**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

The Presentation of Our Lord—February 2n

Celebrated on February 5th, 2023

Malachi 3:1-4

Psalm 84

Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

Rev. Dianne Loufman, Duluth, MN

We started celebrating Candlemas a few years ago.  We had so many half-used candles around that I thought we should recycle them rather than throw them out.  We are doing so again this year; so, I am sorry if this is a disappointment to those hoping to find reflections for the Fifth Sunday of Epiphany.

The lessons for Candlemas also known as the Presentation of our Lord or in the Roman Catholic Church, the Purification of Mary and in the Orthodox Church, the Feast of Meeting are:

For creation themes I’ll focus more on the Candlemas emphasis.  This year on Sunday January 15th between services and with middle school youth group and confirmation class, we melted down leftover candle stubs, Advent candles, Christmas candles and the remnant of our Easter Vigil candle. Everyone who wanted to made dip candles for us to bless on Candlemas and for them to take home.  We also made small votive candles to give out to our worship guests with tags that say, “Let your light shine . . .”  We will also bless all the candles that will be lit during our worship services  this coming year.

Candlemas takes place 40 days after Christmas – halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.  We are never far away in our celebrations from connections to creation – in this case to the turning of the planet away and then back towards the light.  It’s a wonderful time to preach about darkness and light and what it means to live in-between in the shadows.  It could be an opportunity  to break through the binary of light/good-dark/bad.   What does the darkness help us to see?  What does too much light prevent us from seeing?  Light can be a source of deliverance or a source of judgment.

What are some examples of light being welcomed and light not being welcomed? My geranium plant grew so big and beautiful in my office last winter and spring but when I took it outside into the full rather than dappled sunlight, the light became more like Malachi’s refining fire – there was not much left!

When is shade a gift?  When are the shadows frightening?  Epiphany is known as a season of light, but the light to be seen needs the darkness.  The darker the night sky, the brighter the stars.  When I was in Peru a couple of years ago, I learned that the Incas named constellations after the dark spaces whereas we see and name them based on the points of light.

In what ways does creation use and need darkness for growth?  What is taking place in this wintering time beneath our seeing ready to burst forth with new growth as the longer, warmer days return? In what ways does darkness foster our faith?  In what ways do we meet God in the darkness?

Is facing our death a time of darkness or light?  The Spirit that rests upon Simeon in Luke 2  is the One who revealed to him that death wouldn’t come until the Messiah appeared and the Spirit is the One who guides him to the temple to meet Jesus.  There is no resistance on his part; he goes to the temple and receives the child, Jesus, in his arms and says:

*Now I can depart in peace*

*My eyes have seen the salvation that you have prepared*

*In the presence of all peoples*

*A light for revelation to the Gentiles*

*And for glory to your people Israel*

In the Orthodox Church this is known as the Feast of Meeting.  Simeon, the God Receiver, welcomes Mary, the God Bearer.  I love this.  Where do our feasts of meeting take place?  In what ways can we be God Receivers in relationship to creation?  One could also preach on the first line – “Now I can depart in peace.”  What will allow us to depart in peace when we think beyond our own lives and families and contemplate the world and what we leave to future generations as the planet erupts in  the violent protestations of floods, hurricanes, wildfires, tornados more fierce than previously known.

One could also move in a very different way having fun with the fact that Candlemas is celebrated on what we know in this country as Groundhog Day.  Here is a Candlemas Proverb:

If Candlemas be fair and bright

Winter has another flight

If Candlemas brings clouds and rain

Winter will not come again

We can hear Punxsutawney Phil, the Pennsylvania Groundhog weather lore in this saying– if the groundhog emerges from its burrow on February 2nd and sees its shadow, it will retreat to its den and we’ll be in for 6 more weeks of winter; if it doesn’t see its shadow because of cloudy weather, spring will come early. This strange tradition was brought over from Germany by the Pennsylvania Dutch.  Only in  Germany the animal forecaster was a badger. The badger/groundhog winter/spring forecasting is rather nonsensical, but isn’t it interesting that it takes place on February 2nd – Candlemas, the Presentation of our Lord.

Again, we hear about light and shadows and creatures telling us something by their movements about the seasons.  Even though this one has no basis in reality, we can in other ways tune into the creatures around us and learn something about the seasons, about changes in the atmosphere, about implications of humans trespassing creation’s boundaries.

The Psalm for the day is Psalm 84 which provides plenty of fodder for sermon contemplation.  This is a song of praise celebrating the Lord’s dwelling, in this case, the temple.  However, I think we can lean into it and consider how the earth is also God’s dwelling place and a place in which we can offer praise and thanksgiving.  The Psalmist celebrates that even the sparrow finds a home in God’s house  and the swallow a nest for her young. How can we make God’s earthly dwelling a safe, welcoming home for these small ones?  How can the space around our church buildings be welcoming to God’s birds, butterflies, worms, dragonflies?

There is the wondrous line that those whose strength is in God as they pass through the dry land of the Baca Valley make it a  place of springs.  Those who long to worship God care for the earth helping bring to it new life.  One senses that all is right with creation largely because the people whose strength is in God have their  hearts set on the pilgrims’ way.  Traveling God’s holy way is mirrored in creation living its holy way.  What the pilgrims leave behind is not litter and destruction, but a transformation of barrenness into an oasis.

And the psalm ends taking us back to the image of light and shadow: “For the Lord God is both sun and shield, bestowing grace and glory; no good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity.”  We need the sun and to be shielded from the sun. Warmth and protection – how can we shield one another and creation as God shields us?

Maybe you’ll be inspired to celebrate Candlemas/Presentation of the Lord/the Feast of Meeting this year.  Here is a blessing I think we will begin worship with that day:

As Jesus is presented in the temple,

we present ourselves and these candles.

May these candles be a visible reminder of

“the true light which enlightens everyone.” [John 1]

As these candles are kindled,

may our baptismal commission be rekindled in us:

“To let our lights shine before others that they may see our good works

and glorify our God in heaven” [Matthew 5:16]

May our hearts be enlightened

By the invisible fire of your Spirit

May our spirits be illuminated

By the fire we call Christ

With Simeon and Anna may we see your salvation

And be bathed in your light that never fades away

May we enter into darkness knowing that so often

That is where we will find you

May the fire of your love refine our lives

May the flame of your love burn within us

May the light of your love illumine our path

and spread hope for the whole of creation.

The Reverend Dianne O. Loufman

First Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

Reflections on the Lectionary

February 12, 2023

Epiphany 6, Year A

Rev. Krehl Stringer, Fergus Falls, MN

Theme: Jesus’ Teaching Alters the Law

Bible References

Deut. 30:15-20 or Sir. 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1Cor. 3:1-9; and Matthew 5:21-37.

**Prayer of the Day**

O God, the strength of all who hope in you, because we are weak mortals we accomplish nothing good without you. **Help us to see and understand the things we ought to do, and give us grace and power to do them, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.**

**Overview**

This is not an easy set of lections to preach if one’s gospel sensibility derives from a strong law/gospel dialectic that confesses something along the lines of “we are by nature sinful and unclean,” and the only hope is in the promise “while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6; Cf., Ephesians 2:8). Many of us cut our theological teeth on such crackers, and it would seem to betray our heritage, our godly upbringing, and even our good sense of self to suggest anything close to compromise (after all, that would be semi-Pelagian and a crying shame liable to hellfire). Well, I’m as Lutheran as they come…a premie baptized at 49 days old on January 28, 1962 at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Winter Park, Florida (so my brother recently informed me with photographic evidence of Parish Register Entry #261), grew up in a loving Christian home, got Confirmed, married up (another Lutheran!), experienced my share of exiles and exoduses, and been a pastor for…how long now? Well, Paul laid out a similar argument about the value of such credentials when compared to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord…the righteousness from God based on faith.” (Phil. 3:8-9) It’s this *knowing* *Christ Jesus* piece where we must come to terms (at the *kairos* time of Rom. 5:6) with the reality of God’s resolve and initiative in Christ to extend steadfast love to all people and all Creation. Christ, after all, was the everlasting rainbow covenant of Genesis 9 fulfilled for all future generations of life on the planet. And it’s that truth that colors all we might imagine to be our prerogative and calling to do. We may or may not “get with the program,” but that doesn’t alter the reality of our already being made a “new creation,” God through Christ having been busy “reconciling the world to himself…and entrusting the ministry of reconciliation to us.” (2Cor. 5:18-19) To miss out on sharing the joy of *that* gospel with the world would truly be a shame.

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**Commentary**

Both Deuteronomy and Sirach extol humanity’s God-given capacity to make choices, but they also make clear that choices will have their consequences. The Israelites can choose to obey God’s commandments and ordinances for the flourishing of community, or they can choose to disobey, which will naturally redound to the diminishment of community. Broaden this concept to the workings of the biosphere and you have an understanding of the ecological consequences wrought by a humanity neglectful of its mandate to serve and preserve this beautiful garden planet upon which all life depends. The appeal in Deuteronomy to “choose life so that you and your descendants may live,” (30:19b) is especially poignant in face of this present ecological crisis. It’s also worth noting that choosing life, choosing to be a blessing, is understood as “loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him “ (v. 20) In other words, making choices for the building up of community and the flourishing of life is an act of loving God…in the same sense as “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt. 25:40) This might offer a *kairos* time to extol the kinship we share with all creatures.

The lesson from 1Corinthians focuses attention on how a community of faith, diversely equipped and with common purpose, can become God’s field to facilitate growth, God’s building to shelter unity. But the finesse of Paul’s delivery makes clear that communities of faith, like individuals, have choices to make—either to celebrate diverse gifts and the gospel’s common purpose/promise of growth and unity, or not celebrate such things, which will lead to the breakdown of community—jealousy, quarreling, disunity. People will gain their wages accordingly.

The gospel lesson is particularly difficult because, taken out of context from the rest of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (and from the rest of Matthew’s gospel, for that matter), it treats of strict obedience to the law, but without any attendant word of mercy or hope. Then again, perhaps we can create an opening that the promise of unmerited grace might exploit…

Notice how Jesus both radicalizes and subverts the law by his teaching—radicalizing has the effect of making the law impossible to uphold; subverting has the effect of nullifying the law altogether. (You can broaden your investigation to the rest of Jesus’ sermon, putting an “r” or an “s” next to each law Jesus interprets). Jesus makes both moves in this pericope, which leaves the dismayed, law-obsessed listener to wonder if “Maybe there’s more to righteousness, to blessed-ness, to faith, to life, than strict obedience to the law.” Perhaps the evil one’s game is to promise people heaven by scaring them out of hell. Rather, Jesus seems to be exposing both how powerless and how pointless the law can be in promising hope to those keenly aware of their failings.

The final “subversion of the law” Jesus offers up in the text is particularly interesting. At issue is the making of promises one cannot keep—the evil one makes such promises all the time (as Jesus’ *kairos* time in the wilderness (Mt. 4) made clear). Instead, Jesus seems to be saying, resolve simply to rely on the promises of God alone—the only legitimate maker of promises, and the only one trustworthy enough to keep them. Jesus seems to be saying to those who would listen, the choice is before you, either ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’ when it comes to relying on God. The ‘Yes, Yes’ trusts in God’s steadfast love to prevail from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, from ancient times to the end of the age, and seeks humbly to live in light of that promise. The ‘No, No’ supposes God’s love is not so steadfast, not so universal, that it shouldn’t be trusted, that other agendas are more promising. None of these are true, of course, God’s love will not be deterred. But for the one who chooses to resist, it does make for a less than abundant, joyful, and meaningful life. Thankfully, it just makes them a target of the ‘Yes, Yes’ crowd!

*Krehl Stringer serves as chaplain at PioneerCare Retirement Community in Fergus Falls, MN. Ordained in the ELCA in 2006, Pastor Krehl has served parishes in southwestern Michigan and northern Minnesota, and in that time has been involved with three synodical green teams. He and his wife, Meghan, enjoy outdoor activities like hiking, biking, camping, and gardening. Krehl has been a MN Master Naturalist, supports The Nature Conservancy, Creation Justice Ministries, Lutherans Restoring Creation, the Arbor Day Foundation, and Citizens’ Climate Lobby, and most recently has been designated a Creation Care Ambassador by Blessed Tomorrow/ecoAmerica to inspire public engagement on climate.*

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

Reflections on the Lectionar

February 19, 2023

**Transfiguration of Our Lord, A**

Bible Ref’s: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2 or Psalm 99; 2Peter 1:16-21; and Matthew 17:1-9.

**Prayer of the Day**

O God, in the transfiguration of your Son you confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the witness of Moses and Elijah, and in the voice from the bright cloud declaring Jesus your beloved Son, you foreshadowed our adoption as your children. **Make us heirs with Christ of your glory, and bring us to enjoy its fullness, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.**

**Hymn Suggestions**

Gathering: “Come, Beloved of the Maker” (ELW 306)

“Can You See the Seasons Turning” (ACS #1065)

“God Bestows on Every Sense” (ACS 1069)

Hymn of the Day: “Jesus on the Mountain Peak” (ELW #317, WOV #653)

 “Look Who Gathers at Christ’s Table” (ACS 977) “Dazzling Presence on the Mountain” (ACS #917)

Offertory Response: “For the Wholeness of the Earth” (ACS 1067)

Sending: “Shine, Jesus, Shine” (ELW 671)(change “the nations” with “creation”)

 “When Morning Guilds the Skies” (ELW 853)

“Earth is Full of Wit and Wisdom” (ACS 1064)

“Christ the Lord Was There” (lyrics below to “Go Tell It on the Mt.”)

**Overview**

Last year, I reflected on The Transfiguration of Our Lord from a Lukan perspective, focusing on the mountaintop experience the three disciples were privileged to have “above the ordinary plain of existence” witnessing the glory of God, and yet in the midst of such glory, suddenly noticing Jesus “standing alone” as plain and ordinary as themselves. While Luke’s account shares many of the same features as Matthew’s, it seems to me that the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel desires to “lift up” what seems just ordinary to heavenly glory rather than “bring down” glory to the lowly. In other words, while Luke emphasizes Jesus with us on the plain, Matthew emphasizes Jesus escorting us up the mountain. (Consider Jesus’ end-times parable of Matthew 25 where the dismay among the sheep/goats is “when did we see you…?” to which the glorious king responds in effect, “Don’t you see? I am ‘the least’ among you…” Earlier (in Matthew 18), Jesus teaches his disciples about humility, to be mindful not to despise “little ones” for they are “greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” and Jesus gives them the keys of the kingdom to ensure that heavenly glory abounds.) Neither evangelist’s thinking is necessarily better than another nor contradictory; they both seek to convey a transfiguration in their readers’ perceptions of the kingdom’s nearness. It’s perhaps just a question of strategy/effectiveness—sometimes the situation or personality will find Luke more compelling, sometimes Matthew. And the same will be true with broadening peoples’ faith perspective in caring for Creation. As I mentioned last year, “What’s called for is a transfiguration of human character that welcomes a co-creator’s role in preserving ecological vitality throughout the biosphere, that accepts a co-redeemer’s role in restoring what sin has polluted and degraded, that fully embraces a co-ordinator’s role in preserving creation’s wellbeing and guiding creation to peace. For while anthropocentrism has impaired a certain creation-centered conscientiousness toward becoming authentically human, anthropo-marginalism, also, has denied a certain creation-centered responsibility toward becoming co-creators/co-redeemers/co-ordinators divinely equipped and called to carry out its trinitarian project. Perhaps in this expansive respect, a preacher could occasion an epiphany, awaken a benighted psyche to its original sin of earthkeeping neglect, and elicit a *metanoia*.”

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**Commentary**

Therefore, when it comes to our texts for the A-cycle of The Transfiguration, I’d seek to invite folks “up the mountain” so to speak, so that they might perceive with all their senses the glory of heaven in all the places they might dwell or go, and to aspire to their upward call in Christ to show forth God’s glory. Matthew’s account is very intentional about associating the disciples’ experience to Moses’ experience on Mt. Sinai (the mountain, after 6 days, the shining faces, Moses’ presence, the bright cloud, being overcome with fear). The first lesson from Exodus 24 draws attention to this foundational moment in the wandering life of the Israelites receiving the law. The forbidding clouds and 40 days/nights are reminiscent of the dreadful rains of Genesis 7, and the pillar of cloud that would descend to guard the entrance of the tent of meeting in Numbers 12 and Deuteronomy 31. I prefer Psalm 99 (over Psalm 2) as it makes these connections to the Exodus more explicit.

Here's what I wrote last year regarding the psalm response. “Because we esteem God the Creator as holy (set apart, distinguished) from all that God has made, we find it necessary to set apart or distinguish time and space to worship this God. This is a cultic practice that we sapient creatures need to focus our fleeting attention, though we need not impose this setting-apart-of-God to all of reality (as if God could somehow exist outside of existence). Yes, we do experience holy moments, we visit holy places, we cherish our holy objects, we celebrate our holy sacraments, but we also have an assurance (by grace through faith) that God is always close, we are never alone, and that nothing is beyond God’s holy love (a love, that is, we distinguish as holy only because it sets nothing apart, because such love defines who God *is*). Whenever we come to worship, we come to God’s “holy mountain” to rehearse psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God, to remark on God’s word, to recall the promises, to repent, to rededicate, to rejuvenate and to reimagine. Throughout scripture, mountains represent close proximity to God, a place of wilderness retreat, of refuge, of prayer, of worship. The psalmist calls out Moses, Aaron and Samuel by name, but we could name so many more (Abraham, Elijah, Isaiah, Peter, James, John and Jesus) who encountered God on mountains and came away from the experience changed to face a new day. Most often, references to the “holy mountain” refer to the holy city Jerusalem (also called Mount Zion) that was the center of commercial, rabbinical, and worship life for the Jewish people. Many other psalms show how all of creation is continually engaged in worship (Pss. 19, 69, 96, and 148); so it is that we rejoin the rest of creation in offering our praises and thanksgivings to God.”

The epistle reading draws particularly from Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration to validate its prophetic message of hope and to make its appeal to listen (“be attentive”) to what God desires for a world darkened by fear and dissipation. Indeed, it is evident throughout this pseudonymous letter a particular burden of the writer to reinforce apostolic authority and teaching for a community beset by purveyors of falsehood and competing allegiances. But with “Majestic Glory” behind you, what’s the point of hiding under a bushel? Let the morning star rise and shine!

Moving on to the gospel lesson, what I find interesting is how the voice from the cloud makes explicit a connection to baptism (verbatim from the voice at Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3) as if to reiterate for folks first and foremost that they are beloved children of God. Baptism imparts (or reveals?) the glory of God’s love for all people and all Creation—a majestic glory that Jesus reveals to the disciples on the mountain. Notice how Jesus’ face shines *like the sun*, his clothes dazzling *white as snow* (Cf., Mt. 28:3 and Rev. 1:14), and his Father’s voice emanates from *a bright cloud*. This is more than the employment of metaphor to describe the ineffable—this is Matthew using the common experiences of nature to convey a beauty and glory manifest in all Creation for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. As the text of a new hymn puts it, “God bestows on every sense beauty as hope’s evidence: signs of what the earth will be just beyond what we can see.” (in All Creation Sings, #1069). There is a veritable rainbow of experiences available to the senses to live out God’s everlasting covenant of love for all people and all Creation, as that universal principle was established by God in Genesis 8-9. (Don’t get me started talking about *that* biblical mountaintop experience!). New Creation is our vocation!

The emphatic add-on “listen to him!” underscores that what Jesus reveals by his identity and mission is the too-oft-ignored imperative to convey God’s steadfast love for the world, which is how Jesus lived his life and taught his disciples to obey (“to go and do likewise” would be more Luke’s way of describing discipleship, which I think I like better, but that’s just me ☺ ).

The last thought I’ll leave hearkens back to my comments above regarding worship. Just as we might think of worship on Sunday morning as the highpoint of the week, so within the context of worship, we might think of Communion as the highpoint of the service—that is, the place/time where/when our closeness to God is most fully disclosed. (Not to preclude this intimacy possible in other spaces/times in worship or otherwise (thus affirming the *panentheist* principle of God’s sacramental presence throughout all Creation!), but only here as a focal point in our worship experience). Insight here comes from another new hymn “Look Who Gathers at Christ’s Table” (in All Creation Sings, #977): “Clouds of light surround the table; ancient followers appear, saints confessing how they wrestled with their guilt, their doubt and fear. Peter tells of his denying Christ was ever in his sight; Paul relates his fruitless efforts to obliterate the light.” (st. 2) So, in having confessed earlier in worship, “We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, nor cherished the earth as a sacred trust and home to share with our kin,” we go up the mountain to experience the nearness of God, to taste the goodness of grain and grape, to hear assurance of God’s steadfast love and forgiveness, and be accompanied as beloved children to share Christ’s redeeming love with all the world. Perhaps this pinnacle of worship can serve to transfigure us into Jesus’ image, who is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all tings by his powerful word.” (Hebrews 1:3a). Which reminds me of that favorite hymn of many, ELW 671—consider changing the refrain slightly as follows: “Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father’s glory; blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire. Flow, river, flow, flood *creation* with grace and mercy; send forth your Word, Lord, and let there be light!” Like sun, snow and cloud on the mountain, consider how beauty and glory might radiate from land, fire, hearts, and river, bespeaking God’s steadfast love for all people and all Creation! Wouldn’t that be a great way to come down the mountain?

**Addendum**

Consider adapting various liturgical elements to be more inclusive of all creation, and to help broaden minds to the true scope of salvation (the Christ event) beyond mere human wellbeing. Some examples:

For the Confession and Forgiveness, “~~Most merciful God,~~ **~~we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.~~** [God, who satisfies the desire of every living thing, **have mercy on us. We confess that we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin.] We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves [, nor cherished the earth as a sacred trust and home to share with our kin]. We are truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive our sins, know and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do. Turn us again to you, and uphold us by your Spirit, so that we may live and serve you in newness of life through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.**

Or in place of Confession and Forgiveness, consider using this Assurance of God’s Mercy.

We are a pilgrim people accompanied by God, who journeys beside us, accepting who we are, yet also going before us, beckoning us toward who we might become.

**But as we move through our days, other gods call to us, questions confound us, worry distracts, bitterness blinds, indifference lulls, we lose our way.**

Sisters and brothers, we can trust God at all times, for the Holy One is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. With confidence, let us pour out a shared confession of our hearts:

**We confess, steadfast God, that we wander from the path of love upon which we are meant to walk. Fear divides us, prejudice hardens us, greed consumes us, loneliness discourages us. Because of our neglect, the wellbeing of creation has suffered.**

But God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. By God’s mercy in **+** Christ Jesus, and by guidance of the Holy Spirit, our wayward hearts are set again upon the path of faithfulness and love, reoriented to our sacred purpose making all things new. We cherish this assurance of God’s mercy among ourselves, and are bold to proclaim it to the world in Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

For the Eucharistic Prayer, consider using ELW Prayer Form VIII (pp. 67-68), “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears…” (for themes of light, exodus and liberation, especially with respect to affirming those of non-European descent), or Prayer Forms IX (p. 68), “Holy God, you alone are holy, you alone are God…,” or X (p. 69), “O God most mighty, O God most merciful…” (for themes of the universe declaring God’s praise, and God’s creation of all things).

Finally, here’s a familiar hymn with new lyrics that can be used for various occasions.

**Christ the Lord was There!** (©2021 Krehl D. Stringer) to the tune “Go Tell It on the Mountain.”

*Refrain* Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and ev'rywhere;
 go tell it on the mountain that Christ the Lord was there!

1 Before the void and silence, the Wisdom of the Word,

 Gave voice to good creation, its harmony and verve. *Refrain*

2 Whence Sinai’s Mount was given, a law to order good,

 That Christ fulfilled at Calv’ry, no single earthling could. *Refrain*

3 Upon Mount Tabor lonely, Christ shone as sun on earth,

 For prophets and disciples, a ray of promised mirth. *Refrain*

4 Amid upheaving pressures, and mounting range of need,

 Christ sought a prayerful refuge, creation’s cry to plead. *Refrain*

5 God calls us to Mount Zion, to worship, pray and feast,

 And thence to serve and welcome, the garden and the least. *Refrain*

6 On all God’s holy mountain, with steadfast love and grace,

Shall Christ and by his Spirit, a new creation lace. *Refrain*

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

Ash Wednesday

February 22nd, 2023

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Rev. Paul McLean Strike

 I’m drawn to the ashes on this day. Isn’t everyone? These charred remains were once celebratory palm fronds, used to mark Jesus’ royal entry into Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosanna!” Now, with a little oil, the ashes are made into signs of the cross, naming and claiming us as sinful beloveds of God in Christ. These bits of earth tell me that I am but a part of the cosmos that needs the redemptive healing and care that Christ provides.

 The gospel passage for today reminds me of God’s claim on us. Unlike the hypocrites, who seek the attention of others in what they do, the true follower pays attention only to God’s desire for them—for their eternal treasure is built up in their relationship with God. That relationship isn’t simply spiritual, but involves the whole being—physical body included. How we live in the world—in relationship with one another, in relationship with the dust around us (ie. all that God has made, touched, and loves)—is critical to our relationship with God. The ashes, for me, bring to the fore this physical/embodied facet of the relationship.

 An Ash Wednesday blessing from *Speak it Plain: Words for Worship and Life Together*,by Meta Herrick Carlson, conveys this idea much better than I can:

 *Tonight we remember*

 *that we come from the dust*

 *both earthen and cosmic*

 *thanks to bursts of atoms*

 *billions of years old,*

 *still chasing*

 *the coattails of* kairos.

 *We are the heavy elements:*

 *carbon, nitrogen, oxygen,*

 *pressed and held down*

 *by the gravity of sin*

 *trapped in the stillness,*

 *waiting for nova until*

 *wind, breath, spirit*

 *fills the ordinary*

 *and everywhere*

 *with more.*

 *Tonight we remember*

 *that we come from the dust*

 *by listening carefully*

 *to the sound of our chests*

 *rising and falling,*

 *fragile with the wonder of dust*

 *that lives.*

On this day, may the “wonder of dust” bring us deeper into the love God has for us and for the fragile, yet precious, world God has made!

*Paul McLean Strike is a first-call pastor at New Life Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Florence, Oregon. He lives with his wonderful spouse, Logan (also an ELCA pastor) and puppy dog named Beans. He enjoys running through the woods, on the beaches, and anywhere a trail can be sustainably made.* 

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Year A / Lent 1 / February 26th, 2023**

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 / Psalm 32 / Romans 5:12-19 / Matthew 4:1-11

Rev. John Stiles, Pine City, MN

Here are a few “sermon nuggets” I’m considering for this week’s message which may or may not fit into our ecological frame of reference… mostly focusing on the story of Adam & Eve’s mistakes and redemption…

Children’s Time: carrying a file full of paper, accidentally trip and spill it all on the floor. Talk about mistakes… times when you’ve “dropped the ball.” Does God love us any less when we’ve made a big mess? What if someone had tripped me? What if the mess was made on purpose? Does God still love us, then? Even the tripp-er?! (Tell about a time you “dropped the ball”) In our lesson today, Adam & Eve tripped… they disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the forbidden fruit. But God forgave them and provided for them in their life outside the Garden of Eden. So, too, God forgives and provides for us in all the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th chances we are given in life…

How is it that we’re so good at making a mess of things in this life? I once had a college prof who said, “Democracy is the *worst* form of government, except for all the others.” (quoting Churchill, I’m assuming) If it weren’t for all those checks and balances, we would sure get things done a lot faster. If it weren’t for the need to build consensus things wouldn’t take so long. Running a government is messy business, but darn it, if we’re really all in this together – that’s what it takes.

So, too, is the process of caring for creation and each other: it’s messy business. Like Adam and Eve, we all make mistakes. We say things we wish we could take back and do things that are pretty stupid sometimes. We make messes and expect someone else (future generations?) to clean them up. In some cases, there’s zero tolerance for mistakes. You could be out of a job if your error costs the company.

~When the [I-35 bridge collapsed in Minneapolis](https://www.mnopedia.org/event/i-35w-bridge-collapse), we saw how one flaw in design can prove fatal.

~When [3M buried toxic chemicals](https://www.startribune.com/3m-end-manufacture-use-forever-chemicals-pfas-by-2025/600237425/) that leaked into our water sources we saw how those mistakes can have lasting impact on the health of our communities.

~When a [study of fish consumption](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pfas-forever-chemicals-one-fish-us-lakes-rivers-month-contaminated-water/) recently found that eating one freshwater fish was the equivalent of drinking a month’s worth of contaminated water, we see why they’re called “forever” chemicals.

~We’ve made a mess of our atmosphere by relying too much on fossil fuels, resulting in global warming (though, in recent years, there are [hopeful signs that this is turning around](https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2020nasa-data-aids-ozone-hole-s-journey-to-recovery)).

Summer camp is one way to equip the next generation for the challenges they will likely inherit from the rest of us. When you’re on a camping trip, you’re out of your familiar surroundings, away from your safety net, and thrust into a space where everybody matters. Whether you’re backpacking in the mountains or serving kids in poverty in an urban jungle – the rest of your group counts on you to do your part. No one gets to *sit things out* at camp and no one is going to ‘clean up your mess for you.’ In fact, in the Boundary Waters, campers have a lot of work to do in gathering wood, cooking, setting up & taking down camp… and you are expected to ‘leave no trace.’ You are expected to pack out whatever you bring in, leaving the campsite better than you found it. And yet, simply the majesty of creation (in all it’s beauty and terror) can minister to us.

You might consider Jesus’ “wilderness experience” like going to summer camp. Just as Jesus was tempted by the devil to see what he was made of – so, too, our young people need an opportunity to be tested – to rise to the challenge of those experiences, trusting that God will be there when it seems more than you can bear.

When we make mistakes or face challenges, we aren’t driven to despair – we’re driven to the cross, where we meet Jesus who told Satan: “Away with you!” In our everyday lives, we make mistakes. I’m a parent of adult children, and recently divorced. So, there is a lifetime of mistakes I wish I could’ve done or said differently. Perhaps we’re all dysfunctional from one degree to another. So, it’s important to give ourselves some slack here.

I never imagined that God “expected” Adam & Eve to sin. But that is precisely what Rabbi Harold Kushner proposes in his fascinating little book: [*How good do we have to be?*](https://www.amazon.com/Good-Have-Understanding-Guilt-Forgiveness/dp/0316519332/ref%3Dsr_1_1?crid=2GY2Q4DJAOMSC&keywords=how+good+do+we+have+to+be&qid=1674232345&sprefix=how+good+do+we+have+to+be%2Caps%2C104&sr=8-1)Kushner tells the story of a college basketball player, Chris Webber, who made a mistake in a national championship game in 1993 (Michigan vs. North Carolina). He called a time out when his team had already used up all its time outs. So, they lost the ball in the final seconds of the game, and it cost them the championship. But Webber refused to let that one play define him. He believed he could be an outstanding player if not a perfect one. A year later he was professional basketball’s Rookie of the Year and went on to become a 5-time NBA All-Star.

God expects us to fail from time to time; but we’re still All-Stars in God’s eyes! That’s why God put that tree in the garden in the first place – he created us in the image of God… and it was high time Adam and Eve grew up into the knowledge of good and evil.

Are we going to still make mistakes? Oh yeah, and some dooseys! But we know those mistakes don’t define us. That’s the difference between shame and guilt. Learn from your mistakes. Own up for your sins, but remember, Christ lives within you. In the wilderness Jesus withstood temptation. And because he did, we can too, through Christ who strengthens us. Take up the challenge by going to a wilderness camp. Resist the devil, who will flee from you (James 4:7). But – above all – believe in the Holy Spirit who dwells within you and “sing praise to the Lord, whose anger is but for a moment, whose favor is for a lifetime!” (Psalm 30:5)

Prayer: O God, you see the messes we make in our lives and in the world. Show us how to live with the knowledge of good and evil, to admit when we’re wrong, and to rise up to meet the challenges we face through faith in Jesus Christ, who lives within us and among us. Amen.



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John Stiles is a pastor at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church (Pine City, MN). His hometown is Albert Lea, MN. He graduated from Augustana College, Sioux Falls, with a BA in Elementary Education and earned his Masters of Divinity at Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, IA. John has served congregations in Fairmont, Mankato, New Brighton, Oakdale and Brainerd prior to accepting the call in Pine City. John is recently divorced and has two adult children. He writes music, knits things to wear, and is interested in artificial intelligence, especially as it relates to music and the arts.