

**Wisconsin Council of Churches
Peace and Justice Commission
Lectionary Reflections
Lent & Palm Sunday, 2015**

First Sunday in Lent

February 22, 2015

Lectionary Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

“At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness.” Mark 1:12 CEB

The celebration was short. Those who witnessed it were in awe of the splendor. It seemed over before it had begun and now the star was gone---immediately escorted from the scene. Baptized by Water and Spirit, Jesus was now propelled into the public life, but first there would be time away---out of the limelight, but also away from home and known comforts. The unexpected party was shortly lived.

As we celebrate the first “little Easter” of the Lenten season, let us recognize that while we have the comfort of living as disciples of the Risen Lord (we know the Easter story); we are also charged with venturing into the wilderness. One definition of wilderness is an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region. Journey into the wilderness---into the unknown, unexplored, and the uncertainty---may be daunting, overwhelming and frightening; but nonetheless, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to make this journey. Let us not be afraid, but confident. Let us be curious to discover what is out there---it is cultivated, inhabited and hospitable, but we will only discover this if we are willing to journey with our hearts and are willing to let go of our preconceived notions. Yes, we will face trials, challenges and temptations, but if we are willing to stay the course with God, we will also discover a way of living that is beyond our expectations and leads us to living beloved community

Just as Jesus’ journey into the wilderness was about growing his relationship with God. It’s the same thing for us. We’ve been invited to the party, but now it’s time for us to venture into the wilderness and confront the challenges and temptations that hold us back from truly living the life that God has called us to live.

*Ellen Rasmussen
Pastor, Wesley United Methodist Church, La Crosse WI*

Second Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2015

Lectionary Texts: Gen. 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31 and Mark 8:31-38

It's an interesting experience to prepare a meal and eat with homeless families. We volunteer with our county-wide homeless coalition and host families four times a year (we worked with the Interfaith Hospitality Network to set up the program). My husband and I usually prepare a meal and do some over-nights. Each experience is different. Sometimes the guests love the food and sometimes they pick at it or don't take hardly any. Sometimes there's a lot of chatter and sometimes mostly silence. Sometimes the people want to tell their story and sometimes they keep to themselves. The story of the life of each one is different. But, what we always come away with is more compassion and more understanding of how complex life is. There are no easy answers.

My grandmother told of life in the '30's. Grandpa was the manager of a milk processing plant. He insisted on living near the plant so they would be neighbors with the labor force ("the men"), rather than living "uptown" where the other management lived. This put their house right by the railroad tracks where the hobos would get off and come to the back door for food. So grandma would make extra sandwiches or whatever the family was having and have it ready to hand out to whoever came to the door.

Our Psalm for today speaks of how God hears us when we are afflicted; God does not hide from us. But, it goes on to say that we should then praise God by sharing food with others in the community, especially those who are in the greatest need. This is what will be remembered by future generations. This is what will turn hearts and minds to God. This is how we show our praise to God.

But, in real life we cannot notice the poor if we choose. It's easy to be busy, live in a nice neighborhood and neglect the part of our community and world that is in the most need. Jesus knew that. He saw it. That's why he tells Peter in Mark 8 that he should put his mind on divine things; he told the crowd, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Jesus tells us to be active in our pursuit of justice and mercy. To notice need and fill it.

When we seek God, we find God, and each story is different. "May your hearts live forever!"

*Petra Streiff
United Church of Christ Pastor*

Third Sunday in Lent

March 8, 2015

Lectionary Texts: Ex. 20:1-17; Ps. 19; I Cor. 1:18-25; John 2.13-22

Theme: The Cleansing of the Temple

Cleansing the Temple is a story of Jesus as savior. When he healed, Jesus also pronounced sins forgiven. Forgiving without a temple sacrifice threatened the priestly class, who enriched themselves by controlling the sacrificial system. Jesus' action was thus not simply a protest of dishonest money changers or animals in the wrong location. The savior who can forgive sins renders the sacrificial system irrelevant. He was acting to eliminate the entire system of sacrifice.

The story can also be an instance of what today is called civil disobedience by nonviolent direct action. It was a symbolic disruption of the prevailing order of doing business. From the placement of this event in the Synoptic Gospels, we know that it precipitated the plot to have Jesus killed. When looked at in the arc of Jesus' life, this disruptive action was not a surprise. He also broke conventional rules by such things as plucking grain and healing on the Sabbath, by traveling through Samaria and interacting with a Samaritan woman, by dining with supposedly disreputable people, and more. He challenged the scribes and Pharisees with very sharp words (Matt. 23). The temple cleansing is more of the same rather than a unique event. Some commentators have appealed to the whip of cords to justify violence. But it does not. Whips make noise and are used to herd animals.

Applications to civil disobedience abound, including in Wisconsin. What options for civil disobedience exist in your area? On what issues would you be willing to engage in civil disobedience? Suggest examples based on local concerns and issues.

*J. Denny Weaver, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Bluffton University
Member, Madison Mennonite Church*

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2015

Lectionary Texts: Num. 21:4-9; Ps. 107: 1-3, 17-22; Eph. 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Is there any verse of scripture more familiar to American Christians than John 3:16? For decades, it was prominently displayed at major sporting events; one can see it on bumper stickers; the verse (if not the words) even appears on tattoos. In fact, it is so ubiquitous especially among Evangelicals, that Christians of other stripes, progressive ones, might be offended when they see it. It's one of those markers of identity that are as likely to alienate as they are to attract; to divide insiders from outsiders, to condemn rather than invite.

And that's a shame, because of all scripture, there may be no passage that is as profound in proclaiming God's love for humanity and the world: "For God so loved the world, that he

gave his only-begotten son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life.”

There is condemnation here. There is judgment. There is also love, God’s love. The passage confronts us with the question of our conception of God, our understanding of the fundamental nature of God. Is God a God of love or a God of judgment? We might be inclined to see these two attributes as equal. Certainly, both are important and both are intrinsic to God’s character. But in this passage, love wins.

“God so loved the world.” This little sentence is really quite remarkable for John’s gospel. Everywhere else in the gospel, consistently, the world, the *cosmos*, is depicted in complete opposition to God. But here we see God loving the world (not just humans) so much that God gave God’s only son that we might have everlasting life. And note that the judgment in this passage, the condemnation does not come from God but rather from choices made by human beings.

D. Jonathan Grieser
Rector, Grace Episcopal Church, Madison WI

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2015

Lectionary Texts: Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 51:1-12, Heb. 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

We trust our sight. Our judicial system prizes eyewitness testimony even when studies reveal that eyewitnesses to crimes very often get many details wrong. We want to see things for ourselves. As tourists, we hope to check off the famous locations visited and seen: the Grand Canyon, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the Mona Lisa. Usually, we want to document the fact that we’ve been there, seen that, by taking photos of the sights, often with ourselves in the image. But we know that such images can be manipulated and that our eyes very often deceive us.

In the gospel for this week, some Greeks (probably Jews) want to see Jesus. He and his disciples, the Greeks themselves, and many other people have come to Jerusalem for the Passover. There are probably huge crowds in the city and because of Jesus’ notoriety, a crush of people around him. It’s likely impossible to get close to him. So the Greeks are looking for special treatment and approach some of Jesus’ handlers. And that’s the end of their story and the setting for what Jesus says to those around him and to us.

Sight failed the Greeks, and the crowd couldn’t understand what the voice from heaven said. Jesus’ words were clear but their meaning continues to elude us. Instead of crucifixion, Jesus says he will be glorified. The spectacle of his death will draw all people to himself.

Crucifixion was designed to be a spectacle, a warning to all who might resist Rome. In John’s gospel, Jesus consistently refers to it as his “glorification.” It is the means by which he draws all of humanity to himself, welcoming us within the loving embrace of his outstretched

arms. It is also a reminder that wherever there is suffering, and especially where humans inflict horrific suffering on other humans, in those dark and evil places, we see Jesus.

*D. Jonathan Grieser
Rector, Grace Episcopal Church, Madison WI*

Palm Sunday

March 29, 2015

Lectionary Texts: Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16; Ps. 118:1-2, 19-29

Theme: The Palm Sunday Donkey

There is a (fictitious, but poignant) story from the point of view of the donkey on which Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The donkey was so honored and flattered at the way he was received that day. The crowds threw their coats down on the road so he wouldn't get his hoofs dusty. They were waving palm branches to greet him. He was a rock star!

Well, a week later, he came back to Jerusalem and found no such welcome. In fact, merchants were rudely shooing him away. He finally asked the falafel booth guy why he was being treated this way...compared to a week ago. He was told, "Well, last week you had the Savior of the world on your back... and...well...now it's just you. And, you're just a donkey.

The point is obvious, isn't it?
Without Jesus, you and I are just donkeys.
Our function, as Christians must be to bring Jesus Christ into the world with all our thoughts, words, and actions. Perhaps that is the meaning of Justice.

Reflecting on justice:

When will we know when our salvation and restoration are near?
"When Love and Faithfulness meet; when justice and peace kiss." (Psalm 85:10)

1. How is your faith in Jesus Christ driving you to love others?
2. How can you be his donkey in everyday life...taking *his* love and peace to others?
3. Consider how you might
 - bring his gentle love to others through your words
 - bring Christ's hope through your encouragement
 - bring His healing touch through your complete empathy

**And you might want to proudly repeat this mantra:
"I am the donkey."**

*Fr. Yeprem Kelegian
St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church, Racine WI*