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**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Eco Faith Commentaries for Epiphany 2024**

**By retired pastor Mark Ditmanson**

**Grand Marais, Minnesota**

**Introduction**

As you read this Epiphany is here, as I begin to write Advent is only just starting. And my thoughts are quite taken by the words for worship right now. At the very beginning of Advent we will hear Isaiah’s prophetic wish, “Would you just rend the heavens and come.” We will also hear Jesus’ response to that apocalyptic and mysterious longing with ‘wait for it.’ In our annually repeating liturgical discipline we seek to enter into the divine drama like so many generations before us. Even as we pray “stir up our hearts Lord,” Advent’s themes stir our spirits as we contemplate God’s announcement that the “kingdom is near.” Then finally the familiar festival of the Incarnation will be upon us. Centuries of longing answered in something so natural as a birth. We of course will adorn the celebration of that birth with crowded, and sometimes boisterous, sanctuaries decorated to our utmost where we will raise our voices and maybe “raise the roof” singing about angelic choirs “in excelsis deo Gloria!” And yet amid all the festivities my overwhelming image of Christmas is quietude. In my imagination in the aftermath of the birth I see the young woman take the crying infant in her arms, kiss its head, she rocks and hums and comforts it, just as the pattern had been happening and is still happening, quiet, intense, intimate mother and child. And in that quiet Christmas Eve moment as “I wonder as I wander” out to my car after the last late night service my heart turns to that classic Lutheran question: “what does this mean?” What does this mean to me, and to everyone, that the longing for the divine presence resulted in cuddling a little baby? There is so much to think about, and to allow those thoughts to shape our responses. What does it mean that our God so cares for, in fact esteems, the very substances of the created order that God would enter there. Partly, it is an honoring of the creation, an acknowledgement of the place of God’s heart. It is an acknowledgement that our faith is not based on some gnosis, some vague spirituality, some mystic inner striving within, but an encounter in the moments of life lived, an encounter with the prevailing presence of the Creator who loves the creation. A little baby says this and more to me, for an infant is such a tremendous statement of the depth of love as we have all experienced it in our lives or that of our extended families. And therefore we are to love God’s creations. We are to embody this intense intimate tending and keeping modeled for us in this moment. God placing God’s self in the cradling arms of humanity. And now in our arms we must cradle and care for the fragile, the young, the vulnerable, and most of all the loved by God.

And then finally we arrive at Epiphany. If advent is the season of longing and waiting for the presence of God to come into our hearts and homes and this troubled world; and if Christmas in the event of the incarnation of God in the swaddled and embraced Christ child is the season of the answer to that longing; then Epiphany strikes me as a particularly Lutheran season for asking, “What does this mean?” Indeed the event of Incarnation needs more that the two Sundays after Christmas. And Epiphany becomes for me the season of seeking answers. Many years ago I received the carved images of three magi from my parents’ home. I put them on my mantle for the first Christmas season in our new home. Twenty two years later they are still there. They never get put away. They stand there year around seeking answers and bearing gifts, and I have come to realize that that they represent something deep in my heart; that I have been seeking epiphanies to better understand this God who chose birth and incarnation to teach us love, justice, grace, freedom, the way of God. Epiphany is upon us and for me the arrival of these three seekers longing to know more fully what this means, that in the ‘fullness of time God sent his son,’ to be born, swaddled and loved as every child deserves. Incarnation leads me into a journey of seeking, or perhaps more accurately, being open to epiphanies of further revelation.

**February 4, 2024 Epiphany 5 B Isaiah 40:21-31 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 Mark 1:29-39**

We all encounter from time to time, moments when our powers to control outcomes seems small to negligible. The longer we live the more aware we become of powers beyond our finite scope. You don’t have to look far. For me, I think of a friend, a classmate, who had just been diagnosed with cancer, and another friend of the family who lost his wife. For you, what is it that convinces you of your limitations? Age, aches, pains, disability, influenza A or B, COVID, ALS, Alzheimer’s, loss of capacity? Are you grappling with issues of caring for children, parents and relatives? Are you grieving the changing climate, the threat to water supplies, the fires that rage, the droughts and the floods? These are some of the personal reminders of who we are as mortal and human. We are so dependent on one another and the soil, water and air that sustain life.

History doesn’t present much greater estimation of our powers. As intoxicating as each new technology can be at times, it can also be a mere smoke screen covering our inability to make substantive change in the human situation. Unlike some previous generations, we have seen too much to bow before the ephemeral current god of progress, each idol of human supremacy. We recognize that humanity has much yet to struggle over. And by history, by experience, by the Word we are also aware that the answer to humanity’s needs is from outside, it is not the voice within.

That might feel more than discouraging, if humanity is all we had to go upon. But there is a higher authority. And it is to that higher court that we are going in prayer for our friends and family. We have come to understand what was revealed to Elijah, that the “still small voice” he needed to listen to was not inside him, it was a gift from God, guidance from a loving creator.

Today we heard Isaiah preaching to a discouraged gathering of listeners. In fact, they may have been so discouraged, and had the tar so kicked out of them by life, that they didn’t want to listen to any preacher. Maybe they had heard it all and none of it fit their lives. They believed that if God existed, and they had their doubts about that, that he didn’t stack up to the gods of the land of their captivity. And so they were giving up and accommodating to the culture around them. I’d say Isaiah had a tough assignment. Consider the situation; the people were stuck in Babylon, they were a powerless people mired in the middle of the world’s greatest power at the time, and God gave Isaiah a word of hope to share with the exiles.

What is the hope of this sermon which Isaiah preached? That your God is not to be underestimated. That your vision is limited, and your imaginings of God are myopic. And all of this is not intended as a way of criticism, but as corrective. Because everybody feels trapped by trouble, or exiled from hope, or captive to fear time and again. And we need God. I hear this word from God telling me, look deeper, look farther, look closer and use the lens I will provide.

Like the runaway best seller many years ago and rather cute book, *All I really needed to know I learned in Kindergarten,* Isaiah is very specifically telling his listeners to remember what they learned in their version of Sunday school in Yeshiva. Isaiah asks them, “Has it not been told you from the beginning?” Go back to your foundational lessons. “Our God is an awesome God; he reigns from heaven above.” And then Mark the Gospel writer provides the other foundational lesson: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

God’s Word presents the juxtaposition of an intellectual imaginative trajectory that begins in the mystic void before creation and follows a star to Bethlehem – it is awesome and awe inspiring! Isaiah begs you to enter into that wonder struck estimation of the width and breadth and authority of God, and then the gospel writers all call us to recognize that the same God walked, healed and taught through the heartbeat, pulse and breath and touch of a man from Nazareth named Jesus. That this same Jesus represents an invasion of sorts. An entrance not only into the grand scale, but into Peter’s home and there to heal Peter’s mother in law. Up close and personal, every day meaningful. God rushing into lives that are teetering and even toppling, reaching out with power to renew our strength, with command and ability to order our days in a new creation.

The message of Isaiah is a corrective to an image of God which is helpful but inadequate. I mean the image that God is Jesus, defined as your good friend and one who will always affirm you and never contradict you. The God of Isaiah, who came to this world in the mystery of the incarnation, is beyond our capacity to fully understand and certainly not ours to control. Isaiah challenges us to make friends with the discoveries and speculations of astronomy and quantum physics to appreciate the God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways. The God who brings out the host of stars and calls each star of the expanding universe by name is not a God you can ever encapsulate in one word “friend”. The God we encounter in the text of Isaiah and the God we encounter when we take the wonder of creation seriously is not a God to address as “hey you,” but always with reverent “Thou.” For this is God, the creating God whose work is evident in the birth of each new star in the Great Nebula in Orion’s belt, and each new baby born in every maternity unit, and each new place prepared in our Father’s house for a departing saint to be with him always. And yet, and yet, what must have continually amazed the disciples after the epiphany of the resurrection and the post resurrection appearances of Jesus was the fact that this One who had indeed called them ‘friends and no longer servant’ was none other than the One who brooded over the chaos on the very first day of creation, and the One who will sit enthroned on the last day of time. The One who inspired the jaw dropping moment for Thomas when he saw the scars of his closest friend on the evidence of God in front of him, and his eternal testimony “My Lord and My God” is now our most perfect creed. And yet, and yet, this one came to Peter’s house and cared for a specific person in her distress. What does this mean? What does this mean to you?

We wrap our hearts around this promise. The God of all, the one God, is the One who comes today to you in all your finiteness, in all your limitations, in your times of trouble, in the frustrations, in the fevers of this life, in your feelings of abandonment or exile, spreads a table before you in the presence of your enemies and then bids, asks you to come and dine, to take and eat, to come and follow, to commit yourself to his cause, he asks you to lose yourself and in the process to find yourself through surrender to the one - the only, the highest truth, the most abundant of life, the surest of way. When you reach out and touch this One, and take this One into yourself, all the worry and confusions, are put on hold for a moment, sometimes longer, for a lifetime and beyond.

**February 11, 2024 Transfiguration Sunday 2 Kings 2:1-12 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 Mark 9: 2-9**

Let’s talk about mystical experience. Mystical experience such as the disciples Peter, James and John had on the mountain-top when they saw Jesus transfigured before them, such as Elisha experienced when he saw Elijah ascend in the whirlwind. There are many events recorded in the Bible that portray mystical and amazing experiences and these two placed before us this morning are just two. And I plan on focusing on just one, the one recorded in Mark's gospel. But I intend to ask a question that pertains to all mystical experience.

And that is what is the purpose of mystical experience, how does it function? Some might want to ask, the more traditional Lutheran question: what does it mean? I think I am asking the same question by asking why did it happen? And I am not asking this as a literary critical question but as a humanly curious, sincerely searching question. If this experience is of God, sent by God, directed by God, then, what is it that God intends by providing mystical experience? I'm quite sure that we can't ultimately answer questions such as that. Certainly not in a brief worship time. But I am convinced that the longer we wrestle with the question, we will approximate a more adequate answer as we grow faithfully.

This event in the gospel story was memorable; all three of the synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, tell this story with very little variation. Later in his life Peter would write to fellow Christians and describe that day on which he saw Jesus transfigured before him. As Peter related his memory he talked about the meaning of that day in terms of an affirmation that everything they learned from Jesus and learned about Jesus was pure revelation from God on High. The experience must have carried strength with it to affirm his faith. Moreover, I would speculate that every time he started to run on empty in his spirit and begin to doubt either himself or his faith he would go back to his memory closet pull out one of those experiences to give him strength. And say, yeah but then there was that day. He had other mystical moments to draw upon too we can be sure, Oh yes, there was that day when the Risen Jesus pushed his patience asking him three times did he love Jesus. Oh and then that day, Peter felt so grand when Jesus said blessed are you Simon Peter son of Jonah, upon you I will build my church. So the memorable mystical moment is almost a flywheel to perpetuate the original devotion, or reaction.

We also know that the Apostle Paul would recount his experience on the Damascus road a number of recorded times in the book of Acts, and I wonder how many times he told the story in less public arenas and it just wasn't recorded.

You see this moment was just that, a moment, not a sustained time. Just a snap shot in time to be held in the mind I believe that there is a mountain of meaning in it and especially so in the brevity of the moment.

What do I mean? I mean that this is a glimpse of the power and reality of God; this is a confirmation of the divine, but definitely not a modus operandi of the divine. The purpose seems to be to identify Jesus and impress upon the disciples who were only slowly catching onto his identity, the authority behind Jesus. Such a purpose was served by this brief encounter. And the brevity itself is purposeful. To remain would be unfaithful to the incarnational purpose. The brevity is the significance. For the story tells us that suddenly it was over and the immense glory that had been evident to the eyes and ears of the disciples, we assume was dissipated like a morning mist burned away by the return of the reality of everyday life. Gone is the dazzling apparel, gone are Moses and Elijah. The voice from heaven has resumed silence. Suddenly it was over and there was Jesus, just Jesus, only Jesus, same old Jesus, dusty, determined, travel sore, itinerant preacher Jesus, follow me, take my cross, lose yourself for the gospel Jesus, cure the sick, touch the lepers, dine with the outcast Jesus. Feed the hungry, welcome the child, and love your neighbor Jesus. Same old Jesus, only Jesus. But never again the same, because of the glimpse of glory that was theirs – for a brief moment.

The apostle Paul said to the Corinthians that the gospel was veiled in Jesus, not obvious to all people, but obvious to those who with faith were given to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus. But the Jesus they saw was only Jesus, not the transfigured Lord, but the humble carpenter of Nazareth, who turned their lives upside down. Paul tells us that it is none other than the creator of the universe who could just speak and light appeared who then has shone in our hearts in the face of Jesus.

What I have noticed is how stunning events in life create a new perspective, they give a new vision. And they give a lasting strength to keep us going, even if the moment does not keep going. And that is significant; even if the moment passes and we pass on to the next task, the vision given lasts.

I was hiking the border route by Rose Lake in the boundary waters canoe area. A dismal and arduous trek through shoulder high thimble berry bushes, and then through the dusty duff of the coniferous forest floor. But then like a curtain opening and the show beginning we came up on the vista from on top of a rocky outcropping and the layout of the lands and chain of lakes below displayed the long stretch of the Canadian Shield, and in that moment a flood of thoughts filled my mind, I saw old black and white photos out of my eighth grade geography text book, I heard naturalists describing the glacial formation of the Canadian Shield, I remembered passages from Sigurd Olson's accounts of paddling the boundary waters and stopping at Rose Lake. I stopped to drink in the view and a new enthusiasm flowed through tired limbs as we plunged back down a valley. Just the memory of the vista and the hope for vistas ahead made the travelling easier. The next cliff was a long distance away, almost too distant for the first vista to keep me enthused, but then there we arrived to see a new angle and a new understanding of the lake country.

For Peter and the other disciples they were given a new insight. In his letter Peter remembered the awesome moment as that which corroborated the divine inspiration and authority by which Jesus taught, but not the manner in which God chose to live among us. In Philippians Paul describes this pattern of identity with God, and yet the divine choosing of the humility of Jesus. But that is part of the scandal of the Christian faith. It was only Jesus, just a man Jesus who remained, and yet not ever only human, it is Jesus, also called Emmanuel, God among us, clothed in human experience. The full glory of God present, but veiled to all but those who see the light. And therefore human life matters, all earthly life matters, matter matters. We don’t live in the ephemeral moments that may be given us; we live every day in the matter of existence provided by God’s gracious creative hands. We are called to love, forgive, welcome people of this earth. We are not called to seek spirituality or spirits or heavenly ideas and a personal sense of peace. We are called to recognize “the least of these” as Christ incarnated before our eyes and hear the echo of that voice again, “Go and do likewise.” We are called to tend and keep, to guard and protect the creation into which God has placed us.

What have you been given to see, I mean really see? What charges your battery, what spins your flywheel? To you the light has been revealed. The veil has been lifted, God is with you, entering your hearts and your life every day. We keep our eyes open. By faith we are given the gift of discerning the Spirit moving through our lives in the so called mundane and ordinary yet sacred world God continues to bless.

*Mark Ditmanson is a retired pastor living in the Grand Marais, MN area.  Beekeeping,monarch watching, gardening, and planting trees keep him busy these days.*



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**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

RETURN, REROOT, RESTORE

*Rev. Emily Meyer reflects on returning to Love for the sake of our selves, our young people, and the planet.*

*….*

Care for Creation Commentary on the Revised Common Lectionary

Readings for Ash Wednesday, Year B

February 14, 2024

* [Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=70#hebrew_reading) or [Isaiah 58:1-12](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=70#hebrew_oth_reading)
* [Psalm 51:1-17](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=70#psalm_reading)
* [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=70#epistle_reading)
* [Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=70#gospel_reading)

Hymn suggestions: *May This Church Be like a Tree*, All Creation Sings #1042

*Spirit, Open My Heart*, All Creation Sings #1043

Songs: [Root of the Root](https://sarathomsen.com/track/1907969/root-of-the-root) (2018), Sara Thomsen; Song like a Seed, 2019

[Where Did Jesus Go](https://sarathomsen.com/track/1907935/where-did-jesus-go), (2016), Sara Thomsen; Song Like a Seed, 2019 - for an Easter Sunday following a Lent ‘Rooted in Love’

Ash Wednesday, landing on Valentine’s Day as it does, offers congregations the perfect opportunity to frame the entirety of Lent as a time to become ‘Rooted in Love’ - Love that creates spaces of safety and belonging; Love that has the power to reconcile and repair.

Our Ash Wednesday texts powerfully set the stage for delving into practices designed to develop our self-compassion and love, individually and communally.[[1]](#footnote-1) They also help us define what a loving community looks like and how it behaves in the world.

It is astounding how familiar both Joel’s and Isaiah’s concerns are.

In their respective writing, both prophets sound an alarm: ‘Blow the trumpet’, Joel bellows; ‘Shout out’, cries isaiah. On God’s behalf, they desperately, urgently want our attention. And not ‘our’, as in some inner circle of leadership or power or membership, nor some marginalized scapegoat group, either, but everyone’s attention: all ages, all identities, all walks of life. Their aim is a communal one - the community is in peril and it is through the community that healing will come. To realize our healing, the prophets call Individuals and communities - all people - to turn from paths of destruction and return to ways of Love.

God is not calling us to more of the same, more status quo, more public piety, or mere shows of deference. God does not care for or about our false practices of right relationship or half-hearted attempts to draw near to God; the world does not need our ‘Minnesota niceness’ or our ‘holiness’. Even our regular worship comes into question by the prophets. We are called to turn from all the systems and ways of oppression and injustice - wherever and however they manifest themselves - and return to the ways of Love.

We are in an ‘early church’ time, a kairos time, an urgent time of change.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Like Larry Rasmussen[[3]](#footnote-3), more and more folx are recognizing that the planet adults are handing over to young people is not habitable in the same way as it has been for the entirety of human history - and we are the ones who have made it less habitable.

The trumpets are blaring: ‘Return!’. The alarms are ringing: ‘Reroot!. The planet itself is shouting: 'Restore!’

The prophets of old warned of gloom and thick darkness; like their original listeners, we see wars - terrifyingly so - and along with our wars, our hills are blackened by wildfires; the grey gloom of hurricanes, tornadoes, and tempests swirls around us; the terrifying whiteness of blizzards blinds and debilitates us - and all of them with greater frequency, greater intensity, and more out of season - than any generation before has seen.

And we have done this: armies and storms are human-made.

The EcoFaith Summit Planning Team recently shared the article, [Minnesota Mental Health Professionals Say Climate Concerns Driving Patients to Depression](https://minnesotareformer.com/2024/01/04/mn-mental-health-professionals-say-climate-concerns-driving-many-patients-to-severe-depression/?utm_campaign=MSP%20Daily%20Edit&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=288804847&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--A1qFEuzkdacdhCjAJZDvO2_lZNbnQI-sli5_Zbx1bCbvLiZKIbwWzZycYHXGTYaGctAu9DeT9Ls2KqtiK07CugEpvwA&utm_content=288804847&utm_source=hs_email).[[4]](#footnote-4) The crisis of teen mental health that is spreading like those hill-blackening wildfires is directly linked to them: our young people are extremely anxious, concerned, distraught, terrified about the planet they are inheriting.

On their behalf, God does not care for displays of public piety.

The trumpets are blaring: ‘Return!’. The alarms are ringing: ‘Reroot!. The planet itself is shouting: 'Restore!’

Paul was able to commend his ministry to the Church in Corinth because his way of ‘putting no obstacles in anyone’s way’ was to see himself and the church as ‘servants of God’ - followers of Jesus who were willing to endure prison, be afflicted with beatings, share the hardships of sleepless nights and the calamites of riots; they were willing to go hungry out of their commitment to truthful speech; they were rooted in genuine love.

None of this sounds fun, or comfortable, or remotely desirable - yet God promises through Joel, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul - and saintly neighbors who are doing these things every day - this is the way to hope and healing, to renewal and restoration.

This is what love looks like in kairos times - and always: standing with our raging planet, our rioting siblings, and our ravaged souls. Stand as a community committed to turning from ways of destruction to build up safety and belonging, by participating in and with the real struggles of the times. Heeding the calls of Love to work for justice, end oppression, renew the face of the earth.

In the animated movie, Moana, the hero learns that her not-quite-idyllic island is threatened by blight: it is moving across the ocean, destroying life on island after island - and it has come to her home. Her quest is to find ‘the heart of Te Fiti’, stolen then lost by the demigod Maui, who she enlists to help her in her mission. With the spirit-lifting aid of Hei Hei the rooster, Pua the pot-bellied pig, a host of stingrays, and the ocean itself (creatures/creation must be part of the healing community, too!), Moana and Maui find and [restore the Heart](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjzivXLhOyDAxV2J0QIHb1NAHcQtwJ6BAgdEAI&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3Da9FIg6Zr0dg&usg=AOvVaw0wS8_HZl9YkkcACDfxSLEZ&opi=89978449), which in turn restores life to each and every blight-blackened island. Not surprisingly, it also restores the joy and freedom missing from Moana’s community, which had become stagnant and isolated by fear. Moana’s journey begins with the heartbeat of a drum resounding deep in the belly of the island where she glimpses her people’s history ([Opetaia Foa’i - We Know the Way](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubZrAmRxy_M)). Through her journey, Moana rediscovers the heart of her people, their roots as wayfarers, always connected to home and telling ‘the stories of our elders in a never-ending chain’, yet regularly leaving the safety of ‘home’. It is by dragging their ocean-going boats from the cave in which they’d been hidden (new birth!) and crossing the reef of their fears that Moana’s people are healed; it is by returning to and embracing the dangers of the ocean - where ‘[we know where we are / we know who we are](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4UUTTuZ9gI)’ - where young Moana and her people are joyfully restored.

The trumpets are blaring. The alarms are ringing. The planet itself is shouting.

Because God abounds in steadfast love, God is calling us into this same quest, this same mission, this same Lenten journey: to stop the blight - to stop creating and being the blight - and to find and restore our true heart: to fall in love with our beloved planet, with our Divine Creator; to live from the beauty of the clean heart God creates within us; to let Love so fill our being, individually and collectively, that we cannot abide isolation or oppression, so that we refuse to accept the death and destruction of our current ways and systems. To root ourselves in Love so deeply that we overflow with it: that places of belonging and meaning flourish - as families and congregations and communities; that Love’s flourishing spreads and moves across the planet greening hearts and souls, greening the whole of creation, so that ‘healing will spring up quickly’ and rebuilding, repairing, and restoration might begin.

Originally written by Rev. Emily P.L. Meyer for Green Blades Rising Preacher’s Roundtable.

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Find more from Emily Meyer at [www.theministrylab.org](http://www.theministrylab.org).

A person taking a selfie in the snow

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**Rev. Emily Meyer** creates contemplative retreats, liturgical arts, sermons, costumes, choreography, and performances. Along with contributing to Green Blades Rising and Sundays and Seasons, Year B, 2024, Emily serves on the St Paul Area Synod’s Care of Creation Team, the EcoFaith Summit Planning Team, the ELCA’s [Truth-Seeking and Truth-Telling Initiative](https://www.elca.org/IndianBoardingSchools#:~:text=ELCA%20Truth%2DSeeking%20and%20Truth%2DTelling%20Initiative,-This%20initiative%20is&text=Our%20Goal%20is%20for%20members,their%20communities%2C%20then%20and%20now.), and as executive director of [The Ministry Lab](https://theministrylab.org/).

**First Sunday in Lent**

**February 18, 2024**

Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

I once heard a scholar wryly describe the dour Lent they grew up with as *“a forty-day wake at the funeral for Jesus he never had.”*

This Sunday we begin a season that many of us associate with sin and suffering. For many of us, Lent has emphasized the ways that our sin wounds not only the world but also wounds – crucifies – God’s own self. Indeed, Lutherans are known for taking sin seriously, and Lent is a profound time to do just that. However, the Lenten emphasis on sin is actually a remnant of a wider, ecological approach to the season.

This first Sunday in Lent weaves together themes of creation that we can follow all the way to Easter. But first, it’s worth telling the four-part story of how the theme of sin eclipsed almost everything else during Lent.

**1. Easter as birthday of the cosmos, and baptism as return to Eden**

In its earliest expressions, the ecological dimensions of Easter were much more prominent and continued the Jewish tradition that Passover was associated with the annual “birthday” of the universe. I noted in this past year’s Green Blades Rising Easter Preaching Helps:

The ecological layers required to calculate the date of Easter are beautifully deep! First, we wait for earth’s renewal at ***springtime*** (beginning with Jerusalem, therefore also throughout the northern hemisphere). Then we watch for ***equinox*** – when the plane of the earth’s equator directly intersects the sun, so that night and day are held in balance throughout the entire earth. Then we watch for the next ***full moon*** – mystically holding in balance night and day – a moment that also marks the beginning of passover. Then we wait for ***Sunday*** – the first day of creation and the day of resurrection – which, according to the most ancient way of counting time for Jews and Christians, begins with ***sunset*** on Saturday evening. St. Augustine wrote that all these layers of meaning are to be understood sacramentally, the entire cosmos participating in the meaning of Easter (Letter 55 to Januarius 1.2).

When those being baptized at Easter traveled from west to east through the font, some early preachers interpreted this as beginning a baptismal pilgrimage back to the Garden of Eden (“in the east”), our first home, now to be restored and renewed.

**2. Lent as “new member class” for those being baptized at Easter**

The church invented Lent in large part to be a “new member class” for individuals and families who would be baptized at the Easter Vigil. Just as the creation was being renewed at springtime, so too were all those who journeyed to the font during the Lenten springtime. (“Lent” comes from “lengthen,” for the lengthening daylight of springtime.) The springtime readings reflected baptismal themes of water and rebirth.

**3. Lent become a “membership do-over” time for serious sinners**

When fewer full families were being baptized at Easter and more infants were being baptized soon after birth, the “new member class” of Lent still existed as a liturgical structure. So the structure remained in place but was repurposed over time: when people committed sins that were so serious that it seemed like they had forgotten or abandoned their baptism, the church excommunicated them before Lent and told them to “do over” the new member class during Lent. So they put ashes on these serious sinners on what became Ash Wednesday, and their sins were forgiven on Maundy Thursday so – while not rebaptizing them, of course – they could be fully readmitted to communion at the Easter Vigil.

**4. Realizing we’re all sinners, everybody joined the “membership do over” of Lent**

When people saw the ashes only placed on the people identified as serious sinners, they realized of course that we’re all captive to sin and so everybody – all of us sinners – should go through the membership do-over together. Happily, Lent was restored as a time for everyone to prepare for Easter. Sadly, because of this strange four-stage history, the only part of baptismal preparation that really remained was repentance for sin.

In our era, this Sunday – the first Sunday in Lent – can be part of our recovery of a more fully baptismal and ecological Lent and Easter. A few of the creation threads to follow this Sunday and through Lent and Easter:

**The first endangered species act**

Some have called our first reading from Genesis – the story of the Ark and the rainbow covenant – *the first endangered species act.* God saves every species on earth, and God makes this first of the covenants with “all future generations” and “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” To be baptized is to be washed into the flood of God’s covenant with all species, all creatures on earth.

**Waters of renewal all around us**

In the reading from 1 Peter, Christ is imaged as going below the waters of the flood to bring the Gospel even to those under the flood, and then as rising to the heavens where all things are held in Christ’s merciful reign. In this reading, baptism is a sign of God’s merciful, overflowing life extending to every dimension of the whole cosmos. As the fifth century inscription around the great Lateran baptistry reads*: “Here is the fountain of life that washes the whole earth [cosmos].”*

**A wild baptism**

In today’s Gospel text, preachers can help people perceive the wild mercy of God at Christ’s baptism: the edge of the wilderness, the Jordan River, the heavens opened, the Spirit appearing like an earthly bird that both blesses and then drives into the wild, Christ with his fellow creatures the wild beasts, and God’s care in the wilderness given by the mysterious angels.

**The path ahead**

Lent begins as a journey into the wild, and it continues along earthy paths through the coming weeks: 2) On the mountain in the clouds, the mystical secret of the transfiguration, 3) against the commercialization of religious, Jesus reveals the Temple of God as being made of living, earthly, creaturely, flesh, 4) the healing serpent in the wilderness, God’s love for the world/cosmos, light exposing and revealing what is true, and 5) the seed in the earth dying and being raised to bear abundant good fruit.

God’s blessings to you at this beginning of our journey to Easter springtime and the baptismal renewal of Eden’s garden.

A person taking a selfie in front of mountains

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Green Blades Preaching Roundtable

**Second Sunday in Lent**

**February 25, 2024**

Pastor Karen Behling (she/her)

Chippewa Falls, WI

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 - Ps 22:23-31 - Rms 4:13-25 - Mark 8:31-38**

Here are three threads one might choose to explore:

**FRUITFUL LIVING**

God’s words to Abraham and Sarah call to mind creation with God’s promise to make them exceedingly fruitful. In the Genesis 1 creation account, by the time we get to verse 28 with God’s instructions to “be fruitful and multiply”, we have already been told about plants yielding seed and trees bearing fruit as well as swarms of living creatures and multiple kinds of birds and animals. Life is already abundant and fruitful when God charges humankind to “be fruitful and multiply”. Within such a context, fruitfulness seems to be about so much more than many human children and descendants.

When God promises that Abraham and Sarah will be exceedingly fruitful, God is inviting them and us to envision a future full of life for all of creation that has been declared by God to be good. Fruitfulness is about our shared quality of life.

Questions to ponder for life in today’s world:

* What does a fruitful life look like?
* What does a fruitful world look like?
* Who benefits from the fruitfulness? Some or all? Humans only or all of creation?

Galatians 5:22 offers a helpful list for fruits that are abundant in a healthy world - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Where and how do we see these qualities at work in today’s world? And where are they in short supply?

**TURN TO GOD’S VISION**

The gospel speaks of Jesus turning and looking at his disciples. The rebuke of Peter is about calling Peter to turn and reorient his life according to God’s ways.

The psalmist celebrates that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD.” (v. 27)

This would be a great Sunday to give close attention to the Gospel Acclamation text “Return to the Lord your God. . . .” How are we involved in turning and returning our lives to align more fully with God’s vision for life together on this planet?

Through household and congregational practices to Reduce - Reuse - Recycle, we have incorporated intentional, on-going practices into our lives, and in so doing, our lives have become reoriented.

**LIFE ON THE ROAD**

Abram and Sarai have been on the road. And in many ways, their journey is less about destination as a place and much more about the process of living into God’s vision for their lives in relationship with the world around them.

Jesus has set his face toward the cross, and he is on the road toward Jerusalem. Jesus has a clear purpose and destination in mind, and yet, the more he speaks of it, the more ignorant the disciples seem to the larger mission.

In speaking of our own lives - filled with change and transitions - we often use the image of a journey to emphasize the process more so than the destination. To journey through life is to encounter others along the way. Through such encounters on the road through life. . .

* When have we gained greater clarity or deeper insight?
* How have chance encounters shaped us for the better?
* What surprises have we discovered along the way?

A person in a blue coat

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Pastor Karen Behling (she/her) lives within a mile of the congregation she serves - Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church in Chippewa Falls, WI - which means that most days, she enjoys walking as her primary mode of transportation. Previous calls over these past 34 years have been in Minnesota, Iowa, and North Dakota in congregations small to large, with and without staff. Her primary creative outlets are quilting, baking, and replacing more and more of the front lawn with pollinator plants which makes for great conversation in the neighborhood.

1. Traci Smith suggests this in her blog, [Lent 2024: Rooted in God’s Love](https://tracismith.substack.com/p/treasure-box-tuesday-e82?utm_source=substack&publication_id=23734&post_id=140515827&utm_medium=email&utm_content=share&utm_campaign=email-share&triggerShare=true&isFreemail=true&r=u7ie7), as she offers three practices for doing so, including Lovingkindness Meditations, Practicing Self-Compassion, and Scripture Memorization, particularly 1 Corinthians 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See ‘[Allow Flourishing in Season of Creation](https://blogs.elca.org/advocacy/allow-flourishing-in-season-of-creation/)’, ELCA Advocacy Blog, September 11, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keynote speaker at this spring’s EcoFaith Summit. Read [The Planet You Inherit](https://www.broadleafbooks.com/store/product/9781506473536/The-Planet-You-Inherit) (Broadleaf, 2022), for more. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christopher Ingraham, [Minnesota Mental Health Professionals Say Climate Concerns Driving Patients to Depression](https://minnesotareformer.com/2024/01/04/mn-mental-health-professionals-say-climate-concerns-driving-many-patients-to-severe-depression/?utm_campaign=MSP%20Daily%20Edit&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=288804847&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--A1qFEuzkdacdhCjAJZDvO2_lZNbnQI-sli5_Zbx1bCbvLiZKIbwWzZycYHXGTYaGctAu9DeT9Ls2KqtiK07CugEpvwA&utm_content=288804847&utm_source=hs_email); Minnesota Reformer, January 04, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)