



Lenten Preaching Series 2024 - February 20

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Mark 6:7-15

⁷ He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹ If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus's name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

Good evening! It's wonderful to be with you tonight, on this first night of this Lenten preaching series. It feels as though we are at the start of a journey together - which is what I have always liked about Lent. And I'm excited to eat soup together in just a few minutes.

I've been thinking a lot about Lent, and about the wisdom of the liturgical year which conceptualizes time as a series of circles, in touch with the seasons of the earth and the ecological year. The liturgical calendar reminds us that just as plants and animals rely on the return of Spring each year, we need to return to the same stories and lessons again and again, because anything worth knowing and understanding is worth returning to. Part of it is that when we return to something, we ourselves are changed, made up literally of new cells, of new brain synapses, new memories and dreams and experiences. How are we different than we were a year ago, the last time we embarked on this season called Lent?

Dean Amy gave me the option to choose my scripture passage for tonight. I started by looking at the lectionary for today, Tuesday in the First Week of Lent, and found the passage appointed, Matthew chapter 6 verses 7-15. This passage does not show up on a Sunday in our common lectionary, so only those of you who have been reading the bible or attending daily prayer have seen it recently in full. And yet, of course, it contains some of the most familiar words in our entire faith. I know that when I pray the Lord's prayer in church, my tongue moves as if on its own, repeating the familiar words - often without thinking or really hearing them. It feels a bit nerve wracking to preach about a passage that is so familiar to us - but I hope that in this Season of Lent in particular we can find new meaning in it together.

What was happening when Jesus taught his disciples this prayer? In Matthew's telling this happens during the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is just beginning his early ministry after being baptized by John, and then spending 40 days in the desert, and then traveling through Galilee. He goes up a mountainside, gathers his disciples around him, and begins teaching.

Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” and offers teachings on everything from anger to adultery, on how to love our enemies, and then he gets to today’s passage on how to pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

What was on Jesus’s mind as he offered this guidance on how to pray? And what did the disciples hear? Did they feel ashamed or defensive about their own practices of prayer up to this point? Whatever they felt, I doubt they would have predicted that we would be reciting these words two thousand years later...

I’m interested in thinking about the relationships laid out in the prayer: Relationships between us and a God that is parental. And relationships between all of us - those gathered to pray together tonight. And perhaps all who pray and have prayed this, across space and time...

Already in this season of Lent, Dean Amy and Christie have been encouraging us to think about our Lenten disciplines in new ways, and to embrace practices that bring us deeper into our connections with one another and our sense that we are not alone. Never before have I heard so clearly that the Lord’s prayer is full of “us,” not the words I or me. Give **us** our daily bread, forgive **us** our debts... **our** father.

Brother James Koester from over the river at the Society of Saint John the Evangelist wrote a remarkable commentary on this scripture that speaks to the relationship of responsibility to each other that I am interested in: “In this prayer which Jesus taught us, we come to God, not as self-possessed individuals, but as members of a community who know our common need for sustenance, forgiveness, salvation and liberation. In these words, we pray not simply for ourselves, but for all in their need, and so we take

responsibility, not just for our own wellbeing, but the wellbeing of others.” It is in this deeper responsibility for the wellbeing of others that we move towards God’s vision and God’s will on earth.

A key teacher for me, and for many of us here, about the Bible and the work of justice has been the Rev. Liz Theoharis of the Kairos Center and the Poor People’s Campaign. She spoke here in this Cathedral during last year’s Lenten series, reminding us how much the Bible has to say about **today’s** issues of poverty, and racism, and war. Theoharis brings our attention again and again to the material reality of our world, which is Jesus’s concern for the poor and marginalized. In that lens, what we are praying for in the Lord’s prayer is also material, and invites us IN:

How can we be part of God’s will to make daily bread readily accessible to all?

How can we work toward a reality in which basic needs are met, where all people have access to affordable housing, clean water, good healthcare, and food?

And, importantly - why is our current society set up so that so many people are struggling to access those things, and facing violence and scarcity?

I’ve had the great opportunity over the last five weeks to participate in a course about the Doctrine of Discovery, taught by our own Bishop Carol Gallagher. The course is about “how we got here”: colonialism, violence and oppression of Indigenous Peoples, and the role of the Episcopal Church in this violence, including Indigenous boarding schools. A phrase from the course has been reverberating through my mind ever since I first heard it, and answers the question - why do we need to learn about the harms of the past?

Donald Warne, Associate Dean at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences said in a lecture on health inequities, **“if we are ever going to get to equity we have to walk through truth”** Even when it’s unpleasant, even when it makes us uncomfortable. Telling the truth about our histories can be so hard - when we are tired, when we are worn down by the challenges of our lives. And it can be hard to look at the distant past - especially when there is so much in the present moment that is painful too.

But I think we need our churches to be a places where we can speak the truth, in the face of disinformation and division. And when many of us are realizing how much **unlearning** and **re-learning** we have to do about the history of our country, our state, and our Church.

Since 2020, tens of thousands of Episcopalians have been learning and telling the truth about our country and racism through the Sacred Ground race dialogue series. I got to be a small part in that process through my role with Presiding Bishop's Office of the Episcopal Church under Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. I have had the remarkable opportunity over the last four years to work on a small team of people supporting the Episcopal Church's efforts on environmental and racial justice as part of the Way of Love.

There are so many stories I could tell about where I have witnessed Episcopalians telling the truth and taking action toward love and justice - here in Boston, across our diocese, and across the Church from Alaska to south Florida, from Hawaii to Colombia, from Iowa to the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe. There could be a whole other sermon just on the practice of telling the truth, following the prophetic leadership of Episcopalians pushing for truth and reckoning, reparations, and repair.

But where were we tonight- oh, rocks!

Christie let me know that rocks were going to be a theme for this Lenten series. The inner science nerd in me was excited. On my path to being an environmental justice activist I took a lot of geology and earth science classes.

This past weekend, I was visiting family in Midcoast Maine, about four hours up the coast from here. It's a place that's special to me - I spent a lot of my childhood there, swimming and canoeing and picking blueberries. But I found it transformed. My aunt lives by the coast in Rockport, a region of Maine that was very badly hit by January's unprecedented winter storm which saw the **highest** tides ever recorded there. Walking by her house on Sunday, she showed us how radically the coast had been transformed overnight. More than 15 feet of soil and trees and shrubs had been washed away in some places. Across the state - roads and buildings, docks and lighthouses, all destroyed.

The climate crisis, taking place in front of our very eyes. The grief I felt seeing this felt magnified by the **inequities** of who was worst impacted by the flooding - just like which of us, which of our neighbors here in Boston are hurt worst by storms, and summer heat.

On the beach, a huge granite rock had been moved more than 10 feet inland - a seemingly impossible feat of wind and waves. And a brand new rocky beach was forming, covered in thousands of rocks. I brought 30 of those rocks here today. Some of the rocks are smooth and nearly round - those were on the coast already, where they have been for hundreds or thousands of years. Other rocks are jagged, sharp, rough. Some of these had washed ashore for the first time - or broken off larger rocks in the midst of the storm.

These rocks to me represent the ground that is shifting underneath us - literally and figuratively- bringing uncertainty and the reshaping of what might have thought was permanent. 2024 will be a year of change whether we want it or not, and we will see changes in leadership: our diocesan bishop here in Massachusetts, a new presiding bishop elected at the churchwide level, and of course - the election in November.

What can guide us? What prayers - what ways of being do we need to weather these storms?

And as well as climate change and elections, there are other sources of fear and despair that are keeping me up at night, of course. The ongoing crisis and loss of life in Palestine, for one. The sense that fewer and fewer people across our country can afford what they need to live, or see a way out of poverty. And more particular violences too - Last week, Nex Benedict — a nonbinary, Native American, 16-year-old sophomore — was beaten to death in the bathroom of their school by three older female students in Owasso Oklahoma. In a school district championing transphobic hate speech and book bans. Many of them Christians, promoting these deadly policies of hate.

I doubt that this list is unfamiliar to you. And I suspect you have your own list of things that keep you up at night, and bring you close to despair. How does the Lord's prayer sound to us when we are desperate? When we are grieving? When we are scared and fearful?

Can we truly imagine God's will being done here on Earth, as it is in Heaven? Can we see past the wilderness of Lent to the possibility of Easter resurrection?

I know that when we gather here to pray, over the bread and wine of the eucharist, over cookies during Advent evening prayer, or over soup like we do tonight, it is much easier for me to see my way to that transformed, resurrected world. And, too, when I imagine thousands of years of ancestors - mine, yours, all of ours in the church, I feel bolstered by the communion of saints, trouble makers, grievers, teachers, who have prayed the words of the lord prayer for all these years.

We must say this and **mean it**: Our faith is about how we live **together**, not what we do alone.

May we remember that we do everything with community. May we be inspired that through truth we can move towards justice. May we find solace and strength, pardon, forgiveness, and renewal. And may we walk together telling the Truth and knowing we are Beloved.

Amen.



Lenten Preaching Series 2024 - February 27

*Leo Biocchi - Minister of Families and
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As a Behavioral Therapist, he lead groups and
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Isaiah 43:1-19

1. But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
2. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
3. For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
4. Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5. Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6. I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—

7. everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

8. Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
who are deaf, yet have ears!

9. Let all the nations gather together,
and let the peoples assemble.

Who among them declared this,
and foretold to us the former things?
Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,
and let them hear and say, “It is true.”

10. You are my witnesses, says the LORD,
and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.

11. I, I am the LORD,
and besides me there is no savior.

12. I declared and saved and proclaimed,
when there was no strange god among you;
and you are my witnesses, says the LORD.

13. I am God, and also henceforth I am He;
there is no one who can deliver from my hand;
I work and who can hinder it?

14. Thus says the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
For your sake I will send to Babylon
and break down all the bars,
and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to
lamentation.

15. I am the LORD, your Holy One,
he Creator of Israel, your King.

16. Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,

17. who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

18. Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

19. I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

God, open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear you, our minds to know you, our hearts to love you and our hands to serve you. AMEN.

“Who in the world am I? That's the great puzzle.”

I'm quoting from the third most quoted piece of literature of all time - second only to the Bible and Shakespeare.

It's the children's story of Alice in Wonderland

I was surprised by this. If you were playing one of those “which doesn't belong” games, surely you'd pick Alice as the odd one out.

The story of Alice has had remarkable staying power from its 1865 inception due to its unique way of speaking to both children and adults.

If you're not familiar with Alice or don't remember, it's about a little girl who daydreams and follows a white rabbit down a rabbit hole.

She enters a place called Wonderland where everything is crazy, illogical and out of order.

Alice has to change her size multiple times just to fit through doors. The doors are first too big then too small.

There's a psycho mad hatter and a white rabbit who ignore her questions in preference of drinking tea and singing the unbirthday song.

Every attempt that Alice makes to figure out a way home only results in nonsense and frustration.

Wonderland is a little like what the world feels like to us without God.

Alice continues "I can't explain myself...because I'm not myself" (41).

Alice wholeheartedly believes at the beginning of the story that she lacks her own identity.

When she gets to Wonderland she tells herself she's fond of 'pretending to be two people'.

Alice's changes in size further challenge her self-image. She asks herself, 'was I the same when I got up this morning?' and goes on to question whether she might, in fact, be another child entirely.

Her grip on reality is tenuous, even for a child.

And as she struggles to anchor herself, she faces constant questions from people demanding to know:

"WHO ARE YOU!?"

Do you ever feel like Alice did? Like you're searching for an identity in a world that wants to know who you are all the time?

If we as adults feel like this at times, imagine what it feels like to a child or a teenager in the throes of adolescence.

Critical to creating this concept for young people is defining the concept of home-base as within the self and that self as being connected to God.

Because if we instill home as a house or a place or even those we love most like family members, we are vulnerable.

And when the winds and the rains come, we will run back to our home only to find no one is there anymore. Everyone has grown up.

Being resilient is being God-reliant within the self.

It's different from being self-reliant.

It's understanding and genuinely believing you are strong with an awareness that the self is created, connected and exists to stand with a heavenly host.

What Wonderland didn't have that we do is - the church.

The church's role is to help the current generations find Jesus no matter how confusing or divided the society seems.

And make no mistake God is far more current than anything else.

He was here well before Jeff Bezos and will be here thousands of years in the future when people say "who the heck is Jeff Bezos?".

Simply put, God does not operate within the confines of human time. He is literally the past, the present and the future rolled into one.

But there is an unavoidable perception that mainline churches, the "seven sisters", in which Episcopal churches are a part of are old fashioned and out of touch. And God gets blamed for that.

The mission of Christ may be ancient and unchanged but the methods cannot afford to remain too far behind.

Communicating the ancient Word of God to current generations requires change.

The church has shown a great flexibility to change by putting themselves on the front lines of social justice and advocating for the marginalized.

Imagine what it could do, if it extended that same potential for change inside its doors. And no I'm not talking about changing the timing of the opening hymn or publishing a new facebook image.

Every Easter season we wait for God to walk the road to calvary

But even though we know the story, we shouldn't move the cross to make it harder for him.

When we do, there's an image of a winded Christ with the goalpost of the cross so far from where it started.

It's not an image any of us want to imagine but I worry it's the reality the church finds themselves in.

Pause.

Loss, doubt, discomfort.

The world changes constantly.

For good and for bad and this requires us to meet the change.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite stores was Blockbuster.

Watching a movie at home was a completely different adventure than it is today.

It was a whole evening process.

First you'd call your friends to come over from a landline phone sometimes connected by a chord to the wall.

Then your parents would drive you to Blockbuster and only then would you be able to see the new movie releases and your choices.

There was no looking it up online on the way there. It was an exciting unknown.

Then you pull up and enter with aisles and aisles of VHS and DVD's before you.

But just because you made it over to Blockbuster didn't mean you'd succeeded yet.

You had to hope everyone before you didn't take all the copies of the movie you wanted to rent.

It wasn't like now where it's impossible to run out of stock of a movie as you simply purchase your own digital copy online.

Blockbuster only had a certain amount of each movie.

Walls of the newest releases adorned the store but once those were taken out, all that remained were cut outs the size of the movie that once sat there and you knew you had been too slow.

But once you got your movie and your candy, the rest of the night was magical as a kid.

But even though Blockbuster helped bring entertainment into millions of families homes at one time in 2004 with 9,000 stores and 6 billion dollars, 6 years later in 2010, they filed for bankruptcy and became a footnote in history.

There is no crazy story here, no extenuating once in a lifetime circumstance that took Blockbuster out.

All that happened was the natural change that comes with time and an institution that cared more about their methods than their mission.

The mission did not vanish with Blockbuster nor did it start with them.

People have been viewing entertainment for centuries before Blockbuster.

Today Netflix is the Blockbuster of the current generation and Blockbuster had numerous opportunities to adapt and become the voice to this generation. At one point even being offered to buy the Netflix enterprise for 50 million dollars - which at the time was - brace yourselves: One one hundredth of a percent of the 6 billions dollars they were worth.

Mainline Protestantism which is what the Episcopal Church is part of began at Jamestown in 1607 where the colonists built the first Anglican church in what would eventually become the United States, foreshadowing the Episcopal Church.

This church was fundamental in the creation of our country.

The seven sisters founded most of America's colleges and universities, helping spur economic growth and craft the concept of America's democracy.

They were the forebears of creating tools of social and political reform. The reason you see so many churches in so many town centers across the country is because at one time - the church was the place to gather for all laws and all community gatherings.

But the reality is that the "mainline churches" have been in steady decline since 1960 with more dramatic decline in the last 10 years.

The data shows a clear and consistent pattern over a long period of time.

As I'm sure we all know, I'm not reporting anything the National Episcopal Church hasn't already published widely over the years.

In 2019 the Diocese published an article saying "At this rate, there will be no one in worship by around 2050 in the entire denomination."

I mentioned at the beginning of my message the words: loss, doubt, discomfort.

These words are only half of the story.

They're the hardest parts of what is called "The Change Cycle".

The change cycle is a tool used by an organization that helps institutions and leaders adapt so they remain solvent into the future.

And I'm not sure which stage you might feel your church is currently in but typically, if we're being honest, mainline churches are in one of these first 3:

Stage 1 – Loss - you admit to yourself that regardless of whether or not you perceive the change to be good or ‘bad’ there will be a sense of loss of what “was.”

Stage 2 – Doubt

You doubt the facts, doubt your doubts and struggle to find information about the change that you believe is valid. Resentment, skepticism, and blame cloud your thinking.

Stage 3 – Discomfort

You will recognize Stage 3 by the discomfort it brings. The change and all it means has now become clear and starts to settle in. Frustration and lethargy rule until possibility takes over.

Then there’s The Danger Zone

The Danger Zone represents the pivotal place where you make the choice either to move on to Stage 4 and discover the possibilities the change has presented or to choose fear and return to Stage 1.

Something I’ve seen in the many churches I’ve served as I’ve sat on Church Councils and Vestrys’ is people often go immediately to the what and how and neglect the why. It’s human nature.

Problem? Okay how do we fix it?

Then the how comes: how are we going to pay for this? How are we going to get people on board? How are we sure this will work? How long will this take?

The reality is that virtually every idea - many proven to be a voice to young people in other churches - remains unattempted by the seven sisters.

I’ve talked with people just a little younger than me that have said “well they obviously don’t care about our generation. If they did, they wouldn’t be continuing to do the same thing.”

So the question in leadership circles before any ideas is - “why?”.

Why do we want to change?

Because none of us wants to think of a winded Christ when we think of God. We want to think of a Christ we've made it easy for to connect with the current generations.

Because we love and care deeply for children - that much is clear through our advocacy and missions and the things we have tried in our churches to appeal to families.

We want them to have a shelter in which they come in and people are speaking *their* language - not only the language of the parents.

Because there is no standing against racism if the church is gone and our black brothers and sisters deserve for us to do change whatever it takes in our methods to ensure they have an ally long term.

Because the world is divided and a bit dissociative from truth today and the church is the only hope and I mean that sincerely - the only hope - to provide an identity among the many Alice's in Wonderland.

It's hard to disagree with statements like these, isn't it?

Why appeals to the best in people.

Why motivates.

When people agree on the why, the conversation starts to sound more like this:

"Well I might not like it personally, but it is the most sensible approach. Let's go for it."

"We'll find the money somewhere."

"I see now that creating a service where young people are welcome doesn't have to sacrifice our tradition, it's merely the methodology and nothing more."

"Let's give it a try. I'll put my objections aside."

"I feel like there's a future again!"

In this way we confidently plant the cross where it should be once again like we did all those years ago so Jesus can get home.

Because when we do this, when we remove obstacles for Jesus, we remove obstacles for young families with children in the backseat driving home. Not in the neighborhood, but their church home.

The final 3 stages of the change cycle are:

Stage 4 – Discovery

Stage 4 represents the “light at the end of the tunnel.” Perspective, anticipation, and a willingness to make decisions give a new sense of control and hope. You are optimistic about a good outcome because you have choices.

Stage 5 – Understanding

In Stage 5, you understand the change and are more confident, think pragmatically, and your behavior is much more productive. You begin to make accomplishments.

Stage 6 – Integration

By this time, you have regained your ability and willingness to be flexible. You have insight into the ramifications, consequences and rewards of the change — past, present, and future. But, be aware, more change is just around the corner.

Young people have to change size enough and listen to mad hatters ask them who they are every day.

We know who they are - they are God's. Let's do whatever it takes, to remind them.

I'll end with today's reading:

“I called forth the mighty army of Egypt with all its chariots and horses. I drew them beneath the waves, and they drowned, their lives snuffed out like a smoldering candlewick.

But forget all that—

it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?”

AMEN.



Lenten Preaching Series 2024 - March 5

Margaret Walker – Emmaus Fellow with Life Together, intern with the Family Van

Margaret is a second year Life Together fellow from Minneapolis, MN. Her site placement is The Family Van, where she does a combination of direct service, outreach, and communications. As a life-long learner, they are passionate about exploring the intersections of spirituality, community, and social change, and the way(s) that can inform how we show up during these times. Margaret also loves spending time outdoors, reading, and baking, and has over 14 years of experience as a tap dancer!



from This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us by Cole Arthur Riley (page 18)

Long long ago, the birds you now see in the sky used to dwell in the bowels of the earth. Here, underneath us, they were scattered at birth and would spend their days squirming and scooting their way back to each other. Their wings, which they did not then know were wings, would flare out and press up against the walls of their tunnels, making it very difficult for them. Until one day, the sparrow and the swallow found each other. And I have to tell you, when their beaks cracked against each other just right, they heard a voice— from inside or outside they could not tell—but it said to them *This is not the way*. And for reasons still unknown even to them, at that moment they looked into each other's beady little bird eyes and began to sing. Their song pierced the earth and everything began to crack right open. They scuttled their way up and up and up until the air caught their wings.

I grew up Methodist in a family with an overrepresentation of clergy, so I was consistently surrounded by conversations about church. I remember many of these discussions involving concerns about the future. Is the church still a place where people will feel called to, where future generations will find God in each other? Will the church ever be truly united? They expressed a vision that many throughout the history of this faith have yearned for: that the church would be a place of radical welcome, where people are called into connection and action in the world, from a place that is centered in the love of Christ. And yet, we are all continually reminded that the church is not immune to evil and injustice; as much as we'd like them to, these walls do not keep out the oppressive systems that harm us. In fact, mainline protestantism, especially the Episcopal Church, has become synonymous with power in the US; even 3 of our first 5 presidents identified as Episcopalian. The policies they put in place infused racism and inequality into the foundations of our country's institutions, and we are still dealing with the repercussions, despite the church's progressive aspirations. Here in this diocese, the church is beginning to reckon with its legacy of slavery through the Reparations Fund. While this is an important first step, there is a long journey ahead in rooting out internalized white supremacy, moving towards repair and trust, and embodying a just future.

Our reading today is an excerpt from Cole Arthur Riley's *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. The text opens with a perplexing image of birds living under the ground. Although I was invited to speak as a young adult, I have to admit that my hard core birding era is already going strong— to the point where I had to consciously set aside my questions about what species of sparrow was in the story. In any case, whenever I am outside, I find myself scanning the sky and trees, my ears straining for the sound of singing or flapping wings. These are all things we learn to associate with birds as inherent to who they are in the world. So knowing this, we can start to imagine the suffering and confusion they are facing at the beginning of the story. Riley tells us vividly how their wings, which they did not then know were wings, would press against the walls of their tunnels, making it very difficult for them. The difficulty was not only in their physical movement, but in the way the birds were separated from one another, as we are told that the scattered creatures were trying to squirm and scoot their way back together.

When I was 5, I started taking dance classes. I was one of those jazz, tap, and ballet kids who was in the studio at least 3 days a week. Though I loved dancing, I struggled with it, especially ballet. No matter how much I stretched, my body seemed to lack the affinity for the fully rotated, fluid motions that are expected. One day, when I was around 12, we had a physical therapist come to my ballet class to give us personalized tips and exercises that would help us improve our abilities. One by one, dancers entered the mirrored room, and emerged with sheets of paper listing all their tailored recommendations. When it was my turn, the therapist had me do some pliés and stretches, and at one point she pressed down on my knee to rotate my leg a certain way. We both felt my hip shift a little and then refuse to budge. The sensation was familiar to me, but this time, it took on a whole new meaning. After a pointed glance at me and my teacher, the therapist told me that my hips rotated from the bone instead of the muscle and that this meant I would never be able to go on pointe. She told me there was nothing she could do to help me with my turnout, as the issue was with the structure of my body itself, and she sent me out of the room, paperless. She did not give any further explanation or mobility advice, and even my dance teacher just watched as I left the room.

I was completely bewildered and devastated, and I spent the rest of rehearsal trying to hide my tears from the other dancers as I replayed the encounter. Without any outward guidance, support, or hope of improvement, I felt so alone—like I was broken. After that I spent many nights lying in bed with the soles of my feet pressed together. I would pile pillows onto each of my knees, trying to force my hips to open more. Even though it was very painful and did not yield the results I desperately wanted, I kept at it, convinced I needed to try just a little bit harder to make my body perform in that specific way. From that point on, when I looked in the mirror during rehearsals, all I could see was the wrongness of my body, the clunkiness of my movements, in stark contrast to all the “normal” dancers around me. One by one I watched them get invited to the pointe class. They would glow with pride and excitement, and the teacher would too, as they tried on their new shoes, basking in the evidence of their growing strength and skill. I knew I would never get to experience that, which largely contributed to my decision to drop out of the studio just before ninth grade. Though I am still working to unlearn that narrative of brokenness, I did end up joining a tap company in college and re-discovered my love of dance. I both grieve and cherish my journey towards reaching a

place where, each time I practice or witness dancing, I strive to simply receive the immense reverence and beauty in the many different types of bodies and ways of being, including my own, as we express ourselves through movement, just as we are.

Cole Arthur Riley's fable reveals that the birds' wings were not the problem, but rather the restrictive setting they inhabited. I, too, was brushing up against rigid ideas about the ways dancers are supposed to move, and with the framing of any difference as "wrong" or unwanted. I may not replicate the movements favored in the classic ballet aesthetic, but I can still experience and share immense joy and creativity in my dancing if I am given space to. Similarly, the birds' movement was made difficult by the earthen walls, because they had to morph their bodies to accommodate a space that was not made for them. Not all birds can be burrowing owls, after all. How often do we see this dynamic playing out in the world and in the church, of people having to contort themselves to adhere to a narrow version of what acceptable existence can be. There is often an emphasis on one way of knowing, being, or believing, and so many have been excluded, sometimes violently, from Christian fellowship because of their gender, age, queerness, racial or cultural identity, class background, neurodivergence, or other parts of their identity. Though it strives to be a place of love and acceptance, many, especially young people, leave church feeling broken or unwanted. I find it interesting that this concept of honoring difference is highlighted, at least textually, in the Christian faith. In first Corinthians chapter 12, we see a potent metaphor outlining the importance of recognizing each person's unique qualities as part of our larger whole. We are told explicitly: "...God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body."

This leads us back to the birds. Things are only able to change when two of them, Sparrow and Swallow, come together. In the resonance of their meeting, they heard a voice that revealed a transformative and powerful truth: *This is not the way*. In order to prepare for the uprising of Easter, we must recognize and contend with the tunnels we are facing, and how these show up in the church and the world: the dynamics and structures that are hurting us, the forces that are keeping us apart. We must listen for the Holy Spirit and come to terms with the truth that we cannot continue with the status quo of injustice, and that another world *is* possible.

This is no easy task, and so it is one we must do together. This requires living into our communal calling, not the same-old, surface level, and often empty unity, but really digging into the challenges and messiness of our relationships as members of the body of Christ. This includes practicing radical love alongside radical accountability to prevent and address harm both within the church walls and outside of them. It means cultivating our capacity for challenging conversations, for bearing witness, giving of ourselves in solidarity, and building the types of relationships that will help us get free. As the sparrow and swallow teach us, taking risks together can bring us out of the familiar discomfort of what is, and into new possibilities that will allow all of us to thrive, and spread our wings. Up until the two birds met, they knew nothing beyond the dark, cramped earth. And, even with the way opened before them, they could have chosen to stay where they were. Who knew what was waiting for them? My friends, there are barriers that must be cracked open in order for us to reach that promised future of collective flourishing. Each year, before we can get to Easter, we remember and feel the impact of the Earth shaking and the rocks cracking open on Good Friday. And as an Easter people, we are called to hold hope that those cracks may be pathways towards a future of utmost renewal and rejoicing.

Like Phoebe so beautifully highlighted earlier in this series, a deep embrace of community is also crucial in navigating the uncertainty that is so present in the church and the world. As late stage capitalism pushes us towards increased business and hyper-individualism, religious spaces like churches, temples, and mosques are one of the few places where we can coexist and reflect together intergenerationally with people we are not related to. People of all ages gather in church, as we have today, to share food and fellowship, offering space for communal wonderings and singing together, all in the context of a shared, love-rooted vision. This creates a holy byproduct alongside the Holiness that we come to worship. And this communal element, I believe, is one of the greatest strengths the church has to offer. Church has the potential to be a space where cracking open the tunnels of injustice and emerging from them becomes possible *through* our gathering. Interestingly, one of the other spaces that reflects most of these same components is protest. Again, we see a group of people, from babies to elders, gathering around a vision of what the world could be. There are speeches and testimonies, announcements, and ushers directing people or traffic. Sometimes there is food, and

usually you can count on singing and chanting. People are then sent forth to continue working towards and living into the shared vision and values, hopefully in a cycle of reflection and action. Often when I attend protests, I feel a similar sort of reverence and connection that I do when I worship— to God, and to those around me. Throughout my life, I have found myself deeply challenged, moved, hurt, and loved in both spaces, often simultaneously.

When we apply the journey of the birds to this current moment in the church, a potent message emerges. First, that we need each other. This is how humans, and life in general, has always survived. But in being together we must identify when and how we are replicating the harmful structures that keep us from recognizing that our unique ways of being inherently reflect the necessary diversity and complexity of the Body of Christ. Like the birds, we can do this by listening to the Holy Spirit and raising our voices together in response. Imagine what could unfold - and what tunnels could crack open - if we leaned more fully into the idea of church being a place to discover our wings, our gifts that are not only worthy and valid, but can uplift and transform this world.

And so I wonder, what are our wings that we might not have known were wings? What small and essential part might we play in bringing healing change to this world? Who are the people, pets, plants, that might witness, listen and reflect with us? And what restrictive tunnels are we called to join in cracking open so that Creation can thrive? Racial and economic injustice, ableism, transphobia? In pondering these questions, I often resonate with those subterranean birds trying to scoot their way through the dark. And yet. I invite you to join me in the sacred cycle of sitting with and living into these questions as we prepare to celebrate the Resurrection. I have immense hope that we might find our way together as we gather, listen, sing, disrupt, and follow the path towards the world to come.

So, in the spirit of the birds, I hoped we could sing together in closing. I will lead us in a chant called “speak through the earthquake” and you may join me when you feel ready. As we repeat it, I invite you to pay attention to your breath and body, and to listen for what the Holy Spirit might be revealing to you through our shared practice. As you are able, you are invited to form a circle around the altar and join hands.

Throughout my time in Life Together, an Episcopal Service Corps program that seeks to raise the next generation of prayerful and prophetic leaders for the church and world, I have found sacred chant to be a particularly meaningful practice to engage with in our intentional community. I know we will be chanting in closing a bit later, but I think there's no such thing as too much chant! So let's center ourselves and begin.



Lenten Preaching Series 2024 - March 12

Alden Fosset – Postulant for Ordination and Seminarian, Berkeley Divinity School at Yale

Alden is a postulant for the priesthood in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts and a first year seminarian at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. His historical report on the financial connections between the diocese and slavery was recently published online by the Racial Justice Commission's Subcommittee on Reparations.



Mark 6:1-6

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house.” ⁵ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶ And he was amazed at their unbelief.

A Sermon for the Release of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts and Slavery Report

I am so blessed to be here for this time and on this occasion as we continue the conversation about the great uprising that is Easter. The last time I was here, I spoke about my research on William Appleton (b. 1786, d. 1862), a wealthy businessman and politician who supported this congregation financially in its early days before it became the Cathedral Church of St Paul. His income was derived through investment in the shipment, purchase, and sale of cotton and other slave produced goods. Appleton was entangled with places near and far through his commercial activity. He was caught up in an international nineteenth century economy that depended upon the labor of enslaved Africans to produce cotton, the most lucrative commodity of its time.⁽¹⁾ In his journal from 1843, Appleton writes about the ethical consequences of his immense wealth and even acknowledges his that he struggled the most in his spiritual life with his pride.

My research about Appleton was one part of a larger and more comprehensive archival research project commissioned by our subcommittee on reparations. The result of this work, a report, was released last week, March 6, on the toolkit on reparations page of diomass.org. It is meant to outline in general terms the kinds of connections that exist between diocesan resources and the institution of chattel slavery from the seventeenth century through the Civil War. These connections take different forms, but they all branch off of the same tree. Slavery may have been abolished by law in Massachusetts in 1783, but it was still an essential part of the New England economy in the nineteenth century through shipping, insurance, cotton mills, and railroad. This report is meant to be an example of some ways that parishes might continue or take up this work of research, especially if they have their own archives. It concludes with some recommendations for other relevant areas of research.

The last time I was here, I was just at the beginning of something that is now much more developed. Perhaps that is how Jesus felt returning to his hometown of Nazareth, having at this point in Mark's gospel already established his itinerant ministry of preaching and healing, like he could see the distance between his life now and his life when he left.

When we return to a familiar place, we, too, should look out for the ways that we have changed. But don't think that these places are just the locations you can find on a map. In many cases, they transcend geography. Sometimes, they can be the stories and beliefs that we inherit. Consider, for example, William Appleton or any of this diocese's other benefactors who had enriched themselves by enslaved African labor even if they were not enslavers themselves. In this diocese, these people are like our hometown. This legacy of slavery is where we are from and to it, we must constantly return.

The text says that Jesus left Capernaum and traveled to his hometown. On the sabbath, he was teaching. Jesus' words themselves were not recorded, but we know from the reaction that he was teaching something disquieting and powerful and that those who were hearing it could not believe that this local boy had returned and was speaking like he knew what he was talking about, like he was a teacher. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?" They said, I know this kid. He's a carpenter. He's Mary's son. I know his brothers and sisters—who does he think he is? And here the NRSV translation fails us when it says that the took offense at Jesus. That verb translated as "took offense at" also means "cause someone to sin" or "cause someone to give up faith." The translation is not wrong, but it makes is easy to miss that the very substance of their faith was tested by Jesus' teaching and his works of power, as if he had placed an obstacle in their way. Those who rejected Jesus in these verses were so confident in what they knew about him, in their proximity to him and their judgment of him. Their unbelief may disappoint us, but it should not surprise us. It is a mirror. There is something dangerous about thinking that you already know everything about the people and places most familiar to you. And this is most true about the story that we tell ourselves about who we are. Since our history is ours, we believe that we are automatically the experts.

But do we really know where we are or how we got here? Are we willing to admit what we don't know about the things that we trust the most? Because when I sat in cold special collections reading rooms surrounded by paneled wood under the watchful, painted eyes of the men whose portraits hung on the walls, I realized for the first time that the American history I had grown up with was not the history revealed by these primary sources.

Maybe you grew up with the same kind of American history, the history that centers the experiences and beliefs of religious reformers and that commends the foundation of Plymouth Plantation and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This history, told from the perspective of those who inherit this colonial legacy, says, they may not have gotten everything right, but they sure meant well. That they may have disagreed with the Indigenous people nearby, but in the end, everything worked out as it was meant to. That their reliance upon slave labor was not ideal, but at least it eventually led to abolition. That since Pilgrim and Puritan alike were animated to leave by authentic religious belief, it was okay to embark on this mission. In response to this history, we might ask, what violence was required to dispossess and forcibly convert indigenous people? We might ask, what kind of ideas were circulating to justify and rationalize such behavior? What kinds of theology were being taught?

When we start asking these kinds of questions, we begin to understand the words of Jesus when he says, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their own town, among their own kin and in their own house?” The words “town,” “kin,” and “house” need not refer only to literal places, people, and things. Maybe the ideas and the stories that we cling to, the ones we feel we know better than any others, the ones that we consult for guidance and support are our town, maybe those are our kin, and our house. For it is in these places that God will be amazed by our own unbelief. Where the prophetic voice sounds out, we will be unable to listen. And he could do no works of power there. We have believed in our self-knowledge so much that we can’t even recognize the voice of Christ.

The voice of Christ cuts through our self-deception. This voice began his ministry on earth in Mark’s gospel by saying: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.” The etymology of the Greek word *metanoia*, which is translated as “repent” includes the preposition *meta* meaning beyond and *noia* from the word *nous*, meaning mind. So, Jesus’ invitation to repentance is more precisely a call to change our minds, to understand afresh, to reconsider not just what we think we know, but even the ways that we think we know it. Before we can even hear the good news, our thoughts must be transformed. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord. We must not simply think

differently, we must think upside-down and inside out. What if this transformation starts with our practices of storytelling and remembering? Are we are telling the wrong kinds of stories? What if the most important stories we have to tell are the ones we have kept hidden?

As we wait for the great uprising of Easter, we must surrender ourselves and our own desires to the way of the cross. Only God knows what we need right now. As we wander in the wilderness, let Jesus be our guide. Go to dark Gethsemane and hear these words: “My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake.” Hear and disobey, for we cannot keep awake. Once more, Judas will betray him. Once more, Peter will deny him. Once more, we will shout, “Crucify him!” God whose love confounded worldly power is pouring himself out for us, freely. Look—he’s so close.

Soon, darkness will crack the sky. Soon, the curtain in the temple will tear in two. Soon, the stone will be rolled away. Are you ready to go to Calvary?

(1) Howard French, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War* (Liveright, 2021), 390.



Lenten Preaching Series 2024 - March 19

Sarah Neumann – Candidate for Ordination and Seminarian, Berkeley Divinity School at Yale

Sarah is a senior in seminary at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and a Candidate for Holy Orders. Born and raised in Massachusetts, she grew up attending the Church of Our Redeemer in Lexington and the Barbara C. Harris Camp and served most recently as Minister for Youth and Young Adults at Trinity Church in Boston.



Matthew 16:24-28

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷ “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love a good bargain. Chalk it up to my New England upbringing, or whatever else, but there's something I love about paying less when I could have paid more. On my weekly drive home from my seminary internship last year, sometimes I'd stop at the local outpost of Ocean State Job Lot. If you've never been to an Ocean State Job Lot, my friends, you are missing out. If you've ever wanted to buy pool equipment, silverware, mustard, sweatpants, and books on CD—yes, I said CD—all in one fell swoop, you have come to the right place. Ocean State Job Lot is essentially an overstocked goods warehouse, where items that are out of season, or have outdated packaging, or otherwise are just slightly off somehow, come to be sold at discount prices. On a day when I'm feeling more cynical, Ocean State feels more like a kind of consumerist wasteland, endless rows of mostly unnecessary items piled up in a kind of absurd representation of all the things we thought we wanted, but actually didn't. But on the days when I find some rare treasure – my favorite granola bars for 60% off, or the popcorn popper I've been eyeing finally on clearance – I remember why I'm such a devotee of the Job Lot. It's because at some level, the thrill of the sale is the sweet righteousness of paying what you always knew the actual value of this or that thing should have been all along. You are finally not being swindled. The price of the item matches, at least more so, its actual value.

Lest you think this sermon is some kind of ode to capitalism, let me turn us to the text we just heard from Matthew, where Jesus has something important to tell us about cost. "If any wish to come after me," he says to us, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Now this is not a transactional cost, like when we exchange money for goods at a store. Jesus does NOT say "this is the price I am demanding in exchange for the reward you want." No, instead he simply states the reality: that discipleship has a cost. Following Christ has a cost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, takes up this very same issue. Bonhoeffer makes the distinction, which you might have heard before, between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace, he says, is "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ,

living and incarnate.” (1) Cheap grace, I think, is so seductive to us because it mimics so well the real thing – until it doesn’t. There is no foundation to cheap grace, nothing of substance underneath it, and it is only a matter of time before it is exposed as the house of cards that it is.

Seventy years after Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, a pair of sociologists, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, studied the spiritual and religious lives of American teenagers. They published their results in a book called *Soul Searching*, and they defined a new combination of beliefs that they found had taken hold amongst American youth. They coined the term “moralistic therapeutic deism” to describe the tenets of this new brand of spirituality.

Moralistic therapeutic deism includes the beliefs that:

1. God exists,
2. that God wants people to be good and nice to each other,
3. that God is involved in our lives mostly just when we need help solving a problem, and
4. that the central goal of life is to be happy. (2)

Now this might not sound so bad, at first glance. You’re telling me the youth still believe in God? Incredible! And the not-so-great parts, we’ll just chalk those up to teenagers being teenagers, right? Youth, though, are always the harbingers of what is true more broadly in our churches. And so we have to pay attention to these findings not as a problem with our teenagers, but as a problem with ourselves.

Because however benign it sounds, moralistic therapeutic deism is not Christianity. It is the modern manifestation of Bonhoeffer’s cheap grace. It cannot conceive of a religion that would actually ask anything tangible of us. The very idea of taking up your cross makes no sense if God only ever wants you to be happy and nice. Moralistic therapeutic deism is pleasant, it’s respectable, it fits nicely into modern, rational life. And, it is theologically bankrupt. It has next to nothing to do with the Gospel. It’s cheap.

As I prepare to graduate from seminary this spring, I’ve been thinking a lot about the state of our churches. I think we have sometimes been too quick to mistake ease for appeal when it comes to evangelism. Christianity is hard, after all! Being part of a church

community is hard. Why would anyone want to sign up for that? Why did I sign up for that? Instead of contending with those questions, the siren song of cheap grace pulls us in. We try to market our churches, our ministries, our faith, as requiring as minimal a commitment as possible.

But when most people walk in the doors of our churches as spiritual seekers, they are looking, actually, for something costly. Not a transactional cost, but costly in the same way that taking up your cross is costly. Unless they've taken a very unlikely wrong turn, they know exactly where they've come. They are looking for the Good News. And when all we give them, all we have to offer them, is cheap, we should not be surprised when they walk right back out again. And what does that cheapness look and sound like? "Oh, you can believe whatever you want here, it doesn't really matter." "You don't have to really change much about your life to be a Christian." "God doesn't really care what you do as long as you're being nice to everyone."

All of these are lies. They are lies we tell seemingly in an attempt to be more appealing. They're lies we tell out of our fear that the church we know and love will cease to exist, and so the only solution must be to make it as easy and undemanding as possible to belong to it. But we have it all wrong when we do and say these things, friends, because Scripture tells us over and over again that they are not true.

Ease is not the same thing as truth. We should be seeking to lower the bar to entry by making our church communities less like social clubs, and by ensuring that everyone who wants to lead and belong has the opportunity to regardless of race or sex or identity. We do not lower the bar by cheapening our faith. Not only is that contrary to the Gospel, it also doesn't work. People want costliness because they know that cost reflects value. And all they are being offered elsewhere in the world is cheapness. They have come to the cross to find something different.

The Jesus who tells us to take up our cross is anti-cheapness. He refuses to misrepresent the value of a life with God by pretending it is not worth a high cost. And so Jesus rightly asks of us the level of commitment and self-denial that he knows it will take to follow him. He asks the ultimate cost, because he knows that a life with

God is of the ultimate value. “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”

It's for this reason that I am, as I described it recently to a friend, bullish on Christianity. The church may have waned in institutional might, but the Gospel never has. And as long as we preach that Gospel, doing justice to its real cost to us, we have nothing to fear. That Gospel is as powerful as the day it was first preached, by a poor man from Nazareth, and it is still speaking today if only we will let it. In the prayers of the Iona community, there is a line which reads: “we will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing.” As we complete our observation of Lent and anticipate the renewal of Easter, I hope you will join me in committing to this life of holy costliness, for ourselves and for our beloved church.

Amen.

(1) Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*

(2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralistic_therapeutic_deism