closer, we might see that these are not requirements; they are descriptions of different kinds of people and experiences. Which of them do you feel most connected to? Which seems furthest from your own experience? Take time to live into how you discover yourself to be poor in spirit, merciful, or persecuted. How do Jesus' words strike you?

EXPLORING FURTHER

“Blessed are the Merciful” by Kathie Collins

One day I looked at you
and realized my belly was
soft again.

The fetus conceived of
your betrayal and my
anger, floating months

past its due date in a bitter sea of self- righteousness
had dissolved—
a miscarriage of justice
that felt for all the world

like grace,
like a blessing,
like a river of mercy

flowing through us,
catching us in a current
of divine love.

“Vacillation IV” by William Butler Yeats

My fiftieth year had come and gone, I
sat, a solitary man, In a crowded London
shop, An open book and empty cup On
the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed My
body of a sudden blazed; And twenty
minutes more or less It seemed, so great
my happiness, That I was blessed and
could bless.

"Fortunate are the poor in spirit" by Louis Evely from *That Man is You*

That means:
Fortunate are those who are willing
To let themselves be censured by the word of God,
To re-examine their views,
To believe they haven't yet understood a thing,
To be taken by surprise,
To have their mind changed,
To see their convictions,
Their principles,
Their tidy systems
And everything they took for granted
Swept out from under them,
And to face the fact, once and for all,
That there is no such thing as a matter of course
And that God can ask anything.

From *Creation Continues* by Fritz Kunkel

The First Section of the Sermon provides nothing less than the Magna Charta of the kingdom of heaven on earth. It does not refer, however, to the kingdom of heaven as a realm beyond space and time. If we suppose that the promise of "rewards" in the Beatitudes can be fulfilled only after death, we deprive the Sermon of its actuality and efficacy. If we understand it as a statement about actual events in the spiritual realm here on our earth, taking place within us and within our fellowmen, it will prove not only to be true, but also to be charged with power almost to the extent of being dangerous.[…]

The Beatitudes, the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, convey an inner experience, a new discovery, which overthrows our natural philosophy of life. A step of development, an achievement of conscious growth, is proclaimed in appalling, though simple terms: nonsensical oratory to those who are not ready for it; clarifying insight and unquestionable truth to those who have passed the test of evolution; help, comfort, and remedy to those who struggle in the midst of painful transition.

The proclamation of the kingdom is a series of paradoxes, built in pairs around the center, the fourth beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Hunger for

righteousness means in modern language "hunger for spiritual evolution." Even in the Old Testament the righteous one is the mature one who lives up to the will of God. To be discontent with our spiritual situation, to crave for something better with all the violence and recklessness of people who are starving to death, that is the inner situation of those who are blessed.

Nobody has this blessing as a birthright. We have to deserve it by our own endeavor. We must, therefore, first understand that we do not have it. We are like landless peasants, like settlers without farms, hungry, thirsty, demoralized. Suddenly the message comes that there is land to be had. Claims can be staked with the government, and everyone who is aware of his poverty joins the surging crowd of pioneers, shouting for land.... There is, of course, the danger that good news may be misunderstood and the new property misused. The hardships of the journey are a safeguard, but not a sufficient one. Matthew, therefore, surrounds the fanfare of the spiritual riot by two restrictions: only the meek and the merciful are accepted.



John the Merciful Aiding Impoverished Merchant (1497-1519) artist unknown, Originally located at St. Catherine's Church in Krakow, now located at the National Museum of Poland, Krakow, Poland. (Source: Commons.Wikimedia.org)

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1. Joshua 24:1-3a [4-13], 14-25 38
2. Entering the Story 38
3. Exploring the Story 39
4. Between the Lines 40
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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

[4-13 I gave him Isaac and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the LORD he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant.]

"Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed;18 and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!" Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

ENTERING THE STORY

In the final days of the forty years of their wilderness journey, the people are addressed by Moses who instructs them what they are to do once they cross the Jordan River into Canaan. Moses tells them ahead of time because, though he will see the land from a distance, he will die before the river is crossed. It is for Joshua to lead them into the land where he is to gather them as Moses commands at Shechem (the city below the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim). Deuteronomy 27:1-8: *Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today. On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. You shall*

write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over, to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. And you shall build an altar there to the LORD your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. You must build the altar of the LORD your God of unhewn stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, rejoicing before the LORD your God. You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly.

This week's lectionary selection describes how Joshua gathers the tribes at Shechem as Moses ordered, recites their history and invites them to join him in a covenant to serve the Lord as one united people.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.* Joshua begins a recital of the history of the people and their relationship with the Lord. How does he begin his recitation? What figures are named, and what are the circumstances of the people of Israel? Read verses Joshua 24:4-13 which are omitted from this week's lectionary but included above. Describe what then happens. Make note of some of the important events and people Joshua recollects. In your own words, describe where the people have been and what has happened to them in their relationship with the God of Israel, beginning with Abraham and extending to this ceremony at Shechem:

*"Now therefore..."*Joshua now turns his attention to what? The time that concerns him is when? The therefore implies what link between the past history and now? Joshua tells the people: *"Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

The Hebrew word translated by the New Revised Standard Version as revere is more often rendered as fear. What is the difference for you? Why might the translator choose one rather than the other? Which fits for you? The choice this day is what? How do you suppose Joshua is feeling as he tells the old story and now presents the people with a decision? What might be happening for those who are gathered to listen to him?

What do you imagine is at stake here? What are the dimensions of the choice before them? What happens if they choose one way or another? What's the deal?

2. Take time to consider the long ago of your ancestors. Who, in your history, are the *Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor* who lived beyond the river? Who are the beginning people in the history of your family over the centuries? What gods were those ancestors serving?

Who are the forefathers and foremothers in your lifetime? Who are the ancient ones out of your childhood, from a distant past, in a primordial world? Where have you come from and where have you been all these years? Take some time to recall a few of the important people and events, places and choices in your personal journey:

Name your gods when you *lived beyond the Euphrates*. Recall the gods you served when you were beyond the river and in Egypt as you passed through childhood, into adolescence, as a young adult, into middle age, and through how many years until your now.

3. Consider your *now therefore*. At this moment as you look back, mindful of the past, who do you choose to serve? Who have you been serving lately? Joshua suggests that one's god is that which is reverenced, feared, treated with sincerity and served faithfully. When you apply such criteria to your life, what or who are the gods you have been serving over the years? Lately? How has that god—be it Spirit god of Church, career, success, sex, fame, portfolio, health, bottle, family, purity, or ego—been faithful to you and brought you to this day?

> On this particular day of now as you look back and take stock, who do you choose to serve? How might deciding and saying YES to whatever god you choose tilt, shape, or refashion your life?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- "*Choose this day whom you will serve*." How do you hear these words? As a challenge, demand, opportunity, or what? Reflect on the word choose. Being able to choose, having a choice can be powerful, empowering; one is no longer in the "victim" role or position. Even not choosing is a form of choosing. How do you view choice? What thoughts or feelings come up when you think about choosing? How about the word serve? What comes to mind when you consider the words serving, service or serve? What are some other words for serve? How do you exercise choice when deciding whom to serve?

- In the minds of the people listening to Joshua, what might be the practical benefits of continuing some level of relationship with the gods from beyond the Euphrates, from Egypt, or even those native to the spot where they find themselves? In public or personal life of our day, what practical benefits accrue for you from maintaining a positive relationship with the gods or values of competition, national security, the bottom line, family, institutional church, correct behavior? Do you find it necessary to preserve your relationship with God or with your own self, to turn away from these other gods? How exactly would your behavior be different if you did? It might help to answer this question if you took paper and pencil and listed actions and decisions you have made over the last 24 hours. Opposite each, write the name of the god you were really serving with that action or decision. How would your list look different if you had been serving Joshua's god? What activities and decisions do you anticipate in the next 24 hours? List them on paper. What god or gods will you be serving in each?

- Consider the choice of Shechem as the place for Joshua to gather together the people after they have crossed the river. Read Jerome Creach in EXPLORING FURTHER about “why Shechem”. It is where God first addressed Abraham and where the promises were made. It is where, in an idol-burning ceremony, Jacob earlier told the people to put away foreign gods. Geography thus serves to link the past and enliven the present. What are the "Shechems" in your journey? What are the places on the map as well as part of your inner geography where you first discovered your self, where you made the defining promises, and where you first chose whom and what you would serve?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> “Wreckage, thy name is progress. It hurts just to think of you.” —*Stephen Dunn*

"To 'fear the Lord' is to recognize the magnitude of God's demands, not to approach God casually as friend to friend, but reverently as subject to king.—*Jerome F.D. Creach*

From *Joshua* by Jerome F.D. Creach

Joshua 24 presents a host of challenges for interpreters. There are questions about how 24:1-28 is related to 8:30-35, about whether or not the account of Joshua's ceremony is a record of a historical event, and about how this section of the book is affiliated with the rest of the book and the literary strands in Genesis through Numbers. Such questions can obscure the theological significance of the text if they become the focus of interpretation. On the other hand, these questions can aid theological understanding of Joshua 24 and illuminate the message of this section of the book for people of faith. Thus we will focus on the issue of choosing the Lord, permitting the discussion of critical problems to inform us, in order to hear the call to Israel from Joshua to affirm its faith in the God of Abraham.

Why Shechem? That geography sometimes serves theological purposes in the book of Joshua is nowhere more evident than in chapter 24. Shechem was associated closely with covenant making, a fact that helps explain why Joshua gathered the Israelites there for the ceremony reported in 24:1-28 (see 8:30-35). More importantly, Israel's patriarchs had a special connection to this city. Since God addressed Abraham for the first time in Canaan at Shechem (Gen. 12:7), this is a fitting place for Israel to gather when the promises to Abraham were fulfilled. Furthermore, Jacob's purchase of property near Shechem made it a proper burial site for Joseph's bones (Gen. 33:18-20), an act recorded in Joshua 24:32 immediately after the covenant-renewal ceremony. The most important ancestral link to Shechem for Joshua 24:1-28 is the story of Jacob there leading his household in an idol-burying ceremony (Gen. 35:2-4); Joshua's command to "put away the foreign gods that are among you" repeats verbatim a line Jacob spoke to his family (24:23; Gen. 35:2). This connection is important, since Joshua 24 is shaped around the idea of choosing the Lord and rejecting all other deities. Thus the geographical location of the command links Israel's attempts at faithfulness in Joshua's time to similar attempts of its ancestors.

From "Mother's Day Proclamation" by Julia Ward Howe

[***Ed. Note:*** Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) was an American poet and author, best known for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". She was also an advocate for abolitionism and a social activist, particularly for women's suffrage.]

Arise, all women who have heart, whether your baptism be that of water or that of tears!
Say firmly, "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies.
Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for our caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience.
We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs!"

From *My Life With the Saints* by James Martin

This popular meditation from Pedro Arrupe, which has been printed on note cards, posters, and coffee mugs, has a complicated provenance. Though it has been attributed to Arrupe, no one has been able to find it in any of Arrupe's official speeches or letters. Fr. Vincent O'Keefe, SJ, one of Arrupe's closest friends and advisers, once

told me that it had most likely been copied down by someone at a talk given by Arrupe and circulated from there. And, said Fr. O'Keefe, it's just the kind of thing Arrupe would say:

> "Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."

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1. Matthew 25:14-30 44
2. Entering the Story 44
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5. Exploring Further 46

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

ENTERING THE STORY

At one level, the retainer has simply described the aristocrat, using terms that the master himself accepts. In his wrathful retort, the aristocrat never denies the truth of the servant's description, because he understands exploitation and wasteful living as honorable. But the third servant has named the master and his occupation from another point of view. In light of the courteous and high-sounding phrases that have marked the speech of the master and his two retainers, the third servant's remarks serve a critical purpose. They expose the sham of what has transpired and place it under the unobstructed light of clear analysis and prophetic judgment. Within the context of the codification of retainer life, the third servant analyzes the scenes that have just occurred by supplying what was missing from them but assumed by them. He makes the connections that comprehend the first two scenes as part of a coherent whole. Finally, to cover himself, he returns to the master what is his. In his actions, he wants to show himself an honorable person.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. How would you describe the master in the story? What are words and phrases that characterize him at the beginning of the story? At the end? Describe the three slaves. At the beginning and at the end:

What do you learn from the story about the world in which the story happens? Between the lines what do you speculate about social and economic matters? The role of masters and slaves? The relationship between them?

In your own words what is going on between the master and the three slaves? Between the three slaves?

1 William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*.

What is a master as depicted here? What is his authority and responsibility? What do you suppose it is like for him to reap where he does not sow and to gather where he does not scatter seed? To be able to journey while entrusting his property to slaves? What might he tell you about himself?

What is a slave as seen here? What makes a slave good and trustworthy? Why call a slave wicked and lazy? What might it mean for a slave to be put in charge of many things? To enter into the joy of his master?

What do you suppose it means for a slave to have taken away from him what he has? To be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

A master hearing Jesus tell this story might say to himself:

A slave hearing Jesus tell this story might say to himself:

2. How is the world of this parable similar to your world today? How is it different? Who are the masters in your world? Who are the slaves?

Who is reaping where they do not sow and gathering where they do not reap? Who is entrusting what kind of property to what slaves? How might such masters be harsh and such slaves afraid?

What is the joy the master offers to the slaves who do his bidding? What is the outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, that is the lot of those seen as wicked and lazy?

> What is the threat of having people like the third slave in your business, neighborhood, political party, church, school or family? What might they add or contribute? As you look around your world who reminds you of this third slave?

3. In what sense are you a master such as in this parable? How are you like the first or second slave? What do you know of yourself as the third slave? What is the joy of a master that you enjoy? That you have rejected? What is the outer darkness that you have experienced? That you fear?

> How might you meet all four of these people within yourself? What do you hear yourself saying and see yourself doing that reminds you that such a drama is going on within as well as around you?
>
> What do your two inner good and trustworthy slaves do for you? What is your inner third slave resisting or desiring? How does your inner master reward and punish? How does he stay in control and manage your world?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Tell someone real or imagined this story from the point of view of the slave who received one talent. If it is helpful, see yourself dressed as that slave and even give yourself and the other characters names. What in your self-disclosure—your "I" statements—remains consistent with the text throughout the story? What changes? Is the drama and/or the ending any different? How do you come away from the experience as one viewed as and

called a wicked, lazy, teeth-gnasher? What more does your experience tell you about this story then and the ways you may know or observe it globally and personally?

- Herzog (in EXPLORING FURTHER) says the hero of the parable is the third servant. Many of us have grown up with the idea that the parable of the talents has something to do with the serious obligations we have to "use our god-given talents" - and that this parable has something to do with working hard, investing wisely, and getting ahead. Maybe it's time to explore the heroism of the third servant. How might burying a talent, not using it, be a good thing? Herzog explores the economic implications of passive resistance. It might also be worthwhile to think about the personal aspects of this. Consider what it might mean to bury a talent. What might be the cost of so doing? What might be the gift? What conflicts with masters and other servants might result? What would it look like to give it back to its owner? What weeping and gnashing of teeth might result? What might your own life look like if you saw the hero of this parable as the third servant? Write yourself into this story. How might your life be different? How might you move in that direction today?

- Is it possible to hear this story anew? The word "talent" has come into the English language through this parable, taking on the meaning of "any natural ability or power" or "a superior ability." In Jesus' day, and in his parable, it was a weight of some valuable material, such as gold, silver, or copper. The NRSV notes that "a talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer." Imagine being entrusted with such an enormous sum! What might you desire to do with it? What would you not dare to do with it? What expectations might the master have of you? What promise might trading with that wealth hold? What might it potentially cost? Likewise, what might a slave hope to gain by hiding such wealth away? What might it potentially cost?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "There are no conditions of life to which a man cannot get accustomed, especially if he sees them accepted by everyone around him." —*Leo Tolstoy in Anna Karenina*

From *The Parables of Jesus* by Luise Schottroff

The parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30) was the one that for a long time made me doubt the possibility of interpreting the kings and masters in parables as God. The third slave tells the truth. He accuses the slave-owner of theft. And the slave-owner does not feel insulted by it. He criticizes the slave for not having invested the money in such a way that it would double—or at least gain interest in the bank. The third slave is thrown into prison, where he will weep and gnash his teeth in fear of death. He has acted as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. He has not served mammon (Matt 6:24). He has refused to be a henchman in the dispossession of small farmers. To see this third slave as the embodiment of people who reject God's righteousness and God's Torah is simply unbearable to me. Such an interpretation is only possible if the imagery in the parables is read without any reference to human life, as almost abstract symbols for something else - that is, allegorically. This tradition of interpretation is so powerful that I continually fall back into it if I do not stay alert to social history—and to the internal contradictions between the message of Jesus, in this case according to the Gospel of Matthew, and the behavior of the kings and masters in the parables.

From *Parables as Subversive Speech* by William R. Herzog

Once shunned by the aristocrat and banished to the role of day laborer, the third servant was on a one-way street to extinction. Such was the price paid for telling the truth.

Whistle-blowers usually meet such fates. In its present form, v. 30 is redacted to serve as an image of the last judgment, but in strangely appropriate ways, it remains a description of the life of the poor. Gnashing of teeth can refer to the sound of chattering teeth caused by being in the cold without adequate clothing or shelter, or it can refer to the sound of teeth grinding because one is in pain or deep anguish. When used with the definite article, "weeping" (ho klauthmos) describes extreme behavior. Thus, taken together, weeping and gnashing of teeth accompany those moments that tear life apart and change it forever. No doubt, peasants gnashed their teeth when they lost their family plots or saw their subsistence threatened by new tributes and extractions, and after they became day laborers, inadequately clothed and poorly fed, their teeth chattered in the cold.[…]

The constant pressure of tribute taking and toll impositions on the peasant population had the effect of forcing many free peasants into increasingly dependent forms of labor. Even those who managed to survive would have had to have made hard choices, such as letting the weak and infirm die or expelling excess children to the world of the day laborer. Whether a peasant managed to maintain his patrimonial plot or lost it, he would be involved in weeping and gnashing of teeth. The third servant was being thrown out of a comfortable household into a world where the sounds of grief and anguish were facts of everyday life, so the latter part of the saying makes a certain kind of sense when applied to his situation.

The hero of the parable is the third servant. By digging a hole and burying the aristocrat's talent in the ground, he has taken it out of circulation. It cannot be used to dispossess more peasants from their lands through its dispersion in the form of usurious loans. By his actions, the third retainer dissociates himself from the system he has cleverly exploited to attain his position of power and influence. No motivation is given or needs to be; a figure known by his actions, not by his internal ruminations. When the hero speaks, he utters in the full light of day what has been learned in the dark; he reveals what has been covered beneath the public rhetoric of praise and promise, makes known what has been hidden beneath the mystifications of the elites, proclaims clearly what has only been whispered among the elites and their retainers (cf. Matt. 10:26-27). He describes the master for what he is and acknowledges his fear of his power. The whistle-blower is no fool. He realizes that he will pay a price, but he has decided to accept the cost rather than continue to pursue his exploitive path.

From "A Brief History of Self-Immolation" by Josh Sanburn in *Time Magazine*

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight on Dec. 1 7, he sparked flames far greater than the ones that would ultimately kill him. The Tunisian man, an unemployed college graduate with children to feed, had tried finding work hawking vegetables, but was thwarted by police, who confiscated his cart. So in a grisly act of protest and anguish, Bouazizi doused himself in gasoline and set himself ablaze. The act of self-immolation not only triggered the current political crisis in Tunisia, which ousted the president Jan. 14 and has led to a complicated political impasse. It also inspired copycat self-immolations across North Africa, who attempted this very sensational form of suicide as statements of their own desperation and frustration with the authoritarian regimes in their countries. The latest count of protesters who have set themselves on fire in North Africa is up to eight, with four in Algeria, two in Egypt and one in Mauritania, as well as Bouazizi's act in Tunisia.



Read more here: http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2043123,00.html

From *Ill Fares the Land* by Tony Judt

Poverty is an abstraction, even for the poor. But the symptoms of collective impoverishment are all about us. Broken highways, bankrupt cities, collapsing bridges, failed schools, the unemployed, the underpaid and the

uninsured: all suggest a collective failure of will. These shortcomings are so endemic that we no longer know how to talk about what is wrong, much less set about repairing it. And yet something is seriously amiss. […]

Even within individual countries, inequality plays a crucial role in shaping peoples' lives. In the United States, for example, your chances of living a long and healthy life closely track your income: residents of wealthy districts can expect to live longer and better. Young women in poorer states of the US are more likely to become pregnant in their teenage years—and their babies are less likely to survive—than their peers in wealthier states. In the same way, a child from a disfavored district has a higher chance of dropping out of high school than if his parents have a steady mid-range income and live in a prosperous part of the country. As for the children of the poor who remain in school; they will do worse, achieve lower scores and obtain less fulfilling and lower paid employment. Inequality, then, is not just unattractive in itself; it clearly corresponds to pathological social problems that we cannot hope to address unless we attend to their underlying cause. There is a reason why infant mortality, life expectancy, criminality, the prison population, mental illness, unemployment, obesity, malnutrition, teenage pregnancy, illegal drug use, economic insecurity, personal indebtedness and anxiety are so much more marked in the US and the UK than they are in continental Europe.

The wider the spread between the wealthy few and the impoverished many, the worse the social problems: a statement which appears to be true for rich and poor countries alike. What matters is not how affluent a country is but how unequal it is. Thus Sweden, or Finland, two of the world's wealthiest countries by per capita income or GDP, have a very narrow gap separating their richest from their poorest citizens—and they consistently lead the world in indices of measurable wellbeing. Conversely, the United States, despite its huge aggregate wealth, always comes low on such measures. We spend vast sums on healthcare, but life expectancy in the US remains below Bosnia and just above Albania.

Inequality is corrosive. It rots societies from within. The impact of material differences takes a while to show up: but in due course competition for status and goods increases; people feel a growing sense of superiority (or inferiority) based on their possessions; prejudice towards those on the lower ranks of the social ladder hardens; crime spikes and the pathologies of social disadvantage become ever more marked. The legacy of unregulated wealth creation is bitter indeed.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

[17-19 As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?]

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

ENTERING THE STORY

The 34th chapter of Ezekiel includes an extended metaphor of shepherds and sheep. The power of a metaphor lies in the tension between the image and the reality—it both affirms the similarities between the reality and the metaphor being used and highlights the differences between the two. The chapter begins: *The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.* [34:1-6]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What are the qualities of a shepherd? What are a shepherd's duties? Responsibilities? Challenges? What might a shepherd gain from the sheep? What happens to a shepherd who has no sheep?

What are the qualities of the sheep? What do sheep do? What do they need? What might sheep gain from having a shepherd? What happens to sheep that have no shepherd?

How does Ezekiel describe the shepherds of Israel? What are they doing? What are they not doing? What kind of shepherds are they proving to be? Who might the sheep be?

In what ways are those addressed by Ezekiel not shepherds? How are the people of Israel not sheep?

> *For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. Who now is to be the shepherd of Israel?* How is this shepherd different from those who were described before? What does this shepherd do?

Jot down how sheep or Israel might be:

	Sheep	Israel
Scattered		
Gathered		
Brought		
Into their own land		
Fed		
Lying down		
Lost		
Strayed		
Injured		
Weak		
Fat		
Strong		

> *Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.*

What might the difference be between fat sheep and lean sheep? What responsibility might the sheep have for one another? What are the standards for judging between sheep?

> *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.*

Who at last is to be named shepherd of Israel? Ezekiel writes some six hundred years after the time of the shepherd-king David. What kind of shepherd does Ezekiel envision this David to be? How is he different from the other shepherds of Israel?

2. Who in your world today would you describe as shepherds? How did they become shepherds? What are their responsibilities? How do they carry out those responsibilities? What gains or privileges do they enjoy? What values or priorities do they demonstrate? Who or what depends on them? How well do they fulfill the tasks of a shepherd?

Where do you sense people longing for one shepherd who will lead? What qualities does this hoped-for shepherd have? What values or priorities might they demonstrate? What might the sheep gain from having such a shepherd? What might they lose?

3. What do you know of sheep and shepherds moving within you? What parts of yourself need care and feeding, protection from dangers, gathering and leading? Which parts of yourself provide those functions within? What do you know of times when you have been a good shepherd of your inner sheep? When has your inner shepherd been focused on his or her immediate needs to the detriment of other parts of yourself?

How might your inner shepherd seek out, gather, feed, give rest to, heal, and strengthen the sheep?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- If time allows, re-read the 23rd Psalm as well as this week's passage. How, if at all, do they relate? In what ways do you hear the psalm echoing?

- *"The fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."* How does one get to be fat and strong? What is the cost of becoming fat and strong? What is the attraction in being fat and strong? In a world of limitless abundance, one could perhaps become fat and strong without significant harm to others. But in a world of limited goods, for one to become fat and strong, another one will not have enough to sustain them. What kind of world do you live in? What does justice look like, from the point of view of Ezekiel's shepherd? What do you know of being fat and strong? What do you know of that internal shepherd who feeds the lost, the strayed, the injured, the weak? What do you know of the other sheep within you? How might the fat and the strong take what those others need? How might your inner shepherd care for your inner sheep?

- *"As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness."* Ezekiel describes a tension between the gathered and scattered sheep. Consider the gathered and scattered. We talk of someone being "scatter-brained." What are some other ways we experience ourselves as scattered - separate, divorced, strewn, broken apart and diffuse? How do you experience this in a relationship, community, job as well as within yourself? Why do you suppose Ezekiel speaks of the scattering "on a day of clouds and thick darkness"? What is the cost or danger of being scattered? What might be the advantage and promise? What can happen when you are "scattered" that might never happen when you are gathered and together? Is it only scattered or only together? How do you know and profit from this tension daily?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"They love me. All my people with me, they love me," he said. "They will die to protect me, my people."
—Moammar Gadhafi

*[**Ed. Note:** The quote by Gadhafi above is from an interview with Christiane Amanpour in February 2011. In October of that same year, Gadhafi, the deposed self-proclaimed “Brother Leader” of Libya was captured and killed by the National Transitional Council forces.]*

From *The Metaphorical Narratives in the Book of Ezekiel* by James A. Durlesser

The metaphors of the ruler as shepherd and the people as sheep were probably standard metaphors.[…]

It appears from this survey of texts that the metaphor of people as sheep was a standard way of describing or understanding a group of people, especially the relationship of that group of people to its ruler or deity. The fact that the writers of some texts chose not to declare a specific metaphorical relationship between sheep and people, but permitted their readers to identify such a relationship on their own, based on an explicit announcement that the ruler was a shepherd, and a description of the shepherd ruler's actions on behalf of the people, suggests that the metaphor of people as sheep was probably a standard metaphor. Writers could expect that their readers would understand that, if the text identified a ruler or deity as a shepherd, then the people in the texts were to be thought of as sheep.

In Ezek 34, the metaphors of people as sheep and the leaders of Judah as shepherds are comparative metaphors. The two symbols the shepherds and the sheep would have been familiar to Ezekiel's audience. And the two subjects or referents—the ruler or rulers of Jerusalem and Judah and the people of their own community would have been familiar to Ezekiel's audience. By using the symbols of shepherds and sheep in Ezek 34 as ways of thinking about the rulers of Judah and the people of the community, Ezekiel was probably not trying to, "provide illumination of relatively more mysterious subjects" through the use of "relatively better-known symbols." Instead, it is likely that he was trying to prompt his audience to consider the relationships the similarities and differences between "two equally well-known realities," between the two symbols and the two subjects. We may suggest that, rather than wanting to teach his audience something about the rulers, or about one segment of the population that had more power than another, Ezekiel wanted to encourage his audience to explore their relationship with their rulers and the relationships between various segments of the community. Of course, the prophet could have simply declared in literal discourse what he wanted to say. But instead, Ezekiel chose to allow his audience to think on their own, to think about their relationships with their rulers and with other segments of the community. The prophet chose to invite his audience to compare their relationship with their rulers to the relationship that exists between a flock of sheep and its shepherd. He chose to encourage his audience to compare the relationships that exist between various parts of the community to the relationship that exists between sheep in various segments of a large flock.

From *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks* Matter by Thomas Cahill

> [***Ed. Note:*** Solon (640 BC) was an Athenian statesman, lawmaker and poet. He is remembered particularly for his efforts to legislate against political, economic and moral decline in archaic Athens. His reforms failed in the short-term, yet he is often credited with having laid the foundations for Athenian democracy. Source: Wikipedia.org]

In Homer's day, Greek communities were ruled by a basileus like Odysseus. This word, usually translated as "king," had in early times the somewhat humbler connotations of chieftain, captain, lord, leader, judge. (It will be the word put into the mouth of Jesus in the New Testament parables about God and his basileia, his kingdom or dominion.) But it was a decidedly hereditary position, one that did not fit well with city life. Since cities were experiments in themselves, it made sense to the Greeks to experiment with modes of urban government. As the day of the landed gentry began to fade, Greek cities adopted, or sometimes had forced upon them, the new office of tyrannos. Though tyrannos gives us our word tyrant, the initial difference between the basileus and the tyrannos was that the tyrannos was a nonhereditary king, one who had obtained his position by sheer excellence. It was only as the tyrannos turned (as often as not) into a dictator unconcerned for the wishes of his people that the designation acquired a pejorative connotation.

Though tyrants would continue to rule many Greek cities for much of their history, Athens in the early sixth century was already experimenting with a system based on the consensus of its citizens. Solon came to be

eponymos of Athens neither by heredity nor by force but by election; and his rule was limited to one year. By this point, Athenian government had evolved from monarchy to aristocracy, that is, rule by a consortium of archons (of whom the archon eponymos was chief), supplied by Athens's leading families. Aristocratic Solon, however, used his year to enlarge the political and economic power of all freeborn male citizens.

The city's existing law code, drawn up in 621 by one Draco, was so harsh that it has given us the word Draconian, though Draco's code did remove from individual families the right to pursue vengeance on their own—the Hatfield- McCoy premise on which Orestes and Electra pursued their father's murderers. Solon labored intensively to give every citizen a stake in Athenian society. Henceforth, every male born at Athens to a citizen father-very nearly the only way one could become a citizen-would have the right to prosecute a crime, even if he were not the direct victim. Solon fashioned this innovation to impress on all their unrelinquishable obligation to the commonweal. Every citizen now had the further right to appeal unfavorable decisions of the magistrates to the great Assembly of citizens, in effect a jury of their peers. By abolishing the universal Greek custom of enslaving debtors who defaulted on their bond, Solon encouraged the security of small landowners; and he divided the citizenry into four classes, based on their holdings.

Each class now possessed specific legal rights and honors, and each was taxed accordingly. […] In making this change, Solon tied the office of archon to wealth rather than birth and thus broke the stranglehold that the wellborn had previously exercised over politics. […] The upshot was that every citizen felt empowered, all assured a say in something; and even the lowest class of citizens—the thetes (tenant farmers and those whose tiny plots produced fewer than two hundred bushels)-had new dignity as members of the Assembly, which had the final say in most matters.



Shepherdess with Her Flock (early 1800's) by Eugene Joseph Verboeckhoven (Source:Wikimedia.org)

> "The Buddha often said that wherever you find water, you can tell if it's the ocean because the ocean always tastes of salt. By the same token, anywhere you find enlightenment—whatever improbable or unfamiliar shape it may have assumed—you can tell it's enlightenment because enlightenment always tastes of freedom. Not comfort. Not ease. Freedom." —*Martha Beck in Steering by Starlight*

Matthew 7:24-27

> *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"*

***Matthew 7:24-27* by Andy Kille**

[***Ed. Note:*** Andy Kille was the Editor of *Reading Between The Lines* from 2008-2018. He passed away in 2018.]

As I was pondering this text not long ago, the sounds of thumping and shouting drifted up from under the floor, and from time to time the walls shook enough to set off my internal earthquake alert. (A lifetime Californian, I can't help thinking every time, "Is this the Big One? Should I get under the furniture?") After a moment, I would remember—it was the contractor and his crew hard at work.

It all began during a tour of the house we have lived in for 27 years with an eye to doing some future remodeling. Yes, we'd noticed that the doors didn't close quite right and there were odd bumps in the floor here and there, but the place seemed sturdy enough and we assumed it was simply showing its age as it neared 60.

Then came the "Uh, oh!"— the sound you do not want to hear from the contractor inspecting under your house. We discovered that, due to a plumbing leak, the ground under the foundations was saturated and the footings had actually washed away in places, leaving sections of the floor unsupported, the joists bending, and everything threatening to crack and collapse in a real quake.

For two weeks, the crew worked diligently in the crawl space beneath the house. They jacked up the sagging joists, replaced the failing footings, and cross-braced and anchored the whole length of the house. It's stronger now than it has been in many years.

So, I could not help but think of Matthew's retelling of Jesus' story of the two builders (Matthew 7:24-27). Before, my attention has always been on the contrast of rock and sand as the foundation, but I had never given any thought to the quality of the building. Once the foundation was chosen and the houses were built, I assumed, the die was cast. The house on sand was doomed; the one on rock would stand.

Or would it? We were jolted by the realization that no foundation lasts forever without attention. No matter how solid the rock may be, if the links that connect the house to the rock are not sturdy and whole, that house can be every bit as vulnerable to rain, floods, and wind as one built on sand.

There was nothing evident about our house that caused us to worry about the underpinnings. We were willing to put up with minor annoyances like the doors and the bumps and never gave it a second thought. We could easily have let it go until it was too late. Fortunately, we took a look when we didn't have to.

For many of us, I suspect it's much the same for our interior "house." We don't take the time to reconnect with those resources that we know can feed us and strengthen our foundations. I find that the *Reading Between The Lines* often provides just that prod for me to take a serious and honest look at my life and consider where my foundations need to be strengthened. Additionally, working with the texts we are opened up to unending worlds of imagination, inviting us to step in and feel our way around these old familiar interiors. It's an invitation to look, to

listen, and to make our foundations stronger while we explore. This kind of imagination is not simply about amusement; but it is the kind of imagination that J. K. Rowling, author of the popular Harry Potter books described in her commencement address at Harvard:

> One of the many things I learned at the end of that Classics corridor down which I ventured at the age of 18, in search of something I could not then define, was this, written by the Greek author Plutarch: What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.

Significant life changes do not ordinarily work themselves in from the outside. They are manifestations of what is shifting inside our hearts and souls. That is, if we take the time to listen to and reflect on our inner worlds and most importantly, use our imaginations to do the work that is necessary to shore our "self" up. *—Andy Kille*

From "Strangers Bring Us Closer to God" by Sarah Miles at *This I Believe* (National Public Radio)

> [***Ed. Note***: Sara Miles is the founder of The Food Pantry at Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Her relationship with food began as a restaurant cook. She is a journalist and author of the memoir *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (Ballantine Books).]

Until recently, I thought being a Christian was all about belief. I didn't know any Christians, but I considered them people who believed in the virgin birth, for example, the way I believed in photosynthesis or germs.

But then, in an experience I still can't logically explain, I walked into a church and a stranger handed me a chunk of bread. Suddenly, I knew that it was made out of real flour and water and yeast—yet I also knew that God, named Jesus, was alive and in my mouth.

That first communion knocked me upside-down. Faith turned out not to be abstract at all, but material and physical. I'd thought Christianity meant angels and trinities and being good. Instead, I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.

I came to believe that God is revealed not only in bread and wine during church services, but whenever we share food with others—particularly strangers. I came to believe that the fruits of creation are for everyone, without exception—not something to be doled out to insiders or the "deserving."

So, over the objections of some of my fellow parishioners, I started a food pantry right in the church sanctuary, giving away literally tons of oranges and potatoes and Cheerios around the very same altar where I'd eaten the body of Christ. We gave food to anyone who showed up. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters, bishops—all blown into my life through the restless power of a calling to strangers. I confronted issues that had kept me from religion in the first place.

Like church, the food pantry asked me to leave certainty behind, tangled me up with people I didn't particularly want to know and scared me with its demand for more faith than I was ready to give.

Because my new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays and declaring myself saved." I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman's Magnum and then stick the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church.

But I learned that hunger can lead to more life—that by sharing real food, I'd find communion with the most unlikely people; that by eating a piece of bread, I'd experience myself as part of one body. This I believe: that by opening ourselves to strangers, we will taste God.

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

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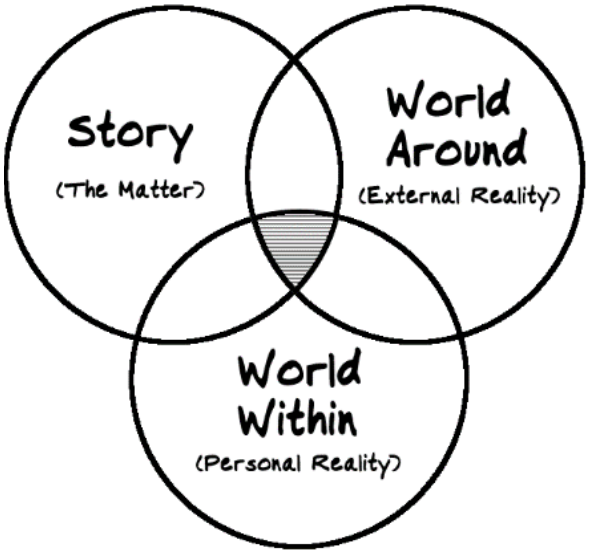
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WHAT IS READING BETWEEN THE LINES?

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

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



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

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

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

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