

Devotions – May 24-30, 2020

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Sunday, May 24, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Genesis 1:31

³¹God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

We are so blessed in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to be surrounded by the beauty of God’s creation! Easy to say on a sunny day in mid-May when the thermometer is creeping close to 70 degrees. Admittedly, a bit harder for some of us to embrace on a day in February when we are getting another foot of snow and winter has already felt like forever...

A few weeks ago, I listened to an expert whose life work has been the study of infectious disease talk about COVID-19 and ask the question (tongue in cheek, I believe), “What was God thinking when God created this virus?”

As I considered God’s declaration of creation to be “very good”, I couldn’t help but think about that physician’s question. Is there anything “good” about this virus?

I struggle to answer that question with a resounding (or even tentative) “yes.” But that does not mean that there isn’t good that can come from this time when the virus seems to be controlling how we live and interact with each other.

As I sit in my office working, I look out on the street in front of my house. I have never – in six years living here – seen so many people outside each day - walking, biking, jogging. It is as if some of us have rediscovered the “very goodness” of being in God’s creation! Hmmm...

Other things I have noticed: Congregation members checking in on one another to make sure folks are “okay”. People willing to adapt as worship has moved from a beloved building to a computer screen (or tablet or phone) or even a good old telephone handset. Folks who are very concerned for children in our community who are dependent on school meals – and tremendous generosity of spirit and gifts in a time of great uncertainty.

In short, perhaps the “goodness” of this time can be our ability to remember that we all rely on God, on one another, and on God that we encounter in one another. And, if you are able to, go for a walk on a sunny day, breathe deep, and say to yourself and those whom you can safely encounter, “It is very good.”



Monday, May 25, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Exodus 14:30-31

³⁰Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Sometimes scripture makes me take a 2nd or 3rd (or 4th, 5th, 6th, etc...) look. That's certainly the case with this reading from Exodus. It is such an important story for both Jews and Christians. God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Perhaps it stirs memories of Charlton Heston as Moses and Jell-O used in film special effects (admittedly showing my age).

It certainly invites us to consider God's love and care for those who are marginalized and oppressed – saving the people of Israel from the horrors of human slavery. But then I have to pause and take another look. Does God's "salvation" for one group of people (Israel) lead to the condemnation and destruction of another (Egypt)?

This text seems to say just that. But then I am reminded that sometimes scripture describes the reality of the human condition even as we who read and hear these stories are left to wonder about the ways in which God is the primary actor (in this case acting to destroy the Egyptians) and the ways in which we humans want to see things in a binary "good/evil", "us/them", "heroes/goons" way and therefore proclaim destruction of the "other" as God's justified action.

Is it God's anger and wrath that brings the sea back upon the Egyptians? Or is it Israel's anger and wrath toward those who enslaved them that leads them to proclaim the destruction of their enemies to be God's desire and action? We are left to wonder and discuss and even disagree. This is part of the beauty of engaging ancient texts that can be confusing. We become a part of the story as we read, hear, and interpret meaning.

When we find ourselves "enslaved" (by poverty, addiction, grief, depression, etc.), one thing we can be sure of is that this is not God's will. That God loves us and wants to free us from that which enslaves. And we are left with hope that God will act. Maybe not in a way that destroys that which we see as our enemy, but in a way that invites us into freedom and to move beyond a need for vengeance, wrath, or hatred. In a way that moves us toward the grace, courage, and life that God wants for all of creation.



Tuesday, May 26, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Isaiah 55:10-11

¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Ever feel discouraged? As if your contributions don't really matter? You're in good company. I think most of us feel that way at times. I remember hearing the senior pastor of a very large, suburban congregation once confess that he was finding joy in simple mundane tasks, like painting a room in his house, because he could see that his work was bearing fruit and because it felt as if it was something in which he had some degree of competence. Which was also his way of confessing that in his role as a senior pastor of a large, suburban congregation he was neither seeing his work bear fruit nor was he feeling very competent!

These words from Isaiah remind us that God's word will accomplish that which God intends. Sometimes it may not seem that way to us. But we aren't God, are we? As you consider the frustrations of your life, your work, relationships, financial situation, health, etcetera, is it helpful to consider that God's word will "accomplish that which God purposes"?

Please don't hear in that "everything happens for a reason" or other such platitudes that hurt more than they help. I do not believe those lies. Yet even in times of great frustration, pain, and sorrow can we depend on God's word accomplishing that which God intends? Will God's "kingdom come" on earth as in heaven? On that I depend. Even when God's reign looks very different from what many of us may want for our own daily lives. "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*" **Isaiah 55:8**

Rather we pray, each week: "**Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**" Help us in our weakness, Lord, to look forward in hope for **YOUR** will to be accomplished rather than our own.



Wednesday, May 27, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Proverbs 8:1, 9:5-6

¹Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

⁵“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. ⁶Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Before I decided to apply to seminary at the age of 36, I was an engineer and then a computer salesperson for a major Fortune 500 company and eventually sales manager for that same company. I remember reading a book in my “corporate days” (I think it was Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) and having an “ah-ha” moment as I read one illustration in particular. It went something like this:

“Use the image of climbing a ladder to think about your (work) life. What will you do, if you spend your entire life climbing that ladder one rung at a time only to discover that for your whole life the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall?”

For some reason that metaphor spoke to me and still does. I suspect that many of us (and at times me too – even now) spend our lives climbing a ladder that is leaning up against the wrong wall. The good news is that we can always back down that ladder and adjust what it leans against. At age 36, that meant a major adjustment for me as I left the “corporate world” and decided to pursue a very different path.

But of course you don’t have to go to seminary or be a pastor to do that. Here’s a silver lining of this current unusual time – we can all do some looking around and evaluate or re-evaluate the “walls” against which our “ladders” are leaning. I believe we might even call that wisdom.

In Proverbs, we have this beautiful (feminine) image of God as Wisdom. Perhaps Wisdom is calling to each of us now and inviting us to hear her voice and understand in a new way. To climb down our ladders and adjust what wall we want them to lean against. To truly live and walk in the way of insight rather than blindly going about our days without considering where our days are leading. May we all have the awareness to hear Wisdom when she calls to us and the courage to follow her ways as we consider our lives moving forward.



Thursday, May 28, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Ezekiel 37:3b-6

“Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

This image of a valley of dry bones is a favorite of mine. I have known many people for whom a valley that is filled with dead and dry reminders of the people, places, and memories they have

loved seems all too real. And this time of physical isolation is quite hard for many of them. In short, it may feel that the dry bones are piling up.

But read the passage. It is the spirit of the Lord who asks the question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” To which the prophet Ezekiel responds, “O Lord God, you know.” I used to “hear” in the voice of the spirit of the Lord an accusation and a challenge. Sort of like, “Well mortal – what do you think, can I make these dead things alive?!” A challenge. A test of faith. But as I have gotten older and live with my own sense of “dry bones” piling up around me, I “hear” (imagine) the voice of the spirit of the Lord differently. Softer, plaintive, comforting. The voice of a lover. “Mortal, *can* these bones live?”

“O Lord God, you know.” I do not. I hope. But sometimes even hope seems faint, transitory, elusive. I certainly do not know that life can come from that which is dried up and dead. But then the Lord invites the prophet into the process of bringing the dead dry bones back to life. “Prophesy (verb: praa-fuh-sai) to these bones.” Join me in proclaiming life to that which is dead and dried up.

And the words which Ezekiel is to proclaim (prophesy) to the bones are these: “I (the Lord) will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” Life will come from that which is dead and dried up.

When your dry bones are piling up all around and hope seems lost or very faint, God’s love whispers to you, “*You shall live... and you shall know...*” We rest in faith and trust that the Lord God will breathe life into those who have no breath – even when it is ourselves who need that breath of life.



Friday, May 29, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Jonah 1:1-3

¹Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

The story of Jonah is often a favorite among those who have tried to respond to a sense of God’s call. I think because he is such a hilarious caricature of so many of us. Ninevah was north and east of Palestine. A significant journey, but not an unreasonable request as journeys go. Tarshish was west on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (in what is now Spain). Pretty much the

other side of the world. A little geographic comparison may be helpful here. Living in northern Wisconsin, I think of it this way: God commands Jonah to go from Rhineland (Palestine) to Marquette, Michigan (Ninevah) and instead he hops on the first flight he can find to Tokyo, Japan (Tarshish).

Oh, how human of him! How many of us would prefer to run the other way when we hear God calling? I think most of us. Why? Well, acting on God's call is not always pleasant or easy. Personally, I fought against one of the ways God was calling me for 24 years at least. But don't get stuck on that word, "call". As Lutherans, we proclaim that we ALL are called. Vocation means just that – "calling". Some have the vocation of pastor, but we ALL have the vocation of baptized child of God. The vocation of one who follows the way of Jesus Christ. Whoever you are and whatever you do "for a living", you can be assured that you are called to a vocation – a way of living that honors and reflects Jesus and his life, and of course – his death.

Oh – that's the unpleasant part isn't it? Don't get me wrong – very few of us are truly called to martyrdom. It is not the faithful response to give of ourselves to the point of physical death. But there are ways in which we may be called to "die" to self. Sometimes that means going someplace we never wanted to go. Doing something we never wanted to do. Relinquishing control of something we never wanted to relinquish.

How are you being called? To where are you being called? How have you avoided answering that call? Hopped in a boat for Tarshish? God can use even that. Our attempts to escape. Our attempts to destroy ourselves rather than answer that call. And sometimes God may use something as strange as a big fish to get us back on track and keep us going in spite of ourselves.



Saturday, May 30, 2020

For devotions this week, I invite you to consider seven excerpts from readings that we use for the Vigil of Easter – the worship service in which historically, candidates for baptism gathered with the Church on the night before Easter and joined the assembly of the baptized.

Text: Isaiah 61:1-3

¹The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

In Luke's gospel, this is the text that Jesus reads from the scroll in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. It is a beautiful vision of the reign of God. A hopeful vision. Hopeful, at least for those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, imprisoned, in debt, and grieving.

Jesus' hometown folks were very pleased that he read this and they spoke well of him. Until, that is, he said some things that followed this proclamation that seemed to say that *they* were not the ones for whom this message was intended. At which point they turned on him and led him to a cliff off of which they were going to throw Jesus.

Sitting in the middle of this pandemic, I can kind of relate to the anger and frustration of the Nazareth "hometown boys". I wonder if maybe they, like many of us, were eager for a word of hope for a return to better days. I, like many of you, am longing for a "return to normal". For the chance to go back to how things were. Less anxiety about the future. Knowing that we would all physically gather together for worship on Sunday. Being able to confidently plan a vacation for next year. Or at least a trip to Illinois to see my parents, my adult children, and my growing (too fast!) grandchildren. I wonder if the Nazareth homies heard in this beautiful and hopeful text from Isaiah a promise that God would indeed be bringing them good news of a return to happier days.

But Jesus seems to say to them, "It is not what you are hoping for – rather God is going to be doing something completely new and you may not even be part of what that new thing will be." Wait a minute! That is not what we are expecting or desiring! No way – return us to the days of glory prior to exile!

But here we are in this time. Waiting. Uncertain. Still in "exile", in a way. Hoping things will return to what they once were. But some of us starting to wonder. Could it be that God is doing something new here that we cannot even imagine? Might it be that we are moving closer to Isaiah's vision of God's reign? If so, what will that mean for us? How might changes be coming that will challenge all of us? How frightening. And oh, how very hopeful as well...

