

# **The 2019 Sermon Book**

**Sermons and Addresses from the  
2019 Preaching Excellence Program**

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**Volume XXVII**

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# **THE EPISCOPAL PREACHING FOUNDATION**

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# Introduction

**Dr. A. Gary Shilling, Chairman and Founder**

## **The Episcopal Preaching Foundation**

Good preaching has never been more important! This was confirmed most recently through two studies by the Pew Foundation (2016) and The Gallup Organization (2017), whose reports concluded that for the American public, preaching is the most important factor in deciding on a place of worship, and making the decision to attend church. This is why the EPF has focused single-mindedly on helping to develop strong preachers since our inception 31 years ago.

Center-stage in this endeavor is the EPF's annual 5-day Preaching Excellence Program, held in 2018 at the Roslyn Retreat Center in Richmond, Va. The Conference was attended by a capacity audience of 50 seminarians representing 14 seminaries and diocesan formation programs across the US and Canada. This year's distinguished Faculty included Rt. Rev. Robert Wright, Bishop of Atlanta, Rev. Sam Wells of St. Martin in the Fields, London, U.K., the Very Rev. Samuel Candler, Dean of Atlanta Cathedral, and The Rev. Dr. Gary Jones, Rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Va.

Among the student body for the first time were postulants from non-seminary diocesan formation programs. These newcomers represented a growing channel for new ordinands, particularly in non-urban areas where the economics of a parish calling are incompatible with the financial burden of a seminary education.

The PEP combination of inspiring keynotes, plenary addresses and sermons interwoven with practical workshops and moderated preaching groups continues to be an effective format that generates strongly positive feedback from PEP participants in our follow-up survey. With an 84% overall response rate, 95% of respondents rated their experience as Satisfied or Very Satisfied and 69% stated that their PEP experience met or exceeded their expectations, with another 14% rating About What Was Expected. One well-attended workshop was a faculty panel: The Worst Sermon I Ever Gave and What I Learned From It.

As you read these sermons and addresses, I hope you agree that the Foundation is making significant strides in inspiring the next generation of parish clergy to develop their preaching skills and ultimately to excel as preachers for the benefit of all of us. We want

to thank all of the donors who make our work possible, especially  
the major contributors listed on page 6 of this book.

A. Gary Shilling, Ph.D.  
Chairman, Episcopal Preaching Foundation  
August 2018

With deep appreciation and thanks, we acknowledge the following major donors – individuals and foundations – who contributed \$5,000 or more to the ministry and mission of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation during our fiscal year 2017/2018.

~ The Anderson Family Foundation

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# **Messages For Tomorrow's Preachers**

## **"Going from Good to Great"**

The Rev. Sam Wells, Vicar, St. Martin in the Fields, London

## **"Preaching on the Issues of the Day"**

The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, Bishop, Diocese of Atlanta

## **"Preaching Across the Divide"**

The Rev. Dr. Wesley Allen, Professor of Homiletics, SMU  
Perkins School of Theology

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## Good to Great.

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**The Rev. Sam Wells, Vicar, St. Martin in the Fields,  
London, U.K.**

I'm going to talk about four stages in the life of a sermon: I'll call them before preparing, preparing, writing and revising, and delivering. I've called my address Good to Great because I imagine everyone's come to this event because they know they can prepare a good sermon but they want to know how to prepare a great one – or maybe several hundred great ones. I'd like to make some suggestions with reference to the sermon I preached just now.

### **Before Preparing**

There are broadly four moments of receiving a sermon. One is the live experience in the midst of liturgy, embedded in the hearer's personal circumstances, the community's events, and wider national and international dramas. The second is the memory of that sermon as it plays in the listener's heart later that day, week, year, decade, lifetime, as they read that scriptural text again, as they face that crisis of which you spoke, as they hear another sermon on that text. The third is the preacher's ongoing relationship with the listener, as they hear others of your sermons, as they compare them to the sermon in life of your pastoral example and practice, as they measure up their notion of God and the church and the kingdom with the one you portrayed that day. The last is a relatively new phenomenon – it's the experience of the person who wasn't there on the day but comes across your sermon on a YouTube video, on a podcast recording, as a text on a website or blog or even just possibly a hard copy lovingly sent by their affectionate but anxious granny.

Here's the first question. What do I want the congregation to experience as they listen, remember, digest or as they engage third-hand? I suggest you want them to remember the interplay of two things. On the one hand there's the intimacy of God. God is talking to me, knows my struggles, understands who I am, and loves me. The siren calls of Albinoni or Mendelssohn are really God calling to me; my tussles in desire and longing and frustration and grief are really tussles with the angel of the Lord; God is as close to me as my heart is to my soul; and God loves me in a way I never will love myself. Put clumsily, in cliché, platitude or heartless theodicy these truths are worse than useless. Whispered gently across the pillow of trust and tenderness these are life-changing discoveries, all the

more so because a horrifyingly high percentage of Christians have somehow been inculcated with a very different message from pastor or parent.

On the other hand there's the awesomeness of God. God is Lord of the universe, God's story encompasses every story, God is beyond, beneath and above. It's lovely to believe God knows us and loves us immeasurably better than we know or love ourselves, but it's just as important to remember that this one who knows and loves us is the creator and redeemer of the universe. Christianity is the place where these two convictions meet. And here's the crucial part. The intimacy increases the awe, not the opposite. With film stars, Nobel Prize winners or former princesses you tend to find that the greater the intimacy, the less the awe. You just don't want to know about the tawdriness of their real, complex lives. But with God, the awe and the intimacy go together. God is completely intimate and completely cosmic. Preaching is about communicating both and their interplay with one another in thrilling terms.

Afterwards you want an intimate silence and an awed hush. You want people to be saying things like, 'I never realised.' When I was 19 I went to Yellowstone Park. I didn't really know much about it except the famous geyser Old Faithful. So when I followed a sign that said Scenic Viewpoint and walked round a rocky outcrop and saw the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen, I had this most amazing sense of grace, because I hadn't realised there was such a thing as the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, but I'd stumbled into it and I knew I'd never forget it. 'I had no idea.' That's what you want your congregation to say. That's the awe.

But what about the intimacy? I recently spent some time with a doctor friend who works in a Malawian government hospital. She described one ward round of 3 hours seeing 56 patients sharing 32 beds; three quarters of the patients had HIV. This is what she said:

The first call was to the diarrhea side room, a sobering array of wasted bodies and sunken eyes. The floor was wet with poorly mopped spills from bed pans. The first bay was reserved for patients with meningitis, strokes, or paraplegia. I crawled half under a bed with the house officer to show him the sensory level of a man with paraplegia. Urine seeped from the mattress on to our knees. Relatives were leaning in through the windows, anxious, listening, watching, commenting. One called across, asking me to treat his cough. I told him where to find the clinic. As we passed the nurse on her drug round, a man from the other half of the ward pulled at my coat sleeve: "Help me". The nurse told him that someone would see him later. The second bay was pneumonia, tuberculosis, jaundice. Another patient was tapping my shoulder and demanding that I help with his stomach pains. We hastened through several cases of chronic cough in the last

bay and were done.

I issued a closing pep talk and turned to leave. Passing the noisy relatives, I felt an insistent tug on my coat hem. Not again! I whipped round, suddenly angry and impatient to get out. It was one of the patients on the floor in the second bay. Could he not see how hard we had worked? I didn't bother to conceal my irritation and said, "I have already heard your problem. What do you want now?" He looked up at me earnestly. "Nothing, doctor. You look tired. I think you can share my beans." He pushed his watery hospital meal on its plastic plate across the concrete floor towards me. I had seen the face of Christ.

That's the intimacy. It should choke you up with the intimacy and grace of God.

How do you get that interplay of awe and intimacy, for which the official word is revelation? By talking about the Bible. 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' say the disciples on the road to Emmaus. By opening the scriptures you are saying *the Bible is God's limitless gift*. You (i.e. the whole church) can receive it. It's not just for theology professors, for pious people with daily two-hour quiet times and leather-bound dog-eared tomes, for charismatic people who see God's healing hand 17 times a day. It's for every Christian. And part of the way you say that is to preach on the Old Testament. The great thing about the Old Testament is that it really is news to most of our congregations and, if truth be told, to most of us preachers. So you're all the more likely to get people saying, 'I never realised.' 'I had no idea.' And if you're sitting thinking 'But I don't know the Old Testament very well' then I'm saying you've got preaching completely wrong. Preaching isn't telling people what you've long known, it's inviting people into the mystery of what you're in the process of discovering.

I truly believe God has given us everything we need to be disciples, ministers and missionaries. Our problem is not that God hasn't given enough but that we choose not to use what God has given us. If you've never preached a sermon on the book of Ezekiel then I rest my case.

## **Preparing**

So the first principle of preaching is you want to communicate the awesomeness and yet the intimacy of God. And the second principle is that the Bible seems small and far away but turns out to reveal to us everything we need. Now it's time to turn to the readings for the day. Gently, tenderly and prayerfully you read through the three or four readings assigned for a conventional Sunday or

festival service, and deep in your heart you listen to the things that give you a jolt, because they surprise you, delight you, confuse you or trouble you. What is it, reading this, that bothers me, that I can't wriggle out of, that moves my soul, that maybe in a half dozen words says it all? You have the beginning of a powerful sermon if you have the courage to stay in that place till revelation comes.

Scriptural commentaries will usually focus and drill down those gut reactions, and they may evoke new points of joy, dread, wonder or fascination. I usually try to read between five and ten commentaries on every passage I'm planning to preach on. Sooner or later something will go ping and I know I have to explore it, dig into it, relish it, ponder it, shake it till it gives up its gold coin. Then I'll usually go in one of two directions. Either I'll focus in on just a handful of words that seem to demand exploration, or I'll look at a whole story or episode to examine its structure and what shape that may give that's of larger significance.

From then I start to build a plan for a sermon that develops an argument. It's not a sermon unless it has an argument. Most of my arguments come in one of two forms. Either they establish a problem and by stages resolve it, or they identify a mystery and gradually enter and enjoy it. (Today's sermon was of the second kind.)

It should go without saying that the sermon should go with the rhythm and grain of the text. But I can't tell you how many sermons I've listened to that don't. It's unfortunately common to hear a sermon that's somehow an organised protest against the text – that communicates the preacher's discomfort with what the text is saying and somehow regards that as salutary for the congregation to hear. Discomfort with the text is fine, but that's for the time of preparation, not for the time of writing. Keep wrestling and share with the congregation what you find. The wrestling itself isn't interesting. It's also regrettably common to hear a sermon that uses a scriptural text as the beginning of a kind of thematic word-association, a kind of improvisation game where the preacher clusters together a bunch of anecdotes or illustrations that seem relevant or resonant with this story or sentence. Both of these aberrations fail to go with the grain and rhythm of the text. They make preaching harder than it needs to be and leave the congregation thinking discipleship is rather more complex and unappealing than they might have thought when the sermon began.

Here are four principles I try never to deviate from in preparing a sermon. (1) Work out the last line and write it down on a piece of paper before you write the first line of the sermon. You may have a structure that makes an argument then outlines some implications but it should almost always end by returning to a clinching climax. If your argument has established a problem and by stages resolved it your last line will probably be a carefully crafted revelation. If your argument has identified a mystery and gradually entered and enjoyed it your last line will probably be a careful repeat of what you've already said. (My

sermon just now was of the latter kind.) (2) Structure your argument. In practice you've got broadly two options. Either you start with the text, and then, having identified the key point in the text, you come out of it and explore that point in discipleship, ministry or mission; or you start outside the text, and spend your opening remarks identifying the point in question and then flip to the text to see that the text is about to disclose hidden truth and depth to amplify that point. (My sermon just now took the latter course.) If your argument is carefully structured then your congregation will have no difficulty following it, and if the point is existentially vital then they'll be hanging on to your every word.

(3) Don't start writing until you have the whole argument and the last line. Start when you can't wait. If you're not bursting to tell the congregation the good news that you've discovered in your preparation and reflection then you're probably not ready to start writing. The idea that it will somehow come to you when you're in the process of writing is almost always a fantasy. (4) Illustrations must advance your argument – not deepen the problem or amplify your starting point. Far too often preachers use illustrations that distract from, confuse or even contradict the point they are making. A sermon isn't an assemblage of random information relevant to a subject. It's an unveiling of the holy of holies, from outside and downhearted to face-to-face with God and beholding the glory. The distracting illustration is almost always a sign that the preacher deep down has lost confidence in his or her argument and settles for amusing or interesting his or her congregation rather than transforming them. The question of anecdotal or literary or personal reference probably takes me more time than any other part of the preparation. I simply sit in a chair, close my eyes, and ponder as deeply as I know what connection, typology, event or story this point deeply resonates with; and then try to be as rigorous and patient and honest as I can in discerning whether the story is apposite, appropriate, and mine to tell.

Before leaving this phase I should say that not all my sermons are exegetical. About one time in five I'll depart from the method I've outlined and respond to a pressing or topical issue in community, church or world. You get the right to do that if people trust that you have opened their eyes and heart and souls to the glory. You don't get to do that if you've lost confidence in the Bible or your ability to glean joy from it and settle for preaching newspaper editorials or blogs instead.

## **Writing and Revising**

By this stage I hope it's clear that most of the real work has been done. As I write I'm sticking pretty closely to my prepared structure and building up to my last line. Then as I revise I have four questions in my mind, and these are perhaps the key ones in going from good to great.

The first is, does the sermon show real nuance, of the complexity of faith and the texture of life. In today's sermon I try to bring this out by highlighting the difference between the terms precious, honoured and loved, and dwelling carefully on what it means to be loved but not honoured, or honoured but not loved. If your congregation trust that you see the true complexity of faith and life, they will trust the resolution you offer to the struggles they all-too-well know. The second is, how is my tone of voice? Do I sound generous-hearted, compassionate, gentle yet clear? Or is there a harshness, a throwaway recklessness, a judgemental denunciation, a superficial generalisation that could undermine all the good things I want people to hear and cherish? Do I sound clever or wise? Is my illustration about myself attention-seeking, or a subtle form of boasting or self-promotion? Could I tell the same story as if it were about someone else to equally good effect? Are all the examples about men? Is the humour laughing with, or at?

The third question is, is my argument moving at the right pace. I may be very familiar with the fact that Israel went into exile or that Jesus' choice of twelve disciples corresponds with Israel's twelve tribes, but am I racing too fast for the congregation to keep up? When I get to my key points, have I prepared the listener to know this is the big moment, or structured in a sufficient element of surprise? Is there enough lightness of touch to help the listener maintain concentration throughout? Are there enough signposts to ensure the listener never gets lost? Am I unwise to be making a four-step argument and could I do all I need to do in three? Is there anything the congregation need to have in their hands to help them grasp what I'm doing? Can the choice of hymns or anthems or the theme of intercessions or introductions complement what I'm planning to say?

Fourth, what single thing do I want the listener to be humming, praying, repeating, treasuring a day, a week or a decade later. What will be the memorable takeaway? Surely not 'try harder to love your daughter.' Just now it was very simple – you are precious, honoured and loved (and so is Israel and so is Jesus.) How do I make that simplicity so elegant it's infectious and irresistible?

## **Delivering**

Finally, a sermon isn't fundamentally a written document but the event of reading out or relaying a love letter. Delivering should be about conveying a letter drenched in love from God to the congregation. You are speaking to the people for God. The congregation should feel like it! When you're bringing good news, smile. When you're saying hard things, say them tenderly and gently.

Don't be embarrassed. You don't need to earn the listener's respect. You have in some formal or informal way been commissioned to do this today or regularly. Enjoy the privilege and fulfil the responsibility to the utmost of your ability.

Make this the best sermon you've ever preached – and if you fear the text isn't your very best, make the delivery your very best. Don't reveal your discomfort or insecurity by making unnecessary jokes or comments as you begin that don't add to what you've truly got to say. If it's really necessary to acknowledge someone for inviting you or some such other introductory remark, clearly distance that from the sermon itself by saying your invocation after your opening comments to indicate a significant change of mood. Don't ad-lib off-hand comments, however humorous, as you go along – it's very unlikely they'll be as valuable as what you've prepared and they may be catastrophically if unintentionally hurtful, offensive or inappropriate. Most of the things I've regretted saying in sermons have been off the cuff, often in relation to an unexpected noise, interruption or equipment failure. Take your time, trust you have something blessed to say, and cherish the words that may be familiar to you but are fresh and life-giving to the congregation.

And recognise the value of eye contact. It's not necessary to have eye contact with everybody, all the time. I used to use a text only very seldom, so as to maximise the intensity and immediacy of what I was saying, but I came to realise how much people engage with a sermon by reading it again later or by reading it without having been there at its actual delivery and for those experiences you need to provide a text. But you can have the best of both worlds if you're sure to memorise key sentences – most obviously your last line.

I want to finish with two uncompromising statements in answer to the two most common reactions to what I'm saying. The first reaction is, 'I don't have the ability.' I say, I bet you drive a car. The first time you sat in the driver's seat I bet like me you had no idea what you were doing. In my case I drove into a hedge and even three weeks after I passed my test I wrote off a car by not looking where I was going. A car can do immense damage. So can a sermon. A car can also take you to the most beautiful and precious and wonderful places in the world. So can a sermon. What's the secret? Stick to the rules, keep filling it with petrol and get better at it.

The second reaction is, 'I haven't got the time.' I say, the awesome God of heaven and earth longs to be revealed in all intimacy to the people who are pining to behold the glory and be transformed by the renewing of their hearts and minds and souls and lives – and you have been called, commissioned and given the priceless opportunity to be the messenger of that wondrous story. And you've got more important things to do. Really?

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## Preaching on the Issues of the Day

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### The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, Bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta

*This sermon was the opening address for a group assembled specifically to address Civil Discourse in America. Featuring members of the United States House of Representatives (both Republicans and Democrats) along with nationally recognized voices from The Episcopal Church, the conference was concerned with pivoting from our current milieu to a place of cooperation and collaboration.*

Good evening! I'm delighted to be with you in this place and attending to this important topic, "Civil Discourse in America." The question hanging over this conference is very specific, How do we follow Jesus given the thickening fog of incivility in our political discourse in our nation. Every sermon needs a biblical text. I choose that old standby. 1 Corinthians 1-13. "Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." But it is the eleventh verse of that chapter that I want to emphasize. There Paul says, "...when I was a child, I thought as a child, I spoke as a child I understood as a child. But, when I became a man." A woman. "I put away childish things." What I think Paul is trying to say to his community then and to our community now, even our country is, grow up! This is important because youth comes but once but immaturity can last a life time! The heart of what I want to say tonight is very simple, by virtue of our baptism, we are different.

By the grace of God, we are growing up into the full stature of Christ. Daily. Hourly. Usually reluctantly. But nevertheless growing up. And if that is true, then when it comes to politics, we are trans-political! That is, we are in the world of politics, but we are not of the world of politics. We are in politics but bigger than politics. Especially the incivility of politics. Of course we should be an educated and active citizenry, but we are ultimately not defined by politics. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "...our citizenship is in heaven...." I would remind us there is no Republican or Democratic section of heaven. Which is to say, growing up, if it means anything, means clarity

about ultimate allegiance. Our first allegiance is to God as we understand God in the life, ministry, example, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Which is to say, despite the increasing complexity and velocity of modern life, we refuse to allow the corresponding bewilderment to drive us to the blasphemy of self-sufficiency or rank tribalism. You and I have been given and have accepted the high calling of partnership with God. And the substance of that partnership is to be demonstrating in the real, beautiful and broken world two things-just two things-the irreducibility of God and the irreducibility of neighbor.

Our refreshed loyalty to these two tenets will break the adolescent appeal and power of loathing- loathing of the other and loathing of political opposition. Loyalty to God is a greater power than the loathing of opponent. What that means practically, even daily, is that you and I must do the interior work of purging from ourselves every residue of contempt. Contempt for other has become the new, practical, consensus building American ethos. Sadly contempt for other has deep roots in the history of our republic as a means to political and economic ends. But, it seems especially in the last couple of decades this phenomenon has found new zeal. It is a no-brainer that this phenomenon has been supercharged by the rise of the 24hour, perpetually breaking news, sound bite, gotcha journalism culture we live in. And yes, both political parties participate in this. And yes, it predates the current administration. The problem is pernicious because most of us consciously or unconsciously collude with the incivility of the status quo. The problem is, contempt for neighbor in any form- even polite southern contempt... bless your heart, is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. And, our maintenance of contempt in all its forms frustrates the working of God's grace.

Given that this conversation is taking place in Lent, I suggest the taking on of a new spiritual discipline to fend off incivility. It is a spiritual discipline to acknowledge, repent and forsake contempt for neighbor in public and private conversations and thoughts. Even over your social media accounts. This is not about politically correct lips, that is beneath us. Our work is heart work. Civility is about the dignity of others and our commitment to the humility that seeks an abundant future for all of God's children. This is about transformed hearts. This is about spiritual maturity at the local and cosmic level. When we grow up we remember, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood. We wrestle against powers and principalities." What is necessary here is that you and I begin the slow and essential work

of coughing up the asphyxiating mucous of contempt for one another. I cannot make this point strongly enough or frequently enough. As Bishop of a Diocese that spans more than seventy-five counties in middle and north Georgia, I understand it to be part of my job to listen both Rachel Maddow and Rush Limbaugh. I listen to both because my diocese listens to one or the other. What I have learned is that both news sources share a spirit of contempt for the core constituency of the other. One version could be described as subtle and condescending. And the other unabashedly hostile and vile. But really it just depends on who you ask. Either way, both are trafficking in a substance more addictive than opioids, contempt. But when I listen to either Rush or Rachel I have found a new way to listen. I don't listen as a partisan. I'm not listening for talking points. I listen as an ambassador. I listen as a translator. Again we remember Paul when he says, "I understand the law-and-order people. And I understand the people who are not under the law. I understand the weak. Because I know my own weaknesses. I take up this relational work so I can save some." That is, so I can point people to things eternal. If we were to talk to Paul this evening he might say to us that there will be no progress in the community, no progress in the nation or the church until someone decides to be the grown up. Until someone decides to default to curiosity rather than always, always defensiveness. Until someone says eradication of the political opposition has no place in the American family.

But not only that. If we are to really defeat this demon called contempt for neighbor that spawns incivility in all things, we have to acknowledge it's a three-headed demon each with its own name. Contempt's three heads are Smallness, Separateness and Superiority. When Paul asks us to grow up. He understands love and immaturity. Love and smallness can't co-exist. He doesn't condemn our smallnesses but suggests that while smallness might be a starting point it mustn't be an ending point for us. Smallness has to be confronted and converted.

Separateness is a global heresy that has historic and unique expressions in America. But sadly at the core of the idea of separateness there is a tragic lie. Sure there is a diversity of human experience, absolutely, but what guides us always is what is at the core, the center. The core is, the coal communities of West Virginia want what the so called 'coastal elites' want for their children, a hope and a future. We are not a human race. We are a human family.

This brings us to the notion of superiority. Contempt depends of this part perhaps the most. There is something that you and I are supposed to learn in the notion that Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings and yet left his gated community called heaven to live among the day laborers and peasant class of Nazareth. Equality with God puts us beside one another. Not even Jesus is exempt from this idea. Our attainments, achievements, education and advancements in the Christian context are simply equipment to be harnessed for the common good. Superiority based on race has recently been dealt a death blow by the scientific community. There is this idea about the Mitochondrial Eve. She is the most recent common ancestor of all of humanity. We are inextricably linked. We are all Africans. What affects some affects all. All are children of the same God. Of one blood. DNA doesn't lie.

If the year 1968 in America were to speak to us now, what would she say? She might say, you think you're divided? Huh. What a bunch of amateurs! You remember that in 1968, the war in Vietnam was raging. The generations were divided about our presence in Southeast Asia. There was absolute chaos on college campuses. Martin was killed on a balcony in Memphis and Bobby was killed in a kitchen in California. Not only that, President Johnson went on television to the great surprise of everyone and said that he would not seek nor would he accept the nomination of his party for re-election as President. Talk about chaos. With this grand and surprising gesture LBJ hoped to unite the country. He used the following words to frame his actions. "A house divided cannot stand." Of course he borrowed those words from Jesus. But they ring true now. What LBJ might have also said to us in 1968 and what we might think of now is that not only can a divided house not stand, but neither can an adolescent nation flourish. New maturity must come forward from us if we are to continue this democratic experiment. America is a gangly, acned, clumsy idea as nations go. She is a youthful 242 years old. We have proof of this immaturity in our binary decision-making. We say either border security or DACA rather than secure borders and a path to citizenship for the most deserving. We say we desire a strong and ready military without seeing the role of a talented diplomatic corps in the equation for safety and peace. We argue that the second amendment is sacrosanct without seeing that common sense public safety legislation would refine the public's sense of gun ownership and keep the 2nd amendment out the cross-hairs of its opponents. St. Paul's says we

must grow up in how we think and how we speak and how we understand. This was sage advice in his day and it still is so. Incivility has to be attacked in our hearts as we endeavor to attack in all the public places that it lives.

I got a recent remedial lesson on this from Ambassador Andrew Young, who I am proud to call friend. As you know, while Dr. King was preaching us into a more perfect union by telling us of his dream, it was Andy Young in cramped back rooms all over the country negotiating progress with all kinds of people. Prior to an event where he was to address school children about appreciating others, I was with him and a few others just chatting and catching up on current events. That's where the growing up began again. He fussed at us about the constant personal attacks on our current President he had heard on the morning news. I could see the shock on peoples face. How could this civil rights icon take such a tone about this President? He went on to remind us that in no place in Dr. King's work would we find a personal attack on any person or group opposing the work of civil rights. He said, you won't even find a personal attack, or contempt for Bull Connor, of fire hoses and snarling dog fame. No personal attacks ever. Not even for Bull. He said, you see what you don't understand is that our goal was not the annihilation of the opposition. Our goal was not the humiliation of the opposition. Our goal was transformation. Our goal was to leave room, even for the people we disagreed with the most, for them to retain their dignity -- if our aim is to purge incivility from our politics, if our aim is to proclaim that we are an American family. Then our work must be to transform the soul of our nation. One encounter at a time. This has been done before. This can be done now with faith, hope and love, the greatest of these of course being love.

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## Preaching Across the Divide: The New and Not-So-New

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### The Rev. Dr. O. Wesley Allen, Jr., Louis Craddock Perkins Professor of Homiletics, SMU Perkins School of Theology

There is no denying that the church in the United States today is divided and divisive. This situation is both a reflection of and a contributing factor of the conflictual nature of the surrounding culture. Given this divide, what is a preacher who sees the conflict spread across the pews in front of her to do when she feels called to address the social injustices and corruption that are becoming the new normal in American political life? How does she speak the gospel to people on both sides of the aisle (both the aisle in the nave and the aisle in Congress)?

Without pretending to answer that question, I want in this short essay to offer two ways to frame our homiletical possibilities. These two frames may seem contradictory, but I would argue they are in paradoxical harmony.

#### What's New?

The first frame through which to view our current homiletical and cultural situation is to recognize that we are dealing with a radical new situation represented by the Trump presidency. On November 4, 2008, this nation elected its first African-American president in Barack Obama. Given our history of swinging back and forth between Republicans and Democrats in office, it is no surprise we elected a Democrat to the White House following eight years of George W. Bush holding the office. In the same way, it is not surprising that in 2016, the populace put a Republican back in the Oval Office. But Donald Trump is no run-of-the-mill Republican. The election of an African American made possible the election of someone making blatant claims of white, male exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> The election of Obama made many white Americans feel they had slipped down the ladder of privilege a rung or two; and Trump told them they were being pushed down further by refugees, Mexicans, “the Blacks” and nasty women.

Of course, Trump did not invent the racism, sexism, heterosexism, or ableism he exhibited in his campaign and continues to exhibit in his administration—he simply emboldened that which had been lying just underneath the surface of polite society. So the discriminatory, hate-filled elements of President's Trump

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<sup>1</sup> See Kelly Brown Douglas, “Donald Trump and the ‘Exceptionalist’ Truth about America,” in *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*, ed. Miguel A De La Torre (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017) 10–19.

persona and policies are not what is new;<sup>2</sup> but the election of this type of politician at this time points to what is new.

What is new is that our first full postmodern president was elected by postmodern voters. To talk about postmodernism in light of the discriminatory worldview described above may not be flashy but it is what lies below the surface of the new situation in which we find ourselves.

In a premodern worldview people believe in absolute truth that is revealed by God. This view dominated the ancient world but is still found in fundamentalists and some evangelicals. In this view Genesis 1–2 must be literally true and science must be wrong in postulating the big bang and evolution. In a modern epistemology, truth is still seen as universal but its source is now reason. This view arose with Copernicus and Galileo and dominated through the Enlightenment and is still found in much of the classically liberal theology of the mainline church. In this view science must be correct in determining the origins of the world and Genesis 1–2 must be interpreted mythologically.

In a postmodern worldview, truth is no longer seen as absolute or universal. Truth is contextual, relative. Instead of being rooted in revelation or science it is based on experience...*my* experience. “That may be true for you, but it’s not true for me.” In other words, meaning has replaced truth as the primary category for viewing and living in the world. Postmoderns are fine with you making whatever you want of Genesis 1–2 so long as you allow them the same courtesy. After all, now “I” am the final authority over what is “true for me” instead of Scripture or science.

The negative side of postmodernism is that the rampant individualism it can manifest can justify all kinds of horrific views of the other. Facts do not matter. If I find it meaningful, it is. A prime example of the way this is currently affecting the public discourse is the Trump administration’s constant claim that any journalist who challenges them is “fake news.” Trump supporters are not interested in what the facts are so much as what is meaningful to them, so they are quite willing to legitimize the claim that news that does not fit with their interpretation of the state of affairs (whatever affairs those may be) are “not true for me.”

Preaching in a day, across the divide or not, when truth is not what is at stake is a new day.

### **Nothing Is New Under the Sun**

Having made a case that the homiletical situation in which we find ourselves has undergone a significant paradigm shift, let me make the paradoxical argument

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<sup>2</sup> These are the elements of his campaign, however, that led me to write *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2017).

that in some ways there is absolutely nothing new about the challenge facing us. We already hinted above that there is nothing new about the racism, sexism, ableism, politics, or xenophobia we find being spouted with renewed fervor these days. But we need to dig underneath the surface of this recognition to get to the real same old, same old.

I have spent much of my homiletical scholarship focusing on preaching in postmodernism, but I must make a confession: I am only a “lite postmodernist.” In fact, I don’t think you can be biblical preacher and be a full-blown postmodernist.

I am postmodern in the sense that I am less interested in what is absolutely true and more interested in conversing about how we construct meaning. Instead of speaking of the Word of God in a top-down, authoritative fashion, I am more interested in preachers viewing themselves as contributing to the matrix of conversations that comprise the congregation as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, I would also argue that the cornerstone upon which the church’s biblical preaching is built is the assumption that our ancient texts still speak to contemporary existence because the underlying structure of human existence is persistent. The human condition as portrayed in our ancient Scriptures is still the condition faced by humanity today, and that the way God in the ancient text addresses this condition and calls us to deal with the condition is the same today. In other words, the divide we are experiencing nowadays is a manifestation of the human condition that has not changed regardless of the evolving epistemology undergirding abhorrent stances contributing to the divide.

### **Homiletical Implications**

So given a new, evolving postmodern epistemology that strips truth-talk of power in public discourse combined with a persistent human condition in which humans are bent toward sin today in the same way we have always been, what is a preacher to do? If our calling is not simply to speak the gospel, but to get the gospel heard, believed, and lived, then how are we to preach this in this paradoxical moment in history.

First, if revelation and reason have been replaced with experience as the basis for making meaning of the world, preachers must address the universal human condition experientially in their sermons. Quoting statistics, citing authoritative sources, and even naming what seems to be blatantly factual may have little effect on our congregations. Sermons must be about *creating experiences* of the human condition and the God’s response to it instead of trying to build persuasive arguments about the message. The homiletical move in this direction

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<sup>3</sup> For an exposition of my conversational homiletic in a postmodern context, see O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

was forged by the New Homiletic of the 1970s and 80s, but must be all the more fully embraced now. This means story and figurative language (and maybe video clips) become the center of the sermon and discursive language is supportive instead of the other way around.

Second, preachers must always be aware that while they may stand ideologically against some of the hearers, they are mired in exactly the same human condition as those congregants. Not only do we not speak with authority (because the hearer's experience is her or his own final authority), but we do not speak as one free from the very condition that leads them to claim an ideology we might find contrary to the gospel. By sharing our own experience of the human condition with the congregation, we invite identification instead of distance. Identification leads hearers to a willingness to hear what we have to say and to perhaps be changed in the process.

Third, preachers must have a cumulative view of their preaching ministry. Rarely does one sermon truly transform. It is week after week, month after month, year after year of offering hearers new, bite-sized experiences of the human condition in which they are trapped and of God's liberating good news that results in a fully nourished and transformed Christian/congregation. Thus, one will often do well to bring (experientially speaking) racism, sexism, etc., into sermons about other topics instead of preaching on a specific "ism" as the focus of the sermon and then being content to lay it to the side. Normalizing talk about such things as a side element of a sermon can help people let their defenses down instead of them building a wall between the gospel and their experience.

## Sermons from the Faculty

- Archie's Story: The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith**  
Rector, St. Patrick's Episcopal Church, Dublin, Ohio 26-27
- Do You Love Me? The Rev. Gary D. Jones**  
Rector, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church Richmond, Va. 28-30
- A Picture of God: The Rev. Susan Ironside**  
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## “Archie’s Story”

### The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith, Rector St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church, Dublin, Ohio

*Mark 10:17-27*

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In the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character is Tevya, a poor milk man trying to deal with all the cultural changes swirling around him. Through it all, he enters an on-going conversation with God. Very early on, he launches into a song that asks why he couldn’t be rich a man, with maybe a small fortune.

By the last verse the song takes an interesting twist, as Tevya sings,

If I were rich I’d have the time that I like

To sit in the synagogue and pray,

And maybe have a seat by the eastern wall.

And I’d discuss the holy books

With the learned men, seven hours every day.

That would be the sweetest thing of all.

To be rich and to know the law inside and out. He would be doubly blessed. And so is the man who approaches Jesus with a question about eternal life. How do I get there? We are told the man is rich. He is already blessed with wealth.

Jesus tells him to follow the commandments. He has done this. He knows them inside and out. He is rich and has obviously discussed the holy books with learned men, maybe as much as seven hours every day. He is truly blessed.

Jesus, however sees something. Mark tells us he looked at him and loved him. Maybe he loved him because he was doubly blessed with wealth and knowledge. But given Jesus’ further response, he may have loved him because he saw his potential. This man might be capable of fully trusting in God. He just might be able to leave it all behind and serve the world in God’s name. And so, Jesus’ invites him to do just that. But he is too attached to his wealth, to his knowledge, to maybe that seat by the eastern wall. He goes away, sad.

The disciples are incredulous. How could a person so doubly blessed by wealth and knowledge of the law, not be the absolute example of salvation? Why ask him to do anything else? If he is not doing enough, then who can be saved?

Only God can do it, Jesus tells his disciples. Only God.

Twenty-eight years ago, I became the rector of medium-sized Episcopal Church with an average Sunday attendance of 200, in an industrial city in Ohio. I had only been ordained priest a few months. I had no idea what I was doing. Thank God there were a few parishioners who became my teachers.

I grew especially attached to Archie Carter. Archie was in his 90s and had outlived two wives. He couldn't drive anymore, so I would bring him communion about once a month. He was very hospitable, and I felt very comfortable in his presence. So, I would ask him questions.

Once, when he was talking about many of his friends who died, I asked him if grief got easier as you got older.

"Hell no," he said. You're just in grief a lot more often."

After a while, he started asking me questions. He liked to ask how certain parishioners were doing, especially the ones who seemed the most cantankerous. I would say something about each person and then he would just start to laugh a little.

I would say, "What's that all about?"

He would answer, "I can't tell you," and laugh a little more.

Archie taught me a lot; about grief, about aging, about accepting people for who they are, even with their secrets, and so much more.

Then, one day, Archie's kidneys began to fail. He refused treatment.

I said, "Archie, without dialysis you're going to die."

"We're all gonna die," he replied.

"You're the bravest man I know."

"I'm not brave, just tired."

And then he went on, "What this is teaching me, though, is how to trust in God. Because, when you get to this point, the only one left that you can trust is God. You can't trust your body. It just starts to do whatever it wants, with no

never-mind from you. You can't trust those you love. They leave you or die. You can't trust your doctors. They can't cure old age, just prolong it. All you've got left is God. And so, I trust God for whatever comes next. And I'm okay with that. I only wish I had learned it when I was your age,"

I remember what you told me all those years ago Archie. It's been 25 years, and I am still trying to learn to fully trust in God. I'm still trying, Archie.

I'm still trying.

## **“Do You Love Me?”**

### **The Rev. Dr. Gary D. Jones, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, Va.**

“Do you love me?”

Over twenty years ago, when I was rector of the old, downtown Episcopal church in Charlotte, N.C., Mother Teresa came to town. She was speaking in the Charlotte Coliseum. Charlotte had become one of the world’s leading financial hubs, but people couldn’t wait to hear from this diminutive woman who was devoted to the poor. They wanted to make a difference, live more meaningful lives. On the day Mother Teresa was to speak, traffic was backed up for miles.

And when this tiny and wrinkled nun was ushered to the stage, with people packed to the rafters, she quietly told them that she had traveled all over the world, but she had never experienced the depth of spiritual poverty she had found here in the richest country in the world – such loneliness. “Don’t come to Calcutta,” Mother Teresa said. “Go home. Go to your own homes and neighborhoods, to your churches and places of work. Go home and love the people you find there.”

At the very end of John’s Gospel, the resurrected Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” We know the symbolism – how this is taking place at daybreak, in new light, around a charcoal fire where Jesus has prepared breakfast. It’s the opposite of the scene that took place a few days before. That scene had been in darkness; Peter had been warming himself by a different charcoal fire, trying not to be recognized; it was the night he denied Jesus three times. But now, it’s morning, it’s a new day, and Jesus asks Peter the same question three times, as a way of undoing or transforming Peter’s worst nightmare.

“Peter, do you love me?”

We know the symbolism, but I love the way a Jesuit interpreted this passage. He said he thought Jesus so delighted in hearing Peter’s confession of love for him the first time that he just had to hear it a second time, and a third time! Say it again! ...So human.

But for Peter, this is as pastorally sensitive as it gets. Jesus doesn’t ask, “Peter, are you sorry?” Of course, he’s sorry. And embarrassed. There’s no need for more of that. Everyone is sorry.

The Bible doesn't say, but I can imagine Jesus perhaps pulling Peter aside to have this conversation, to tend to Peter's very personal, self-inflicted wounds. Jesus doesn't treat Peter with a generic balm that would work for anybody; he offers what Peter very particularly needs, being careful not to heap more guilt or shame.

And perhaps as Jesus and Peter walked away to be by themselves for a moment, with Jesus' arm around Peter, the other disciples watching it all knew that Jesus wasn't taking Peter to the woodshed, as we say here in the South. This was a tender moment. A moment of love and forgiveness that everyone could sense.

Jesus' pastoral response, his very personal engagement with Peter, is a sign of something that has grown in importance for me about the ministry of preaching. That is, preaching more and more feels to me like an unusual opportunity to demonstrate our knowledge and love for our people, the fact that we are not just talking to people in general; nor are we just trying to show how much we know about the Bible. In the pulpit, we're all about feeding our sheep.

And we need to know what sort of nutrition our people need, don't we? Over time, we learn what they'll eat and what they won't. We see their reactions to certain foods. Sometimes it seems that some of them are almost allergic to certain things, so we offer that food in gentler ways, perhaps in smaller portions, at first, while we nourish them for a season with food that they can handle. Sometimes spiritual milk comes first. We'll get to the meatier stuff, but love is what will get us there.

"Do you love me?" Isn't this the question we all ask – if not out loud, at least in the thoughts of our hearts?

A physician in her commencement address for Vassar College once put it this way:

*As a physician who has been deeply privileged to share the most profound moments of people's lives, including their final moments, let me tell you a secret. People facing death don't think about what degrees they have earned, what positions they have held, or how much wealth they have accumulated. At the end, what really matters is who you love and who loves you.*

Surely part of the reason Peter could hear Jesus at all in his time of guilt and shame was that he knew Jesus loved him and was intent not on embarrassing him, or calling him out in public, or in any way keeping open a wound that was killing Peter. Our sermons work only if our people can hear us, and they can hear us only if they know we love them.

I've often heard people say that my job is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." I get it. At least, the first part – comfort the afflicted. Sometimes, though, I sense that frustrated, under-appreciated clergy are afflicting the comfortable just as a matter of principle. But the Lord "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone," the Book of Lamentations says, a passage we often read at funerals but that perhaps should keep before us while our people are alive and sitting right in front of us.

You know that favorite collect from Evensong: "Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake."

"Pity the afflicted and shield the joyous" – that's the phrase I love. We don't pray, "pity the afflicted and *afflict* the joyous"! Of course, there will be times when the preacher will have to say some difficult things, and metaphorically overturn some tables in the temple. Frankly, I'm convinced that our people WANT to be challenged. But not by self-righteous preachers who have all the answers; instead, they want to be challenged by pastors who know them and forgive them, by pastors who sympathize with their struggles and love them, by pastors whose main concern, they know, is to feed their sheep.

Mother Teresa told the people in Charlotte that day that we didn't need to come to Calcutta. We needed first to go to our own homes and neighborhoods, our churches and our places of work; because she knew what we would find there – people with a persistent and often unanswered question echoing in their hearts:

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

## **“A Picture of God”**

### **The Rev. Susan Ironside, Rector, St. John on the Mountain, Bernardsville, N.J.**

A Sermon for 30 May, The Feast of Joan of Arc

*Judith 8:32-9:11*

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Sir Kenneth Robinson, an educational expert who has taught educators across the globe, has a theory that we were all born with creativity, each and every last one of us. We had creativity oozing out of us at birth. But then life crushed it out of us. He feels that schools are often the biggest contributors to the task of pummeling creativity, what with their fixation on rules and testing, But we in the Church probably do our part to quash creativity whenever we can pitch in with that effort, because of our own devotion to rules and order.

When he lectures, Sir Kenneth often tells the story of a little girl in art class. She was six and she was drawing, and the teacher noticed because this little girl hardly ever paid attention. Yet in this drawing lesson she did. The teacher was fascinated, and went over to her and asked, “What are you drawing?”

And the girl said, “I’m drawing a picture of God.”

The teacher said, “But nobody knows what God looks like.”

The girl replied, “Well, they will in a minute.”

Today the Church remembers Joan of Arc, the teenager who saved France. At the age of 13 she heard the voice of God. Who knows what that even sounded like? God and Joan had actual conversations for years. Whatever they talked about, Joan became convinced that she—a peasant teenager—was the one who could save France. And she did. After no small amount of vetting, including the odd task of picking Charles VII out of a crowd when he was wearing a disguise, (which sounds creepy) and having to prove her virginity (which sounds chilling), Joan was actually put in a leadership role, and commanded knights to victory. City after city fell to the army that she helped lead.

After her military victory, she wanted to go home, but that wasn’t in the cards. She was captured. And the king whose army she had deftly led to victory couldn’t be bothered to ransom her from her captors. The inevitable heresy

trial ensued, because who in their right mind could take seriously a teenager who claimed to hear the voice of God?

At her trial, those who had authority over whether she would live or die said to Joan, “You say God speaks to you, but it’s only your imagination.”

She responded, “How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?”

It is fitting that on the day we remember Joan, we hear the story of Judith. Well, some of it anyway. Judith is the story of a woman—a widow—who used her intellect, resources, and even her body to save the Israelites from the Assyrians.

Judith, we hear, had an unusual prayer life. She asked God to make her a gifted liar, so she could plausibly seduce the head of the Assyrian army, which is exactly what she did. She got him nice and drunk, and then beheaded him. In so doing, she secured a vital military victory for the tribe. It’s an amazing story. Better beach reading this summer you will not find.

The lectionary gives us only a small snippet of her story on Joan of Arc’s Feast Day, We hear Judith pray, but before that she declares. “Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants.”

And she was right. She was right not only about what she was about to do, but also that generations of people, her decedents, would be talking about her action. And here we are, thousands of years later, and a world away, talking about her.

I personally long for that kind of boldness in my life, to announce at the breakfast table before I leave the house in the morning that the work that I am about to do will be the stuff of legend.

So what do we make of these Spiritual Aunts of ours, Joan and Judith?

Maybe you have to be a teenager to take such risks, as our Aunt Joan did, to see God with your imagination. Teenagers are so reckless! And don’t argue with them when it comes to what they do or do not believe about God. A teenager will look you straight in the eye and dare you to question that they have heard the voice of God or not.

Maybe you have to be a widow whose knowledge of God is so intimate that you can ask God to make you a good liar so you can accomplish dangerous things. Widows know what it is like to lose, and don’t tell them for a moment that life isn’t complicated. Widows have stood on the threshold of grief and devastation

and somehow kept on living, making a life in a world that often prefers people—women in particular—neatly partnered and attached to an ordinary household.

Whatever else can be said of us, we who are preachers, claim that at some point, we heard God calling. Like Joan did. Maybe it wasn't a clear voice, or an actual conversation. But we got some message at some point along the way that we were supposed to do something. So we submitted to a vetting process that was peculiar and exhausting.

And like Judith, we have all, I suspect, asked God to make us good liars. At least I have. Most of us have prayed and asked God to make us the kind of women and men who will look someone straight in the eyes sound plausible when we say that we know for sure that God loves them and is present with them, even on those days when (in our heart of hearts) we find them deeply annoying, or question if God can love anyone because we feel so unlovable ourselves, or we find our own lives so confusing.

What our great Aunts Joan and Judith knew is that when you are willing to fall into God's embrace with nakedness and boldness you show people what God looks like, you draw a picture with your life so other people can see the God you see in your imagination.

That is our job as preachers. I don't simply mean that we are to find boldness and creativity, although life will more colorful and preaching more vibrant when we do. But the task is greater. Our job is to help the people in the assembly find their own boldness. So they can draw their own picture of God.

The best pictures of God are drawn by six year old girls, and all of God's people.

The Mom who drags herself to the dance recital after an exhausting day at work, even though the child who is dancing on the stage called her a jerk over breakfast and announced that she was an awful parent. But that evening in the school auditorium, that mom drew a picture of the God who teaches that "love keeps no record of wrongs."

An insurance agent in my parish drew a picture of God after a storm devastated a widow's house, leaving her homeless. Telling no one, not even his Rector, this man was on the phone for hours, using his knowledge of the industry to navigate the complexities of what needed to happen next, even though it was someone else's job and someone else's insurance company. That man drew the most stunning picture of God, an illustration of how when we are taking care of an old lady who has a tree fall on the only house she has ever known, we are actually doing nothing less than giving shelter to Jesus.

The best pictures of God are drawn by people like the teacher in my community who made flashcards on her own 3x5 index cards for the student whose undocumented parents couldn't possibly afford them. That teacher drew a stunning illustration of the God who welcomes the stranger and gathers the little child.

All of those things happened in my ordinary life and my ordinary parish. And those stories are the stuff of legend.

Our job is to put a blank piece of paper in front of the assembly so that they can draw a picture of God, the God that they see, the God they have come to know in Jesus through the stories of our ancestors and through his Body the Church.

It is our job to hold a paper in front of another person so that they can sit at their breakfast table in the morning and announce, "Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down for generations. In a few minutes, people will see what God looks like."

## “Behind the Scenes”

**Sam Wells, Vicar, St. Martin in the Fields, London, U.K.**

*Luke 22.14-18*

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We live our lives by two stories. There's the one we present on interview, when we want to impress people; and there's the other one we tell only to a therapist, a confessor, or the most trusted friend. The church also lives its life by two stories. There's the story of faith, courage, and martyrdom – sacrifice, and perfect love. That's the story we call All Saints. And then there's the story of fragility, fear, and failure – foolishness, and forgiveness. That's the story we call All Souls.

Every Christian makes the same mistake. We all think God wants our posh story, our All Saints' story. But the truth is, God wants the real story, the All Souls story. Being a Christian means longing to be a saint – but, in the meantime, offering to God the reality of our soul.

The title of Kate Atkinson's 1995 novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, gives a clue to its theme. The novel's a *museum*, because it's full of memories, mostly about four generations of women in the family of the narrator, Ruby. But it's *behind the scenes*, because, one by one, elements are reintroduced into the story that've been forgotten, denied, or suppressed. The plot rattles along through post-war British history on a hilarious rollercoaster, and you're never sure if the intention is simply to evoke rib-tickling laughter. But that leaves you wholly undefended for the moment when suddenly, very near the end, the savage twist clasps you like a stomach cramp, and you're gasping for air.

By this time Ruby's a young adult. Piecing together stray remarks and inexplicable anomalies, she's driven to rummage through the shoebox that contains her family's most precious treasures. In the shoebox Ruby discovers the clue to her whole existence. She comes upon a birth certificate, and realizes she had a sister, Pearl. Not just a sister – a twin, born on the very same day as she, Ruby. She was born a twin. Ruby and Pearl. And there, to prove it, a locket, with a photo of the two sisters, one on each side. But then, a death certificate, dated four years later. Cause of death: drowning. The precious Pearl had drowned, aged just 4.

Ruby seeks out her mother. In dismay she yells, 'You can't just blot someone out like that. ... You can't pretend someone never existed, not talk about them, not look at photographs.' Her mother replies, defensively, 'There *were* photographs. And we *did* talk about her. It was *you* who blotted her out, not us.' But Ruby's

outburst has unlocked a chamber in her mother's soul. They open up the locket with the photos of the twins and look at it for a long time in silence. Ruby demands to know, 'Which one? Which one is Pearl?' Her mother points to the one on the left, and says, 'My Pearl. My Pearl,' and begins to weep.

Think of that locket for a moment. On the right is a picture of Ruby – the story Ruby thinks she knows, the story it's easier for everyone to tell. And on the left is a picture of Pearl – the story full of regret, guilt, and grief, loss, and sadness – the story no one really wants to tell. Except Pearl, perhaps. And, deep down Ruby and her mother, desperately, achingly, wrenchingly – Ruby and her mother, who can't truly tell any kind of story to one another until they've gone back and told a truthful story about Pearl; the fact that she lived, and the way she died.

Think of that locket as the two stories of the church – on the right All Saints, the story we want to tell, and on the left All Souls, the story of what took place behind the scenes, the story we've suppressed, forgotten, denied – but the story God knows, the story God remembers; and the story we *have* to learn how to tell if we're to stand truthfully before God and be restored in our relationship with one another.

Our worship can only be genuine if it brings to mind the left-hand picture in that locket, naming some of the faces and hearing some of the voices our society and our church has tended to forget, tried to suppress, or sought to deny, and mindful of those memories and experiences in ourselves that, like Ruby, we've tried hard to bury behind the scenes in the museum of our own imagination.

Why are such voices integral to our worship? Because when we stand before the throne of grace, as a person, a society, or a church, we can only ask God to redeem what we bring with us. If we show God just the right hand side of the locket, if we try to tell God just an All Saints story, God will either laugh, or cry.

At the Last Supper Jesus took bread, and broke it, to represent the breaking of his body. And he said, 'Do this, and remember me.' Do this, he said, and re-member. That's our hope. Not that our lives and memories and lockets aren't broken. We know they are. But that we'll be re-membered in God. That's what resurrection is – God putting all our members back together, going behind the scenes, and literally remembering us. And so to open our lives to the suppressed, the forgotten, and the denied members of our society and our church is to anticipate heaven, by the same process of remembering.

The last chapter of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is called 'Redemption.' Ruby's talking to her surviving sister, Patricia. Patricia's trying to encourage her sister to move on. She says, 'The past is what you leave behind in life, Ruby.' Ruby's having none of it. 'Nonsense, Patricia,' she retorts. 'The past is *what you take with you*.'

And that's the gospel. We're on the left-hand side of God's locket; but God doesn't suppress us, deny us, forget us, or leave us behind. Broken as we are, God remembers us, and embraces us, and says, 'I'm taking you with me.'

## “God Has Chosen You”

**Rev. Nikki Mathis, Assistant Rector, All Saints  
Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.**

*Romans, 10*

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God has chosen you. That’s all I’ve got to say this morning. Just like St. Paul in today’s epistle was saying that everybody in the young church in Rome had been chosen. I mean yeah, maybe there was a little *ish* going on between the Jews and Gentiles in the church, maybe growing together and coming together was a little messy.

So far as I can tell, one purpose of the letter was to handle the ‘messy.’ All good. But still, how does a whole, entire, grown behind man, with as much life experience as Paul, fix his lips to speak this foolishness: “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile.”

Off top even I can think of a few, and I’m not that bright. Purity laws, Torah, circumcision...and I can understand why the Gentiles would give especially that last one an ‘oh no my guy, not today!’ ...I would have too if it applied.

But I have to give Paul some credit, even though it might have sounded bad, awkward, or just plain wrong, at least he was direct, at least he named part of what he thought was the problem and he just came right out and said it. But maybe if he had had just a few good Episcopalians in that congregation he might have had some finesse, and maybe even more success, because we do orderly problem solving right.

We would have appointed a commission to study the situation, maybe 3 years or so. We would have held very polite and civil meetings, hired some mediators to dissolve the cultural divide, some smart folks from Iona and from seminary to iron out the theological divide, and some interpreters to work out the linguistic divide, until we’re all preaching, praising, and seeking God’s purpose the one right way, the best way, the only real way to do it...which for most of us Episcopalians means doing it the way it’s always been done. At least that’s what I learned in cemetery, (my bad) I mean seminary.

But when integration only means assimilation, when evangelism is simply tradition, updated by just the teeniest bit of translation, sometimes that makes for a bad situation. Who was at Brent’s bilingual table Tuesday? What do you think happened back when General Motors tried to sell the Chevy Nova in

South America?

Right, you can't sell anybody a car that has the words 'it won't go,' plastered on the side. And then When Kentucky Fried Chicken first failed in China, it was because they had brilliant translators that didn't realize the phrase 'finger lickin' good' is heard as 'eat your fingers off,' in Chinese. And when the Dairy Association, bless their heart, tried to say "Got Milk" on bill boards in Mexico, they found out they were actually asking, 'hey sis, are you lactating?'

And that kind of stuff is why God's not willing to mess up in communication of the gospel with 'go between' interpreters. That's why God doesn't sell a 'one size fits all' approach as a gimmick. Or a cookie cutter Christianity, or even a preacher, for that matter.

This is God's commonwealth, God's kingdom, the restoration of God's family that we are talking about. The stakes are too high, God's children are too precious, and sin, evil and death too real, and while they have indeed been defeated by Jesus, and will be eradicated when he comes again, right now they are still causing us and all the rest of the world a very present pain and suffering.

So we the church can't have you the preacher, twist yourself inside out to be something other than who you are or speak with any other voice than the one God gave you, because there's some folks out there who can only hear the language you speak, and only see the Jesus you show them.

Because God is so wide, so deep, so high, that God's wild beauty, God's great power, God's wide love, God's full image can't be reflected without each and every one of us. So when we hear anybody else in the church, or sometimes even our own voices say, I see no difference between Jew and Greek. I don't see color, gender or sexual orientation; I don't care about your age or physical ability or mental capacity, we are denying one another the privilege of seeing the whole of God. To the folks I'd hear say that kind of stuff, I'd want to say, 'my dude, you can't see I'm black. How is that? I can see I'm black; I'm looking right at it.

When people say 'all are the same in my eyes,' it is simply erasure. It is saying to the other, whoever the other is, that it is o.k. to, at some level, to ignore that human being's heritage, or their partner or their physical or developmental challenges. And in doing that, we give the speaker a pass and permission to disengage from both the beauty and the struggle that shapes the experience and identity of the 'other,' who is actually sister or brother, in the eyes of God.

That's why I like kids... most of the time. They just see it and say it. It goes like this. "Pete has two daddies, he's so lucky. Mo. Nikki, can you do my hair like

yours? Fr. Rosa can you teach me to sing that song with the pretty words?

Children see and LOVE all the differences that God chose of each of us to have, as a reflection of God's great, big image, and just like God, it would NEVER occur to them, until they are taught to do so, to use any of those differences to determine a person's worth. And that's most likely what Paul was really saying, even if it wasn't clear...or maybe we just got a questionable translation.

To him, to kids, to us gathered here, of course all people are equal, even when they are not the same. But please know that though we may get that, even when the church hears that, even when you preach that, it does not mean that there won't be *ish*. The work of being in unity while resisting uniformity is always messy. Whether it's Between Jews and Gentiles in the early church, or in our denomination and the wider church around LGBTQ ordination and hiring, women clergy pay parity, and people of color, and the differently abled being in the pulpits and pews.

There is a messiness in honoring our differences as divine and valuable, and therefore up front and visible, even as we do the work of bringing God's commonwealth equality. Most days, the fight's gonna be ugly and it's gonna be slow...but what it won't ever be, is in vain.

God has chosen you, God has prepared and equipped you, and the battle is already won for you, to preach the truth that all of us in the family of God, are beloved, and we belong, and both 'as is' and while being transformed, are together the full image of God. That's what God chose you to say. So get up, and for God's sake, get out of here... and go preach that!

## “American Idol”

### The Rev. Kate Spelman, Rector All Saints, Western Springs, Ill.

*Deuteronomy 4:25-31*

*1 Timothy 3:1-16*

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What I want to do is talk a little bit about landscape. Our passage today from Deuteronomy, from when Moses is old and getting a little salty, predicts what happens a few generations after the Promised Land. Moses imagines what the landscape looks like a few generations in. Where once it was all wholesomeness and good, all milk and honey, now idols have been built all over, their hulking forms in metal and wood crowding the skyline, littering the earth.

I work in one of the most typical Episcopal churches out there, which means this sounds really familiar. There are many people in my church today who are looking around and realizing that what they thought was a secure position a generation ago - our particular patch of Promised Land - these days isn't looking so hot. Churches like mine are realizing that the things we put in the midst of our life together as an assembly - the things we built our worshipping communities around - have turned out to be mute idols that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. Episcopalians are scattered among the peoples - with, in many parts of our country, only a few left among the nations of megachurch goers; Sunday morning yoga practitioners; and my particular tribe (because I am neither pious nor peaceful), the Crossfitters.

Unless you are in a church plant, and sometimes even if you are, there are folks in your worshipping communities who remember how sweet the old days were: When the Sunday school was full and you had to get to the 10am service early to get a good pew. (If you have retired clergy in your church, they remember a time when a good pew was in the front, not the back.)

It's become very easy, and very trendy, to point to the things that we made into idols. We're at a reckoning, at a stage when we are seeing many things for what they are: Dumb, lifeless idols which we let obscure our view of God and divert attention from true worship. Things we now know we sacrificed too much to, gave far too much power to. Big heavy solid things made of wood and metal, which we now know lack the flexibility to help us meet what is to come.

You can name some of these, right? Buildings that we have sacrificed time and money to. Ministries that we hung our churches' identities on that have little

to do with the Gospel. Maybe even ... orders of ministry, and all the rules about what they can and can't do, who can wear what and who gets a tall, pointy hat.

There's this great book that I recommend to you called *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, by Andy Crouch of *Christianity Today* - I KNOW. Andy and I would not get along very well, but this is a good book. We gotta go to the evangelicals sometimes for their exegesis.

Anyway, Crouch does this great exegesis of Old Testament texts. Through a reading of Genesis 1, he describes how human beings are gifted by God, from the very beginning - from the garden, when God asks the earth-creature to name the animals - human beings are gifted with this amazing ability to make meaning of the world. This is our shared ministry with God. We are made in God's image, and so we are called to be creators. Creating, making objects and making meaning from them, is how we enter into the community of love that is the Triune God and the creator of our world.

But it is also how we mess it all up.

We make so much meaning of the world that sometimes we come to worship those products - be they products of our hands or our intellectual products. These are the "other gods", the idols that scripture warns us against. Crouch goes on to say that idols can be known by the fact that they make really wild, really amazing, magical promises. They tell us: I can make it rain! I can get the young families back to church! I can double your ASA! ...But an idol demands more and more of us, until it sucks from us all that we have, leaving us with less than we started with.

An idol will take everything you lay at its feet and still, never be satisfied. Because it has no power in itself, it takes all you will give it and returns nothing.

But you know, it's become pretty fashionable these days--very, very easy--to talk about how the old idols have no power, how we will cast them each from their thrones ... so easy in fact that I actually wonder if we are paying *enough* attention to the power that idols have. We must not pay them homage, but we must pay them heed.

The old idols are still with us because they are *powerful* things. Moses doesn't talk for his health - scripture doesn't warn us time and again about false gods because they were easy to avoid falling to your knees in front of them. No, the power of idolatry is far more than we give those idols credit for.

Better watch where you swing that axe when you set out to take down one of these things.

You can get a lot of heads nodding at vestry about how we gotta do something

about this old building, but God forbid you try to get rid of the pews in the sanctuary. We can all agree the liturgy should be changed, just not to THAT! Or *that* - good grief!

These old idols are powerful things - and you would be a wise and wary preacher and prophet to pay them not homage, but heed. They mark the places in the religious landscape where others have laid down their lives and their vocations, and lost them. They're at the center of some worshipping communities like tent poles holding the roof up - and some might be sat on top of a sinkhole that will swallow you. Get an old-timer to draw you a map before you go out with your axe to chop one down.

I also want to make sure you realize that there are many new idols gaining in power. The truth is that the religious landscape right now looks like wilderness to just about everyone. No one knows where the hell we're going, which is great for you all, because you probably know as much as I do about the future of the church. We're all on equal footing, at least, as we wander about in what looks like the desert.

But. We are not in exile. We are in the Promised Land, where God got us.

And we have messed it up.

We took what we created with own hands and brains and let these dumb things distract us from the creator of all. We littered the landscape with idols, and we forgot why and how we came here in the first place. And in moments of uncertainty, we seem all the more tempted to make some new idols to fill the gaps in our understanding, to help us make sense of this new landscape.

Just think of all the magical things that you learned about in seminary. Or heard about at diocesan convention. The thing your bishop or your dean told you is going to make it rain, bring the young families back to the church, double your ASA. I warn you now: hold that stuff up to the light, and it if didn't sound like Jesus, you better watch out.

Pay heed, not homage. There are idols all around.

And you know what? You're about to join their number. All of you getting out of seminary - you smart, action-oriented, self-propelled people. I mean this really and truly - it says something great about you that you gave up the first week of summer to come here so I can yell at you and you can share a room with a stranger and some strange bugs. You all got that great new-clergy smell to you. Your faculty just love to smell you.

And someday soon you will hear that someone got your congregation a shiny new thing. There's a sense of new energy in this old church. Someone is going to

come in and extol the virtues of the shiny new thing. They'll say in a sweet voice that will sound so good: This is gonna make it rain. This is gonna bring the young families back to church. This is gonna double our ASA in one year.

And you're gonna be like, "Yesssssss, show me this miracle object!" But then you look around and there's nothing there. Nothing there but .... You. "Oh wait," you say, "did you mean *me*?"

You will be *IDOLIZED* by the church, I'm telling you. I am saying this out of personal experience - I really thought, I'm young, I'm female, I'm a little obnoxious, I clearly do not know what I am doing. But. True story: I'm trying to get my parish to figure out how to be innovative, to do things differently. To adhere to our tradition, but to innovate within it. Really groovy missional church stuff. And you know what they said? Well we did innovate - we hired you.

And I was like *we are all screwed*.

Being idolized sounds great, but it robs me of the chance to be human. I hope you were all listening when one of my colleagues told us a few days ago in a plenary that failure should be a part of ministry. Let me be clear: I do not wish for you high-stakes failure, but I do wish you room to fail. All of us have to be willing to fail in small matters, and to let each other fail, because the mistakes are where you'll learn the most. That's why we're here at Roslyn, after all! To learn from our own homiletic mistakes, from other people's mistakes.

Even failing in front of people publicly, even as you lead liturgy - well, if you can do that with grace and humility you can become an outward and visible sign of the redeeming love of God. You can trip over many things in this wilderness - but if you can stand up and laugh at yourself, you become an example of the abounding grace of God.

Thing about being idolized - It might feel a little seductive, but it sucks.

For a lot of us, too, being idolized is being fetishized. You got some melanin? You can bring in all the people who look like you! You're queer? You can bring in all the people who love like you. You have a family? Well, this certainly will bring the young families back!

I don't want my church to have hired me because I'm young and female. I want them to have hired me because I was, by far, the best candidate with the strongest resume who came in and impressed them.

I don't want to be an idol ... I want to be able to see, hear, eat and smell.

But I know I need to pay heed to that instinct people have to make me into an idol. Because people will ascribe a lot of power to me, even power I didn't not ask

for. And paying attention to that power is pretty important, lest it be abused. Lest respect turn to homage. Lest the prophet in the pulpit become an idol on the shelf

This what your CPE supervisor called pastoral authority - when you take the power people give you and give *juuuuuuuu-st* enough of it back. I hope you have developed some of that - you will have need for it.

And in fact, our ministry requires that we plant ourselves in the middle of the assembly. Church work requires that we root ourselves into the spiritual landscape that we take on the solidity of wood and stone. That we always be there, so people can depend on us as they make their way.

It behooves you to do that - to be solid and to be planted, to be that kind of a witness that marks the landscape.

But I beg of you - do not be an idol - be a signpost.

Signposts get rooted too. They get planted in a landscape, get down in there firmly... and then they point somewhere else.

Get yourself rooted in, planted real deep and solid, and then be a signpost. Plant, root yourself in the middle of that assembly, and point them onward. Point them somewhere else. Point to what really can save them, save the church, save the world. Point them to what *has already* saved them, created the church, redeemed the world. Point them to the horizon and then show them how to expand their thinking beyond that.

Point them to Jesus.

People are going to come, and they're going to gather around you, but if they come to you, you don't have to leave them there. You can point them onward, outwards, further. You can send them out, even as you stay behind to lock up. You can point them onward to a God who is merciful, who neither abandons nor destroys, above all a God who has not forgotten us, even if we have forgotten her.

In whatever landscape your ministry places you, be a signpost. Be a great big arrow pointing to the enormity of God and the greatness of God's power.

Keep on pointing, outwards and upwards, and maybe someday you'll deserve to be turned into a giant arrow too - maybe you really will get to be a bishop and wear a big pointy tall pointy hat, so you look like an arrow pointing up towards where we are to lift our hearts and thoughts. But let that hat just be the ornament, the final finishing on a life that points ever to Jesus.

# **SERMONS FROM SEMINARIANS ATTENDING PEP – FACULTY SELECTIONS**

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# David Paul Christian Carlisle, Church Divinity School of the Pacific

**Introductory Notes by Rev. Susan Ironside:** As a general rule, it is often problematic to try to preach a sermon utilizing all of the texts in one liturgy. This is particularly true in the Track 1 Lectionary, when the semi-continuous narrative in the Hebrew Bible is not thematically linked to the Gospel. This preacher, however, wrote this sermon for a parish where it was the practice and expectation for the preacher to speak to all the texts in a single sermon. This piece is a fine example of a successful sermon that utilizes all the lections without becoming muddled or overwhelming. The preacher holds the strands of the various narratives together deftly and highlights their commonalities and finds a central theme for preaching, even with a diversity of readings.

## David's Sermon

I wonder what the countryside looked like as Joseph appeared to his brothers in the distance, approaching to help them once again, not suspecting that his last dream had pushed their hatred over the edge, not imagining that they were even now plotting to murder him, their own little brother. I wonder if the hills in Dothan were green and blooming, the way the undergrowth is here now that the rains have come; if that is why his brothers brought Jacob's flocks to Dothan from Shechem. I wonder if it looked more the way the Sonora looks today, or more the way the Shenandoah Valley looked the last time I saw Charlottesville: lush green hills speckled with wildflowers of many colors. One thing I suspect: it was against a backdrop of stupefying beauty that these men planned violence against their brother just because they didn't like his dreams.

Not that Joseph comes across as a hero here. If we look in this story for a hero, a good guy to oppose to the villainous brothers, we come up empty-handed. There is Jacob, but he got this whole sibling rivalry started by making a big deal out of how much more he loved Joseph. Joseph, too, bad-mouths his brothers to his father, and can't, or won't, keep secret his dreams of his brothers' bowing down to him. Judah keeps Joseph alive, but only to save his own skin, and Reuben wants to save Joseph, but doesn't have the courage to stand up to his younger brothers' wickedness, so he plans to rescue him in secret. The Ishmaelites are human traffickers, so they obviously won't do, which leaves only God: and if the Psalmist's interpretation is correct, even God's actions don't make sense. God gets Joseph sent into slavery so that the sons of Israel can get fed in Egypt, but then they become enslaved in Egypt so that he can free them from Egypt, feed them in the desert without the Egyptians' help, and then bring them back to where they started out from in the first place?

Maybe the Psalmist is being too simplistic, though. Maybe the narrative

of divine deliverance that *Joseph* gets to spin his story into next week has its own logic, but for today, you might agree with me that it is frankly nauseating to suggest that anyone selling a person or a people into slavery is part of God's plan. Perhaps you find repugnant, as I do, the suggestion that the scars left on a family, a community, and a nation by that violence are divinely ordained. If so, you might ask with me *why do we read stories like this* when we are trying to proclaim the Good News and follow the Jesus movement? If we find something in Scripture that is morally abhorrent, are we required to recite it, and if so, what purpose can it serve, and what can we possibly mean by calling it *the Word of God*?

In the case of the story of Joseph, I think the contrast with the Gospel reading points us in the right direction. What can Joseph being sold into slavery possibly have to do with Jesus walking on water? The simplest answer is: "nothing." The point of Track 1 in the lectionary is to work through connected passages in the stories of the Hebrew Bible, and any connection between the Old Testament reading and the New is purely coincidental. Here, though, that coincidence points us to the purpose of reading such painful stories as we read today: between Joseph's brothers and Jesus, we see the extremes of what human beings are capable of, and why we fall short of one extreme and tend towards the other. Parts of Scripture are there not to suggest God's ordination of human failings, but rather to hold a mirror of God's truth up to us.

What does this mirror reveal? There is, in fact, a connection between Jesus' rebuke of Peter and our own visceral rebuke of Joseph's brothers, since the failing is the same, even if the degree and the effects are wildly different. Failing to walk on water is no great disappointment, not by our standards, anyway. Failing to put the lives of our sisters or brothers ahead of our own envy, jealousy, or greed is a very different matter. Yet both are rooted in the same shortcoming: lack of faith. We are all what Jesus calls Peter, people of little faith. Faith is what makes the difference between justification and condemnation, between sinking and walking on water, being put to shame and salvation. Now, the word *faith* and its relative *belief* has perhaps been overworked and misunderstood by our time. A better translation, one with a little less intellectual pietistic baggage, might be *trust*. We are people of little *trust*. It is why we can say *yes, I may be walking on water now, but what happens when I begin to sink...I will drown!* That is why we can say *yes, I may be well fed now, but how will I feel tomorrow? I cannot share my food with the hungry, or I may run out.* It is why we may even say *yes, my brother's dreams of power are only dreams now, but what happens when he is older? I had better stop him.* It is why, finally, we may say *yes, I have all that I need now, but I must have more, and cannot let anyone else have more, because I may one day run out, and then I will have to beg.*

The only antidote to this kind of thinking is trust: trust that the green or

rugged hills of Dothan and the home of Jacob have enough life and love for all his sons. Trust that the green hills of the Shenandoah and the rugged desert of the Sonora can hold enough for all people to flourish, that the blessing of those who have a little doesn't have to be the curse of those who have a little more. This is part of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and what little I know of this path I have learned from others, people like all of you, whose trust in the goodness of God brings you here today. As Paul suggests, we learn this faith, or better, *trust* by seeing how others trust, by witnessing their openness and the way it brings them true joy. I think that if you, like me, are searching for a response to the grasping greed and hatred in the world around us, we can scarcely find a better one than this: to strive to be such an example for others, showing them in lives of generosity and love the joy and peace found in the alternative way of *trust*. May we all be blessed to live such lives.

# Carrie Cabush, Princeton Theological Seminary – Anglican Studies

## Introductory Notes from Lisa Cressman:

“Sometimes I wonder why God didn’t just obliterate the darkness at the very start. Sometimes it feels like all we have is the dim light of a candle, giving us just enough light to see the next step when all we want is a great beam of light that would take all the shadows away.”

These few sentences in Carrie Cabush’s sermon raise a question, a fear even, so many of us carry: how can I trust there is enough light when darkness is overwhelming? Deftly weaving together the mysteries of darkness and light created at the beginning of the world with the various “lights” the members of the Trinity offer, Cabush illumines both. Without sentimentalizing or offering pat answers, this sermon opens possibilities and hope to see God’s light-- and hold it aloft for others to find their way back.

## Carrie’s Sermon

Trinity Sunday

*Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Matthew 28:16-20*

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In the beginning God spoke – even though there was no one to listen. In the midst of a dark, formless void, God said “Let there be light,” and there was light, and it was good.

You know, it makes sense that God’s first act in creation was to bring light into the universe. It’s almost instinctual. I remember a week when we went without power in our house. When the electricity finally returned, almost every light in the house turned on. Even though we knew the power was out, we could not override our instinct to flip the light switch every time we entered a room. We couldn’t let go of the hope that maybe *this time* the light would appear. Before we do anything else, we too reach for the light, because that light is essential to what we do and who we are.

Our reading from Genesis 1 this morning is the first of the two creation stories in our tradition. Neither story is meant to give us a history of the world, but an orientation for understanding who God is and how God acts in the world. Alone, neither story can give us a full witness of God’s character, just as no single member of the trinity can give us a complete picture of who God is. The second

creation story gives us Adam and Eve and the garden, but this story gives us light.

It's helpful to remember that this creation story was written in Babylonian captivity. After finally reaching the Promised Land and establishing their own kingdoms, Israel once again fell to a foreign power. Israel was in darkness...and what did they do? They wrote books about their origins – they kept their traditions alive in the hopes that those traditions would last until they could once again make it to the Promised Land. And so, just like God, Israel was surrounded by darkness and spoke...or rather, Israel *wrote*, and they hoped someone would listen. In the midst of darkness and despair Israel wrote about light. Walter Brueggemann reminds us this text is “a theological and pastoral statement addressed to a real historical problem.”<sup>4</sup> This creation story says just as much about the God the Israelites knew as the God they hoped would still deliver them.

You see, the Babylonians had their own creation story – *Enuma Elish*. In the Babylonian creation story, we read of gods at war with one another; gods troubled and in disorder. Out of this violent, bloody, and gruesome warfare the world and humankind are created. Human beings were created from the corpses of the gods who lost the battle, and they were created to *serve* the victorious gods. When the Israelites sat down to write their creation story they certainly knew of *Eunuma Elish*, but they also knew their God was different.

Unlike the chaos that haphazardly led to creation in the Babylonian story, the God of the Israelites created the world with order and intention. Our God spent the first three days creating the sky, the sea, and the land, and spent the next three days filling these spaces with stars, birds, sea creatures, animals, and human beings. Nothing is out of place or spontaneous. Not only that, our God created *sea monsters*. Did you catch that during the reading? Because I sure missed it the first time I read this text this week. But there it is – God created sea monsters. Just as children are afraid of monsters hiding in their closets, the ancient Israelites feared the monsters they could not seek lurking in the depths of the sea. And yet, God created them. God not only brings light, God has dominion over the deepest darkest fears God's people could dream up.

Talk about a counter-narrative. The God of the Israelites was not reckless or petty or self-serving like the gods of Babylon. The world we live in was crafted with care and at the end God declared it all good. In the midst of darkness, despair, and enslavement the Israelites proclaimed a God of grace, a God who so loved the world that we humans bare God's image – we are not spoils of war, but prized possessions. Human beings were not created to serve the gods – as they were in *Enuma Elish* – they were given dominion over the earth and all its inhabitants. We were blessed, and created to be co-creators with God.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, 25.

The story of creation – the story of God bringing light out of the darkness and order out of chaos – starts in Genesis 1, but it continues throughout scripture. And each member of the Trinity has their own relationship to that light, that witness.

God first appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush. On the very day the tabernacle is built, God surrounds it with fire to signify God’s presence and direct the Israelites to the next safe place to set up camp. And the prophets continually remind us: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Because they have, time and time again.

Jesus proudly proclaims *he is* the light of the world and he has come to fulfill the prophets. And Jesus is uniquely qualified for this mission because he understands what it is to walk through darkness and long for light.

And the Holy Spirit is the fire by which we are baptized. In last week’s story of Pentecost we heard of tongues like fire appearing among the disciples, marking the gift of the Holy Spirit. And in the here and now, we can be assured that it is the Holy Spirit – the breath of life – that keeps the flame burning, that keeps the light in our midst.

I think you get the point. Wherever God is present, wherever we meet the Creator, Son, or Holy Spirit in scripture we are sure to find light. God did not just bring light into the world, God continues to shine light and hope into the darkness – God continues to impose a limit on the darkness.<sup>5</sup>

But with this gift of light comes a responsibility. We are created in God’s image with dominion over the Earth – we are responsible for treating creation with just as much love and care as God did at the very beginning. And so, like God, we might do well to start by reflecting and sharing God’s light in the world. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells all those gathered there “*You are the light of the world.*”

In our gospel reading this morning, we hear Jesus gift his final charge to the disciples – go out and make disciples of all nations. In essence he is saying: spread the message that the triune God is the light of the world, and bear that light for those who have not seen it yet, so that they can find their way home. We are light bearers, and this is the good news we proclaim.

I spent the past week running a conference for Thistle Farms in Nashville. Thistle Farms is a residential recovery program for female survivors of prostitution, trafficking, addiction, and abuse. At the conference over 300 people gathered to learn about the best ways to help women heal from the trauma of life on the streets and become empowered survivor leaders. Every day at Thistle

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<sup>5</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, 21.

Farms we start by gathering in a circle, whether there are 10 or 300 of us, and we light a candle. We light a candle for the woman who is lost and cannot find her way home. No matter what, we light a candle.

At the beginning of the week, we came together to light the candle to celebrate the graduation of 7 women from the 2-year residential program. On that day, words came easy as we sang praises, laughed, and blessed the future of these incredible women. At the end of the week, we came together to light the candle in grief over the tragic death of a 7 year-old, the granddaughter of one of the women. On that day, there were no words, only the dim light of the candle that boldly proclaimed that since the beginning of time God has and will continue to bring light into the darkness. When all else fails, we begin just as God began – by shining light into the void of darkness.

To be honest, sometimes I wonder why God didn't just obliterate the darkness at the very start. Sometimes it feels like all we have is the dim light of a candle, giving us just enough light to see the next step when all we want is a great beam of light that would take all the shadows away. But Henri Nouwen urges us to “rejoice in the little light we carry,” to “trust that we will have enough light for the step that follows,” and allow ourselves to “be surprised at how far we go.”<sup>6</sup>

And so, on Trinity Sunday, I hope that you light a candle. I hope that the flame and the dim light enables you to sense the presence and power of the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whether you feel bathed in the glow of joy or are straining to see a flickering promise of hope – light the candle. Because even if you do not need the reminder that God is present, someone else does. Someone else may need you to provide the light that will lead them home. As a community of light bearers, it is our responsibility to share that light.

To close, I'd like to share the lyrics from a song by Beth Nielsen Chapman sang for us at the conference. The song is called “There is No Darkness,” and it is part of a children's album that aims to teach kids about space and science. How wonderful is it that this song can scientifically affirm that there is no part of the universe that does not contain some form of light? But as people of God, we can also proclaim there is no darkness because there is no place God cannot reach. The song goes

“When time began, when space was born,  
before the stars came out to shine, and the worlds were formed.  
Before the mountains and the Earth's blue sky,

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Nouwen, <http://henrinouwen.org/meditation/enough-light-for-the-next-step/>.

all the universe was filled with light.

There is no darkness, there is no night,

there is no place in Earth or space without the light.

The great illusion our eyes can't see,

there is no darkness for you and me.”

*Amen.*

# Chris Lee, General Theological Seminary

*Collect for the Third Sunday of Easter;*

*Luke 24:36b-48*

*Acts 3:12-19; 1*

*John 3:1-7; Psalm 4*

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*This story from Luke's Gospel is all about seeing, and not seeing, and about receiving a new kind of vision.*

Jesus visits the eleven remaining disciples at the end of what must have been a very long and strange Sunday. Emotions are running high. Rumors are swirling. Some women disciples had visited their Master's tomb and found it empty, guarded by angels; others claimed they had encountered him, risen from the dead. And then suddenly, there he is. Jesus himself—this man for whom they had sacrificed everything to follow, this man in whom they had placed not just their own hopes but the hopes of their entire nation, and then seen those hopes destroyed in the most disheartening and humiliating possible way—Jesus himself now stands before them, and greets them.

But the disciples cannot believe their eyes. They are afraid, they think he is a ghost. Even after Jesus shows them his hands and his feet, even after he asks for a piece of fish and eats it right there, in front of them, their joy is tainted with unbelief.

In fact, the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus is a running theme in the Gospels. Remember the road to Emmaus? Two disciples spend the better part of an afternoon with Jesus without recognizing him. It's not until they sit down to a meal, and Jesus breaks bread, that they finally see him for who he is.

So, why? Why is it so hard for the disciples to see Jesus, when he's standing, speaking, eating in their presence?

One day I was riding on the subway. Sitting across from me was a mother and her little boy, who looked to be about 5 or 6 years old. And this poor guy was in trouble. He was seriously upset about something, and being very very aggressive towards his mother. She was alternating between pleading with him, barking at him, and basically using every ounce of her strength to restrain him from attacking her.

And every passenger on that train, including me, could see this unfolding. They could see this mother and child locked in painful public combat. And as only straphangers can, all of us essentially made the choice to *mind our own business*.

Every passenger, except one. A woman who was sitting across from that mother and child looked at the two of them and saw something entirely different from the rest of us. And before I knew what was going on, the woman had crossed the subway car, held out the water bottle she was carrying, and asked the little boy: *Do you want this?* The look on his face was one of total astonishment. A wave of calm and quiet suddenly washed over him, even as his cheeks were still streaked with tears. He stuck the bottle in his mouth and kept it there, like it was the only thing that could hold back the tempest within him.

Meanwhile, the woman sat down next to the mother, embraced her, and said, over and over again. *I know it's hard, I know it's hard, but you're strong, you're going to be OK.* The mother nodded a few times, and then broke down and began to weep into the woman's shoulder.

How could that woman see what no one else on the subway car could see? There was Jesus, sitting right in front of us, and nobody recognized him!

*Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him.* This phrase, from the Collect for the Third Sunday of Easter, is a beautiful metaphor. But what if it's more than that? What's the connection between our vision and our faith?

Jesus associates the disciples' disbelief with a certain unsteadiness of heart. When the Emmaus disciples can't seem to make sense of the events of that day, Jesus calls them *slow of heart*; and they themselves exclaim *how their hearts burned* as they walked and talked with Jesus, as if their hearts were bursting with a truth which their eyes were blind to.

Jesus then addresses the eleven disciples' confusion and fear by asking *why do doubts arise in your hearts?* Jesus seems to be saying that the quality of our vision depends on the condition of our hearts.

So what do we call this deeper kind of seeing, this vision of the heart? And more importantly, how in the world can we have it?

We modern Westerners have trained ourselves to associate thinking and perception exclusively with our brains, and to see the heart as solely the source of our emotions. And yet within Christianity, especially in the Orthodox tradition, there has been a consistent practice of *putting the mind in the heart*. Through devotions like the Jesus Prayer, or Prayer of the Heart, Eastern Christians have been refining this technique for centuries.

And it's absolutely crucial to see that this is not some esoteric, mystical teaching—it forms the absolute core of Jesus' message. For proof of this we need look no further than the Beatitudes, where Jesus says:

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

It turns out that the eyes of faith are in our hearts. To see Jesus, you're going to need more than your eyes. When Jesus opens up the Scriptures and explains to the disciples once again the meaning of his passion, crucifixion and resurrection, he tells them *You are witnesses to these things*. So *witness*—witness is the name we can give this kind of vision, this seeing with our hearts.

To be this kind of witness is to be more than a passive bystander. To witness is to testify, as an active, dynamic source of compassion in the world. We can make the distinction even stronger when we remember that the Greek word for witness is *marterus*—from which we get a word we're very familiar with today: *martyr*.

Martyrdom is nothing more or less than Christian witness. And this kind of witness, this kind of martyrdom, is available to all of us. It certainly doesn't require a dramatic and violent death. It can be as simple as looking across a subway car and seeing a mother in deep distress, and testifying to the love of Christ by reaching out to her in pure compassion. This sense of martyrdom is not the unique gift of the saints. It's the inheritance, and the calling, of every Christian.

What kind of world would we see if we committed ourselves to practicing this vision of the heart, this life-giving, light-shedding, truth-dwelling witness? My prayer is that we all learn to embrace this kind of martyrdom, this way of seeing which gives us the strength, and the courage, to open the eyes of our faith, and behold him.

# **“Who Are My Mother and Brothers?” – Courtney Jones, The Iona Collaborative**

## **Sermon for the Third Sunday After Pentecost – Proper 5 – Year B**

As a teenager, Ruth Coker Burks received a bizarre inheritance. Ruth’s mother had gotten into a huge argument with her own brother and vowed that she would never see him again. Ruth’s mother didn’t even want to be buried in the same cemetery as her brother, so she quietly bought 262 plots in the cemetery where the rest of the family was buried. I repeat: Ruth’s mother bought an entire cemetery in Hot Springs, Arkansas so that -- even in death -- she would never again have to claim familial ties to her brother.

Ruth’s mother took her to the cemetery and sarcastically joked, “Ruth, someday all of this will be yours.” Teenage Ruth thought to herself, “Great. What the hell am I going to do with a cemetery?”

In our Gospel story today, Jesus and his newly called disciples have been going from town to town healing the sick. Crowds have begun to follow them wherever they go -- sometimes even making it impossible for Jesus and the disciples to grab a bite to eat. What’s more: Jesus’ recent Sabbath-healings have attracted the attention of the religious authorities in Jerusalem, who have sent scribes nearly 100 miles to question Jesus and his motivations.

Jesus’ family is concerned. There are murmurings around town about what Jesus is doing and saying. Some folks are saying Jesus has a demon. Some think he’s lost his mind.

Jesus’ family comes to him to “restrain him.” Don’t hear me saying that Jesus’ mother and brothers are bad. I think they are probably afraid. Afraid of how people are talking. Afraid of what might happen to Jesus.

Jesus is teaching in a house when his mother and brothers arrive. The house is packed and they can’t get in, so they get some people to tell some people to tell Jesus that they are there.

These messengers say to Jesus: “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.”

And Jesus replies: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Now: depending on your family background, you may hear Jesus’ answer here

as super cold and dismissive. Not gentle. Not good news.

But I don't think Jesus offers this statement as a condemnation of his blood family. I think Jesus is a good teacher, and he realizes he's sitting in a teachable moment. Jesus, as rabbi, takes the opportunity to redefine family.

To make the idea of family less tribal.

Less tied to blood.

More expansive.

More reflective of the vastness of God.

In her mid-20s, with young children, Ruth Coker Burks found out that her friend had cancer. Over the course of the weeks following her friend's diagnosis, Ruth spent a LOT of time in the hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas. To get to her friend's hospital room, Ruth had to pass a room with a red bag fully enclosing the door. The door had a giant "DO NOT ENTER" warning on it. Ruth passed the door almost daily. For some reason, Ruth was drawn to that red door. It haunted her. She began to watch the medical professionals deal with room with the red door. Doctors would bargain with each other not to go in, trading cash, trading on-call hours. Nurses drew straws to for who would "have to" go in. The losing nurse would beg for a "best two out of three." The room would often get "accidentally skipped" on rounds. This all seemed bizarre to Ruth, but it was the early 1980s. The patient inside the room had a terrifying disease, known at the time as "Gay Related Immune Disorder." The disease would in short time be renamed Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome -- AIDS.

Author Jennifer Wright, in her ironically named book *Get Well Soon*, says that plagues are a "solvent for relationships" -- which is to say, people's deep fear of incurable diseases can dissolve even the closest relationships.

Fear is a solvent for courage.

It's a solvent for our bond to other people.

Fear is a solvent for love --

Fear makes us unable to see the image of God in each other.

Perhaps, in addition to inheriting a cemetery, Ruth inherited her mother's stubbornness. The red door finally got the best of her. Despite the warnings, despite the palpable fear in the hospital, she just knew she had to go in. Inside was a very sick, shadow of a young man. His name was Jimmy. Jimmy was

crying out for his mother.

When Ruth came out of the room, the nurses were beside themselves with fear: “You didn’t go into that room, did you?!? You can’t be in there!”

Ruth calmly replied, “Well. Yeah. I did. And he wants his mother.”

The nurses laughed. “Honey, his mother isn’t coming. He’s been here 6 weeks and no one has come.”

Stubborn Ruth persisted until the nurses gave her the phone number for Jimmy’s mother. She called his mother, and as soon as Ruth said the dying man’s name, the mother hung up the phone. Ruth called back and said, “Look, if you hang up on me again, I’ll run his obituary in your hometown paper. I will list the cause of death.”

That kept the mother on the phone. Her son was a sinner, the woman explained to Ruth. She wouldn’t come. She wouldn’t collect the body. As far as the woman was concerned, she had no son.

Ruth hung up the phone and braced herself for having to break the painful news to the young man.

When she walked back into Jimmy’s room, he looked up and said, “Oh mama! Mama! I knew you would come.” He stretched out his hand to Ruth.

Ruth knew what to do. She took his hand, and said, “I’m here, honey. I’m here.” She sat with him for the next 13 hours until he passed away.

“Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

God loved Jimmy in that red room, so God sent Ruth.

God loved Ruth sitting in that hallway, and God drew her to Jimmy.

See, this is what Jesus is talking about. God’s expansive love can’t be contained in just biological bonds. That was good news for Jimmy. Good news for Ruth. Good news for a whole bunch of us in here.

Ruth provided him a mother,

Jimmy provided her a son.

And not only a son, but a vocation. Jimmy didn’t just die . . . his death opened Ruth’s eyes to what God was calling her to do.

When Ruth inherited the family cemetery, she never imagined that there'd be a time when parents refused to bury their children. No one would transport Jimmy's body. Ruth called every crematorium within a hundred mile radius before one finally agreed to cremate Jimmy. No pastor or priest in town would perform the funeral. She dug the grave herself with posthole diggers, and said a prayer. She buried Jimmy's ashes with her family -- in fact, she buried him right on top of her father's grave so that he would always have a family.

Over the next decade, Ruth Coker Burks ministered to over 1,000 people dying of AIDS. Ruth provided many of them with hospice care in her home. She shuttled her kids to school and shuttled dying men to their appointments. She ran her own underground pharmacy in her basement. When a young man had wasted away to 55 pounds and was too weak to walk, Ruth carried him. Ruth ended up burying 43 AIDS patients in her family cemetery.

Who are my mother and brothers? Here they are. My mothers and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God.

Ruth Coker Burks is a living saint. Her brave life shows us the Good News that even in our darkest hour, God will make provision for us. Her stubborn love shows us a glimpse of the stubborn and radically expansive love of God. And her willingness to be family to the family-less shows us how to be the Church – how to be the family of God.

But, before you go putting Ruth on a pedestal – before you go thinking that she was some sort of exception, and you will never do something so weighty as she's done . . .

Ruth Coker Burks didn't go to the hospital that day to be a mother to 1,000 AIDS patients.

She went to the hospital to visit a sick friend.

It was a small act of love.

Ruth didn't walk into that room with the red door thinking that someday people would call her "a living saint". She just went in because it seemed like the right thing to do.

May we have the grace to see family when others are being it.

May we have the grace to be family when others are needing it.

Who are my mother and brothers? Here they are. My mothers and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God.

# “Demons” – Sermon by Edie Wakevainen, Ph.D., The Iona Collaborative

*Matthew 9:35 – 10:23*

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Jesus gave his disciples authority to cast out unclean spirits and heal people. Then Jesus sent them out to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, *cast out demons.*”<sup>1</sup>

Cast out demons. That gives us pause. Today demon possession is an unscientific theory of the etiology of problem thinking and behavior. Mental disorders, like physical illnesses, have physical causes. Patients who claim demon possession are dismissed as delusional. Skeptical about the supernatural, mental health personnel rely on standard, evidence-based treatments. Even so, no treatment helps everyone. Could this be because we fail to acknowledge the existence of demons?

We may not want to believe that demons are real, but we have all read in scripture stories of individuals being delivered from demons. And there’s our Baptismal Covenant and its three renunciations. We renounce “Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God...the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God...and all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The 2003 *Book of Occasional Services* includes a statement “Concerning Exorcism” which refers to Jesus’ use of prayer to deliver individuals from demons. It directs anyone who needs such intervention to inquire of their bishop via the parish priest.<sup>3</sup>

And some in the mental health community concur with our liturgical resources. Consider Dr. Richard Gallagher, a board-certified psychiatrist and practicing Catholic from New York. For over 25 years he has “helped clergy from multiple denominations and faiths to filter episodes of mental illness--which represent the overwhelming majority of cases--from, literally, the devil’s work.” He continues in this consulting work because he is committed to helping relieve the pain of tormented souls--referring them for spiritual help when disordered thinking and behavior are more than mental illness.<sup>4</sup>

These people are dealing with demons that rob them of their humanity, leading them into thoughts and actions that others find terribly disturbing. They are the focus of the second Baptismal Covenant renunciation: “The evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.”<sup>5</sup> Remember the Gerasene

demoniac in Mark's gospel? Demons took over his identity. They answered when Jesus asked the man his name. He acted like a tormented soul bent on self-destruction. When the demons left him, he was a changed person. He sat quietly at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.<sup>6</sup> Today, we are stopped in our tracks by the rare stories that hint of sudden deliverance from evil powers: An alcoholic who never takes another drink or an addict who never craves drugs again.

In our arrogance, we may look down on people who suffer like this. But not so fast. Remember the third renunciation. Each of us wrestles with demons in the form of "sinful desires that draw us from the love of God."<sup>7</sup> Is it an inner critic, a voice that tells you that you are unworthy or you can't do it or you don't belong? Is it a struggle with pride that keeps you from admitting weakness and asking for help? Is it anxiety, a constant stream of thoughts and worries that rob you of enjoying the present? Is it addiction--a thing or an activity that you use obsessively to fill a void or ease pain? These do not sound like things to be desired. But I invite you to consider them as desires, due to their common focus on the self, a self turned inward to hide from others and from God.

My own persistent demon is anxiety. I worry to an extent that far outmatches the realities of my life. As a young child, I remember waking up in the middle of the night to look out my window for my father's car--if it were there, I would know that he got home safely from a late meeting. And that's just one tiny example. I may not resemble a New Testament-era demoniac on the outside, but I think my worries, left unchecked, could brew turmoil on the inside. Medication helps with biochemical imbalances but what helps me most is asking God to direct my focus onto God and others and away from myself. =

I renounce the focus on self that keeps me dwelling in thoughts and worries that rob me of joy in the present. I ask God to help me direct my focus back to God and others. Instead of being mired in thinking I'm not good enough, I hear God's call to intentional interim ministry. Instead of worrying that I don't measure up to my professor colleagues, I devote my energy to loving my students and helping them succeed. Instead of struggling to be accepted in a group, I reach out to others at the margins to make sure they feel welcomed and included.

The anxious four-year-old who woke up in the dark worried about her father's safety understands that she is beloved of her God. In love, God says to focus on me, child, and on my other children. Risk being countercultural in this self-focused society. It sounds simple, but I am here to tell you that we cannot do it alone. The Good News is that we don't have to! We are empowered by God who created, redeemed, and sustains us. Remember the promise in Zechariah: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit says the Lord of hosts."<sup>8</sup> May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 10:8.

<sup>2</sup>The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 302.

<sup>3</sup>The Book of Occasional Services (2003), p. 174.

<sup>4</sup>Gallagher, Richard. "As a Psychiatrist, I Diagnose Mental Illness. Also, I Help Spot Demonic Possession." The Washington Post. July 01, 2016.

<sup>5</sup>The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 302.

<sup>6</sup>Mark 5:1-20.

<sup>7</sup>The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 302.

<sup>8</sup>Zechariah 4:6.

# Elizabeth Harden, The School of Theology, University of the South - Sewanee

## Introductory Notes by Rev. Kate Spelman

*I am a sucker for good writing, and Elizabeth's is a lovely and well-written sermon. Of particular note are her uses of series of threes. Humans are pre-programmed to hear sets of threes as solid, sure, and logical. (This is why the old sermon format of three points and a poem, while now almost a joke in homiletics, is actually quite useful for some preaching circumstances!) See, for example, the seventh paragraph of this sermon, where Elizabeth describes the covenant God makes in this Jeremiah passage. By repeating the phrase "... a law that..." and then a one-word descriptive ("powerful... incredible ... unimaginable") While conveying the enormity of what is at stake with her adjectives, Elizabeth's series of three makes this law seem concrete. Later, in the conclusion, we have another series of three when she repeats the phrase "Lift up your heart" from the Eucharistic service. After the first two, our ears yearn to hear the third - and when we do it, the sermon seems full and complete. The security and solidity of a series of three conveys the consolation of Jeremiah beautifully.*

*When you write, pay attention to your series. If expressing consolation, certainty, or assurance - think about using a series of three, as Elizabeth does. (If, however, you'd like to make things sound wild and illogical, go for a series of four or more!) This simple literary tool can add depth to your preaching and leave your hearers or readers with a sense of completeness.*

## Elizabeth's Sermon

*(readings for Lent 5B)*

*Jeremiah 31:31-34*

*John 12:20-33*

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A lot of my friends have tattoos. One has her college graduation date on her shoulder. Another has the word "believe" on her wrist, and an inspiring quote on her forearm. My brother-in-law has the words "Made in England" on the back of his calf, which is actually true. Some tattoos recall accomplishments, fun times, or events we want to remember. Others are commemorations of seasons of our lives that changed us, or another person whose life and love we wish to

remember always.

I don't have any tattoos, but, like most people, I have a few scars. One is entirely trivial -- a tiny line on my knee from discovering a shard of glass on the playground when I was a child. Another, though, is from a c-section. It's a scar that was painful in the making, but now just a silent reminder of the day my beautiful son joined our lives. Whether in the form of tattoos, scars, or other marks, our bodies keep records of the lives we've lived.

Even our muscles have memory, by which they can recall motions we've practiced over and over again, like playing the piano or riding a bicycle. There is research being done now that shows that the body remembers in other ways, too. We now know that childhood memories, especially of trauma, are stored in the tissue of the body, even when the mind has forgotten.

Our experiences of joy, pain, and everything in between are carried around with us, not just in our minds, but in the very body that moves and breathes and speaks and loves and lives in the world. Our bodies tell the story of where we've been, who we are, and how we got here. Our bodies remember.

When the prophet Jeremiah addresses the people of Israel, he is speaking to a people who have forgotten who they are, and his task is first, to help them remember, and second, to point them forward to the day that forgetting will no longer be possible.

So Jeremiah reminds the people that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and made a covenant to be their God, and they his people. Part of that covenant was God giving them his law- which to us, may not sound like much of a gift. We may even think it sounds oppressive or controlling. But if we look carefully at the law given to the Israelites, despite its quirks and oddities that no doubt have as much to do with our differences in culture as anything else, we find a thread of justice running through it all, and a thread of love, and mercy.

The law that God gives them is a law that, if followed, means that no one goes hungry. That's powerful. A law that, if followed, means no one is ruined by insurmountable debt. That's incredible. A law that, if followed, means justice is for everyone, even the poor, the weak, and the stranger. That's unimaginable.

For all the laws that govern our land, and other lands today, not one human code of law has managed to do those three simple things, and yet here it is, given by God, a beautiful intention for the people he has called into loving relationship with him, and somehow, they have forgotten.

And lest we judge or blame them for forgetting, I think we have to acknowledge that we've all forgotten at times who we really are, and who we are called to be. Yet God always finds a way to remind us.

The message from Jeremiah is not to make the people feel bad, but to give them hope. This is what he says to the people, that a new day is coming, that God will put his law within them, and write it on their hearts.

Like a tattoo, like a scar, like a memory written into their very DNA, God wants his people to know who they are, to know their story, and that they are never beyond his love.

We hear these words today as the prelude to the Eucharist. In a few minutes, our priest will speak the familiar invitation, "Lift up your hearts," and we will respond, "We lift them to the Lord." And in that invitation and response, I think we are asked to consider a few things.

First, what is already written on our hearts today, right now? We are all carrying stories with us, that are more than mere memories of joy and pain, of wisdom or foolishness. We're also carrying all the things those experiences have taught us to believe about ourselves. Whoever you are, whatever your story -- Lift up your heart.

Second, how have we too forgotten who we are? In some way, all of have at times forgotten that we are beloved children of God, and in those moments, in losing sight of our own belovedness, have acted in ways perhaps hurtful to others or ourselves. For all of those times -- Lift up your heart.

Finally, what is God promising to write on our hearts today? A law of love for someone who is difficult to love? Forgiveness of ourselves for things we've failed to do or to be? A promise of hope, that we will never be outside the love of God? Yes, for all of these things, and more -- Lift up your heart.

For it is in the Eucharist, we offer ourselves with the bread and wine, and receive it back again, blessed, as the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, that the law of God -- the love of God -- is written ever more deeply on our hearts, carried in our very bodies, as we move and breathe and speak and love and live as the body of Christ in this world.

# Lauren Kay, Seminary of the Southwest

## Introductory Notes – The Rev. Kate Spelman

*Lauren's sermon uses a modern-day parable - a short story that offers a much deeper theological payoff than we might initially hear. Like the best of Jesus's parables, it also initially misdirects the reader/hearer. Our natural assumption is that we know who the "least of these" are, especially when it comes to Native Americans ... but Lauren's story of the indigenous youth's leadership at Standing Rock causes us to reconsider all of our assumptions. From a political standpoint, what she does is very powerful: we so often see young people and Native Americans merely as passive victims; here, they are agents of reconciliation, acting much more mature than the adults in this story.*

*There's nothing I find more annoying than a preacher who casts themselves as the hero or savior in a sermon! (You can use a story like this, but change it so that "a friend" is the protagonist.) By expressing her own surprise at this turn of events, Lauren shows her own vulnerability and invites us into wondering with her, "Who are the least of these?" Repeating this question and leaving it unanswered should challenge and disturb us - again, just like the best of Jesus's parables!*

## **"Who Are the Least of These?" Lauren's Sermon**

*Gospel Lesson: Matt. 25:31-46*

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Originally preached Nov. 26, 2017 at St. George's Episcopal Church, Austin, TX

*"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

Who are the least of these?

It would be easy to take this passage and make an illustration about the importance of caring for the poor, helping the marginalized, the disadvantaged, and leaning into the gospel for the oppressed. Indeed, often, that is how this portion of the gospel is used. Who among us is hungry, thirsty, without clothing, and in prison? Who among us are the strangers who need welcome, and the sick who need healing? Surely they are the poor, the disadvantaged, and the marginalized.

But what if the least of these are not so easily recognized?

One year ago, November of 2016, six others from seminary and I traveled up to North Dakota to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation to learn from and

bear witness to the movement opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline, a crude oil pipeline being constructed across a major water source for the residents of Standing Rock and millions more downstream.

Beyond the environmental implications, what drew so many indigenous tribes and supporters to Standing Rock was the violation of and disregard for the rights and lives of the natives who lived there. The pipeline went through unceded treaty land. In the path of construction, contractors dug up and destroyed sacred sites and objects with no recourse.

The water protectors standing up against the pipeline were brutally attacked multiple times, often while in prayer. They were arrested, had numbers written on their arms with permanent marker and held in cages which resembled dog kennels. They were attacked with dogs, pepper spray, CS gas, sound and water cannons, rubber bullets, and concussion grenades.

The counties in which Standing Rock is located are among the ten poorest counties in the nation. Residents struggle for access to healthcare and education, and battle high rates of alcoholism, addiction, suicide and domestic violence. Many live in food deserts, with low access to fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods.

Who are the least of these?

Now on the outside, one might say that the residents and water protectors at Standing Rock, in this narrative, are the least of these. Certainly, Christians are called to care for and support the poor and the oppressed in places like Standing Rock. Yet to leave the narrative there is to leave it lacking.

In the wake of one of the most violent attacks on water protectors last year, Morton County Sheriff's office put out a call for snacks and sodas for the officers and security personnel on the front line. I recall harsh judgment and criticism across online commentaries, as people derided them for asking for snacks while they attacked peaceful protestors. But Indigenous youth responded, carrying large plastic totes full of the requested items to the sheriff's office and leaving them with prayer for law enforcement.

Throughout water protector camps, prayer and volunteer service were the language of the land. As much as we prayed for pipeline construction to halt, sacred sites to be spared, and indigenous rights to be respected, we prayed for those who attacked us. Water protectors often could be seen extending peace and prayer to officers in riot gear across razor wire or through rounds of pepper spray and rubber bullets.

When the temptation for snark, bitterness, or slander of law enforcement arose, indigenous elders, youth, and other leaders in the movement reminded us that

those who opposed, attacked, and oppressed us were still our siblings, and we must always strive for peace and reconciliation with our family.

Who are the least of these?

Today's gospel lesson began with the separation of sheep from goats. The sheep are placed at the right while the goats are placed at the left. The sheep are those who responded to God's call to care for their siblings, while the goats did not. The sheep inherit the kingdom while the goats are sentenced to eternal punishment.

Now goats are not inherently to be associated with the negative. Sheep and goats often were shepherded in the same herd. The shepherd separated them on cold nights as the goats' short, coarse hair required shelter for warmth. Goats are more temperamental than docile sheep, but in Jesus' time, they were not seen as any less valuable.

Some believe that the shepherds separated them out also for grazing, as the willful goats could be bullies, sending sheep to the right, and goats to the left. But after grazing, the herd would once again come together, under the care and guidance of the shepherd.

Who are the least of these?

On recent Sundays, we've heard some of Matthew's judgment texts, the kind which carry with them eternal punishment, and being cast into the outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are difficult texts, especially for those of us who want to believe in the goodness of Christ, and a kingdom for all people.

But in these texts Jesus doesn't hold back on judgment of the nations, and judgment of those who believe they are righteous, yet are more slaves to the empire than they are servants of God.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This feast day showed up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, founded by Pope Pius XI to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly supremacy, such as was claimed at that time by fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini.

Reflecting on the experience at Standing Rock, where those in prayer out of concern for their siblings and for their Mother Earth were met by violence at the hands of employees of the government in the interest of a corporation and the almighty dollar, it seems fitting to remember them on this day, and to remember to whom we truly pledge our allegiance.

Still, in light of our gospel lesson, may we be moved to realize that the least of these may not be so easily recognized. Good questions to ask may be:

Who do I have a hard time loving today?

How might they be the least of these?

It is not our job to separate the goats from the sheep, but it is our job to love them, even when they are in the place of our enemies.

So I will not attempt to separate the goats from the sheep among the law enforcement and water protectors at Standing Rock. We all have our struggles in knowing how and why we claim our allegiance in movements such as that against the Dakota Access Pipeline. However I will submit to you that the least of these could be found on both sides of the conflict, just as they can be found in the poorest towns and the richest suburbs alike.

*“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

As we remember what it means to be servants of Christ this day, I would like to close with the collect for Christ the King Sunday from All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California:

*“Most Gracious God, who in Jesus of Nazareth showed us an alternative to the kings, queens and emperors of history, help us to revere and emulate Jesus’ leadership: To love, and to seek justice for all people. Help us to recognize the true grandeur and life-changing power based in loving you and all of our neighbors. In Christ Jesus with you and the Holy Spirit, may we co-create a world ruled not through domination, but in that radical and all-powerful compassion and love.”  
Amen.*

# Michael Corey, Iona Collaborative, Diocese of Connecticut

## Introductory Notes by The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith.

*The following sermon by Mike Corey is an excellent example of a narrative sermon. Mike tells a great story, and is a fine story-teller himself. The original version of the sermon had an ending that was over-simplistic. To Mike's credit he rewrote the ending prior to the conclusion of the conference, which made it a much better sermon.*

## ***“Bouvet and the Rainbow”: Michael’s Sermon***

First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; Mark 1:9-25

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**In the name of God who creates life,**

**In the name of the Savior who loves life,**

**In the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.**

**Amen**

The story of Noah we heard today got me to thinking about an adventure that is in progress, it is still being written. About a month ago twenty hearty souls, a couple of whom are friends of mine, set out on the trip of a life time. The group converged upon Punta Arenas in southern Chile for an expedition to the remote Norwegian island of Bouvet.

Bouvet is about as far from any form of civilization as you can get. It is a speck of land, mostly ice, a little rock and a lot of birds, about 1600 miles south south-west of the Republic of South Africa. In an average year this remote island will only see about five days of sunshine, and temperatures rarely climb above freezing. Despite its remoteness and harsh environment it occasionally draws explorers and scientists willing to take the risk and make the trip.

The trip must be done by boat initially, and then helicopter, as there are no harbors or even a shoreline to make a landing on. These twenty souls embarked on this journey, a journey made at great personal cost and potentially great risk.

The crossing to the island took twelve days. Initially the weather was good, or as good as could be expected in the area of the roaring forties and furious fifties. However, a few days into the voyage several low pressure systems caught up with their boat the *Betanzos* battering them with winds as high as 45 knots and swells of 20 feet or more. One day the description of the weather was “mixed up and angry seas” the next it read “confused seas”. The crew was faced with sea sickness and, as one described it, “shifting migration patterns of gear and furniture”.

On January 31 they arrived off the coast of Bouvet and made anchor. The winds continued at 35 knots and the temperature hovered around the freezing mark. There was no way they could launch the helicopters to the island, all they could do was wait out the weather with their goal in sight.

After four days the weather showed no signs of letting up, and to add to their situation one of the engines on the *Betanzos* developed problems. The team, who had come from eight countries, and had been planning this expedition for 10 years, and had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the effort, now faced a decision that was heartbreaking. They had to make the call to abort the effort and make their way back to Punta Arenas. Unfortunately the problem with the engine was more critical than expected, and they had to make for the nearest safe port, Cape Town. On February 5<sup>th</sup> they were underway, at an average speed of 6 knots. Just yesterday morning word arrived they made port in Cape Town setting foot on dry land after a total of 31 days at sea.

It isn't the amount of time they spent at sea that drew my mind to Noah, but two things; first the sense of purpose of the journey and second the conditions experienced along the way.

The Bouvet expedition clearly had a goal in mind for their journey, but we don't really think about what Noah must have thought about the deluge he faced, one with the intent to destroy humankind. God had found Noah and his family to be the last righteous ones on earth and had sent the rain to wipe out the evil that had overtaken the world. And not just any rain! In Rabbinic wisdom, or Haggadah, God had sent the rain first through the hell of Gehenna before it fell to earth, burning the skin of those it fell on. Adrift in this hellish flood Noah must have thought “What next, where does it go from here?”

The human mind is an amazing thing! Noah spent a lot of time on the ark and eventually he must have come up with the vision of how this all would end; and as the goal became as clear as the goal for those on the *Betanzos*, he worked towards it. What it was we do not know, but he must have had an end in mind.

We too are a lot like the crew on their way to Bouvet and Noah. A few days ago we were at our Punta Arenas, we were with Noah building the Ark – we were

at our port of departure for Lent – Ash Wednesday. As we begin our journey through Lent towards our goal, Easter, we find ourselves taking on spiritual practices. Perhaps we pray more, or abstain from meat on Fridays. Maybe we take part in a structured Lenten study. Then we start digging deeper realizing that we need to make room inside for God if we're going to do this right. We start looking at the things we need to shed, our wrongdoings, our sin. We see the need for repentance and forgiveness as our sins emerge like the swells of the sea chasing after the boat...our soul. What started as a smooth journey towards Easter is getting rougher; we become aware of how serious this storm is that keeps us from God.

And then there is that migratory gear and furniture that isn't tied down! The hellish rain that stings and burns as it hits us; the sin around us, the evil in the world.

In the last few days, we were once again hit with news of another school shooting. As we, along with folks all around the country and in Parkland, try to come to grips with an evil that is beyond imagination, we find ourselves relating more to the world Noah found himself in; a world overtaken by evil and death. The image of a parent consoling another, tears streaming down, the ashen cross on her forehead, brought home to many of us the power of evil in the world. The evil that stands between us and God seems a fierce tempest.

The storm does not let up as we approach our goal, or what we think is our goal. Amid the fear, uncertainty and doubt found in the storm we realize there is a better goal, God's goal. We find strength to proclaim "We will not be abandoned on this island" – "We will not die on this ark" – "We will not let the love of God and God's goodness be overtaken by evil". But how? How do we make such claims in the midst of the storm?

We have reached the point of our journey where it isn't a thin place between us and God, but an encounter with God. We have reached the point where the water that surrounds us, crashes over us in swells, and nearly wipes us off the face of the earth...has become Holy. It has become promise. The water has become Covenant.

It is hard to hear God amid the clamor of the storm, but there it is for us to see, the sign that God gave Noah, this sign found in the rainbow; droplets of water, once part of the storm, signifying a promise of love, peace, friendship and joy. And for us, this Holy Covenant, our relationship with God through Christ lives out in our Baptism. It is through the water of Baptism that we are forgiven and strengthened to make it out of the storm and to the resurrection. In Baptism, we make statements of belief, but don't forget we also make statements of doing, building up God's Kingdom by persevering against evil, proclaiming the good news, seeking Christ in others, and striving for justice and peace. We can make

the claim because we are doers for God. We are participants in the heavenly kingdom. We are heirs of Christ strengthened by the Holy Spirit; all through the hope of resurrection. We still did not make it to the island, all that we know may still be lost, the lives taken from us will not be given back, but take heart, God's promise is with us before and during the tempest and we are called to emerge from the storm Holy and blessed.

And take heed to not get lost in your own storm. You will encounter others caught up in midst of the gale, others trying to make it to the island. You will meet those who have lost everything. You will meet those who mourn the death of innocent lives.

God's covenant with you, that rainbow, is found in your heart to welcome the weary back to dry land, to bring a new beginning after the devastation, and to bring peace to those who mourn.

## Shane Spelmeyer, Nashota House

*“For I am but a sojourner with you; a wayfarer, as all my forbears were.” (Psalm 39:14)*

Throughout scripture we find examples of God calling people out of their present context; inviting them beyond familiar horizons into the uncertainty of the unknown.

- In the story of Noah we find God calling a man and his family to “sailaway” from impending doom, lest *they too* be washed away in the floodwaters.
- In Abraham we have someone being called away from his city, his life, his *father*; having been promised that his descendants would go on to be a Light unto the whole world (as numerous as the stars in the sky).
- In the Exodus we hear of a people who have become trapped – *stuck* under the rule of mortals who claim to be “god” – and of how the True God (of Heaven and Earth) *shook the very foundations of nature* so that God’s people might be free to continue the journey begun by their ancestors.

This image of the journey – of being “called out” into the unknown by a Divine Voice – is one of the most enduring human ideas across time and place. We find it writ large in the stories and mythologies across the world; famously “distilled” in the work of Joseph Campbell and his “Hero’s Journey.”

Campbell presents the Journey as the “monomyth” – a common thread woven into stories throughout the world; each story being unique to its time and place, but with similarities popping up in stories across other cultures:

- The not-yet-hero is called by Fate to leave her home and cross the threshold of the unknown.
- She enters the wilderness to be challenged and tempted by gods and monsters.
- The hero undergoes a kind of death; sometimes literal but always *real* in the sense that they are forever cut off from their old way of *being*.

- The hero is then experiences a kind of resurrection and presses on towards further triumph and transformation.
- After having finally reached a state of Divine Union, the hero eventually returns home, newly empowered and with newfound wisdom to aid her people in their own transformation.

While today's great stories (in movie form) often end with the climactic triumph of the hero, that journey home is often just as problematic as the initial call to adventure. Having been forever changed by our experiences of God on the road – out in those Wild places beyond urban experience – the “civilized” world to which the sojourner returns seems *different*. It is indeed the home they left, but having looked into the Wild Face of God, they no longer see the world in the same way – the journey has given them new eyes.

To the people who never left, the returned traveler seems to have shorted a few circuits upstairs. The person no longer seems bound by the constraints of ordinary society and even begins to challenge settled truths.

This could be the story of any prophet, of any man or woman of God who has stepped beyond ordinary. Having been drawn across the threshold of everyday experience, they are gifted with the Revelation of the Untamable God – but upon their return their message is often challenged on the basis of “status quo” and rejected (until it's too late).

After running from the guilt of murder, Moses eventually found himself in those wild reaches at the edge of human civilization. In the shadow of Mount Sinai, he is drawn into the Wild Mystery of the God of his ancestors (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the Holy One who drew his forbears from the nations of the world to be a Holy People. The Mighty Voice commissions Moses to go and proclaim freedom to his people and judgement upon Pharaoh if the king blocks their way (which he will).

But before Moses even begins his contest with Pharaoh, he must first prove the legitimacy of the Divine Message to his *own people*. His brother Aaron is driven into the wilderness by the spirit to meet Moses on his way to Egypt. Moses shares his encounter with Aaron, and together they boldly bear the Divine Name and the hope of freedom to their Hebrew brothers and sisters, and preform the miraculous signs of the Most High God among them.

Then Moses, Aaron, and their sister Miriam, with the backing of the united Hebrew people (most of the time) went on to face the man who had claimed the title of “god” for himself, Pharaoh – the one who would attempt to stop God's people from following the course into the Wild Places to which they

have been called.

Not that they'll necessarily like the wilderness once they get there...

Having witnessed the wonders and miracles in Egypt which won their freedom, the people of Israel followed Moses into the desert with their sights set on a promised land and somewhere beyond the horizon – that place their ancestors once knew they'd return to. But before they could get there, the people of God had to undergo a period of transformation in that wilderness between their old ways of being and the New Life into which God was ultimately calling them – between Egypt and Jerusalem.

Moses once more ends up at the base of Mount Sinai, now with an increasingly restless and quarrelsome flock of people hungering for the lives they left behind. He once more ascends the mountain to seek God's will for the wandering people and the Lord proclaims:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

After the people receive this message, the holy mountain becomes covered in smoke and flame, shaking with the wild glory of God. Seeing that the mountain is *most* holy, and fearing the awesome Presence of the Most High, Moses is appointed both by God and his people to be an intermediary. Moses is given the task of bearing the concerns of his people before the creator of heaven and earth, and then delivering the Diving Word back to this chosen people – to look into the Wild Face of the Almighty and reflect the brightness of that Face back to God's people.

This is the task of the prophet and of any man or woman of God who seeks to bear the Divine and transformative Word in this world. We are called to journey into those wild places where others fear to tread – to those places that disorient and confuse our worldviews, where everything we know about the world is stripped away and we are left with nothing but the untamable power of the Living God. Having looked into that Wild Face, nothing will ever be the same. Our perception will have shifted and we will have new eyes to see and love world in which we find ourselves. But this gift is not our own, we are called to turn those loving eyes upon those towns and villages and cities which produced us in the first place, to present that Wild and recklessly loving Face upon God's people, that they too may know the One who calls them to be a priestly people.

My great love for the wild places of the world primarily comes from my

father, a man absolutely enamored with the natural beauty of creation. His perfect bliss in life was found either in the woods with a rifle (or bow) in hand, or out on the waters where Tampa Bay meets the Gulf of Mexico, pulling up the living treasures of the sea. He taught me a great love for all living things, chastising me from ever plucking leaves off of a plant unless I had a *very good* reason. My father was a hunter through and through, entering the woods and joining that primordial dance of predator and prey – always watching, always searching.

But eventually this hunt and this search lead elsewhere; in his wandering my father got lost in his journey and eventually made turns which left him broken and struggling for the rest of his life. I didn't really know my father for the last ten years of his life, and in 2008 he passed away from a brain hemorrhage – I was 15 years old.

Now, ten years later (as a 25-year-old man) I know that in some sense I'm still looking for my father; to know more about who this man was and who I am as his son – a newly bearded Telemachus watching for the return of an unknowable father.

In a few days (after the conclusion of this conference), I will be taking a cross-country road trip, camping in national forests and arid badlands, beside lakes, on the sides of mountains, and on the edges of canyons. On this road trip I plan to take my father's ashes to the most beautiful and wild places that I can access, before releasing the last of his remains in the waters he knew best.

I will be *hunting* with my father, searching for the Wild Face of God in the best of creation. Everyday offering more of my own lost father to our Heavenly Father, and leaning ever more into my own identity as a beloved child of God. Upon my own return from the mountains I pray that I may bear something of that Wild and Wonderful Face I seek, having been transformed by the experience and

strengthened in my ability to minister to God's beloved people.

Following our Lord's baptism in the Jordan River, a Great Voice from Heaven proclaimed "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

Saint Mark (of course) gives the shortest account of what happens next:

“...the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1:12-3)

Having been divinely pronounced the Beloved Son of God, Jesus is *immediately* driven out into the lonely places, away from “civilized” company to live among animals and the spirits of the wild places. Here he is tempted by Satan and apportioned a time to reflect on the *kind* of messiah that he is called to be - rather than simply running straight into Jerusalem to establish the earthly kingdom of heaven without having first gone out to listen for the Voice of his Father, and establishing his messianic identity.

As in all things, we are called to follow our Lord Jesus out into the wilderness, to be tempted and tried by the spirits that dwell there, ever growing in our understanding of what it means to be Children of the Most High God in Christ Jesus.

We should not fear to tread beyond our own familiar horizons and follow the Spirit into the unknown; for we trust that our Father is there also, ever ready to reveal more of his earth-shattering (and down-right terrifying) Wonder, Glory, and Love. Having followed Christ into those places, and having looked into the eyes of the One who has made deserts and mountains, rivers, oceans, canyons, and forests; let us now stare out onto this world with those same eyes, showing the world just how wild the Most High *is*.

# Erica Ridderman, Duke Divinity School, Anglican Studies

Notes by The Rev. George “Tripp” Hudgens.

*Erica Ridderman is a layperson who shows incredible promise as a preacher and theologian. This is the primary reason we are including her sermon in this collection. Rife with rich imagery and careful language, this was one of the stronger sermons in her small group. The text you have here is the edited version after the work we did together at PEP. We stripped out some of the questions and made them statements. She edited out an extraneous illustration and tightened her transitions. She took the critique of her colleagues to heart and demonstrated great insight into her work as well as the work of others.*

## Erica’s Sermon

*Mark 16:1-8, the Gospel’s original ending, as the first few centuries of Christians might have heard it:*

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“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Can you even begin to imagine what the women were feeling as they headed to the tomb to anoint his body? They had just gone through the two most traumatizing days of their lives, as Jesus of Nazareth, the man they followed and believed was the Messiah, had been betrayed, arrested, flogged, and brutally crucified. They had witnessed it all, and now, after the long wait of the Sabbath was over, they go to anoint his body.

Unlike the funeral home that we visited last week in preaching class, there was no refrigeration to keep this body from rotting inside the tomb. Instead, it sat there decaying as the women waited for the Sabbath to finish. In the morning — early morning, before the temperature had risen much — they bring spices to anoint his body and cover its stench.

The reality of their situation hit me last week, especially when we went into the embalming room. That cramped room, down a windy set of stairs and into a dungeon-like basement, where they flush dead bodies of their fluids and pump them full of chemicals. The undertaker told us that this is where the ‘artistic’ part happens, where people carefully reconstruct the corpse.

Imagine what Jesus’ body would have been like. No undertakers could have reconstructed it. His flesh torn apart from lashings, his side split open, the skin on his head tattered from thorns. This is the body the women were going to anoint.

But even before they can encounter this brutalized body, they know they faced a large obstacle — a literal one, a giant stone standing in their way. “Who will move the stone from the door of the tomb?” they ask. There’s no physical way they could move it without the needed levers and equipment. Yet when they arrive at the tomb, the stone is gone. Image what ran through their minds. Perhaps someone else had already begun the anointing, or maybe thieves had broken in, or perhaps even Pilate had changed his mind and come to take Jesus’ body away.

Without knowing anything, they walk in. And here they encounter a young man, robed in bright white, just as angels are depicted in the scriptures. This angel speaks the most incredible words they could possibly imagine: Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified, has been raised and isn’t here anymore. Look, right here, at where they laid him. The angel points to the empty space where a decaying body once laid, now simply a pile of clothes. The angel tells them to go and tell Peter and the disciples the news, for Jesus will meet them in Galilee, just as he’d promised before his death.

You might expect these women to put aside their fears and rejoice, right? Their Messiah, whom they thought was dead, had been raised to life again! The horror of the cross was undone — the darkness of the tomb illumined. Oh what Easter joy this must have brought them!

But the empty tomb doesn’t always bring joy. For these women, it brought *fear*. The last words of the Gospel tell us that the women fled and were silent, “for they were afraid.” They hear the angel’s good news and see empty space where the body was laid, but still... they’re afraid.

How do we experience the empty tomb? Do we proclaim, with joy, the Easter

refrains? Bring out the bells and incense and bright white vestments? Do we line the sanctuary with lilies and bring back to fine silver? After the long Saturday is over, do we proclaim the certainty of death's defeat? To be fair, the other gospels besides Mark end in this more triumphant tone: the disciples meet the risen Lord, he spends time teaching and eating with them, and they watch him ascend into heaven. They see him, hear him, even touch his body.

But we aren't like these disciples in the other gospels, I take it. It's just not what life is like for us. Though we may long for it, we don't see, hear, and touch Jesus. More often than not, we're like the women in Mark's gospel who see *signs* of the resurrection but are still left in dizzying confusion.

For my fellow seminarians who are going to be priests, pastors, chaplains, teachers, or any other sort of Christian minister, we are tasked with bearing the message of Christ's resurrection to a hurting and dying world. To many people, our seminary education means that we have seen the empty tomb and can proclaim it with assurance. But I have a this itching feeling that at times, perhaps many times, we will not feel ready to bring that message to the world.

Going to the funeral home a few weeks ago, I couldn't help but imagine what it would be like for me to proclaim the resurrection in midst of death's chaos. Perhaps you have had to do so yourself. With the dead loved one to my side, a grieving family right in front of me, and a community bewildered by death — would I be prepared to proclaim the resurrection? Or would I, like the women who flee the tomb in amazement and terror, feel unable to carry out the task I'd been given?

This text shows us that our fear is inevitable and our weakness is real. The empty tomb doesn't always bring joy, and oftentimes we will still be afraid. But this story says something else too: that even when we're at the empty tomb and scared out of our wits, God does not stop working.

This text, and in fact the entire Gospel of Mark, bears witness to God's faithfulness despite human shortcomings. Take, for instance, Jesus in the boat with his disciples. When a violent storm comes upon them, the disciples wake him up, and he calms the storm. Do you remember how the story ends, after Jesus has miraculously saved them? It doesn't say that they were filled with joy and thanksgiving, but instead, with great fear. Even after this incredible display of power, the disciples are terrified. And yet time and time again throughout the gospel, Jesus keeps entrusting *them* with his message.

The end of seminary is at hand and a new world awaits us. Many are leaving to enter unknown territory, where we'll meet new faces and hear new stories and face challenges and difficulties we never dreamt of. And wherever we go, we'll be tasked to bear Christ's resurrection into a hurting world, whether we're up for

the challenge or not.

To be honest, this makes me afraid. For I so often feel like the disciples who stumble along, sometimes believing but more often simply confused. The things going on in our world terrify me, and I wonder if proclaiming the resurrection will ring hollow in a world of continual violence and pain.

These fears are real, and yet I take comfort in the women at the end of Mark's gospel and in the Jesus they follow. Even though they see God's resurrecting power, they too are overcome with fear. But even though they're overcome with fear, God's does not stop working through them. The scene at the tomb, with tears streaming down their faces, is surely full of despair, but it is also shot through with hope — hope in a God not bound by our fears, but always faithful in the midst of them.

**SEMINARIES AND FORMATION PROGRAMS  
REPRESENTED AT PEP 2018**

Berkeley Divinity School at Yale (BDS)

Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP)

General Theological Seminary (GTS)

Nashota House Theological Seminary

The School of Theology, the University of the South - Sewanee

Seminary of the Southwest

Virginia Theological Seminary

Bexley Seabury

Bloy House

Candler School of Theology at Emory

Duke Divinity School

Princeton Theological Seminary

The Iona Collaborative

University of Toronto, Trinity College Faculty of Divinity

## **EVOLVING MODES OF FORMATION FOR EPISCOPAL CLERGY**

The 2018 PEP Conference heralded the addition to the student body of a new category of academic institution represented by the Iona Collaborative: diocesan-level formation programs. Diocesan-level formation programs now account for a significant proportion of new ordinations.

Traditionally, three years in seminary provided a uniform educational track for ordination in the Episcopal Church. Those were the days when pews were usually filled on Sundays, parish finances were generally sustainable and most parishes had the ability to fund salaries for a rector and perhaps an assistant. Things changed. Today, 44% of parishes rely on part-time or unpaid clergy (2014 Episcopal Church Survey), creating a growing cohort of volunteer and dual-career clergy, most of whom have understandably been unwilling to take on the debt needed to fund a seminary education. Consequently, almost half of today's new ordinands have been formed through local programs administered by their dioceses. Diocesan-level programs are gaining increasing recognition as a parallel track for tomorrow's Episcopal clergy. With increasingly robust and accredited academic content provided by participating seminaries, diocesan-level formation programs like the Iona Collaborative (24 dioceses) and the Bishop Kemper Schools (4 dioceses) are training a growing cohort of tomorrow's parish clergy.

This year in addition to 43 seminarians, the 2018 PEP Conference welcomed for the first time a cohort of 6 postulants from the Iona Collaborative, drawn from a wide geographic base extending from the Dioceses of Connecticut and Texas, to Hawaii. This contributed to the rich mix of students from 14 North American institutions who had the opportunity to learn from one another's experiences and build new networks of their peers as a meaningful step toward their future role the leadership of tomorrow's Episcopal Church.

## **THE PEP PROCESS: EVOLVING WITH TECHNOLOGY**

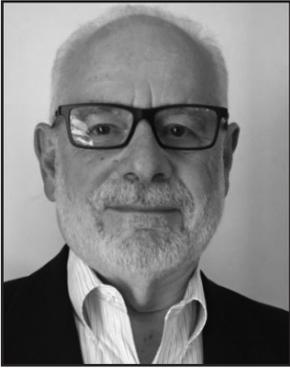
The heart of the Preaching Excellence Programs is the small preaching group. Composed of 4-6 conferees and led by a preaching mentor, meeting several times during each conference, participants take advantage of the opportunity to present a sermon and receive appreciative feedback from the group in a safe setting, guided by a trained faculty group leader. The experience and feedback from these groups are at the core of the conference takeaways for most attendees.

Now Internet technology has made it possible to expand the preaching groups into the online environment, opening up new avenues for program design. For the first time, in September 2018 a cohort of PEP-II conferees will begin a 6-month program, meeting monthly for 90 minutes online via video conference, to continue meeting as a preaching group, thereby extending the impact of the 3-day PEP-II conference. The format will be similar to the core preaching groups, adapted to the online space through a collaboration with BackStory Preaching, an innovator in this area. The goal is to extend the learning curve beyond the conference itself, to achieve a measurable impact on preaching performance. A series of tracking surveys filled out by the participants' congregations will attempt to identify topline changes to the congregations' assessment of the rector's preaching skills based on a standard questionnaire. The EPF expects this to be the first of many new iterations of the PEP curriculum as the Foundation takes advantage of new technology in support of our overall mission to raise the standard of preaching in the Episcopal Church.

EPISCOPAL PREACHING FOUNDATION  
PEP 2018 FACULTY



**The Very Rev. Sam Candler, Dean of the Cathedral of St. Phillip, Atlanta, GA.** Dean Candler has lectured and preached in England, Costa Rica, and Canada and is known for his optimistic vision of traditional Christian church life. Dean Candler presents lectures on religion and science as well as on environmental sustainability and earth stewardship. Besides his sermons and articles, Sam Candler writes a commentary called *Good Faith and the Common Good*, [www.goodfaithandthecommongood.org](http://www.goodfaithandthecommongood.org), and he is a writer for Episcopal Café, [www.episcopalcafe.com](http://www.episcopalcafe.com)

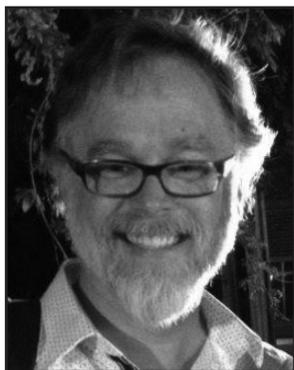


**The Rev. Canon Charles A. Cesaretti** served parishes in New Jersey before joining the national staff of the Episcopal Church, serving in positions of domestic and international policy and diplomacy. His appointment as assistant to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church as envoy to oversee the international church and governmental relations of the Episcopal Church took him to assignments in Central America, East and South Africa, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. He was seconded to the staff of the Archbishop of Canterbury to assist with release of religious hostages in Lebanon and the Middle East.

In 1990, Fr. Cesaretti became the assistant to the Rector of Trinity Church, Wall Street, where he was engaged in the research and development of parish outreach and mission. He is a fellow of the College of Preachers.



**The Rev. Dr. Lisa Cressman** is the Founder of BackStory Preaching, a newly launched online community through which she mentors preaching groups and shares insights from 25 years as an Episcopal priest, preacher, spiritual director, and retreat leader.



**The Rev. George “Tripp” Hudgins**, Bogard Teaching Fellow at CDSP, Instructor in Homiletics and Liturgy, is currently working on his dissertation on Liturgy and Ethnomusicology, addressing how the public performance of a concert becomes the work of, for, and by the people we call Liturgy. As a preaching pastor and musician, he had served in the local parish, in ecumenical settings and at events such as The Wild Goose Festival.



**The Rev. Susan Ironside**, Rector St. John on the Mountain, Bernardsville, N.J., is a returning member of the PEP Faculty. A graduate of The General Theological Seminary, where she was awarded the Bishop of Newark Preaching Prize, Mother Susan has served on the Standing Committee for Liturgy and Music and the Same-Sex Blessings Task Force for General Convention. Before seminary, Susan worked for years as a Registered Nurse, specializing in the care of vulnerable adults living in the community.



**The Rev. Dr. Micah Jackson** is the Bishop John Hines Associate Professor of Preaching at Seminary of the Southwest. His academic interests include the spiritual discipline of preaching, homiletic form, and postmodern construction of the relationship between preacher and congregation. His previous courses have ranged from “New Media in Worship and Preaching” to “Political Preaching” and “The Preacher’s Self.” Micah is a past Board Member and PEP Conference Chair of the EPF.



**The Rev. Dr. Gary D. Jones, Rector St. Stephen's Episcopal Church Richmond, Va.**

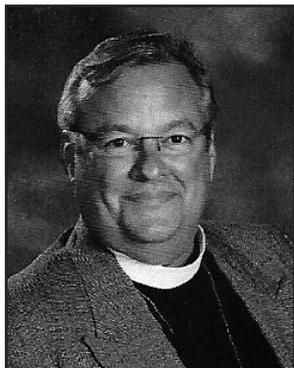
St. Stephen's Church has one of the largest and most vibrant parishes in the Episcopal Church with the fourth highest average Sunday attendance of U.S. Episcopal parishes. The church is known for its outreach ministries that have expanded during Gary's tenure. These include deep relationships with schools and community organizations in the East End of Richmond, as well as national and international relationships; a weekly farmers market; and two Sunday evening services that have attracted large numbers of unchurched people as well as those from other faith

traditions. Dr. Jones has also served churches in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania during his 30 years in ordained ministry. Formative experiences with the Society of St. John the Evangelist have helped him delve more deeply into the contemplative dimensions of the Gospel. A serious bout with cancer in 2011 only enriched the journey. Gary, who recently completed a term as chairman of the board of Forward Movement (publisher of *Forward Day by Day*), is known for his [preaching, writing, and teaching](#).



**The Rev. (Thelma M.) Nikki Panton Mathis** is the Associate Rector at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Rome, Ga., where she is responsible for Children and Youth Ministries. Before entering the priesthood in 2008, Rev. Mathis worked as a licensed clinical social worker, enjoying a career that spanned nearly 20 years. During that time, her research earned publication in *The Journal of Family Social Work*.

Since entering the priesthood, Rev. Mathis has authored several articles and sermons in publications that include *The Sewanee Theological Review*, *The Episcopal Preaching Foundation's Preaching the Beatitudes*, *Graymoor* and *The Alban Weekly*. She is currently a recipient of a grant from the College of Pastoral Leaders from Austin Seminary, and serves as Trustee for Sewanee, University of the South. Rev. Mathis is a regular member of the PEP Faculty.



**The Rev. Dr. Brent Norris, Rector St. Mary's, Asheville, NC**

Brent teaches preaching in the Diocese of Western North Carolina Deacon's Training Program and is the Diocesan Ecumenical Officer. He holds a B.A. in drama from Furman University, an M.Div. from Sewanee, and a D.Min. from Columbia Theological Seminary. Brent has served on the faculty of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation's annual Preaching Excellence Program since 2005. For most of those years, he has done double duty as a preaching group leader and the conference liturgist/musician.



**The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith**

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Smith has a consistent record of providing leadership to Churches that face a multitude of challenges. In his current position at St. Patrick's Church in Dublin, Ohio, he has successfully expanded programming and significantly increased Sunday congregational attendance.

His publications include *Saving Salvation: The Amazing Evolution of Grace* (Morehouse: 2005) and numerous articles and sermons for Forward Movement Publications.

Rev. Smith holds a Ph.D. in Ministry Preaching from the School of Theology at the University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn. He is a dedicated longtime supporter and member of the Board of Directors of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation.



**The Rev. Kate Spelman, Rector, All Saints, Western Springs, Ill.**

Rev. Kate is a returning PEP Faculty Member. Before her work at All Saints, she served as the Assistant Minister at Christ Church, Philadelphia, and as an admissions officer at her alma mater, the University of Chicago. She holds an M.Div. from Yale Divinity School, where she was the recipient of the Mersick Prize for Excellence in Preaching.

Rev. Kate views service to the wider church as a part of her call, and so serves in a variety of diocesan and national capacities. She is the chair of the nominations committee for the Diocese

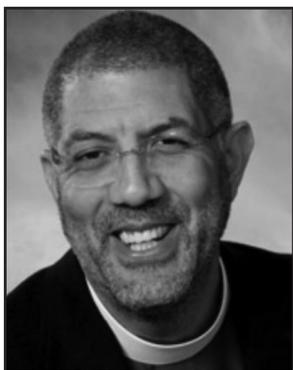
of Chicago, co-chair of diocesan convention, a member of the diocese's clergy compensation committee, and has been elected to represent Chicago at the National Church 2018 General Convention.



**The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, Vicar St. Martin in the Fields, London**

Sam Wells is Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields and a widely-known preacher, pastor, writer, broadcaster, and theologian. Dr. Wells is also Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics at King's College London. He has served as a Church of England parish priest for 20 years. He also spent 7 years in North Carolina, where he was Dean of Duke University Chapel. He has published 30 books, including academic studies and textbooks in Christian ethics, and explorations of

liturgy, preaching, faith and mission. His most recent book is *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World*.



**The Rt. Rev. Dr. Robert C. Wright, Bishop of Atlanta**

The Right Rev. Robert C. Wright is the 10th bishop of the [Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta](#), which embraces 110 worshipping communities across north and middle Georgia. At the time of his election in June 2012, he had served 10 years as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Atlanta. Prior to that, he was a school chaplain and on the staff of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City. In January 2015, he was named one of the 100 Most Influential Georgians by *GeorgiaTrend* magazine. Since becoming bishop,

Wright addressed the Georgia legislature about gun control, spoke up for Medicaid expansion and has been a vocal and active opponent of the death penalty in Georgia. In commemoration of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, he prayed with a City of Atlanta sanitation crew before taking an early morning shift on the back of a city garbage truck.

After graduating high school, he served five years in the U.S. Navy. While attending Howard University in Washington, D.C., he worked as a child advocate for two mayors. He earned an M.Div. from Virginia Theological Seminary, and has been awarded honorary doctor of divinity degrees by the Virginia Seminary and Sewanee.

## PEP 2018 CONFERENCE CHAPLAIN



**Sister Miriam Elizabeth, Order of St. Helena.** A native of Chickasha, Okla., Sr. Miriam Elizabeth is a graduate of Kansas State University and Southwest Theological Seminary. She was ordained deacon in 2002 and priest in 2003. She has served as a priest in Corpus Christi and Victoria, Texas.

The Order of St. Helena is an Episcopal monastic order for lay and ordained women living communally under a vow of monastic poverty, chastity, and obedience to God.

## 2019 CONFERENCE CALENDAR

January 11-13, 2019	Diocese of Wyoming
April 29-May 2, 2019	Diocese of Spokane
May 7-8, 2019	Diocese of Wisconsin
May 27-31, 2019	Preaching Excellence Program
June 4-7, 2019	Preaching Excellence Program II, West Cornwall, Conn.
September, 2019 (dates TBD)	Diocese of Washington, DC
September, 2019 (dates TBD)	Diocese of Fort Worth
October 1-2, 2019	Diocese of New Westminster B.C. (Vancouver)