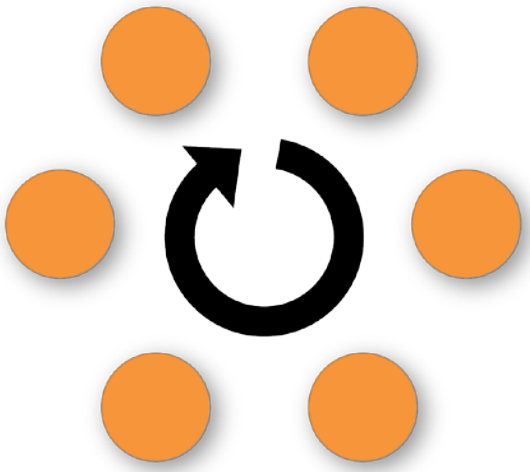
READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories

Epiphany 3 – Lent 5

January 24 – March 21, 2021



Volume 28, Issue 2
Revised Common Lectionary

Reading Between The Lines ~ Volume 28

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Managing Editor: Melissa Thomas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Volume 28.1

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

Volume 28.2

Date	Selection
Jan 24	Mark 1:14-20
Jan 31	Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Feb 7	Mark 1:29-39
Feb 14	2 Kings 2:1-12
Feb 21	Mark 1:9-15
Feb 28	Mark 9:2-9
Mar 7	John 2:13-22
Mar 14	Numbers 21:4-9
Mar 21	Psalm 51:1-12

Volume 28.3

Date	Selection
Mar 28	Mark 15:1-39 [40-47]
Apr 4	Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Apr 11	Acts 4:32-35
Apr 18	1 John 3:1-7
Apr 25	John 10:11-18
May 2	John 15:1-8
May 9	Acts 10:44-48
May 16	Luke 24:44-53

Volume 28.4

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

Volume 28.5

Date	Selection
Jul 25	John 6:1-12
Aug 1	2 Samuel 11:26—12:13a
Aug 8	John 6:35, 41-51
Aug 15	Proverbs 9:1-6
Aug 22	1 Kings 8:[1,6,10-11] 22-30, 41-43
Aug 29	Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Sep 5	Psalm 125
Sep 12	Wisdom of Solomon 7:26—8:1
Sep 19	Mark 9:30-37

Volume 28.6

Date	Selection
Sep 26	Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Oct 3	Mark 10:2-16
Oct 10	Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Oct 17	Isaiah 53:4-12
Oct 24	Mark 10:46-52
Oct 31	Mark 12:28-34
Nov 7	Mark 12:38-44
Nov 14	Mark 13:1-8
Nov 21	Revelation 1:4b-18

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:5-12
1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

ENTERING THE STORY

Jesus stands in this tradition of Jewish figures for whom God, the sacred, was an experiential reality. The data in the gospels supporting this claim are early and widespread, particular and general, direct and indirect. They are found in the earliest layers of the gospel tradition, in both Q and Mark, as well as in later layers. Texts report visions, long hours of prayer, and a sense of the presence of the Spirit in him. His language often expresses an intimacy with God. His activity as a healer and exorcist is linked to an awareness of the Spirit of God active through him. More generally, his wisdom teaching often reflects a transformed perspective and perception most compatible with an enlightenment experience of the sacred. His passion and courage as a prophet suggest an experiential grounding in God like that of the prophets of the Jewish Bible.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. In Matthew and Luke, as well as in Mark, Jesus goes into the wilderness after his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. The very next thing Matthew tells us is: “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali...”

Mark, the early account that scholars assume is the basis of Matthew and Luke, writes of nothing after the wilderness until: *Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee...*

Luke, who does not mention John, continues his story following the wilderness: “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...”

Mark and Matthew tell us that it is not until John is arrested that Jesus appears once more. He is then on his way to Galilee. What do you imagine is happening for Jesus between the time of his wilderness testing and the arrest of John? Where might he have been? What might he have been doing? And why do you suppose he then goes to Galilee?

What do you know of the arrest of John by the Romans? [Mark 6:71-19] “For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.’ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not…”

What do you imagine to be the link between John and Jesus at this point? Why might Jesus not speak until John is arrested? What possible relationship could there be between John's arrest and Jesus' assertion that *the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near*? What kind of good news is it that arises out of John's arrest?

1 Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 117-120.

2. How do you see this story happening in the world around you? Where do you read it on the front page of your newspaper, watch it on the news channels, or see it in your social media scroll? How is it the topic of radio talk shows, podcasts, and how is it considered on the Sunday morning news panels?

How do the signs of these times reflect good news being born out of crisis and conflict, disappointment, loss and violence? How does time take on a new dimension and the ordinary become filled with the kingdom as a result of defeat and disappointment, greater darkness, and broken hopes? What do you see at such dire moments of nations and people repenting—turning around, going in another direction—only when the calamity has come upon them?

3. Consider those times in your life when this narrative has been your story. When do you recall loss and defeat to have been the occasion for new possibilities that could have happened in no other way? What do you remember of turning around or "returning home" only after hopes have been dashed and dreams have died? What have you known of this pattern and paradigm in relationships that mattered most to you and were fulfilled only on the other side of a death or defeat?

4. Who is John in your life these days? Who or what group, community, idea, or conviction carries the hope for you and serves as the light of your world, your anchor and compass? How does this "John" keep you in line, on course, aimed in the right direction? What might result from this "John" getting arrested, lost, killed, torn out of your life forever? What would the bad news be of such a John's demise? What might the good news be in the darkness of "John's" end? How, with him gone, might you move through the grief to a new place, speak your truth for the first time, turn your life in a new direction, and set up housekeeping in a different kind of kingdom?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.* Leaving their father behind on the boat that day must have been the hardest thing James and John had ever done. Imagine the look in Zebedee's eyes as Jesus confronted his two sons with an option to the lives they were living—an option neither they nor their father had likely ever before considered. Fathers in those days were to be honored and revered. Their ways were the right ways. The safe ways. The wise ways. To leave father was to be disloyal, to bring shame upon the family, and to bring more dangerous uncertainty to already uncertain lives. Where in your own life is the way of the father causing you stagnation and pain? Who might the Jesus be in your life, calling you away from all that you have known, providing you with an alternative to the status quo? What options does this Jesus offer? What would it take for you to lay down your nets and follow?

- Simon, Andrew, James, and John are fishermen. They know how to take care of boats and nets, where the fish are, what time of day the fish are more easily caught, and all the lore that those who catch fish are supposed to know. What do they know of what it is like to "*fish for people*"? They know the "*fish for...*" part. But then there is the call of Jesus to do what they know how to do but with a different object, one which changes everything. "*Follow me*" or (equally plausible as a translation) "accompany me" or "come with me." Literally, Mark says "*I will make you become fishers of people*." They already are fishers. They must become something more. What do you know of that call to become more of who or what you are? Rephrase the text for yourself, in your own context.

Who are you? What might you be called to become? What would it look like to be called out of your own way of defining yourself into a new way? What would be the cost of stepping out of the old boat? What might be its promise?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "Over the dining room table in my home hung a batik by Amos Amit of the story of the miraculous catch of fish. But when I looked at it, I thought more of the story of the sons of Zebedee who were willing to drop everything to follow Jesus. When I was struggling with whether to leave the pastorate and move on to graduate study, I thought of how in Sunday School the story was always about leaving the "secular" world and going into ministry. I began to wonder if sometimes Jesus walked by the pulpit and called out "Follow me….." A woman in my church was always furious whenever this text came up: "How can doing that to your father, your family, be the right thing to do?" So I asked myself, what did I know of a voice that has called me to follow, away from ties to the familiar? What would I have to give up? What would I have to leave behind? What could possibly make that choice the right one?" —*Andy Kille*

From " Jesus' Experience of God" in *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* by Marcus Borg

When did God become an experiential reality for Jesus? How early in his life did this happen? As a child? An adolescent? A young adult? According to the stories of his birth in Matthew and Luke, in which Jesus was conceived by the Spirit of God, God was "in Jesus" from his beginning. […] Mainstream scholars do not see these (or the story of Jesus in the temple at age twelve) as historical accounts. And even if we did see them as historical, they would still not answer the question of when God became an experiential reality for Jesus. We don't know when this was, for the gospels report nothing historical about Jesus before his adulthood.

What we do know is that sometime in his twenties Jesus left Nazareth and journeyed to a wilderness where a prophet named John the Baptizer was active. Jesus's decision to do so suggests a deepening religious passion. Why else would he leave home and family to be with a wilderness prophet?

John was an important figure in first-century Judaism. The gospels all highlight his significance, and Josephus gives more space to John than Jesus (Antiquities 18.116-19). His importance did not derive from an institutional role, for he had no official standing. Indeed, he was an anti-establishment figure. According to the gospels, he dressed like Elijah, the great prophet of the Jewish Bible who brought down a kingdom. John subverted the temple's role as mediator of access to God by proclaiming a means of forgiveness—repentance and baptism—that bypassed the temple. He publicly criticized his ruler Herod Antipas, and as a result was arrested and executed.

From *I Don't Believe in Atheists* by Chris Hedges

The Utopian dream of a perfect society and a perfect human being, the idea that we are moving toward collective salvation, is one of the most dangerous legacies of the Christian faith and the Enlightenment. All too often throughout history, those who believed in the possibility of this perfection (variously defined) have called for the silencing or eradication of human beings who are impediments to human progress. They turn their particular notion of the good into an inflexible standard of universal good. They prove blind to their own corruption and capacity for evil. They soon commit evil not for evil's sake but to make a better world. […]

The greatest danger that besets us does not come from believers or atheists; it comes from those who, under the guise of religion, science or reason, imagine that we can free ourselves from the limitations of human nature and perfect the human species. Those who insist we are morally advancing as a species are deluding themselves. There is little in science or history to support this idea. Human individuals can make moral advances, as can human societies, but they also make moral reverses. Our personal and collective histories are not linear. We alternate between periods of light and periods of darkness. We can move forward materially, but we do not move forward morally. The belief in collective moral advancement ignores the inherent flaws in human nature as well as the tragic reality of human history. Whether it comes in secular or religious form, this belief is magical thinking. The secular version of this myth peddles fables no less fantastic, and no less delusional, than those preached from church pulpits. The battle under way in America is not a battle between religion and science; it is a battle between religious and secular fundamentalists. It is a battle between two groups intoxicated with the Utopian and magical belief that humankind can master its destiny. This is one of the most pervasive forms of self-delusion, as Marcel Proust understood, but it has disastrous consequences. It encourages us to ignore reality.

"The soldier is convinced that a certain interval of time, capable of being indefinitely prolonged, will be allowed him before the bullet finds him, the thief before he is caught, men in general before they have to die," Proust wrote. "That is the amulet which preserves people—and sometimes peoples—not from danger but from the fear of danger, in reality from the belief in danger, which in certain cases allows them to brave it without actually needing to be brave."

From *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat* by John Lukacs

Churchill's speech was not broadcast to the nation. The British Broadcasting Corporation summed it up in their regular news bulletins, first at 6 p.m., then at 9. They cited that key sentence: "I would say to the House as I said to those who have joined the Government: I have nothing to offer but blood and toil and tears and sweat." (A small inaccuracy: Churchill's phrase included one "and"; the BBC version three.)

Churchill wrote his own speeches. It is interesting that in his own written and then typewritten text he put "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat" between quotations marks. Where did he get it? Oddly, this was a paraphrase of words famous once (and only in Italy), uttered by the Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi. When, on 30 June 1849, the government of the short-lived Roman Republic voted to capitulate as the French army was about to enter Rome, Garibaldi spoke to the decimated group of his armed followers: "I offer not pay, not lodging, no provisions. I offer hunger, forced marches, battles and death." No other British political figure spoke or would have spoken thus, not even in May 1940, because no one yet thought that way about the war in Europe.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative texts:
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

> *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."*

ENTERING THE STORY

Deuteronomy 1:1 These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan—in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab.

The book of Deuteronomy (literally, the second law) is the last of the books of the Torah—the five books of Moses. It is presented in the form of an extended farewell sermon given by Moses to the people of Israel as they have come out of slavery in Egypt and are about to enter into the land of Canaan. Take a few moments to skim the book and notice the mixture of subjects and issues that are mentioned. If your edition of the Bible has topic headings, note them as well.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Imagine that you are among the people listening to Moses. What do you remember about the journey from Egypt? What are your hopes and expectations as you stand at the entry point into this new land? What do you fear?

> *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.* What is a prophet? What qualities does a prophet have? What does a prophet do? What need does a prophet fill? Who is speaking here? What is *a prophet like me*? What qualities would this prophet have? What need would the prophet fill?

As one who has left Egypt and crossed the wilderness following Moses, how do you feel about Moses? How has he been a comfort to you during the journey? How has he been an irritation? What do you imagine will change when Moses is no longer leading the people?

> *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.* What is significant about the prophet coming from among their own people? How is the prophet one of them? How is the prophet different?

> *Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.* How does one heed the words of the prophet? What accountability comes with hearing the prophet?

Today's text follows a section in which the speaker contrasts the practices of the local peoples to the role of the prophet. **Deuteronomy 18:9-14**: “When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. Although these nations that you are

about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so."

What kinds of activities are being described? What do people hope to gain through these practices? What is lost by engaging in these practices?

2. Where in the world around you do you encounter *a prophet from among their own people*? Who is, or seeks to be, a prophet among political pundits, economic forecasters, religious leaders, your friends and neighbors, your family gathered around the table? What do they hope to accomplish? What do they have to gain? How are they evaluated? Do people *heed the words*?

How might they be said to be relying on ordeals, "soothsaying," or "divination"? What "spells" or "oracles" undergird their message? What authority do they claim for their being a prophet? In what way are they like Moses? How are they different?

3. What do you know of a prophet who stands in your inner life and speaks with authority that seems divine? What does this prophet hope to gain? How do you discern whether this inner prophet's *word* comes from God? What of that part of yourself that seeks out oracles or predictions of the future? What does it desire? How does it relate to God?

How do you *heed the words*? How do you hold yourself *accountable* to them?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Wonder whether the voice of God heard by prophets, those self-appointed as well as those given credibility by their societies, isn't the same as the voice of the prophet's own deepest longings. And consider those real modern day prophets, those to whom we look for moral guidance. Are their rantings not also illness, albeit an illness for the world? Might the hearts of the prophets beat in time with the heart of God? And what about your own wounds and wishes? What visions does God give to you about fixing this broken world? In what ways do the pain and marginalization of your own experiences reflect the same experience of God? How might you express this prophecy, and allow the heart of God to beat as your own?

- Ponder Jung's famous "definition" of God as "the name by which I designate all things that cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things that upset my subjective views, plans, and intentions, and change the course of my life for better or for worse." How would you discern the voice of such a God? What do you know of a prophetic voice within you? How is truth revealed to you? Where in your experience do you find that depth, that truth, that voice? How do you experience such things in prayer, in meditation, in dreams, in song, in study, in nature, in art, in your body, in music? How can you tell whether the voice is that of the Lord God or of other gods? How do you discern where the voice might be coming from? What is the prophetic voice you need to listen to right now? What is the prophetic voice you need to speak right now to those around you?

- *This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die."* The request is found in Exodus 20:18-21 when Moses stills the fears of the people by his willingness to intercede on their behalf with the

LORD and to serve as buffer, go-between, messenger, and interpreter. Who serves such a role in your life? To what or whom do you give authority to shield you from the holy and protect you from the mystery? What do you know of an inner Moses who guards you from the Holy One and defends you from engagement with God? How might your life change were you to let go of the fear that hearing the LORD's voice will kill you? Where might you begin to listen for the voice and to look for the fire?

EXPLORING FURTHER

Lovers think they're looking for each other,
but there's only one search: wandering
this world is wandering that, both inside one
transparent sky. In here
there is no dogma and no heresy.

The miracle of Jesus is himself, not what he said or did
about the future. Forget the future.
I'd worship someone who could do that.

On the way you may want to look back, or not,
but if you can say There's nothing ahead,
there will be nothing there.

Stretch your arms and take hold the cloth of your clothes
with both hands. The cure for pain is in the pain.
Good and bad are mixed. If you don't have both,
you don't belong with us.

When one of us gets lost, is not here, he must be inside us.
There's no place like that anywhere in the world.

—Rumi

From *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* by Walter Brueggemann

It is astonishing that the voices of marginality have not been crowded out of the text. It is more astonishing that they are given credibility in the interpreting community. The old voices of domination, enforced by military power, sponsored by oppressive regimes, legitimated by unyielding religious authorities, practiced uncritically by technicians, finally cannot stop the authoritative, authorizing cry of the poor and pained which is a voice in this text. This cry cannot be silenced because the same struggle of center and margin is present in the heart, life, mind, and will of God. This canon compels us because it has insisted (as no other canon) that these other protesting, hurting, hoping voices are held to be constitutive for the life of society, as for the life of God.

Israel knows that when you come into the land, you will have a king who will get it right (Deut. 17:14-20). But Israel also knows that along with the king, a viable community must have a voice such as the voice of Moses, a prophet who will speak a different word not confined to the dominant rationality (Deut. 18: 15-22). That prophetic alternative in the face of Pharaoh becomes definitional for Israel and its literature. The force of the margin occurs in the prophets, in Deuteronomic abrasiveness, in the Pauline offer of justification by grace, in a theology of the cross, and in apocalyptic hyperbole of expectation, each of which crowds the center in desperate, unyielding

ways. It is wondrous that the canon insists on these voices. It is sobering that much of established interpretation has made these voices marginal.

From *The Year of Living Biblically* by AJ Jacobs

> [***Ed. Note:*** The excerpt below is Day 62 of the author's "year of living biblically" in New York City. On this day he examines capital punishment, specifically stoning and adultery. In his daily travels, he meets a combative elderly man in Central Park and ends up throwing a small pebble at him after the man admits to being an adulterer and threatens the author with bodily harm.]

When I was a kid, I saw an episode of *All in the Family* in which Meathead—Rob Reiner's wussy peacenik character—socked some guy in the jaw. Meathead was very upset about this. But he wasn't upset that he committed violence; he was upset because it felt so good to commit violence.

I can relate. Even though mine was a stoning lite, barely fulfilling the letter of the law, I can't deny: It felt good to chuck a rock at this nasty old man. It felt primal. It felt like I was getting vengeance on him. This guy wasn't just an adulterer, he was a bully. I wanted him to feel the pain he'd inflicted on others, even if that pain was a tap on the chest.

Like Meathead, I also knew that this was a morally stunted way to feel. Stoning is about as indefensible as you can get. It comes back to the old question: How can the Bible be so wise in some places and so barbaric in others? And why should we put any faith in a book that includes such brutality? Later that week, I ask my spiritual adviser Yossi about stoning. Yossi was born in Minnesota and calls himself a "Jewtheran"—Jewish guilt and Lutheran repression mesh nicely, he told me. He's an ordained Orthodox rabbi but never practiced, instead opting for the shmata trade—he sold scarves to, among others, the Amish. He's tall and broad shouldered with a neatly trimmed beard. In his spare time, Yossi writes wry essays about Jewish life, including a lament about how his favorite snack, Twinkies, recently became non-kosher. I met him through Aish HaTorah, an Orthodox outreach group.

He isn't fazed by my question at all. We don't stone people today because you need a biblical theocracy to enforce the stoning, he explains. No such society exists today. But even in ancient times, stoning wasn't barbaric.

"First of all, you didn't just heave stones," says Yossi. "The idea was to minimize the suffering. What we call 'stoning' was actually pushing the person off the cliff so they would die immediately upon impact. The Talmud actually has specifications on how high the cliff must be. Also, the person getting executed was given strong drink to dull the pain."

Plus, the stonings were a rare thing. Some rabbis say executions occurred only once every seven years, others say even less often. There had to be two witnesses to the crime. And the adulterer had to be tried by a council of seventy elders. And, weirdly, the verdict of those seventy elders could not be unanimous—that might be a sign of corruption or brainwashing. And so on. […] He made a compelling case. And yet, I'm not totally sold. Were biblical times really so merciful? I suspect there might be some whitewashing going on.

From *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* by Jon Krakauer

> [***Ed. Note:*** Ron Lafferty and his younger brother Dan were charged with murder of their sister-in-law Brenda Lafferty and her baby daughter, Erica, in 1984. Ron, a self-proclaimed prophet, claimed to have received a revelation from God in which he was instructed to "remove" several people including the two victims.]

According to psychiatrist C. Jess Groesbeck, who examined Ron after the murders, as Ron began to understand that Dianna really was going to take their children and leave forever, it slowly "becomes clear that this man is

losing the most important thing he's ever lost in his life. I can't stress enough how deep this loss was. He feels low, worthless. And his anger and aggression are almost unbounded.... He compensates by creating a new but unreal view of himself and the world. He develops an inflated God-like self-image in an effort to avoid the pain and deny the truth of what he really is."

Buttressing Dr. Groesbeck's assessment, on March 13 the still small voice of the Lord spoke to Ron once again, revealing,

> And the thing that ye have thought concerning the One Mighty and Strong is correct, for have I not said that in these the last days I will reveal all things unto the children of men? For was not Moses the One Mighty and Strong, and was not Jesus the One Mighty and Strong, and was not My servant Onias the One Mighty and Strong, and art thou not One Mighty and Strong, and will I not yet call others Mighty and Strong to set in order My church and My kingdom? For it was never meant that there should be only one One Mighty and Strong, for there are many, and they who have thought otherwise have erred.

In Dr. Groesbeck's learned opinion, this revelation was a delusional artifact, as were all Ron's revelations, spawned by depression and his deeply entrenched narcissism, with no basis whatsoever in reality. Which is, of course, what nonbelievers typically say about people who have religious visions and revelations: that they're crazy. The devout individuals on the receiving end of such visions, however, generally beg to differ, and Ron is one of them.

Ron knows that the commandments he'd received were no mere figment of his imagination. The Lord spoke to him. And he wasn't about to believe the words of some faithless, pencil-neck shrink over the voice of the Almighty. That, after all, would really be crazy.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

ENTERING THE STORY

In a society whose leadership is intensely concerned with the danger of being absorbed by a more powerful culture, an emphasis on social boundary protection may well be symbolized by an emphasis on food/boundary protection. In ancient times, for example, tiny Israel, constantly overpowered by imperial absorption on the political and military level and constantly withstanding imperial absorption on the cultural and religious level, had, in the Jewish scriptures, a massive priestly legislation concerning bodily boundaries.[…]

That meant an especial concern with orifices, with what should and should not enter or exit from the body's standard openings. Thus Leviticus 11 legislates about food going into the body and Leviticus 12 about babies coming out. But Leviticus 13-14, on leprosy, raises an even more dangerous boundary problem. The standard bodily orifices can be clearly delineated and their incomings and outgoings categorized as clean or unclean. And that establishes, as it was meant to do, an intense concentration on boundary establishment. When, however, would-be orifices start to appear where no orifices are meant to be, then, unable to tell orifice from surface, or with all boundaries rendered porous, the entire system breaks down. That is why biblical leprosy applies not only to skin, as in Leviticus 13:1-45 and 14:1-32, but to clothes, as in 13:46-59, and to house walls, as in 14:33-53, and it renders each surface ritually unclean—that is, socially inappropriate. The leprous person is not a social threat because of medical contagion, threatening infection or epidemic, as we might imagine, but because of symbolic contamination, threatening in microcosm the very identity, integrity, and security of society at large.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. In the early part of this passage, Jesus goes into Simon and Andrew's house, and does what? To whom? How?

The same day, in the evening, we are told that *they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.* Imagine the scene, the whole city crowded at the door. What would this look like? Smell like? Sound like? Feel like? How do you imagine the curing and the casting out?

Jesus has spent the whole day healing and casting out demons. *In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.* The word translated here as deserted place is the same root word which is in the baptism and wilderness stories translated as wilderness. Why do you imagine he goes to a place that is isolated, wilderness? Why might he go alone? Why so early?

1 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperCollins, 1994), p. 78.

What might he be feeling? What might he be needing? What might he be desiring?

And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." Why might they be hunting for Jesus? What expectations may they have of him? What is his response? How might they react? What is Jesus' intention? What is it that he came for?

2. Who are those in our world who are today's demon-possessed? Today's sick? What might it take to cure them? Who are the healers in our world? Who are those who cast out demons?

Who are those that press their demands upon others? What are those expectations and agendas?

Where do you see those who get up early and go to some isolated place? Why do they go there? Where are some of those places they go? What do they hope to gain? What must they give up?

3. What do you know of sickness, disease in your own body, mind, or soul? What do you know of demons in possession of you? What do you know of someone within you who is sick, and just wants to stay in bed? What is your bed? What might it take to get out of bed? What would a cure look like? What would your life look like if your demons were cast out? What do you know of the healing power described in this passage?

What do you know of rising early or staying up late, going off to an isolated place, to pray? Where do you go when you need to be alone and wonder what you are about? What within you feels the crush of others' expectations and demands? What knows something of what you came to do? What might that be?

How do you find time to do this when the demands of your work and calling press upon you? If it is not an accustomed practice, try it for this week, as an experiment. Give yourself some time when you can be alone—removed from your normal routine—and in your own way, pray.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."* What is it that he has come out to do? For what purpose? To what end? What is it that you have come for? Take some early morning time this week—solitary, quiet time—and simply see how the day's work goes, in its wake. Notice how it might be different. Pay attention to how the darkness, the solitude, and the early hour inform your daylight activity. What do you know now that you didn't know before?

- Many people point to today's text, highlighting rising early, *while it was still very dark, he* [Jesus] *got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.* What was Jesus seeking? Was it more important that it was early, or that it was isolated? Or were both important? Where in your own day do you find an isolated place? What would you have to do with your schedule, your obligations, your agendas to find such a time and place?

- *And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."* What do the people want from Jesus, according to Mark? What does Jesus tell Simon and those who hunt him is the purpose for which he has come? What does he want to do that requires him to move on to the neighboring villages? These centuries later, how does the church continue to do what Jesus is doing in the story? How does your congregation or parish speak and drive out demons? Where

might the energy be going instead? Who or what hunts you down and prevents you from doing what Jesus came out to do?

EXPLORING FURTHER

"Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me… We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look… To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts." —*Henry David Thoreau*

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.
Don't open the door to your study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.
—*Rumi*

I am, without doubt, a creature of temperate habits, setting the rhythm of my days to the necessary—eight hours of sleep a night being of chief importance. So, seldom do I stay up very late or rise before the dawn to pray. Yet one evening last summer, while vacationing on the tiny Bailey Island off the coast of Maine, illness overtook me and I was up all night alone.

The silence of a sleeping house is unique in the intensity of the solitude it brings. And a bladder infection is unique, as anyone who has ever suffered one knows, in its ability to lead you to prayer. All night I existed in the space between the enormous quiet of the black night and the insistent cries of my body. I spent the hours pacing, praying for relief and drinking copious amounts of water to flush out of my system the anger that had lodged there. And, while certainly not a plight I would ever have chosen, I was also aware of the luxury inherent in the large chunk of time to myself. The quiet and the time spent alone with only my body to talk with afforded me the opportunity to really wonder about what it was trying to say to me. And I realized how seldom I truly listen.

Gradually, I touched a place of quiet within—a silence as deep as the dark Atlantic outside my window. Then, just as the blackness of the sky began to soften into purple, the first sign that the night had nearly run its course, my pain too began to lighten. I had made it through the night. Creeping out the door, I breathed in deeply what remained of it, allowing the moist sea air to settle on my skin. The birds began their warm-ups, preparing their accompaniment for the show that they knew by instinct was just a moment away. Then ... it happened. It dawned. The sun rose up over the flat farthest most reach of Atlantic in a ritual ceremony so magnanimous I understood it must be the prototype for every human ceremony ever conceived. And here I was—a celebrant. No more need for spoken prayer, for thinking, or even listening. This dawn was the prayer. I was the prayer—as were the birds, and the water, and the grass. It was all prayer. Prayer was all there.

—*Kathie Collins*

From *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* by John Dominic Crossan

Was he [Jesus] curing the disease through an intervention in the physical world, or was he healing the illness through an intervention in the social world? I presume that Jesus, who did not and could not cure that disease or any other one, healed the poor man's illness by refusing to accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracization. Jesus thereby forced others either to reject him from their community or to accept the leper within it as well. Since, however, we are dealing with the politic body, that act quite deliberately impugns the rights and prerogatives of society's boundary keepers and controllers. By healing the illness without curing the disease, Jesus acted as an alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of his society. Such an interpretation may seem to destroy the miracle. But miracles are not changes in the physical world so much as changes in the social world, and it is society that dictates, in any case, how we see, use, and explain that physical world. It would, of course, be nice to have certain miracles available to change the physical world if we could, but it would be much more desirable to make certain changes in the social one, which we can. We ourselves can already make the physical world totally uninhabitable; the question is whether we can make the social world humanly habitable.

From "What to Remember When Waking" in *Crossing the Unknown Sea* by David Whyte

In that first
hardly noticed
moment
in which you wake,
coming back
to this life
from the other
more secret,
moveable
and frighteningly
honest
world
where everything
began,
there is a small
opening
into the new day

Read the entire poem here: https://medium.com/@shanebreslin/poetry-for-pandemic-times-1-what-to-remember-when-waking-by-david-whyte-518216cd5385

In this TED video David Whyte talks about the COVID pandemic of 2020 and reads his poem: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=546457072946139

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?' And he said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent.'

Elijah said to him, 'Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.' But he said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?' And he answered, 'Yes, I know; be silent.'

Then Elijah said to him, 'Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.' But he said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

[13-14 He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.]

ENTERING THE STORY

This text describes the transition of power and authority from the prophet Elijah to Elisha. The chapter begins with Elijah traveling to Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho and Jordan. No reason is given for the travels. Nor is it obvious why Elijah has the conversation with his already named successor about staying and leaving. Walter Brueggemann calls the opening narrative about the two prophets and the company of prophets "deeply enigmatic." He writes: "It is impossible to understand what is happening or why the narrator includes it." It is important to note the geography of the story that ends at the Jordan where Elijah and Elisha both re-enact the drama of Moses opening the Red Sea between Egypt and the wilderness. It would seem that both prophets part water, enter and return from what might be another wilderness.

At the beginning of his work, now without Elijah, Elisha is at the Jordan. He is at the boundary between the wild zone of Yahweh's direct power and the controlled territory of the monarchy. He seeks after Yahweh who he identifies as 'the God of Elijah.' His first utterance is an inquiry and a petition. He receives no answer. But his third act is to strike the water of the Jordan parting the waters, replicating Elijah who replicated Moses. Elisha crosses back over the Jordan, now entering into the land ostensibly governed by the monarch. Reentry is at Jericho, a characteristic and familiar point of entry from the wilderness.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. The Lord is about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. He and Elisha are on the way to Gilgal. Elijah is called to Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho. Each time he instructs Elisha to *stay here*. Each time Elisha refuses to stay and follows Elijah. How would you characterize what is going on between Elijah and Elisha? Why might Elijah

want Elisha to stay where he is? What do you make of Elisha's insistence that he not leave Elijah? Reading between the lines what are you learning about each of the two men? What might their relationship be like?

Elijah and Elisha arrive at the Jordan River. Look at the map in EXPLORING FURTHER in order to get a sense of where the three towns, the Jordan River and the wilderness are. What do you recall from the history of Israel about the Jordan River? What do you remember the Israelites leaving behind when they crossed the river? What was ahead for them?

What does Elijah do as he stands before the Jordan waters? What echoes do you hear in the story of Joshua crossing that same river near Jericho years before [Joshua 3]? Of forty years before Joshua, Moses parting the Red Sea waters at the beginning of the great wilderness journey [Exodus 14]?

Why might it be in the wilderness that Elijah and Elisha speak of the coming of the spirit upon Elisha? What do you suppose the storyteller wants you to know by situating the departure of Elijah and the spirit falling upon Elisha in the wilderness rather than on the domesticated monarchy side of the Jordan?

What do you learn about Elisha as he stands on the banks of the Jordan River holding Elijah's mantle?

We are told fifty men of the company of prophets stand there at the river. What might they be thinking and feeling? As Elisha walks through the parted waters one of the fifty men might say to another:

A companion responds:

2. As you look about your world today where do you sense a division between the world of Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho and the world of the wilderness? How might you characterize the world of Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho in contrast to wilderness? What do you imagine is missing on the wilderness side of the Jordan? What is found only there? What is present in the absence of settled towns? How might the hopes and fears of the wilderness differ from the hopes and fears of those living in Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho?

What do you know of a wilderness in your daily travels? Of Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho? How do you experience these two worlds in your classroom or office or health club or retirement center or driving downtown and back? What do you know of two such realms and the river in your church or synagogue or mosque? How have you ever observed a mantel being cast and a spirit arriving in the wilderness places of your life?

3. What do know of change and transformation happening to you in wilderness that could never have occurred in your Gilgal, Bethel or Jericho where you felt secure, comfortable and in control? What have you known of an empowering spirit that came only because you were on the wilderness side of the river? Of a new sense of purpose and identity come to you in the wild place?

How would you characterize life on the domesticated monarchy side of the river? What is there that is missing in the wilderness? What is it that can be found only in the wilderness?

4. What do you know of an inner geography of soul that contains Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho, the River Jordan and a wilderness? Consider the last 48 hours. Where in those hours have you spent your time? In those two days

what have you known of living in your Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho, being in your wilderness, and even standing on your river bank deciding whether to risk a crossing one way or the other? In these few hours when have you been touched by any sense of an empowering or enlivening spirit in your wilderness that fed and inspired you? Even now, what do you know of a call to cross over the water as you stand on the side of the river where your life is secure, predictable, organized and manageable?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Who has been for you an Elijah? A prophet, a mentor, an older person who has taken you under their wing? Where have they taken you in your journey together? What have you feared as they leave you? What have you learned? What have you taken with you? If you could write a letter in which you articulated their wisdom, what would you say to them?

- *"Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?' And he said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent."* From the very beginning of this story there has been no question for the reader about how it will turn out. We're told right off that the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. Both Elijah and Elisha also seem to know what is about to happen. What do you imagine would be going on between these two as they make their way from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan? What questions might Elisha want to ask? What advice or warnings might Elijah want to offer? If you were about to leave a job, a community, a home, what would you want to tell those who will remain? If you are saying farewell to someone who is leaving, what would you want to know? What changes in the relationship as the time of departure nears?

- What might be the relationship between Elisha and the 50 prophets? What might they be hoping, wondering, or assuming with their repeated reminder, "*Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?*" What motivates them to ask the question, not once, but twice? And what of Elisha's apparently dismissive response: "Yes, I know, be silent"? What might Elisha be feeling, hoping, or wondering?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From "When Some Turn to Church, Others Go to Crossfit" by Mark Oppenheimer at *NewYorkTimes.com*

Christian ministers talk about healing broken people, but it seems they would hesitate to focus on athletes, because, in Christian theology, all are fallen sinners, all are broken. Then again, groups like Athletes in Action do, in fact, focus their Christian gospel on athletes. If CrossFit is, for Ms. Carfagna, an even more specific community, one of adaptive athletes, that may not be so different.

Skeptics might scoff that CrossFit is just a gym. But in an interview this week, Mr. Glassman said that for many participants it is obviously much more.

"Down the road," Mr. Glassman said, the core CrossFit values — which he defined as accountability, community and personal transformation — will "translate into, 'I'm going to take my Camry into the Toyota dealer tomorrow, and will someone from the gym pick me up?' And of course they will. 'I'm going to move — will people from the gym help me?' Of course they will."

Ms. Huberlie described the CrossFit experience as an intimate, supportive one, in which cheering for one another to meet fitness goals was expected. It is a culture that can produce effects more often associated with church.

"There is something raw and vulnerable that happens to you when you go into the CrossFit gym," Ms. Huberlie said. "A workout can bring you to your knees, so to speak."

From "Prayer Shaming: A New Front in the Culture Wars" in *The Week*

In the first anguished days following the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, Calif., an ugly new phenomenon spread across the country, said Emma Green in *TheAtlantic.com*. Call it "prayer shaming." Liberal politicians and journalists mocked Republicans for saying they were sending "their thoughts and prayers" for the victims, arguing that without gun control, prayers are meaningless. "Your 'thoughts' should be about steps to take to stop this carnage," tweeted Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) in a message retweeted 23,000 times. Your 'prayers' should be for forgiveness if you do nothing—again." The *Huffington Post* sardonically noted that prayer "seems to have been an ineffective strategy so far," while the *New York Daily News* ran a front page picturing tweeted prayers from prominent Republicans, beside the biting headline "God Isn't Fixing This." Nothing wrong with pointing out "the hypocrisy of empty gestures," said Mary Elizabeth Williams in *Salon.com*. It's sickening to see lawmakers who refuse to do anything about gun violence "hiding behind God whenever blood is shed."

Map of Ancient Israel: Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho are mid-map east of Joppa and the Jordan River is to the east of the three cities. (Source: Biblestudy.org)



From "Lady Gaga and the Life of Passion" by David Brooks at *NewYorkTimes.com*

[…] people with passion have the courage to be themselves with abandon. We all care what others think about us. People with passion are just less willing to be ruled by the tyranny of public opinion.

As the saying goes, they somehow get on the other side of fear. They get beyond that fog that is scary to approach. Once through it they have more freedom to navigate. They opt out of things that are repetitive, routine and deadening. There's even sometimes a certain recklessness there, a willingness to throw their imperfect selves out into public view while not really thinking beforehand how people might react. Gaga is nothing if not permanently out there; the rare celebrity who is willing to portray herself as a monster, a witch or disturbing cyborg—someone prone to inflicting pain.

Lady Gaga is her own unique creature, whom no one could copy. But she is indisputably a person who lives an amplified life, who throws her contradictions out there, who makes herself a work of art. People like that confront the rest of us with the question a friend of mine perpetually asks: Who would you be and what would you do if you weren't afraid?

From "Naming the Shadows" by Heidi Neumark in *The Christian Century*



(Source: Photo by DM1795 via Creative Commons)

[***Ed. Note:*** In Saint Mary's Church, Lubeck Germany]

This beautiful window draws millions of tourists each year. There is a sly social commentary in the original—the pope and peasant are waiting in line for the same dance partner. The point is the equalizing nature of our mortality. But given the church's setting and history, that's a lie. The 102 panels in this stained-glass meditation about death were all created within a decade of the Shoah in Germany, but there is no reference to the Holocaust. Not one piece of glass suggests the truth: not all deaths are equal. Not one piece suggests the lethal affiance of Shoah and church. Instead, Lubeck is envisioned as the victim of war with no role in and no contrition for the city's complicity in millions of deaths. Streams of visitors come, take their photographs, and purchase their postcards, but leave without any mention of the Shoah. They receive no invitation to meditate on how they might live their lives in the wake of the Shoah's macabre choreography.

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Genesis 9: 8-17
Psalm 25: 1-10
1 Peter 3: 18-22

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

ENTERING THE STORY

In verse nine, Jesus appears for the first time in Mark's narrative as he travels from Nazareth to be baptized by John. Mark does not tell us Jesus' motive. But he had to be more than curious about what he had heard about John. Why else would he walk several days from Nazareth—perhaps as far as a hundred miles—to where John was baptizing? For the same reason, we must also imagine that Jesus spent some time with John rather than going for a quick baptism and a journey home a few days later. We should probably think of John as Jesus' mentor.

It is instructive to compare Mark's story of the baptism with Matthew's. To Mark's account, Matthew adds a conversation between Jesus and John (3:14-15). John recognizes Jesus as his superior: John says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" The effect is to suggest that Jesus didn't need to be baptized by John, but nevertheless agreed to be.

But in Mark there is no hint that John recognized Jesus as superior to him, or that Jesus accepted baptism in spite of that. Rather, Mark's account suggests that Jesus' decision to be baptized indicates an acceptance of John's call to repentance and an identification with John's message and vision—in short, that Jesus was, for at least a while, one of John's disciples.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee*…What might Nazareth be to Jesus? What might you imagine that Nazareth is like for him? Who is there? Who is not? Where is John? How far might Jesus have to travel to get to the Jordan and John? What do you know about John from Mark's gospel? What is he like? What does he wear? Eat? What is the content of his preaching? Why might Jesus undertake such a journey to get to John?

   …and was baptized by John in the Jordan. What do you know about the Jordan River? What role in the history of the Jews has it played? What might Jesus have done to prepare for his baptism? For entering into the water of the River Jordan?

   And just as he was coming up out of the water…In order to come up out of the water, Jesus must first do what? What might that be like?

Take a few moments, close your eyes and imagine going under the water. Or put some image onto paper that expresses that going under. Come *up and out* of the water. Express in movement or art coming up out of the water.

   …he saw the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". The most common translation for the

1 Marcus Borg, "Baptism" in *Meeting Jesus in Mark* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011.)

Greek preposition eis, translated here as "on" is rather "in," or "into." A more literal translation might suggest the Spirit as descending like a dove into him. What difference, if any, might this make in your hearing the story? What might this vision of the heavens torn apart be about? What is it to be torn apart? Ripped open? How are the heavens different after such a tearing and ripping?

What might it mean to be called *my son, the beloved*? What is a son? What expectations and trials come with being a *son*? How might Jesus hear these words? How might he be struck by "*You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*"? With what questions might Jesus leave his baptism? What might he be asking? Of himself? Of the Spirit?

What else might the Spirit want as it immediately drives him into the wilderness? What might wait for Jesus in the wilderness? What about the sights and sounds of the baptism might make it important for Jesus to go into the wilderness? What is this *wilderness* like? Why might it be important for him to be *tempted* or *tested*? What might he learn from this tempting or testing?

2. Who do you know in your work or your church or your neighborhood or at your family table who has had a "baptism"? Who has gone into the dark and cold waters and been unable to breathe? Who has come up out of that "water" to see the heavens torn apart and to hear a voice addressing him or her? What did that voice say? What do you see in the world around you that speaks of the tearing apart of the heavens? What voices do these others around you hear?

3. What do you know of this *tearing apart of the heavens* in your own life? What *heavens* have been ripped asunder? What changed, or became newly visible in your life as a result of that tearing apart? What do you know of a voice that calls you "*beloved," "son"* or "*daughter*"? Into what wilderness might that tearing and that voice drive you? What response might the tearing and the voice want from you?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- This Sunday marks the beginning of Lent in the Christian tradition, a period of preparation for the celebration of Easter. It is Jesus' forty days in the wilderness which the church adopted as the appropriate length of time for this season (counting the days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday and omitting the Sundays). If you have access to a concordance or an online bible, take a little time to search for "forty days" and "forty years." What kinds of events are described? What might there be about "forty" that has nothing to do with numbers and counting?

- What do we know about John? What he wore, what he ate, etc.? We know that he ate locusts—variety unknown. The Torah states that 4 kinds of locusts were kosher. **Leviticus 11:21-2:** But among the winged insects that walk on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to leap on the ground. Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind.

- As mentioned in EXPLORING THE STORY the Greek word eis in Mark is usually translated as in or into. Thus Mark suggests the Spirit enters into the body/being of Jesus. In Matthew and Luke the preposition is hupo rather than eis. Their word is generally translated as upon. For a Jew it makes no sense that the Spirit of God would enter into a human being. On the other hand, it is common in Hebrew scripture to refer to the Spirit of the Lord

coming upon—descending onto—the prophets. Most biblical scholars assume that Matthew and Luke have Mark. So an interesting question arises about whether the two later gospel writers have changed Mark's earlier text from "into" to "upon." A possibility. If this be the case then one needs to ask why. What purpose would it serve to alter the text in this way? An alternative is that it was always upon in all three gospels and that Mark is later changed to into from upon. One reason for doing so might be to make clear that Jesus is not a prophet but rather someone unique into whom God has chosen to enter. This is of course consistent with emerging church theology—though this happening at the baptism was one of the earliest "heresies" in the struggle to define the human and divine nature of Jesus. Be your own theologian and decide for yourself. Why is such a task valuable? It will help you come to terms with a definition of Jesus for yourself in the same way that was happening from the beginning.

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Meeting Jesus in Mark: Conversations with Scripture* by Marcus Borg

Visions are a dramatic kind of religious experience. Reported in many religions, they involve an ecstatic state of consciousness in which something "beyond" the ordinary is "seen," as the word "vision" suggests. They are often accompanied by a voice, an "audition," to use a semi-technical term. Vision and audition frequently go together. What is seen and heard has sacred significance and is often life-changing.

They are important in the Bible and associated with its major figures: in the Old Testament, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and many prophets experienced visions; in the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, Peter, the author of Revelation, and others did. Moreover, they are commonly about vocation—being called by God to a specific task.

Visions fall into two primary categories. Some involve seeing into another level or layer of reality, another "world." For example, Ezekiel saw the heavens open and visions of God (1:1). Isaiah "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty," attended by six-winged creatures from another world, accompanied by an audition that called him to his prophetic vocation (6:1-13).

Some visions involve seeing an ordinary object in this world but transfigured and suffused with sacred significance. In Exodus 3, Moses saw a bush that burned without being consumed, filled with the fiery radiance of God. Then a voice spoke to him, commissioning him to be liberator of Israel. Jeremiah's visions and call to be a prophet included an almond branch and a boiling pot (1:11-13).

Jesus' baptismal vision and audition belong to the first category. […]

[I]n Mark, only Jesus sees the vision and hears the voice. They are an internal experience, not a public event and disclosure. This is consistent with Mark's gospel as a whole: in Mark, Jesus' status as Son of God is not part of Jesus' message. Indeed, in Mark, the first human to declare Jesus to be the Son of God does so at the crucifixion, at the end of Jesus' historical life.

That Mark presents Jesus' vision and audition as a private, internal experience does not in any way diminish its significance. For Mark, it is vitally important: the story of Jesus begins with a dramatic experience of the sacred. Like other great figures in the Jewish tradition, Jesus had a vision and heard the voice of God calling him to his vocation.

From "The Baptism in the Jordan" in *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* by Joseph Campbell

Much has been made throughout the centuries of the fact that in the Gospel according to Mark there is no account either of the Virgin Birth or of the infancy of the Savior. The text begins with his baptism, and the descent, then, of the Spirit as a dove. […]

The baptism is the first event of the biography to appear in all three synoptic gospels, and the version according to Mark's being the earliest of the series, c. 75 A.D., it supplied the matter from which the other two were derived. Nevertheless, in one authoritative text of the Gospel according to Luke, the voice from heaven

declares, not "Thou art my beloved Son," but "This day have I begotten thee." (FN: Luke 3:22, Western Text, codex D).

Now the controversy over the dignity of Mary hinges on the question as to whether Jesus was the very son of God from conception or became endowed with his divine mission only at the moment of his baptism by John. Apparently the historicity of John the Baptist cannot be denied. The almost contemporary Jewish historian Josephus (c. 37-95 A.D.) states that "he was a good man and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue through justice toward one another and piety toward God, and by so doing to arrive at immersion; for immersion would be acceptable to God only if practiced not to expiate sins but for purification of the body after the soul had first been thoroughly purified by righteousness." And further: "Because many affected by his words flocked to him, Herod feared that John's great influence over the people might lead to revolt (for the people seemed likely to do whatever he counseled). He therefore thought it best to slay him in order to prevent any mischief he might engender, and to avoid possible future troubles by not sparing a man who might make him repent of his leniency when too late. Accordingly, because of Herod's suspicious nature, John was imprisoned in the fortress Machaerus, and there put to death." (FN: Josephus, Antiquities 18.5.2.) [. . .]

The site of John's activity…was within ten miles of the Essene community of Qumran, where a white-clothed army of the Lord was waiting, watching, and preparing for exactly such a one as he foretold. The air of the desert in those days, in fact, was filled with the expectations of a Messiah and the Messianic Age. John, however, was no Essene, as we know both from his garb and from his diet. He was in the line, rather, of Elijah, who is described in the book of Kings as a man who wore "a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins." And the rite of baptism that he preached, whatever its meaning at that time may have been, was an ancient rite coming down from the old Sumerian temple city Eridu, of the water god.

"A Man Lost By a River" by Michael Blumenthal from *Days We Would Rather Know*

There is a voice inside the body.
There is a voice and a music,
a throbbing, four-chambered pear
that wants to be heard, that sits
alone by the river with its mandolin
and its torn coat, and sings
for whomever will listen
a song that no one wants to hear.

Read the entire poem here: http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2015/03/michael-blumenthal-man-lost-by-river.html

From "The Word" in *Sweet Ruin* by Tony Hoagland

Do you remember? that time and light are kinds
of love, and love is no less practical
than a coffee grinder or a safe spare tire?

Read the entire poem here:
https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2011%252F09%252F10.html

From "Everywoman Her Own Theology" by Alicia Suskin Ostriker in *American Poetry Now*

I am nailing them up to the cathedral door
Like Martin Luther. Actually, no,
I don't want to resemble that Schmutzkopf
(See Erik Erikson and N. O. Brown
On the Reformer's anal aberrations,
Not to mention his hatred of Jews and peasants),
So I am thumbtacking these ninety-five
Theses to the bulletin board in my kitchen.

My proposals, or should I say requirements,
Include at least one image of a god,
Virile, beard optional, one of a goddess,
Nubile, breast size approximating mine
One divine baby, one lion, one lamb,
All nude as figs, all dancing wildly,
All shining. Reproducible
In marble, metal, in fact any material.
Ethically I am looking for
An absolute endorsement of loving-kindness.



Read the entire poem here: https://www.blueridgejournal.com/poems/ao-95theses.htm

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

ENTERING THE STORY

Jesus and the disciples have just left Caesarea Philippi where he has asked them who people thought him to be. They tell him that the people speak of him being John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. When he asks them who they think he is, Peter speaks out calling him the Messiah (Christ). The Greek in the next verse is the word "rebuke" that Mark uses in stories of demons being cast out and the stormy sea being calmed. Though most translations render the verse and he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him, the Greek makes clear that the reason he wants to silence them is that Peter has gotten it wrong.

The next entry in Mark's narrative takes place six days later. On “a high mountain apart” the question of who Jesus is gets raised again. And once more Peter volunteers the answer. This time, Mark tells us, his response is born of terror and not knowing anything else to say.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. There on the *high mountain apart with Peter, James and John…there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.* What do you recall of Elijah? Recall that Hebrew Scripture does not tell of his death but rather being taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. The tradition that Elijah is to be the precursor of the Messiah is set in place when the Christian Bible (unlike the Hebrew Scripture) arranged the placing of the Prophets so that Malachi and its anticipation of the return of the prophet is the filial book. It thus sits on the cusp of the New Testament story of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Remember Moses. Recall the stories of Moses in accounts of his confrontation with Pharaoh, the Exodus from Egypt, the parting of the sea waters, going up to meet the Lord God at Sinai and his return with the Ten Commandments, his forty years in the wilderness, and death before the tribe reaches the Promised Land. In Exodus 9:14-19, Moses tells the people: The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. What does this conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah suggest to you? What does it reveal about each one and about the three of them as a group?

Elijah and Moses appear and are talking with Jesus. Peter has learned at Caesarea Philippi not to call Jesus "Messiah" or the Christ. He instead addresses him as Rabbi. "*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*." *He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.* What is Peter revealing about his estimate of who Jesus is? What status does he accord Jesus in relationship to Elijah and Moses? How might he put into other words his assessment of who Jesus is and what he is about?

What does Peter know now that he did not know before he entered the cloud and heard the voice? What might be required of Peter if he is to believe what he hears?

The end of the story in all three synoptic gospels includes a cloud and a voice:

Mark 8:7: Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Matthew 17:5: While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Luke 9:34-35: While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

What event from the beginning of each of the gospel's accounts does the conclusion of the mountaintop story recall?

Mark 1:9-11: In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:16-17: And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Luke 3:22: Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark, as well as Matthew and Luke, wants Peter and future readers to know what about the identity of Jesus?

2. What have you known in your life of a dark and frightening time when the right answers you had accumulated and counted upon no longer worked? As you look back, recall a time when one of your right answers about who God is, who you are, and how the world operates no longer made sense. How, like Peter, have you tried out a confident answer, solution, or remedy only to be overshadowed by a cloud wherein you discovered a very different understanding that promised a new world, relationship, or self-image?

3. What are the things that you now hold to be true at your core that guide you as you try to make sense out of the nonsense of the world? Name them.

Ponder what it would be like if what happened to Peter may someday happen to you. Consider the possibility that a cloud is out there that may someday overshadow you, terrify you, and leave you almost speechless. Pick one of your truths. How might you and your world become filled with new possibilities were a "voice" in the darkness ever to convince you that you are wrong?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *Six days later*…Wonder why this time was important to Mark. What did he want to convey by introducing this story in this way? In modern historical reports we would consider it a statement of fact, but this is a gospel, written not to communicate history, but significance. Six days later. Later than what? Later than the incident at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-9:1), that we will not encounter until the second Sunday in Lent. How is our experience of the story of Mark changed by reading it backwards? Six days later. What can happen in six days? Not quite a week,

but a significant span of time for the disciples to ponder, wonder, question. What do you imagine was happening during those six days? Why might it be necessary for six days to pass between the argument with Peter and the experience of transfiguration? What do you know in your own life of times when six days have needed to pass before deeper understanding could emerge?

- What does it mean to be "transfigured"? How does it change a person? How does it change those who witness it? Do you know of any around you who have been "transfigured"? Have you witnessed such a change? How have their changes changed you? The Greek metemorphothe means what you might guess—to transform, to change, to metamorphose. What do you know of metamorphosis in your life? What events have marked the significant changes in your life? Take out the photo album and really look at pictures of a younger you, perhaps several of them at different times. Look at the changes in your physical appearance. Ponder perhaps how your appearance has or has not paralleled your inner changes.

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Binding The Strong Man* by Ched Myers

At the level of Mark's own story the appearance of these two [Moses and Elijah] should not be surprising, since both Moses (alluded to in Jesus' "Who am I?") and Elijah (embodied in John the Baptist) have already been implicitly present. Finally, at the level of ideological legitimation, they lend credibility to the teaching Jesus has just delivered; the cross stands now with "the law and the prophets." This is meant as a dramatic confirmation of Mark's repeated claim that his story stands in continuity with the "old story" (1:2).

In 9:3 we are given a detailed description of the transformation of Jesus' garments (himatia). It almost seems as if this marks a kind of symbolic "transfer" of clothing, an enactment of the call to forsake the "old" garments (2:21). The "new" garments are described as extremely "white" (leukos.) Once again, this term recalls the Danielic courtroom (Dn 7:9; see also 10:8); more importantly, in apocalyptic intertextuality, white garments came to symbolize the clothing of martyrs (as in the Book of Revelation, 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13). And at the end of the story we will see, in "place" of Jesus, a "young man" who also, as we shall see, had cast away one garment (14:52) and now wears white (16:5). We must conclude that in the transfiguration, following as it does directly upon the first portent and teaching of the cross, Jesus' new garment is symbolic of the martyr's white robes.

In awe of this spectacle, once again Peter speaks for the group. But he has changed his tune: he addresses Jesus here not as "Messiah," but "Rabbi" (9:5). At the two later points in Mark's story in which "Rabbi" occurs, the disciples are standing with the dominant Jewish ideology over against Jesus: (1) their lament over Jesus' repudiation of the temple (11:21), and (2) Judas's greeting even as he betrays Jesus to the high priests (14:45). Is this also such a moment? It seems so, for again instead of understanding the way of the cross Peter proposes a cult of adulation. He offers to construct a memorial, "a temporary dwelling place like the 'booths' made of interlacing branches at the Feast of Tabernacles (Lv 23:4ff.)" (Taylor, 1963: 391). For the second time in as many episodes Peter has misconstrued the discourse of Jesus! And, for a second time, the lead disciple is rebuked. This time, however, it is not by Jesus but by the heavenly voice itself (9:7). But this voice does not condemn Peter; neither does it, the intertextual allusion notwithstanding, pronounce any new commandments (Moses), whisper in a still small voice (Elijah), or exposit the combat myth (Daniel). It simply reiterates the testimony of the baptism, and then adds, "Listen to him" (9:7). There is not need for new revelation; "the word" has already been delivered in Jesus' teaching of the cross.

From "The Itch" by Atul Gawande in *The New Yorker*

It was still shocking to M. how much a few wrong turns could change your life. She had graduated from Boston

College with a degree in psychology, married at twenty-five, and had two children, a son and a daughter. She and her family settled in a town on Massachusetts' southern shore. She worked for thirteen years in health care, becoming the director of a residence program for men who'd suffered severe head injuries. But she and her husband began fighting. There were betrayals. By the time she was thirty-two, her marriage had disintegrated. In the divorce, she lost possession of their home, and, amid her financial and psychological struggles, she saw that she was losing her children, too. Within a few years, she was drinking. She began dating someone, and they drank together. After a while, he brought some drugs home, and she tried them. The drugs got harder. Eventually, they were doing heroin, which turned out to be readily available from a street dealer a block away from her.

One day, she went to see a doctor because she wasn't feeling well, and learned that she had contracted H.I.V. from a contaminated needle. She had to leave her job. She lost visiting rights with her children. And she developed complications from the H.I.V., including shingles, which caused painful, blistering sores across her scalp and forehead. With treatment, though, her H.I.V. was brought under control. At thirty- six, she entered rehab, dropped the boyfriend, and kicked the drugs. She had two good, quiet years in which she began rebuilding her life . Then she got the itch.

[…] the internist concluded that M.'s problem was probably psychiatric. All sorts of psychiatric conditions can cause itching. Patients with psychosis can have cutaneous delusions—a belief that their skin is infested with, say, parasites, or crawling ants, or laced with tiny bits of fiberglass. Severe stress and other emotional experiences can also give rise to a physical symptom like itching—whether from the body's release of endorphins (natural opioids, which, like morphine, can cause itching), increased skin temperature, nervous scratching, or increased sweating. […] M. was willing to consider such possibilities. Her life had been a mess, after all. But the antidepressant medication often prescribed for O.C.D. made no difference. […]

The images in our mind are extraordinarily rich. We can tell if something is liquid or solid, heavy or light, dead or alive. But the information we work from is poor—a distorted, two- dimensional transmission with entire spots missing. So the mind fills in most of the picture. You can get a sense of this from brain-anatomy studies. If visual sensations were primarily received rather than constructed by the brain, you'd expect that most of the fibers going to the brain's primary visual cortex would come from the retina. Instead scientists have found that only twenty percent do; eighty percent come downward from regions of the brain governing functions like memory. Richard Gregory, a prominent British neuropsychologist, estimates that visual perception is more than ninety percent memory and less than ten percent sensory nerve signals.

The account of perception that's starting to emerge is what we might call the "brain's best guess" theory of perception: perception is the brain's best guess about what is happening in the outside world. The mind integrates scattered, weak, rudimentary signals from a variety of sensory channels, information from past experiences, and hard-wired processes, and produces a sensory experience full of brain-provided color, sound, texture, and meaning. We see a friendly yellow Labrador bounding behind a picket fence not because that is the transmission we receive but because this is the perception our weaver-brain assembles as its best hypothesis of what is out there from the sliver of information we get. Perception is inference.

From *Born Standing Up* by Steve Martin

After our lunches, my parents, now in their eighties, would walk me to my car. I would kiss my mother on the cheek and wave awkwardly at my father as we said goodbye. But one afternoon, perhaps motivated by a vague awareness that time was running out, we hugged each other and he said, in a voice barely audible, "I love you." This would be the first time these words were ever spoken between us. Several days later, I sent him a letter that began, "I heard what you said," and I wrote the same words back to him.

My father's health declined further, and he became bedridden. There must be an instinct about when the end is near; Mehnda and I found ourselves at our parents' home in Laguna Beach, California. I walked into the house

they had lived in for thirty-five years, and my tearful sister said, "He's saying goodbye to everyone." A nurse said to me, "This is when it all happens." I didn't know what she meant, but I soon understood.

I was alone with him in the bedroom; his mind was alert but his body was failing. He said, almost buoyantly, "I'm ready now." I sat on the edge of the bed, and another silence fell over us. Then he said, "I wish I could cry, I wish I could cry."

At first I took this as a comment on his condition but am forever thankful that I pushed on. "What do you want to cry about?" I said.

"For all the love I received and couldn't return."

I felt a chill of familiarity.

There was another lengthy silence as we looked into each other's eyes. At last he said, "You did everything I wanted to do."

"I did it for you," I said. Then we wept for the lost years. I was glad I didn't say the more complicated truth: "I did it because of you."

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3. Exploring the Story 38
4. Between the Lines 40
5. Exploring Further 40

[***Ed.Note:*** *See FURTHER EXPLORATION p. 55 for a sermon on this week's text.]

The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

ENTERING THE STORY

The Temple was the embodiment, institutionally, of holiness understood as separation—a holiness that prevented direct access to God by all but "undefiled" Jewish men. Jesus abolishes the pollution system maintained by the Temple through its inherent separation of the sacred and the secular. This separation worked greatly to the financial advantage of the priestly ruling elite.[4]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Versions of this story appear in all four gospels, but only John places it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, rather than during the week leading up to his crucifixion. John's version is slightly different; take care to read it closely and not bring in elements of the others. *Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.* What might *Jerusalem* represent for a first-century Jew? Why is the *temple* important? What goes on in the *temple*?

Look at the diagram of Herod's Temple in EXPLORING FURTHER. From the outside in, each area is more restrictive. Non-Jews were allowed only into the Court of the Gentiles; women can go no farther than the Court of the Women. Priests alone are allowed into the Court of the Priests, and it was here that the priests offer sacrifices of birds, sheep, goats, or cattle on the Altar for purification, forgiveness, and reconciliation of those who come to the Temple. Sacrifice is at the physical and symbolic center of the Temple itself. Every Israelite is required to pay a half shekel toward the support of the Temple. Since no engraved images are permitted into the Temple, including the images that frequently appear on coins, everyday money has to be exchanged for a special coinage.

What, do you imagine, might be necessary for making a sacrifice? What equipment? People? Animals? Rituals or activities? Intentions?

Imagine that you are a first-century Jew coming *up to Jerusalem* to make sacrifices. What intentions or expectations do you have? What preparations might have been necessary to make your journey? To stay in Jerusalem? To get to the Temple? Where do you think you will find what is necessary for making your sacrifice? If you have traveled a great distance, have you been able to bring animals with you to sacrifice? If not, where might you hope to get them?

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

4 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press, 1992).

After traveling to Jerusalem and arriving at the Temple, you are standing in line to change your money or to purchase an animal for sacrifice. You notice a scuffling break out near the tables. What do you see? Who is involved in the furor? Do you know this man? What effect might these events have on the functioning of the Temple? What effect does it have on your plans? How might you be feeling about what is going on?

> *He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"* What do you now hear? What might your response be to the man's words? What might you want to ask him?

Some people in the crowd now address him: *The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"*

What is a *sign*? Why might people be asking for a *sign* as an explanation for what Jesus is doing? How might a *sign* explain the man's actions or authority? What do you make of the man's answer? What sense might it make or not make?

As you leave the Temple at the end of the day, have you been able to make the sacrifices you have traveled so far to offer? What might you and the others at the Temple say about the day's events?

After you have returned home, how might you tell the story of that day in the Temple? If sometime later you heard again about this man Jesus—his teaching, his healings, or even his crucifixion and reported resurrection—how might your telling the story of that day change?

2. Where do people in your world go to "offer sacrifice"? Where are the temples or sacred places in your city, your place of work, your congregation, or even in your home where people go seeking reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration to the community?

Who are those who preside over the traditions and rituals of those sacred places, who see that requirements are fulfilled and proper standards observed for gaining access to the desired restoration? What "sacrifices" are required? What must be offered up? Why is a sacrifice needed at all? Who or what determines whether the sacrifice is adequate or appropriate? What are the "hoops" one must jump through or steps that must be completed?

> What do you know of someone who challenges those traditions and rituals, who interferes with normal transactions and "business as usual"? How do the keepers of the tradition respond? How do others in the family or group react to their disruption? Is it an experience of liberation or annoyance? What do you know of such a disruption which results in jolting people into a new way of thinking or acting?

3. Who are the sellers and money changers in your own inner life? What within you profits from exploiting your demands and expectations of yourself? What stands between you and finding reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration? Where, if anywhere, is the voice that challenges the sellers, overturns the tables, and drives them out of your inner temple?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Consider the use of the word zeal in the sentence, *His disciples remembered that it was written,* "*Zeal for your house will consume me*". The quote comes from verse 9 of Psalm 69. Take time to read the psalm and see the phrase and the word zeal in that context. Then wonder why John inserted the phrase into his description of the events unfolding before the disciples' eyes. Assuming those reading and hearing John's gospel might be familiar with the Psalm, what more does it add, between the lines, to this particular story being retold differently than it appears in the other, earlier, gospels?

- As you consider the place of the Jerusalem temple and the meaning of the sacrifice offered at the altar there it seems important to consider how the ritual may have been linked to the geographical place and building. Why do you suppose in the years following the Roman destruction of the temple in 70 that Jews did not build another temple elsewhere—or over the centuries return to erect another in Jerusalem? Notice that Judaism instead turned for its focus from temple sacrifice to life in the Torah text. It is in wrestling with the scripture and its meaning that Jews later and even now find the core of their faith. As Jews moved on to scripture from altar sacrifice, the Christians appropriated the temple imagery and metaphor as a description of the person and purpose of Jesus of Nazareth. It is Jesus as the "lamb of God" whose blood is now shed for the remission of sins in the liturgy of Mass and Eucharist, much as it was once described as happening at the temple altar. Jesus in the vocabulary and catechism of the emerging church becomes both the sacrifice and high priest. In some aspects the church over the centuries focuses more upon the adapted and adopted temple theology of Judaism than upon the biblical texts that become central to Judaism. How is Jesus such a sacrifice for you? What would you think might be the relationship between the temple altar sacrifice and your church liturgy with Jesus "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world"?

- Take some time, and some art materials, and create a temple, to house what is for you most holy. Make it three-dimensional, if you can. Decorate it as befits a temple. Sit with your temple. Imagine walking into it. What do you find there? Is there an altar or a sacred place for sacrifice? What, in your temple, might be brought to be sacrificed? How might such a sacrifice be honored? Who are the sellers and money changers outside your temple? What are they selling? What is the currency that is being changed? What does it do to you to allow them to stay? Why might you want them there? Why might you not? What does it do to you to drive them away? How do you drive them away? What might you say to them? What in you wants to drive them away? What is the promise in driving them away? What does it cost you to do it? What do you now know?

EXPLORING FURTHER

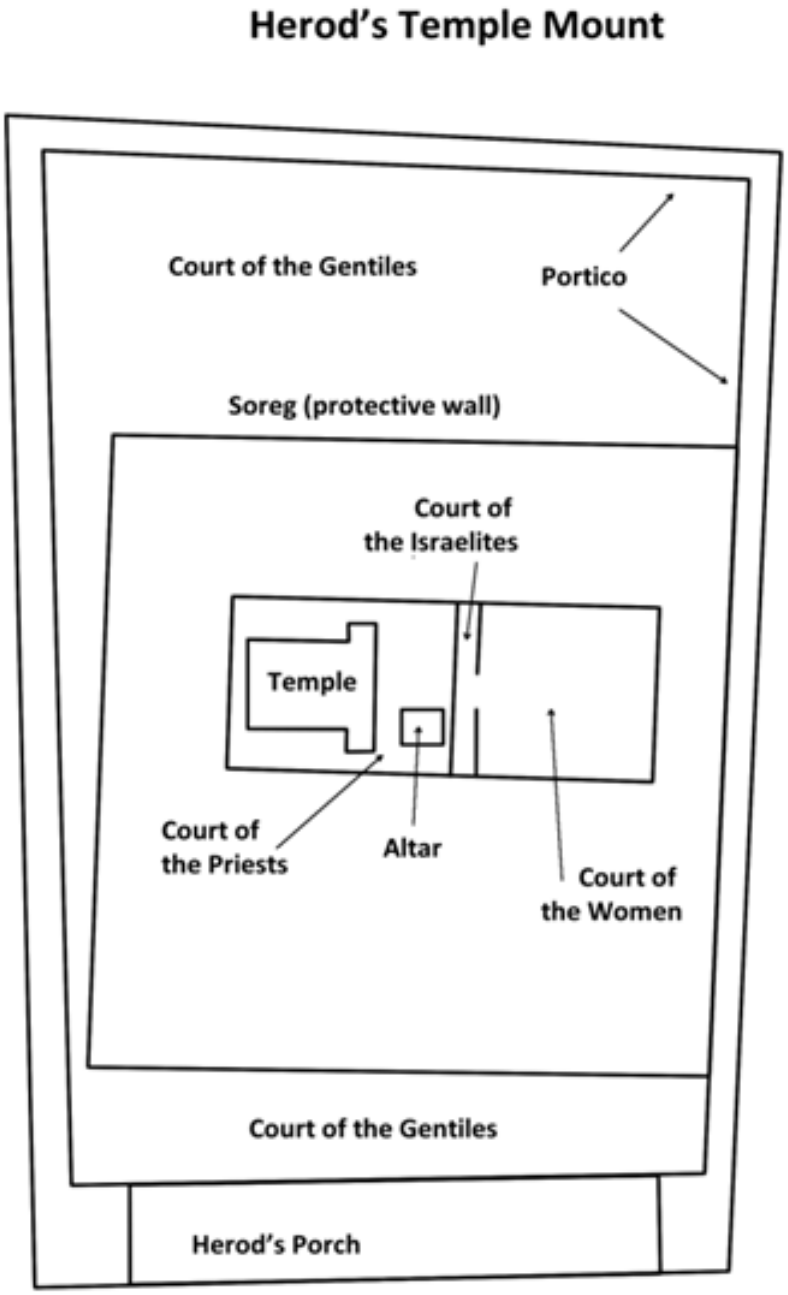
From *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* by Walter Wink

No doubt the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE was the single most decisive factor in the rethinking of sacrifice. But the seeds of the church's rejection had already been sown much earlier. Perhaps a clue lies in John 2:22—the disciples, John says, did not understand the meaning of Jesus' demonstration in the Temple until he was raised from the dead. They had not comprehended it at the time. What Jesus himself intended by it was certainly not made clear to his followers.

We cannot enter the mind of Jesus to retrace his motives. Whatever he may have intended by his act, the church gradually discerned that his life and teaching had undermined the entire theology of holiness on which the Temple cult was based. Jesus' death, they also came to believe, had exposed and annulled the whole system of sacrificial victimage, and thus terminated Temple slaughter—in short, sacred violence.

His action was understood symbolically. It was not a "cleansing" or reform of the Temple, to restore it to pure sacrifices or to eliminate business activity from the Temple precincts. The Temple could scarcely function at all without these sellers and money changers. Rather, the Gospels depict Jesus as enflamed by the separatism and exclusivity of the Temple ("my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations," Mark 11: 17a). He is shown attempting to shut it down entirely by preventing payment of the Temple tax, the obtaining of sacrificial victims, and even its use as a shortcut.

Diagram of the Jerusalem Temple



From *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of An Accidental Book* by Timothy Beal

Bible sales have been booming. The biggest Bible publishers in this highly competitive business guard their sales data closely, but reliable industry sources estimate that 2007 saw about 25 million Bibles sold, generating revenues of about $770 million in the United States alone. That was an increase of more than 26 percent since 2005, which saw U.S. sales of about $609 million. In fact, the Bible-publishing business has been enjoying a healthy compounded growth rate of close to 10 percent per year for several years. Even during the high point of economic crisis in late 2008, when other book sales were hurting badly, Bible sales continued to boom, with an estimated $823.5 million that year. Indeed, Bible publishing tends to thrive during times of war and financial disaster. Although it's too early to know for sure as I write, it may well turn out that the latest economic bust will be another boom time for the Bible business.[…]

[B]iblical literacy is low to zip, even while biblical reverence remains high and Bible sales rise. What's going on?

Could it be that biblical literacy is being replaced by biblical consumerism? In today's consumer culture, we are what we buy, wear, and carry. We identify ourselves by our patterns of consumer choices, by the market niches we buy into. It's gone beyond that post-Cartesian proof of existence, "I shop, therefore I am." Today, it's closer to "I shop for what I am." The culture industry makes and markets identities. I want to be outdoorsy, so I buy a lot of Gore-Tex, some "Life is good" shirts, and a Yakima rack for my Subaru. High school and college students identify the cultures on different campuses by brands: this school is very Hollister; that one's more American Apparel.

At the same time, we consumers are convinced that the shortest route to self-improvement is through new products.

Products change lives, right? My big New Year's resolution might be to become an organized person. So the first thing I do is go to the home store and buy a bunch of plastic boxes. Never mind the empty ones in my basement that I bought a year ago.

Or say I want to strengthen my identity as a Christian and grow deeper in my faith. I want a more God-centered life. I want to be "in the Word." I feel like I should be reading the Bible a lot more than I do. After all, like most people, I believe that the Bible is God's Word, that it's totally correct in all of its teachings, and that it holds the answers to all of life's most basic questions. So what do I do? Buy a Bible. Or, more likely, buy another Bible. A marketing executive at a major evangelical publishing company told me that, according to their research, the average Christian household owns nine Bibles and purchases at least one new Bible every year.

From "A Message from the Wanderer" by William Stafford from *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*

> Tell everyone just to remember
> their names, and remind others, later, when we
> find each other. Tell the little ones
> to cry and then go to sleep, curled up
> where they can. And if any of us get lost,
> if any of us cannot come all the way—
> remember: there will come a time when
> all we have said and all we have hoped
> will be all right.



Read the entire poem here:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52880/a-message-from-the-wanderer

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

ENTERING THE STORY

The Israelites are on their way through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. The journey will last forty years. As they set out from Mount Hor they discover that the king of Edom refuses to grant them passage through his kingdom. Going “around the land of Edom” means doubling back before they can resume their route to Canaan. The people become impatient. They have seven previous times spoken or murmured against Moses. This eighth time the murmuring is against both God and Moses.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. *Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness*? *For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.* How would you describe what is happening to the people? How do you suppose their experience of impatience sounds or what does it look like? Impatience with whom and what? What do you make of their protest that the food is miserable following a complaint that they have neither food nor water? Egypt is now recalled how? What has become of their relationship to God and Moses? Wilderness has become what for them?

The LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people. The people ask Moses to pray to the Lord for them to take away the snakes. Moses prays. The Lord does what? Does not do what?

What is to become of the poisonous serpents? When might they return? Why do you suppose that when bitten if one sees the bronze serpent on a pole he or she lives rather than dies?

2. What do you know of being on a wilderness journey when you encountered resistant and uncooperative people, systems or institutions in your way? How might this have happened for you in your growing up, schooling, career, marriage, friendships and even within yourself? What detours have you encountered along the way?

How have you experienced impatience when your plans were thwarted and your way blocked? Whom did you blame? How did you find fault with God, the cosmos/world, as well as particular people you could call by name? What slavery or captivity from which you were being liberated started to be remembered fondly and with longing? How were you tempted to turn around and return to Egypt? What was the food and drink you found in your wilderness journey that left you hungry and parched? What was the manna that was no longer enough?

How at such a tight place, running out of patience and blaming everyone and everything in your way, did the poison bite and infect you? What were your serpents? In those hours or days what of you was wounded, broken and even killed? From whom did you ask help? Who was your Moses, both outer and inner?

How were your prayers answered? In what sense did the poisonous serpents remain but were no longer lethal? Rather than go away or disappear, how were the serpents that accosted you raised up high to be seen and acknowledged? How did consciousness or awareness of the reality of poisonous serpents serve as antidote and remedy?

3. Where on your journey at this stage in your life have you arrived at Edom? What is blocking your way in body and spirit, in growing up or growing old, in a relationship that matters and even in your aching heart? What are your complaints and who do you blame? What are symptoms of your impatience? What food perhaps in abundance no longer nourishes? What are the poisonous serpents that sap your energy and rob you of life? How do you deal with them? In what ways do you deny, battle, ignore, discount, try to wish or pray them away, develop strategies to keep the serpents manageable or at bay?

Rather than escape or avoid the poisonous serpents that now threaten you, consider making "a serpent of bronze" and placing it "upon a pole." Imagine what it might be like to look at and live rather than avoid the serpents and keep dying.

In what sense might what you fear the most be part of what can be a source of bravery and courage? How might what wounds you be a possibility of healing? How might what is killing you be the very thing that promises you life?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- It seems that serpents always get a bad rap in Bible stories. Yet, they also seem to point us in the direction of becoming more conscious. For example, after the whole serpent incident in Genesis, Adam and Eve become awake and aware of how naked they have been. The Israelites in today's passage—once bitten—do also. Many cultures consider serpents a source of healing and the familiar Caduceus medical symbol shows two serpents intertwined. One definition of the word serpent is "traitor." A traitor, in turn, is a betrayer. Wonder—when, where, and how have I ever betrayed myself? Why? Where does that "serpent" side of me come from? And what healing self-knowledge did I acquire from that betrayal? And finally—could I have learned "that" any other way?

- "And so the wilderness had to be a new school for the soul…" (see Walzer in EXPLORING FURTHER) Forty years. Poisonous serpents. Miserable food. Stupid leaders. Kings who won't let us get through. Wilderness. What wilderness have you been in for the last forty years? What king has stopped your progress to the promised land? What poisonous serpents have threatened you, hurt you, even killed you? Take some time and some art materials, and give expression to those poisonous serpents. Put the image in front of you, and quietly ask it what it might have to tell you. Spend some time listening to whatever comes. Perhaps a dialogue might ensue. Honor whatever happens by putting it on a pole. What is poison in this? What is healing? What might you learn from your serpent?

- "*We have sinned by speaking against the* LORD *and against you; pray to the* LORD *to take away the serpents from us.*" Does God give the people what they want? They ask for the serpents to be taken away, and instead, God tells Moses in effect to make the serpent even more present to them. When in your life have you wanted to be relieved of some person or situation that was proving troublesome, only to find yourself even more confronted? How did you respond? What did you learn?

EXPLORING FURTHER

> "This is the [God] name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans, and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse." —*CG Jung*

From *Exodus and Revolution* by Michael Walzer

[T]here is a kind of freedom in bondage: it is one of the oldest themes in political thought, prominent especially in classical and neoclassical republicanism and in Calvinist Christianity, that tyranny and license go together. The childish and irresponsible slave or subject is free in ways the republican citizen and Protestant saint can never be. And there is a kind of bondage in freedom: the bondage of law, obligation, and responsibility. True freedom, in the rabbinic view, lies in servitude to God. The Israelites had been Pharaoh's slaves; in the wilderness they became God's servants the Hebrew word is the same; and once they agree to God's rule, He and Moses, His deputy, force them to be free. This, according to Rousseau, was Moses' great achievement; he transformed a herd of "wretched fugitives," who lacked both virtue and courage, into "a free people." He didn't do this merely by breaking their chains but also by organizing them into a "political society" and giving them laws. He brought them what is currently called "positive freedom," that is, not so much (not at all!) a way of life free from regulation but rather a way of life to whose regulation they could, and did, agree. That this latter condition is properly called freedom is an idea much criticized in recent philosophical literature, and sometimes rightly, but it contains a deep truth nonetheless about the process of liberation. The Israelite slaves could become free only insofar as they accepted the discipline of freedom, the obligation to live up to a common standard and to take responsibility for their own actions. They did accept a common standard hence the Sinai covenant (the subject of chapter 3); but they also resented the standard and feared the responsibility it entailed. They had what we can think of as an Egyptian idea of freedom.

And so the wilderness had to be a new school of the soul. That is why the Israelites had to spend such a long time in the wilderness. They did not march by the most direct route from Egypt to Canaan; instead God led them by an indirect route. […]

Exodus history and politics work as a constraint on Christian eschatology. Liberation is not a movement from our fallen state to the messianic kingdom but from "the slavery, exploitation, and alienation of Egypt" to a land where the people can live "with human dignity." The movement takes place in historical time; it is the hard and continuous work of men and women. The best of the liberation theologians explicitly warns his readers against "absolutizing [the] revolution" and falling into idolatry toward "unavoidably ambiguous human achievements." This, again, is Exodus politics.

From "A Gift" in *Sands of the Well* by Denise Levertov

You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

Read the entire poem here:
http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2014/10/denise-levertov-gift.html

From *The Religious Function of the Psyche* by Lionel Corbett

If we cling to the gap between the way things actually are and the way we would like them to be, we add another level of suffering to an already painful situation. For instance we may have a narcissistically motivated need for success, fame, beauty, money or some other means of buttressing the self, based on what the self has learned is important to its survival. If this support disappears or is not attained, perhaps because of misfortune, we feel not only the misfortune but also the added pain of the loss of the fantasy or image of how we 'ought' to be. […]Such failure to live up to the demands of a narcissistic fantasy adds a derivative, such as an element of bitterness and depression, to the primary problem. We then refuse to carry the primary burden in all its fullness because we are so distressed about its implications for our image of ourselves. The authentic level of suffering is thereby made into a derivative of itself, or added to, by virtue of our refusal to let go of what is often only a defensive fantasy. We can also add layers of additional suffering to a problem by making other people suffer because we ourselves are suffering, for instance by being in a constant rage about the problem so that the atmosphere around us becomes intolerable to others. Or, we can become envious and hateful of those more fortunate. All of these are devices which avoid the full impact of the problem itself. By focusing on the derivative problems, we are distracted from the real issue and the situation is less likely to open us to new levels of awareness. This kind of reaction to suffering takes us in the opposite direction from the quest for its meaning and purpose in one's life; in a sense it is an anti-religious attitude. […]

Jung's position that it is the product of the incarnation of the Self, and that suffering is a subjective aspect of that process, has certain important implications. It suggests that suffering is essential for the telos of the personality, and that, whether we like it or not, whatever happens to us actually belongs to us, even if we cannot see the point of it at the time. Sometimes suffering is the friction generated by our resistance to what is happening. Usually this friction is produced in relation to events that either do not fit with the image we have of ourselves, or it involves loss of aspects of the self that we thought were important. Acceptance of suffering then requires the conscious renunciation of an image of the self, or of aspects of oneself, which the situation allows us to see are not essential even though they have felt important because of our conditioning. Suffering is then like a sculpture in progress when material is cut away, what is left is increasingly like the true, underlying form of the self. In other words, suffering clarifies real identity, as the wound of Christ was his means of proving his identity.

From "After the Fall" a play by Arthur Miller

HOLGA: Quentin, I think it's a mistake to ever look for hope outside one's self. One day the house smells of fresh bread, the next of smoke and blood. One day you faint because the gardener cut his finger off, within a week you're climbing over the corpses of children bombed in a subway. What hope can there be if that is so? I tried to die near the end of the war. The same dream returned each night until I dared not go to sleep and grew quite ill. I dreamed I had a child, and even in the dream I saw it was my life, and it was an idiot, and I ran away. But it always crept onto my lap again, clutched at my clothes. Until I thought, if I could kiss it,
whatever in it was my own, perhaps I could sleep. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible…but I kissed it. I think one must finally take life in one's arms. [. . .]

QUENTIN: Maggie, we…used one another!

MAGGIE: Not me, not me!

QUENTIN: Yes, you. And I. "To live" we cried, and "Now" we cried. And loved each other's innocence, as though to love enough what was not there would cover up what was. But there is an angel, and night and day he brings back to us exactly what we want to lose. So you must love him because he keeps truth in the world. You eat those pills to blind yourself, but if you could only say, "I have been cruel," this frightening room would open. If you could say, "I have been kicked around, but I have been just as inexcusably vicious to others, called my husband idiot in public, I have been utterly selfish despite my generosity. I have been hurt by a long line of men but I have cooperated with my persecutors—"

MAGGIE: Son of a bitch!

QUENTIN: “And I am full of hatred; I, Maggie, sweet lover of all life—I hate the world!”

MAGGIE: Get out of here!

QUENTIN: Hate women, hate men, hate all who will not grovel at my feet proclaiming my limitless love for ever and ever! But no pill can make us innocent. Throw them in the sea, throw death in the sea and all your innocence. Do the hardest thing of all—see your own hatred and live!



Moses by Benjamin West (1793) from *The Macklin Bible*—The Macklin Bible consists of seven volumes of copper-plate engraved art. It is two feet in height and weighs over 130 pounds. The bible was a gift to Vanderbilt University from John J. and Anne Czura. (Source: Vanderbilt.edu)

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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B
Alternative readings:
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

ENTERING THE STORY

Psalm 51 is probably one of the best-known psalms. It is used in the various lectionaries for Ash Wednesday each year as the Church marks the beginning of Lent. Verses 10-12 and 15, have been used widely in prayers of general confession or in the liturgy of the Daily Office or Daily Prayer. At the time of the Reformation, this psalm was among the texts to which Luther appealed for his doctrine of justification. It is one of seven psalms, the so-called 'penitential' psalms, concerned with confession and forgiveness.[1]

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. If you are meeting in a group, ask three or four people to read the psalm aloud. Pause for a few moments between each reading. Then have everyone read it together as a group. Again allow some silence. If you are working alone read the Psalm aloud to yourself several times and pause between your readings. Note the differences you discover between the various readings. How does the psalm change each time?

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

What kind of experience, do you imagine, might give rise to these words? What do you know from them about:
the speaker?

the situation?

the speaker's view of him—or herself?

the speaker's understanding of God?

the speaker's expectations of God?

What is *mercy*? What is it to *have mercy*? What is the relationship between someone who *has mercy* and the one who asks for it? What might be the relationship between *mercy* and *steadfast love*?

1 Howard N. Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2005), p. 96.

Several words appear in the psalm which have taken on many associations and interpretations in subsequent Christian history. In the Hebrew, the root of the word translated as *transgression* carries an implication of rebellion or revolt; *iniquity* implies something crooked or twisted; and *sin* involves missing a goal, turning aside, or straying. In your own words, how would you restate what the psalmist is saying about his or her life experience?

> *Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.* Some interpreters have seen this statement as an example of the Christian doctrine of original sin. In the original context of the Psalms, that makes no sense. Further, the NRSV translation obscures its connection to other words we have seen. The New American Version offers this more literal translation: *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.* If this is not about the theological doctrine of "original sin" as the Christian tradition has elaborated it, what might it be saying about the psalmist's own experience?

What does the psalmist ask for? What words does he or she use to describe the process? What does this tell you about how the psalmist understands the relationship to God, sin, and forgiveness?

> *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.* Hyssop is a small plant, which is associated in the Hebrew scriptures with rituals of healing and restoration. For example, the book of Numbers describes how someone who has become unclean would be restored: **Numbers 19:16-20:** Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword, or who has died naturally, or a human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt purification offering, and running water shall be added in a vessel; then a clean person shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent, on all the furnishings, on the persons who were there, and on whoever touched the bone, the slain, the corpse, or the grave. Then the clean [person] shall sprinkle on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify him from uncleanness, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe [himself] in water and shall be clean by evening. But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself from uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD; the water for impurity has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean.

What does this add to your understanding of the psalmist's request that God should *purge me with hyssop*? Does he or she expect a literal hyssop-purging? Where might this purging come from? What might it be like? How might the psalmist know it has happened?

2. What do you know about someone's asking for forgiveness? For mercy? What experience or awareness brings them to seek it? Where do they look for one to forgive? Is it an outward search or an inward search?

How do they understand their situation? What do they desire to gain by asking forgiveness? What advantage might they achieve by taking a position of asking for mercy? What must they let go of to do so?

> How might they recognize forgiveness if it should come? What would be the signs of restoration or healing?

3. When, if ever, have you recited this psalm, or words from it, in a worship service or liturgy? What was it like to say these words alongside others in a space designated as "sacred"? What connections did you make with the words as you spoke them? What distractions kept you from hearing them fully? How did those around you, next to you in the pew or row, or leading from the front, seem to react to the words and feeling of the psalm? How might your reading this psalm aloud change next time?

4. How are these words your own words? What has been your experience of your own acts of rebellion, crookedness, straying? Where is the sacred space in your "secret heart" where you might go to seek wisdom, joy, gladness, cleansing, forgiveness? What is there within that is abundantly merciful and ready to create a new heart within you? Or do you look for help from someone or something from outside that will intervene and "save" you?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- *Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight...*It does not take much imagination or soul searching to come up with a list of our sins—in terms of the Greek archery word hamartia, meaning how we have "missed the mark." All of us are haunted through the years by those occasions when we missed the target by compromising ourselves and hurting others. Take a few moments to ponder your sins—the dark and crippling moments when you have "done what you ought not to have done" and, as a result damaged and bruised strangers, friends, as well as those who you love best and would choose to hurt least. As painful and distasteful as it may be, recall and recollect the words and acts, the silence and absence, the betrayals and treachery that haunt you with remorse and regret. Consider those you have sinned against—their wounds and damage, the grief and pain you have wrought on them. What do you imagine the Psalmist is suggesting about your sins in relationship to God? What can it mean that all those sins committed against others and even self were done not only or just to them, but to God as well? What if your offense has extended beyond people involved to God? What if your sins also bruised and wounded God? How could this be? If it be true, what might you assume about forgiveness? Whose forgiveness might be needed or sought? Where do the people on your list and God meet? How do you attempt to keep the two separate? What does the Psalmist know about evil and sins that you try to ignore? On this day, what is some of your unfinished business that couples your "neighbor" with your God?

- *You (God) desire truth in the inward being (dark, hidden spaces); Therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart (closed space).* Take some art materials, or write it out if you wish, and give some expression to this secret heart, this inward being. In the quiet, see if there is some wisdom it has gained that needs some attention from you. What "closed space" might need to be taught some wisdom? What "dark, hidden spaces" might need truth? Why might God desire truth in (your) inward being? Why might your secret heart need to be taught wisdom? What might you know about that wisdom from that mysterious source? What might it cost you to know that truth in your inward being? What might it cost you to look away from those dark, hidden spaces? What might be the gift in opening that closed space?

- Find some sand or loose dirt in which you can "write" down your transgressions—the ways you may have violated a rule, a command, or a duty, or crossed a boundary or exceeded a limit in relation to God, to others, to yourself. When you have written them, sit with them for a while, and then erase them, blot them out. How does it feel to consider your transgressions? How are they always a part of you? What is it like to have them blotted out? Can you leave them behind and start over…anew?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* by Howard N. Wallace

Finally, in Psalm 51 there is no complaint that God acts unjustly, or that the psalmist is innocent of wrongdoing. The sentiments are, in fact, quite the opposite. This psalm, therefore, stands in sharp contrast to many of the

lament psalms that declare the innocence of the psalmist (e.g. Pss 7:3-5; 17:3; 26). It is clear that the psalmist anticipates occasions when it is proper to complain that God acts unjustly, or doesn't act at all when God should, or that the prayer is not guilty of sin in a particular context. He/she recognizes also that on other occasions we must acknowledge that we are caught in a complex web of sin. There is a fine line between these two situations. At what point does a complaint against a perceived wrong by God become arrogance or self-delusion? Or when does an awareness of our being utterly lost in sin become either self-denial or cause for self-pity? No clear answer is given to this but there are some points to be noted in the psalms. In Psalm 51 it is said that the psalmist is acutely aware of his/her own sin. One can presume that God knows of the psalmist's awareness. This is clearly stated elsewhere and is the very hope of the psalmist when he/she proclaims their innocence, as in Ps 69:5. Psalm 139, discussed in detail elsewhere in this book, describes the total knowledge God has of the psalmist.

Thus, God is totally aware of the psalmist's situation. God knows the psalmist's innocence in certain circumstances, their culpability in others, and his/her general inability to escape from sinfulness. While that could be a threatening situation, it is, in fact, hope for the psalmist who knows also that the one who knows him/her is not only just but also compassionate.

From "Confess" in *Healing Words for the Body, Mind and Spirit: 101 Words to Inspire and Affirm* by Caren Goldman

They say that confessing is good for the soul. I'd go a step further and say that confessing our truth is healing, and it's healing not just for our souls, but for our bodies and emotions, too. Take Zachary's confession, for example.

A few years ago, this gentle, slightly stooped, mentally challenged man began attending Ted's early Sunday service. Usually, only fifteen to twenty regular worshippers show up, and they sit close together in the choir loft in front of the altar. Zachary would always arrive late and look as though he had slept in his clothes. A ten-gallon cowboy hat usually topped his small frame, and a big metal medallion from a Cadillac always hung on a chain around his neck. Because he never followed the liturgy, no one knew if Zachary was literate. He would just sit quietly throughout the service, or else he would follow everyone else's lead and stand, sit, and receive blessings when they did. The only time Zachary interacted with the other worshippers was when everyone exchanged handshakes and said "Peace be with you."

One Sunday, the readings were about the Ten Commandments. As Ted began delivering his sermon, Zachary, as usual, wandered in late. Ted paused, smiled, invited him to sit down, and then started over again. Zachary listened intently for a few minutes, but then, in a loud, monotone voice, interrupted. "Father," he said in front of everyone, "Father, am I forgiven? Am I forgiven, Father, because I've broken all but one of the commandments?"

Ted didn't ask Zachary about the lone commandment that wasn't broken, and he didn't ask him about the nine that were. He did assure Zachary that God forgave him, and when he did, Zachary stood straight up, smiled, and with tears said, "Thank you, Father. I've never told anyone that. But today I told you. Thank you, Father, thank you. I feel so different inside."

Later, at the main Sunday service, Ted ditched his prepared sermon and walked out into the aisle to tell the congregation about Zachary. He talked about Zachary's question, about his smile, about his tears, and about how our willingness to acknowledge we've missed the mark helps to relieve us of our burdens and to stand up straight.

From *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* by Walter Wink

If Satan has any reality at all, it is not as a sign or an idea or even an explanation, but as a profound experience of numinous, uncanny power in the psychic and historic lives of real people. Satan is the real interiority of a society

that idolatrously pursues its own enhancement as the highest good. Satan is the spirituality of an epoch, the peculiar constellation of alienation, greed, inhumanity, oppression, and entropy that characterizes a specific period of history as a consequence of human decisions to tolerate and even further such a state of affairs.

We are not dealing here with the literal "person" of popular Christian fantasy, who materializes in human form as a seducer and fiend. The Satan of the Bible is more akin to an archetypal reality, a visionary or imaginal presence or event experienced within. But it is more than inner, because the social sedimentation of human choices for evil has formed a veritable layer of sludge that spans the world. Satan is both an outer and an inner reality.

From *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal

> [***Ed. Note*:** When Simon Wiesenthal, who devoted his life to tracking down former Nazis, was in a concentration camp, he was taken to the bedside of a dying SS man who wished to confess and receive absolution from a Jew. He described the encounter, and his life-long wrestling with it, in his book *The Sunflower.*]

"I cannot die ... without coming clean. This must be my confession. But what sort of confession is this? A letter without an answer…"

No doubt he was referring to my silence. But what could I say? Here was a dying man—a murderer who did not want to be a murderer but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology. He was confessing his crime to a man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers. In his confession there was true repentance, even though he did not admit it in so many words. Nor was it necessary, for the way he spoke and the fact that he spoke to *me* was a proof of his repentance.

"Believe me, I would be ready to suffer worse and longer pains if by that means I could bring back the dead, at Dnepropetrovsk. Many young Germans of my age die daily on the battlefields. They have fought against an armed enemy and have fallen in the fight, but I ... I am left here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough."

I said nothing. The truth was that on his battlefield he had also "fought" against defenseless men, women, children, and the aged.[…]

"I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left …

"I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

Now, there was an uncanny silence in the room. I looked through the window. The front of the buildings opposite was flooded with sunshine. The sun was high in the heavens. There was only a small triangular shadow in the courtyard.

What a contrast between the glorious sunshine outside and the shadow of this bestial age here in the death chamber! Here lay a man in bed who wished to die in peace—but he could not, because the memory of his terrible crime gave him no rest.

And by him sat a man also doomed to die-but who did not want to die because he yearned to see the end of all the horror that blighted the world.

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. Between them there seemed to rest a sunflower.

At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."—*Anton Chekhov*

You are broken, I am broken, everyone is broken
You are broken, I am broken, intimately broken

Stay, there is peace beyond anguish
life beyond death, love beyond fear
and we all have to suffer to enter our glory.

Bless, bless and do not curse.
Pull brokenness far from the shadow of curse
put it under the light of the blessing.

Praise, praise to you Lord
for I never realized
broken glass could shine so brightly.
—*Henri Nouwen*

From *"*How the Japanese art of Kintsugi can help you deal with stressful situations" at *ABC.com*

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold—built on the idea that in embracing flaws and imperfections, you can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art. […] Using this as a metaphor for healing ourselves teaches us an important lesson: Sometimes in the process of repairing things that have broken, we actually create something more unique, beautiful and resilient.

From a Sermon on John 2:13-22 by Rev. William L Dols

[***Ed. Note:*** *The coin must be free of Caesar's image and it must be minted of silver in the city of Tyre.]

On the Passover of the Jews, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. He journeys to the heart of the holy city, core of the ancient place. Jesus then goes to the temple. In temple, Jesus finds people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. He makes a whip of cords and drives them out. He pours the coins of the money changers on the floor. Their tables he turns over. He cries out to those who are selling doves. "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace" Violence in the holiest place. Anger in the house of God. Anxiety about what may happen next. Guilt and shame over whatever it is that has gone wrong

For those who sell the doves, cattle and sheep for use in the sacrifice, it makes no sense at all. Passover is a pilgrimage festival when devout Jews come from afar to offer sacrifices of atonement, healing, and thanksgiving. They are only selling what is needed to serve the very purpose of the temple. What have they done wrong?

Since every male Jew is required to pay his half-shekel temple tax in Jewish currency* the money changers are performing a necessary function if the faithful are to fulfill the law and if the temple priesthood is to survive. The Jews observe aghast and ask what it means. How have they offended by only doing what is needed?

The disciples stand by and watch. They recall the psalm about zeal or passion for the temple being a consuming, devouring, swallowing up hunger. Most likely they too are confused and unsure, wondering where this will lead. What is to become of them if they now continue to follow Jesus?

And Jesus. What is the passion and zeal that consumes him? What does he know that causes him to challenge everything that is sacred and true in his tradition?

In this story, the temple is filled with people who are perplexed and puzzled, dazed and mystified. The center no longer holds, the most important part of their lives has come unglued and what matters most is coming apart—collapsing. Such feelings erupt in the holiest places. But this also happens in every area of life when what we have counted and depended on is suddenly tried and tested. When those things we take for granted are disrupted and questioned. When what we value is subverted, and when the foundations are no longer secure and firm. It is the unseen fault-line and unexpected earthquake that would sabotage trust between spouses, lovers, friends, parents, children, confidantes and colleagues. When what we have counted on is no longer as sure or certain as it once was.

It happens when we thought we were through the bad times and that old scores were settled and we had solved the problem, broken the riddle, paid the debt or resolved the conflict. It happens when we thought we had earned and deserved to be let alone to enjoy the way things should have turned out. But life says NO. Life rears up and says NO. You are not finished yet.

We reach for our comfort zone but find it elusive. Comfort zones are the safe turf where we create boundaries. Where we confine ourselves for the sake of feeling secure, peaceful and safe. Comfort zones are the places where we can catch our breath—relax for a moment. But comfort zones within a church, marriage, vocation, friendship or even deep within the soul are meant to be in-between places. When comfort zones get confused with life, we turn bland. Life waits outside our comfort zones. Only on rare occasions do we summon the courage it takes to move outside the comfort zone and look at what is really going on and what is needed to grow. Usually we need to be wooed. Pushed. Shoved into the uncomfortable void.

The church, like the temple in this story, is a laboratory for living; it must be more than a comfort zone. True to the Jesus of the temple with whip in hand, it is about anything but a comfort zone! We are not here in order to be comfortable, to do and live the habitual, but to endure and share enough pain between us to grow into the fullness and stature of one like Jesus who braved the discomfort enough to cry down the chaos and live through it.

In response to the Jews' question and the disciples' silence and the people's bewilderment, John's Jesus says that he can rebuild a 43-year-old temple in three days. He tells them that for the sake of more, much must be given—the sake of what yearns to be born, a dying is required. John bears testimony from his experience of an emerging first century Christian-Jewish sect— a temple in ruins and struggling to define itself. "*But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*" He proclaims that there is such a thing as reaction, rebirth, starting over, and for hope on the other side of brokenness.

Sacred things are so easily broken. We have all been here before. Cherished and holy things shattered in church, on the job, at school or at home at 3 a.m. in the kitchen wondering what in the world to do or be or say next and wanting most to run away. "I never realized broken glass could shine so brightly." [Henri Nouwen] The promise is that broken glass can shine brightly. The hope is that we might have the eyes to see it. The pieces are never put back the same way, are not easily or ever fully mended, and even when healed bear scars of brokenness. If you and I have been lucky, we know that by having a few such battle scars. The final truth is that God does not in the end look us over so much for our medals and badges of success, but for the scars we bear that have led us to new life.

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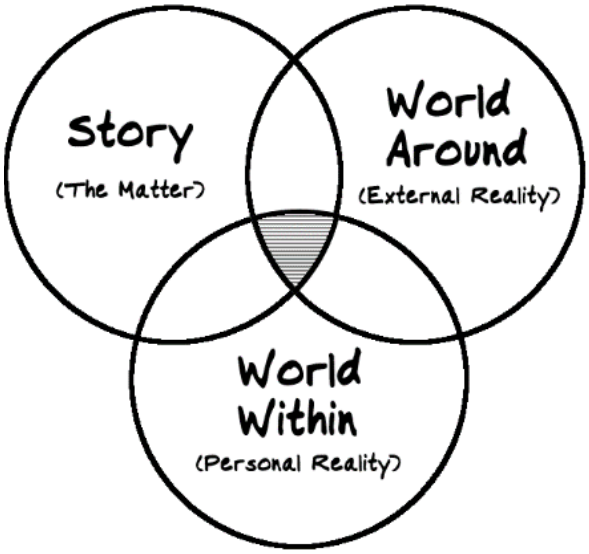
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WHAT IS READING BETWEEN THE LINES?

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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