

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B.

March 3, 2024

John 2:13-22, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Psalm 19, Exodus 20:1-17

       Luke Pederson

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“You shall have no other gods before me.”

Exodus 20:3

In “A Sand County Almanac”, Aldo Leopold wrote, *We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.i*

“A community to which belong”—how often do we view the land as a community of which we both a part of and dependent on? A community to which we have responsibilities, where neglect or abuse affect the whole community? How can this connect with us as members who belong to the Body of Christ?

“What’s that land worth?” A question that quickly comes up when word or rumor goes around about land in the neighborhood that is up for sale. In the real-estate marketplace section of a sales paper in my area, one finds properties listed, often with some pictures, like an aerial photograph of the property, and a list of the properties’ attributes—a stream flows through the property, hardwood or pine forest, farmland, potential building sites, potential places for food plots, and perhaps a glowing description of the land’s potential for “trophy bucks”—an especially popular attribute! Flyers occasionally arrive in the mail—have your land assessed. Land wanted! Sell now or buy now!  Indeed, the land is treated as a commodity, and something to be coveted, or even an idol with landownership a sign of wealth and power.

When treated as a commodity, the land is reduced to a superficial value. The biota, the web of life that inhabit the land either ignored or ranked on its economic benefits as just another item to be bought and sold. A commodity for the owner to do as they please with. It is reduced to solely what economic benefits are available in the land.  The life that dwells on the land is also ranked by its economic “worth”. The land is ranked on its agricultural or recreational value, or on the value of its mineral and timber resources.  When land is a commodity, do we really get to know the land and the lessons it teaches? Aldo Leopold referred to his farm on the banks of the Wisconsin River as a “Land Laboratory”. Could we also call it the Land Classroom? For the land teaches lifelong learning; there are always new lessons the land can teach us. Even when you have lived there for your entire life, there is always something new to learn from the land, just as the life of faith is lifelong listening and learning from the Holy Spirit.

When we look beyond the surface level, beyond the economic value, we may see the true value and beauty of the land and the community of life—from the insects to the trees, the flowers, the animals large and small, and ourselves, that are fed and sustained by the land, and how the land in turn sustains us. The health of the land reflects the health of the human beings who depend on it. When we see that the land, the Earth is a gift; a gift entrusted to us by God to honor and care for, we may see that it is a gift to be shared; a gift to love and respect; a gift that is for generations to come. When we see the land as a beloved creation of God with the *Imago Dei* all around us in the plants, the animals, the soil, and the water; when we feel the ground under our feet we feel the connection with creation, with life, with each other. For we are the one Body of Christ joined with him through all God’s good creation. How we treat the land, the Earth reflecting on how we treat one another, on how we treat each member of the Body of Christ.

May we remember our baptismal calling to strive for justice and peace, to care for the world God made, listen to its teachings, and to put no other gods before us.

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**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B**

**March 10, 2024**

Numbers 21:4-9: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

The Rev. Nathan Sager, D. Min.

Duluth, Minnesota

Every family has traditions.

My wife and I have one…where we hide an Easter bunny for the other to find.

It has been found in a dresser drawer.

The bunny might show up in a suitcase…when you’re off on a trip.

What does it represent?

You are remembered. You are cared for, even from a distance. You are loved.

Sometimes it disappears for months at a time…or even years.

Then it makes its appearance again when you least expect it,

communicating its message of love and care.

We need more little bunnies in our lives.

You don’t need a stuffed animal to give a bunny away.

They are sometimes called warm fuzzies.

They take the forms of: A gentle, caring hug/ a word of affirmation and support/

a gentle touch/ an act of kindness.

Warm fuzzies make you feel good. They make you feel loved.

It’s like being surrounded by a soft, thick, luxurious bath robe.

It’s like sinking into your soft, cushy recliner.

Little bunnies. Warm fuzzies.

There are no bunnies named in the Bible. Not a single one.

Although we can assume that there was a pair on the ark.

But there are no Bible verses that refer to rabbits…

and warm fuzzies is not a biblical, theological term.

Instead, what we find in the Bible are snakes.

Wait a minute. What did you say? Snakes?

Talk about being the opposite of bunnies.

There are a few things I hate. Snakes are high on the list.

They touch some deep, primordial fear within me.

Snakes live in dark, secret places.

They surprise you when you are not looking.

They bite you when you are not paying attention.

I like bunnies, but I want to stay far away from snakes.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is teaching the Pharisee Nicodemus.

As he did, he used Old Testament images to convey theological truth.

I notice two in particular: wilderness and serpent.

He didn’t hold up a Christian t-shirt…or a 3:16 sign at a football game.

He held up wilderness and serpent.

Jesus and Nicodemus were not on the same theological page.

But both knew their history, and God’s hand revealed in nature.

As St. Paul told the church in Rome, *Ever since the creation of the world*

*His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are,*

*Have been understood and seen through the things he has made* (Rom 1:20)*.*

Wilderness and serpent.

Let’s plumb those natural elements…

To see why Jesus chose them in particular to communicate holy truth.

The wilderness…is not where you want to live.

It is the geography from which you try to stay away.

Crops? Forget about it.

Grazing of animals? No.

Wilderness is not conducive to life.

In the Exodus, ancient Israel was in the wilderness…

As they made their way from the Red Sea to the Promised Land.

For like, overnight? No.

For like, 40 years.

In the wilderness, the people were hungry.

They cried out to God.

And God sent food from heaven for them—manna.

But that was a long time ago.

Now, the people were tired.

They had lost their spirit.

They had been eating this manna day after day.

They told God they were sick of it.

These people had the gall to say,

*“We had it better in Egypt when we were slaves.*

*At least, every once in a while, we had a good square meal of meat,*

*not this day-after-day manna.”*

Do you and I ever live in the wilderness?

The place where life is so very difficult.

The place where all you feel inside…is discouragement.

Not having what you need and want to live.

Boredom with the routines of life.

Unconvinced that God cares about you.

Unpersuaded that justice and truth will ever win the day.

Notice this. It’s to the wilderness that Yahweh sends ancient Israel.

Notice…it’s the wilderness where John the Baptist begins announcing that the kingdom of God has come near.

Notice…it’s to the wilderness that Jesus goes to be baptized.

Notice…that Jesus uses the wilderness to teach Nicodemus and you…

about salvation and eternal life and the love of God.

Jesus also uses the image of the serpent to teach us about these holy matters.

According to our Old Testament story from Numbers,

God sent snakes to bite the people, and some of the people died.

You think television is violent. This story from Numbers is shockingly violent.

In the story, the snakes sent by God bite the people into their senses.

Being brought close to death, they remember how much life is a gift.

They are shocked into recognizing how much they owe to God, and their leader Moses, who are doing everything they can to preserve the people.

They are poisoned into their senses.

They apologize to Moses, admitting that they are sorry sinners.

Please ask God to call back the snakes!

Then Moses intercedes before God.

But God will not call off the snakes.

God will not remove this evil from them.

Instead, God tells Moses to…

put a brass serpent on a pole, and make the people look at it.

So that, in the future, when they are bitten, when evil overtakes them,

they will look at the saving snake upon the pole and be preserved.

In looking up toward the heavens, instead of looking down upon the earth, they will be saved.

Let me tell you how I see it.

Moses makes a replica of the very evil that people fear.

He takes the source of their anxiety, pulls it from beneath their feet,

puts it up on a pole and makes them look at it.

Somehow, by God’s hand, they are able to see…

that the terrible death has become the snake of awesome life.

Somehow, in the mystery of the moment, evil and threat are transformed.

The snakes that appear because of peoples’ sin

are the means for leading people out of sin.

The snakes that are the means of death…become the way of life.

Let me tell you how I see it:

We try to make God into a more gentle and pleasing image, like an Easter bunny.

Our savior is the one who always brings us good things,

who gives us our heart’s desire, who makes life easier for us.

Then one comes to us in threatening appearance,

with biting words, words that cut to the quick, venomous and prophetic words,

which makes life considerably more difficult for us,

and surprises us with the truth about ourselves that we don’t want to hear.

And sometimes with him, it feels like…

both something is dying, in order that something might be reborn.

Sometimes on Sundays in our encounters with him in Holy Word,

it hurts a bit, before we can be healed.

For 40 days in Lent, we talk of sin, before there can be salvation.

It’s like, we have to have weeks of Lent, before we can have weeks of Easter.

It is a strange story.

Here is a deep, dark powerful symbol of salvation.

Somehow, in the hands of God, evil and good, threat and promise, life and death are all put together.

We can’t explain it. But we intuitively know that we are looking at a deep truth.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus used that ancient symbol of a brass serpent on a pole as a symbol for himself.

In lifting him up from earth toward heaven, he becomes the means of salvation.

And even those who had killed him, standing at the foot of the pole, the cross, were able to look up and say, “Truly this is the Son of God.”

*Nathan Sager currently serves as Pastor of Spirit of God Lutheran Church in Duluth and Instructor at Lake Superior College.  He has served as a parish pastor for 39 years, and 24 years as a college instructor.  His education includes: B.A. from Gustavus Adolphus College, M.Div. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and a Doctor of Ministry in preaching from Luther Seminary. He lives in Duluth with his wife Rayna and son Isaac and enjoys walks, curling, Harbortown Rotary, home improvement projects, music, art, reading, antiques, and community service.*



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B

March 17, 2024

*Jeremiah 31:31–34 Psalm 51:1–12 Hebrews 5:5–10 John 12:20–33*

Melinda Quivik

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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 In this era of reckoning with global climate chaos, this Sunday's readings invite us to think expansively in terms of our own lives about that grain of wheat falling and sprouting new grain in John 12. Jesus may well be speaking of his own death and the resulting good that will come from it. Death must precede resurrection, certainly. And the good that comes is expansive. From the death of one single stalk of wheat can sprout two to thirty kernels. The metaphor is apt; that dying grain is about the lives of all of us. Try on the idea that we are all grains of wheat called to die to the ways we live that harm other people and Earth. We are called to oppose all that is death-dealing in our world. For that, something in ourselves––in our vision, in our theologies, in our actions––must die.

 That is, at least, how two astute theologians, Walter Wink and Charles Campbell, understand this passage. Campbell sees "the world" as "the fallen realm" estranged from God, driven to amass wealth and power at the expense of the creation without concern for the effect of our choices on other people or plants, soils, air, water, and all creatures. This fallen world has a ruler whose influence distorts our desires and the meaning of what is in our own best interests. Imprisoned by this fallen realm, we muddle on in our comforts. We fear change or find it annoying if not something more akin to impossible. We look for excuses not to address climate damage instead of working together toward a brighter, cleaner, livable future. We do not want to be that grain that falls and dies even though we hear Jesus' assurances that the fruit can only come after that grain falls. Death must precede life. We even know this from our vast experiences of being alive and surviving. The plants and animals that feed us and give us life must die before we can live. Something in our way of seeing must die in order for a new vision to come forth.

 Into that cauldron of frustrating difficulty, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection comes to plant in our midst a new vision. Jesus says No to the ruler of the fallen realm. Campbell writes that "Jesus' crucifixion judges 'the world' and drives out the 'ruler of the world.'"[[1]](#footnote-1) Some Christians would say that Jesus does this by "taking away our sin", which means we are not condemned eternally for our inabilities and our rejection of what is for the common good. There is nothing amiss about that interpretation of the crucifixion and resurrection (that Jesus "atones" for our sins), but it can limit the scope of what there is to see in Jesus' meaning. That interpretation can leave us off the hook about responding to the on-going problem of how to live while we are here in this fallen world. That interpretation can seem to give us permission not to care about Earth or our neighbors.

 A wider, deeper, more communal interpretation of Jesus' suffering and resurrection yields a different way to live. It defines our calling, asking us to ponder again and again: Who was Jesus opposing on that cross? Who is the ruler of this world that must be driven out? Who is calling the shots? Who will we find at the end of the road if we do as investigators say and "follow the money"? Who gains when others lose? Who perpetuates the idea that life is a "zero-sum" game in which if I get more, you get less––as if life is a finite pie? Who is subverting Jesus' insistence that God loves the world and gave Jesus so that those who believe will have life? Who is telling us to believe in a narrow understanding of Jesus' meaning? Who does Jesus become if he isn't the one sacrificed by God the Father to pay our debts? What does Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection mean if the result has more to do with how we live on Earth than whether we get to enter the pearly gates?

 One way to answer that last question is to look at ourselves with clear vision. The definition of sin is "missing the mark," being separated from God. Being estranged from God makes us strangers even to ourselves because it means we are looking at creation with a twisted view. We are missing our relationship with Earth and all things. We are not in tune with the needs of others. Instead, we are seeing our human selves (I'm speaking generally here) as needing to grab the biggest piece of pie, leaving the rest of those to whom God gave the gift of life (coral reefs, polar bears, spotted owls, jaguars, wetlands, California condors, grasslands, beetles, bees, and many more) to be ignored as if they do not matter.

 Campbell shows that when Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from this world," he is referring to the violent System that clings to the fixed-dimension, zero-sum pie. That System has hauled him before Pilate for the threat he poses to the System by teaching and healing. On the cross he exposes the System and "we begin to be set free from its captivating ways. We are free to die to a life shaped by the System, in order to live fully and freely in the way of Jesus." (145)

 What is that way of Jesus? Jesus denounces the way of the fallen world, the System, that kills the neighbor in order to take her land, take his home, take their clean water, destroy the peace they once knew and the livelihood that honors differences among people and the different needs of each community.

 The way of Jesus is in that dying grain of wheat. It is to die rather than to kill. It is to trust in change rather than continuing to live as if we humans deserve all good things at the expense of others. It is also to love ourselves as God loves us enough to make the necessary changes that will heal our alienation from God.

 We might ask where we are to begin to live a resurrected life. Jeremiah is the one who tells us that a healed life starts with the fundamental way God answers our needs and prayers: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God." We are given what God desires for us: an end to our alienation from God, the gift of life abundant.

 And notice: God will put God’s law *on* our hearts. Not *in* our hearts. Why the difference? To ask the question about where God's Word lodges *in*––or *on*––our hearts is to ask *how* God's word helps us. The answer is in an old Jewish story:

A student asks the rabbi, the teacher, how God’s word is supposed to help us keep faith and not be afraid. The student refers to God's law being planted *on* our hearts, as the prophet Jeremiah has it. The student asks why God doesn't plant the law *in* our hearts.

The rabbi answers, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

God’s word is planted *on* our hearts and *on* our minds so that on the day when our hearts are broken, when we are opened to hope for the future, when we are struggling to find a way to hope, God’s word is already there on our broken hearts, ready to fill the holes created by fear and pain.

 We don’t need to see as God sees. In each different moment of our lives God says: You are my beloved child. When your heart breaks, I will fill you with my promises. When change comes, have peace. Something new is arising. The fallen grain is bearing fruit for many because "the commandments will not be an external rule which invites hostility, but now will be an embraced, internal identity-giving mark, so that obeying will be as normal and as readily accepted as breathing and eating. Israel will practice obedience because it belongs to Israel's character to live in this way."[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, when our hearts break, when our hopes of never having to change die, it will be with us as Jeremiah pronounced for Israel: our very character will compel us to live in such a way that we will renounce violence and embrace sacrifice of ourselves.

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Hymns to consider:

In ELW:

#583 Take My Life, That I May Be

#607 Come, Ye Disconsolate

#735 Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth

In *All Creation Sings*:

 #1016 Cast Out, O Christ

 #1023 God Alone Be Praised

 #1025 If We Live, We Live to the Lord

**Melinda Quivik**, an ELCA pastor (who served churches in Montana, Michigan, and Minnesota) and former professor of worship and preaching, is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the quarterly journal *Liturgy,* a writer, and a preaching mentor with Backstory Preaching at backstory-preaching.mn.co. Her most recent book is *Worship at a Crossroads: Racism and Segregated Sundays* which is a response to Lenny Duncan's *Dear Church.* She calls all churches to learn why worship ways differ in our various traditions and to ask ourselves how we might better welcome others.



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

Sunday of the Passion ~ Palm Sunday

March 24, 2024

Year B.

Liturgy of the Palms

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-20; Mark 11:1-11

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

Rev. John Stiles

Pine City, Minnesota

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. (Philippians 2:5-7)*

On Palm Sunday, the people are cheering for Jesus; they’re waving palm branches and throwing their coats on the street for him to ride over with his donkey. It’s a parade fit for a king, as they shout *Hosanna!* *Save us!* He’s got the backing of the people. They’re in the palm of his hand. It’s a good parade. Safe, happy, relaxed, and free. But there will come another parade this week; a parade marked with a different tone. These same people watching from the curb today will shout: *“Crucify him!”* They will curse and exploit him, spitting in disgust as he carries his heavy cross under a crown of thorns.

This is what it looks like to be the God we meet in Jesus. As Paul says in Philippians, Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” For Jesus, all the pomp-and-circumstance ended in his bearing our sinful consequence. All the pageantry ended in travesty. It was his majesty to give the people their wish to “save us” by taking it upon himself. All the hurt and shame; the hatred and thirst for revenge so that we might be free. Between these two parades, one of pageantry and one of mockery, Jesus shows us how to love and what true power looks like.

And yet, it is not only people who are redeemed this Holy Week. There are cosmic consequences happening all throughout the narrative. If you’re looking for an eco-faith connection, consider the ways nature itself groans on this final day of Jesus’ life. The temple curtain is torn in two (Mark 15:38); darkness came over the land, blotting out the sun (Luke 23:44); and the earth shook, causing the dead to rise and walk about (Matthew 27:51-53). Even Jesus acknowledges the humble boulders strewn along the roadside when the priests order his followers to be quiet. He simply says: “If these were silent, even the stones will cry out!” (Luke 19:40)

Here is a “Cosmic Christ” who empties himself, humbly. All the unnamable majesty of a God beyond comprehension was poured into this human, Jesus. As Paul reminds us, Jesus didn’t consider his divinity as something to be exploited. Just think of the many ways we exploit the earth, its resources and one another, for momentary gain or gratification. Maybe we’ve gotten better at caring for the earth in some respects, and yet, what if we learned how to “empty ourselves” for the sake of others? How might it benefit not only our neighbors but the sun, moon, plants and animals of the earth as well?

If you’ve given up on things getting any better, when it comes to the climate crisis, consider this: see how, in one fell swoop Jesus redefines greatness. Somehow, through difficult times and situations we come to know more fully the joy, freedom, and restoration of this life – all of LIFE. This Palm Sunday, let’s stand on both parade routes and trust that it’s not a lost cause after all. There is hope for a forsaken planet that groans with the effects of climate change. There is hope for those who betrayed Jesus, who were forgiven from the cross, and who trust in his name to this day.

**Let us pray:** O God, you sent your son to save us, though he wasn’t what we expected. Forgive us when we betray you and make our lives miserable. Thank you for loving us in spite of it all and for restoring the friendship between us and the natural world around us. May we do the same in our own lives each day. In Jesus’ name we pray: Amen.



John Stiles is the pastor at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Pine City, MN. He has served churches throughout Minnesota for 30 years, and currently lives in Chisago City, where he bought a house recently after a divorce. Outside his work as a minister, John’s interests include canoeing, knitting, bonsai trees, guitar and artificial intelligence. His two adult children also live in Minnesota with their families.



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Maundy Thursday**

**March 28, 2024**

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Pastor Greg Kaufmann, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Hymn Suggestion: ELW 358

These reflections were written a few days after Ash Wednesday, and only a few months after my wife entered home hospice. Our synod created a Lenten devotional written by a variety of persons in our synod and our companion synod in Malawi, Africa. <https://nwswi.org/malawi> (click on Journey to the Neighbor)

Deacon Laura Ramlow wrote the devotion for Ash Wednesday, which included these words by Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies:*

 “Today, let us hold the tension of the story of our making – born of the dirt, beautifully connected to the earth we walk on. And yet, possessing the knowledge of our own mortality – that our common decay cannot be escaped. As we begin Lent, help us to become honest about the ways our societies and selfhoods are marred by injustice, cruelty, neglect , and greed.”

 These words are ringing in my ears as I live into my vocation as caregiver of my wife, and the land I’m privileged to steward for God. And they form a fitting backdrop for the readings assigned for Maundy Thursday.

You are preparing to preach on Maundy Thursday, and every year the same four lessons are appointed to be read in the RCL. The same is true for Good Friday and the Vigil of Easter. And for each of these days the Gospel lesson is from John. I am reminded of a comment by my friend, Susan Briehl, regarding the Gospel of John. During a presentation to students in our Lay School of Ministry she noted that John often has Jesus teaching/acting on or near a Jewish festival. To understand what Jesus’ teaching/acting meant, it is important to know the Scripture that would have been heard at that Jewish festival. In the case of Passover (John 13:1) it would have been the Exodus 12 story (our first lesson).

The Exodus event, which Passover celebrates, and the cross, which the Eucharist celebrates, are not trapped in the past. To this day, the Passover is celebrated, and on Maundy Thursday your worshipping community will celebrate Holy Communion. Both are days of remembrance. Exodus 12:14 – “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.” 1 Corinthians 11:24 – “Do this in remembrance of me.” 1 Corinthians 11:25 – “Do this…in remembrance of me.” Your worshipping community might not be aware that the words of institution that you will be proclaiming, come from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, and not our gospels.

All 3 Synoptic Gospels include details of the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples; John does not. Instead we are given the powerful image of Jesus washing the disciples feet, and his command in 13:34-35 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Why doesn’t John include the last supper? Maybe it is because John has a sacramental aquafer under the entire gospel. While there might be no description of the institution of holy communion during John’s portrayal of the last supper, when you pick up the gospel and turn it upside down, bread falls out!

Remember that the worshipping communities to whom each Gospel was addressed, preceded the written Gospels, and the Synoptic Gospels were already in circulation prior to John’s Gospel. Might it be possible that the writer of John’s Gospel didn’t see a need to have Jesus’ last supper focus on something they were already doing, and instead chose to refocus it on something they were having trouble doing – serving in love?

Might this be the reason for the chiastic structure of the “last discourse” which we find in John 13-17? This five chapter long section is packed with key Johannine concepts, most of which are introduced in chapter 13 and repeated throughout the rest of this long discourse. At the very center of this careful chiastic structure we find John 15:12-17. Take time to read these verses, and then refer back to John 13:34-35.

“We love Jesus and somebody else enough, that we want them to meet each other!”

John’s Gospel is a Gospel of questions – 161 of them, 2 of which are included in today’s lesson. (13:6,12) In true Johannine form, I have a few questions of my own.

How does one show love for one another today? We know that the effects of climate change disproportionately impact the most vulnerable people/countries in the world, and we know that climate change is being exacerbated by lifestyles many of us in the developed countries of the world consider our right to enjoy. What might this call us to change in our own lives?

Young people across the globe are calling out for justice – for people, for creatures of all kinds, and for the earth itself. Are we listening? How do we, as people of faith who confess each Sunday that God is the creator of this universe and our world in particular, demonstrate that we indeed are disciples of Jesus? Might we show our love for one another by the way we choose to treat the creation God called very good? Harry Wendt, the creator of Crossways Bible Study resources, has suggested it might help us move in this direction if we added these two words to the 1st article of the creed: “and owner”.

It is helpful to remember the stated purpose of John’s Gospel. (John 20:31) In John’s gospel, faith is never something we have or a concept/belief that we tuck away in our brains. The verb“pisteuw” is a favorite of John, who uses it 96 times in the gospel. The noun “pistis” is not found in John’s gospel at all! One could say that faithing is a journey of trust, “relationshiping” with Christ; it is never belief in a set of credal doctrines. What might that mean for our own believing/faithing in our daily lives? How might John’s understanding of faith as action and not credal assent change how we treat others and God’s amazing creation?

I am reminded of the elevator speech I use to describe our synod’s Lay School of Ministry, now 30 years old and going strong. “Imagine gathering in community with others to reengage the Biblical stories and our Lutheran theology with frontal lobes fully developed so that we might live out our baptismal callings to serve God by serving our neighbors and God’s creation.”

The Psalmist proclaims that the Lord has heard my voice and my supplications. (Psalm 116:1) This is nothing new for the Lord. In yet another connection to the Exodus story, note what God does in Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-9. I doubt that God no longer hears the cries of the oppressed – human and nonhuman alike. Could we ask, as does the Psalmist “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”

I think ending with a slightly amended quote of the words of Cole Arthur Riley, Black Liturgies, is appropriate.

 “This Maundy Thursday, let us hold the tension of the story of our making – born of the dirt, beautifully connected to the earth we walk on. And yet, possessing the knowledge of our own mortality – that our common decay cannot be escaped. As we journey through Holy Week, help us to become honest about the ways our societies and selfhoods are marred by injustice, cruelty, neglect , and greed.”

 

*Pastor Greg Kaufmann served congregations in Colorado and Wisconsin between 1975-2000. He served as Assistant to the Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin from 2000-2023, retiring in August, 2023, after working with 4 bishops. In 1993 he helped begin that synod's Lay School of Ministry, and currently teaches its Bible courses. In 2000 he helped start his synod’s resource center and still serves as its director. He was a member of the ELCA’s Book of Faith leadership team, and currently is part of the ELCA’s Life of Faith Initiative leadership team and the ELCA’s Lay Ministry Programs leadership team. Greg is the Director of the ELCA's Select Learning ministry. Greg has written a number of the quarterly adult Bible studies for Augsburg Fortress, and recently completed a course for Select Learning on the formation of the NT. For 20 years, Greg and Diane practiced sustainable agriculture (think rotational grazing of sheep and chickens) on their 22 acre farm near Chippewa Falls, WI. Currently Greg is living into his vocation of caregiver for his wife, who entered hospice at the end of 2023.*



**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

March 31st, 2024

Easter Sunday

Mark 16

Claire Repsholdt

Patchogue, NY

This Easter, I’m concentrated on the promises God makes to us, at baptism and for the rest of our lives, and on the simple ways that any kind of water can remind us of those baptismal promises. My parsonage is located only 5 minutes from the Great South Bay, a brilliant scoop of water that lies between Long Island, New York, and her beloved cousin, Fire Island. It’s one of the greatest treasures I’d never heard anything about when I lived in the Midwest. A little sliver of calm seas standing between us and the roaring Atlantic, barely buffered by Fire Island, the Great South Bay is beloved playground for locals. It’s full of sailboats and motorboats shipping folks back and forth between beaches. Parents can often be found standing and pointing out landmarks across the water, or teaching their children to sail and fish. Nearly any time of day, eager groups of birds can always be seen, whooshing and diving above the waves.

Almost because it so beloved, the Bay has also been devastated by civil pollution. Only a few decades ago a thriving natural habitat for abundant oyster and clam colonies, there are hardly any to be found. I’ve heard that the Bay is only actually good for crabbing nowadays, and fishermen advise not to eat many in a row, for fear of digesting too much water, long polluted by the runoff from ceaseless motorboats and heavily fertilized lawns nearby. The Bay has changed, and yet it’s understood as a local ecosystem so vital to the community that across party lines, voters can be found participating in “Save the Bay” movements to invest in local wildlife, restore clam colonies, and educate neighbors about the how to ensure the bay’s ongoing vitality.

It’s no wonder that from a very young age, my congregants here on Long Island claim Noah’s Ark as their favorite story. Water is a vivid companion in this island life. If God’s got any clue about how to care for people around here, God’s got to be able to calm waters and find rainbows easily. A few of my oldest members still get lost in stories about the hurricane of ‘38, which cleared out quite an amazing thoroughfare of the island’s best beaches, and created a breach between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great South Bay, which took years to fill. One recently brought a calendar in to show me, featuring stories of Katherine Hepburn clinging desperately to a branch at her beach home to save herself from the deep. And even more contemporary congregants remember the way Sandy blasted the bay, creating a breach to the ocean once again, and destroying plenty of homes along the way.

And yet, for all the threat of storms, the Bay attracts people like a magnet. Recently, a friend of mine was telling me how difficult it was for her to sleep longer than the sun. Her body seems to be extra sensitive to dawn’s first light. As soon as she sees light breaking through her window, almost before her brain is awake, she finds her body moving into the car and driving down toward the Great South Bay, where she can see the first rays of light breaking in ripples over gentle ways. Luckily here in Patchogue, NY in the middle of the south shore of Long Island, we are never further than fifteen minutes from the bay, so it is not unreasonable to make this a morning practice. Even in the early morning, it’s rare to ever be completely alone, parked along the water. For one reason or another, folks are always lingering there. Some spend hours at the marina, just parked in their cars, absorbed by the flow of the tide. So many spend hours there, in fact, that the town has had to put up signs to remind them not to idle—lest the water transfix a body enough that they forget their ignition key.

One morning after a rainstorm, my friend told me, she woke up extra grateful for the sun, drove down to the Bay, and found the whole marina submerged in several feet of water, completely absorbed by the Bay. Stunned, she stayed longer that morning, focused not on the sunrise but on the power of the water, completely consuming the land. How fragile the island seemed then, so vulnerable to the whims of the storms. And yet, dawn still came, as pink and purple and orange as it ever had been. How fragile she felt, as she imagined her car getting swept into the water, and yet how clear the morning light was, and how beautiful the water looked, as it swelled around the high poles of the dock.

When she painted for me the image of the sunrise rippling over the flooded bay, it struck me as a perfect metaphor for Easter this year—the fragility of our grasp on creation, matched by the certainty of the sun rising. Every year, we are compelled by our liturgical calendar to greet Easter in all of its brilliant color again, no matter what is going on in this mixed up world, flooded with more and bigger problems and fewer and more complicated solutions. Every year, we must find it within ourselves to greet Christ our Savior anew, and reintegrate his salvation into our fragile human experience. Some years it’s harder than others to understand how Christ is at work by our sides.

Martin Luther tends to write about Christ’s resurrection as a new promise of love made to us by God, a sign of hope created for Christian disciples that upends all other signs of God’s love ever construed. But, for all of my confessional training, I dare to say that I side more with Calvin’s take on God’s promises. I take heart in what Calvin writes about the immutability of God in a commentary on Jeremiah, “God who once made a covenant with God’s chosen people has not changed in purpose, as though God has forgotten God’s faithfulness… The covenant which God made at first is perpetual.” Perhaps we Lutherans can learn a little something from Calvin this Easter. What if Jesus is not a sign of God’s fidelity that overrides everything God ever made before, but a heartwarming renewal of those promises, an integration of those promises into our lives day after day. If once God drew our attention to rainbows as a living symbol of his promise to protect creation, perhaps in Jesus God draws our attention to the sun, the steadfast sun, as the daily sign of his love which can shatter even the waves of a flood into brilliant, rippling light.

I praise God for giving us the gift of Jesus, who is as connected to us day to day as the sun is to the sea. And likewise I praise God that every Easter morning here in Patchogue, we gather at that fragile little outpost, that sweet, windtorn and floodscarred marina, to create a community worship service alongside several different local congregations and many neighbors who only worship on that one day of the year. How sweet it always is that together we wake up very very early to stand and look out of the water, and celebrate the Son rising on Easter Day.



Claire (she/her/hers) was born and raised at a little family church in the Chicago suburbs, where both sides of her family lived. She discerned a call to ministry during her senior year at Indiana University, where her studies in English and History led her to theological questions, and her leadership at church and in a Lutheran sorority kept her energized. She went to seminary at Yale Divinity School, where she reveled in ecumenical opportunities, and she graduated during the height of COVID in May of 2020. She has served as an inner city hospital chaplain and as an apprentice at the LGBTQ+ ministry wonderland in Baltimore at partnered St. Mark’s and Dreams and Visions Lutheran churches. She is now serving her first call as the solo pastor the Lutheran Church of Our Savior in Patchogue, New York, where she delights in creating loving worship, deep relationships, and vibrant community connections. She most often finds that the Holy Spirit reaches her in poetry books, yoga classes, delicious meals, and live performances.

1. Charles Campbell, *Feasting on the Word: Year B*, vol. 12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 141, citing Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 13–31 and 51–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Parker Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 25–52* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991),71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)