



**Peace Church United Methodist**



Evangelisch-  
methodistische  
Kirche

*The English-Speaking Methodist Congregation in Munich*

# The Lockdown Collection of Sermons & Meditations



*Sermons, meditations and reflections  
shared at Peace Church during the Corona-virus pandemic*

**VOLUME I**

*May 2020 – February 2021*

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## Foreword

This booklet comes to you with much love!

This unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic and all the resulting restrictions have required us to be creative in finding new ways to meet, to worship, and to be church together. New church services were created, the prayer meeting went online, videos were made of the special celebration services, and we enjoyed hearing each others' voices on PeaceCast.

This booklet attempts to collate many of the Bible reflections, sermons and meditations which have been shared on these platforms throughout this Corona time.

The reflections have been prepared and shared by many different people: some experienced preachers, and many new voices too.

The booklet is laid out in the sequence of the Bible passages they cover, starting in Genesis and progressing through the Old and New Testaments.

In fact, we have so many Bible reflections to share, that this is just Volume I! A second volume will be printed in a few months time.

As you delve into these Bible passages, I trust that the sermons and meditations will speak to you in your situation now.

We are living through a time of much challenge, much pain and much loss. But I believe this is also an opportunity of deep reflection for humankind, as our normal lives have been stripped back and altered (in some ways, possibly forever). We therefore have an opportunity to move forward from this pandemic in new ways and with new insights.

Many of these sermons and meditations reflect on this very challenge: what kind of world do we want to live in going forward? And how can we play our part?

I therefore hope you find these reflections comforting, challenging and inspiring!

It has been such a loss not to have been able to meet up all together for so many months now. And I look forward to the time when we can greet each other face to face with lots of hugs. Until that time, I hope you enjoy these reflections...

With love and hope,  
Kat Wagner



# 1. We are part of a family: the human family of God

*Reflection shared at the Council on Ministries meeting, 9 September 2020,  
by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



In this time when we are all affected by the coronavirus, whether directly or indirectly, whether physically, biologically, psychologically, spiritually, and for many economically, it may be helpful to remember that we're in this together.

Jesus came among us in the first place, to show us the way to be right and reconcile with the God who is the creator of us all, and right and reconciled with each other as children of this one god who has created us all, and therefore as sisters, brothers, and siblings, of one another.

Jesus came to show us how to be in a relationship with God and in relationship with each other, came to show us how to live not simply as collections of individual self-interest, but how to live as the human family of God. That's why he said love the Lord your God, love your neighbor as yourself. Because in that is hope for all of us to be the human family of God.

Working together as individuals from many different backgrounds, working together as churches, exchanging thoughts and ideas with one another, sharing and supporting each other, finding out which way one can go, and which paths to leave untouched is something essential and absolutely necessary.

We need to look not only at the Peace Church and its plans and members. We need to have a worldwide awareness of what is going on. ...of where people suffer from Covid 19, from racism, from violence, terror, war, hunger... Our lives are unpleasant at the moment, unsure, undecided... The lives of many others in the world are unbearable, and this puts the whole of humankind to shame.

We are all part of a big family. Bigger than our biological families, bigger than our immediate families, bigger than our congregations, bigger than our denominations,

bigger than our cities, our states, our nation.

We are part of the human family of God.

Jesus came to show us that his way of love is the way of life. It's God's human family. We are in a time when remembering that may be important for all of us.

We are in this together.  
What affects some directly affects all indirectly.  
We are part of a family.  
The human family of God.

The head of the World Health Organization, said this, and I quote:

*"We have seen this coming for years. Now is the time to act. This is not a drill. This epidemic can be pushed back, but only with collective, coordinated, and comprehensive approach by us all."*

It takes us all. We are family.

And then one of the spokespersons for the European Union, speaking to the member states said this, and I paraphrase: We must share our resources and our information. It is not the possession of any one nation.

In each of those calls, and in the calls of many knowledgeable people, we have heard again and again, that we are in this together, we can walk through this together, and we will find our way in our life together.

So, look out for your neighbors, look out for each other. Look out for yourselves. Listen to those who have knowledge that can help to guide us medically and help to guide us socially. Do everything that we can to do this together, to respond to each other's needs and to respond to our own needs.

Let us pray:

God of the present moment, God who in Jesus stills the storm and soothes the frantic heart; bring hope and courage to all who wait or work in uncertainty. Bring hope that you will make them the equal of whatever lies ahead. Bring them courage to endure what cannot be avoided, for your will is health and wholeness; you are God, and we need you. This we pray in Christ our Lord. Amen.

God love you. God bless you. May God hold us all in tender hands of love.

## 2. Welcoming people can be a healing experience

*Sermon on Genesis 18, by Reiner Kanzleiter*



Sisters and brothers! Welcoming people can be a healing experience. Being made welcome can be a healing experience. Finding a place at a table as a stranger can be a healing experience. Being invited and served as if you were a family member can be a healing experience. It can be so easy to heal, to comfort, to make people feel at home.

Sara and Abraham have been such welcoming and healing people. Abraham is zealous when the guests arrive. He is happy for someone to come, he gratefully fulfills his task as a house-father: he is hospitable, he takes care of the service: "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on". Then he takes care of the strangers, gives orders to the wife and servants and finally they eat.

This means, after a couple of long hours they eat. There is no rush. The meal takes time to prepare and the hosts have time to spend with you making you feel comfortable and welcomed. Feeling at home also means: I am given time, as much as I need. I am not set under pressure. I don't have to hurry. If

have time to arrive. My hosts are patient people. They are welcoming.

After some hours, the guests ask: "Where is your wife Sara?"

God comes not just to Abraham but to Sara too. God comes to promise a future to the old couple, to announce the fulfillment of their long-buried hopes. But Sarah laughs. She waits in the tent and listens; she is, if you set it negatively - "curious," if you set it positively, she is "interested". She wants to know what the strangers have to say and also what has led them to their home, what they want.

Sara hears: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." What she hears makes her laugh. She laughs at the absurdity of what has been said. "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" Sara can only laugh derisively - and perhaps a little bitterly, too.

What is to be expected when you are old? It is not to believe that in old age you will give birth to new life. Sara has resigned herself, probably with some effort, to the fact that her life is lived, that nothing more is to

come, that no next generation will take up her journey, that it was not her life's mission to be a mother.

Now she is in the years in which no one expects great things, in which people are preparing for the end of the road. No, there is nothing more to come. There is nothing more to expect. Just a little bit of everyday life, which is getting more and more tiring day by day: The eyes are not the same as 50 years ago; the hands are not, nor are the ears or the legs. Everything goes more slowly ... She is resigned to growing older without offspring and drawing ever closer to the end of her life. And now: Sara laughs bitterly as these guests open up old wounds.

You don't have to be old yourself to get close to Sara. How often do we think or live according to the inner motto: Nothing more will come. Everything is settled, the procedures are sorted, plans are made, ideas and longings from the past are happily buried. We strive for a settled life where everything is in place and providing the daily necessities determines our lives.

Then something happens that may awaken old desires. Some long hidden or repressed past ambition comes to the fore. Would you believe that there could be new life outwith this old everyday life?

Do we then laugh like Sara? Bitterly, disbelievingly, derisively? Would you believe it: New life out of this old everyday life?

Maybe Sara laughs not only bitterly, but also somehow wisely. Perhaps she laughs in the wisdom of age, because she knows how to distinguish the important from the unimportant; maybe she laughs wisely because she is able to accept things that cannot be changed.

Sara laughs, she laughs bitterly, unbelievably, and perhaps also calmly and wisely.

And then, when asked about her laughter, she denies having laughed. She denies because she is afraid. Could it be possible after all? Maybe she denies having laughed for fear of something new to come after all, when nothing more awaited her? Maybe she was afraid that this old hope for children might germinate again. This hope, which she had buried so painfully?

Anyway, there is something to smile and to laugh about when God promises something. God always believes that even the old ones, the desperate ones, or the tired ones still have something to offer.

Sara laughs. God makes her laugh again. It is a bright smile of happiness. Sara experiences the fulfillment of God's promise. She does not remain stubborn in her conviction that everything is too late anyway. The years that are to come are hers, with her child, with her husband. Sara, the old woman, has born a child.

It does not necessarily have to be the birth of a child, which will change our lives forever. It can be the birth of hope, the birth of satisfaction, the birth of the courage and the confidence to expect something new. A chance to depart from the familiar path and start something new, something long buried. There is still something alive in us that wants to grow towards the light.

God has to offer the happiness of a new beginning, the promise of life before death!

Many a bitter and disbelieving laughter could slowly turn into a bright smile: on Sara's face and on our faces too. Maybe we just need to be more attentive when God's guests come knocking at our door, bringing a promise which is only meant for us and which we should grasp. Let us open the door, welcoming guests, strangers, friends, angels...welcoming God's future for us and with us. Let us lay our tables, offer something to eat and to drink and start the conversation about a new beginning.

Welcoming people can be a healing experience. Being made welcome can be a healing experience. Finding a place at a table as a stranger can be a healing experience. Being invited and served as if you were a family member can be a healing experience.

Sometimes it can be so easy to heal, to comfort, to make people feel at home, to become a host for God and his angels. To be blessed and to be a blessing.

Amen

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### 3. The burning bush

*A meditation on Exodus 3, by Sabrina Gill*



When did you first meet God? I first met God when I was around 15 or 16. I was in a phase where as soon as I went to bed and the household went quiet, I began to be terrified. I was afraid of burglars, ghosts, demons thanks to Horror Movies that I had watched at a time where I wasn't mature enough. I used to lie awake wrapped up in my blankets and squashed to the furthest in my mind safest corner of my bed as far as possible from the edges of the mattress. I used to watch YouTube Videos until 4 or 5 in the morning until I was so tired that I didn't have the energy to be afraid anymore.

In one of these nights I got up to go to the bathroom. After I had gone to the toilette, I

had looked myself in the mirror. From inside of myself a question popped up: "What are you afraid of?" I had said it out loud to myself whilst staring in my own eyes reflected in the mirror. Suddenly I was filled with a feeling. A feeling of peace, of silence, of safety, of God. I wasn't afraid anymore, because I had realized that I didn't have an answer to that question. I went back to bed and straight away fell into a deep sleep.

I interpret the Bible text about Moses who meets God in the burning bush as a type tutorial for how to meet God.

Moses at this time is a shepherd. He is doing this to help out his father in law. He spends



a lot of time on his own in the desert. Being in solitude and doing favors for other people, are a gateway to God.

It is then that the burning bush sets in. It couldn't have just been there. Before it receives any meaning, Moses has to notice it. He has to have enough curiosity to step forward and look carefully how this bush is burning, namely without turning to ash. A miracle to a certain extent does not exist without a receiver or a person to tell about it (a spectator).

Now that God has Moses attention, he speaks to him from inside the bush. Here Moses actions convey another step in how to meet God. He answers the call. He says to God: "Here I am". He acknowledges being called and simply answers that he is indeed here right now. Present and conscious.

God proceeds to ask him to take off his shoes as he is standing on holy ground. To me this is a metaphor for being humble, being oneself, being rooted and in contact with the earth, the place that bore us and keeps us.

After all this, Moses only just now realizes that it is God he is talking to and who is calling him. He then tries to hide his face. He is ashamed of his past. He doesn't feel worthy of Gods attention.

This is also a part of faith. Doubt. The belief that one is inadequate for God's presence comes to us in times of trouble or depression. It is inevitable for us to feel this way, if one chooses the way of faith, the way of God. Doubt is a part of faith and it is part of meeting God.

God tells Moses that he can hear the cries of suffering from the Israelites trapped and enslaved in Egypt. God faces what is troubling him and is prepared to find a solution, so much so that he even promises the release and the salvation of the Israelites.

We too have to face suffering if we want to change the world or ourselves for the better. One has to see what it is, the bad, the dark, the violent to know what it is we need to change and even to figure out how this change needs to be realized.

Moses knows that the Israelites are suffering under Egyptian rule, because he witnessed it when he was there, but he still has to face it. He has to learn to hear the cries so that he learns what it is that might forever follow him in his dreams, fears and into his life. God wants to make him aware of these things.

The solution for Gods suffering is Moses. And so, he tells him to set forth and free the Israelites from their captivity.

Moses doubt and therefore his belief in his own inadequacy are still a topic/issue for him. He tells God that he can't be fit for this task. He doubts himself to be worthy of Gods plan. (He even asks God if he is sure in what he is saying.)

But God is sure and so gives Moses the promise that he will be with him.

Moses is running out of excuses. He still attempts to weasel himself out of the task and situation at hand. He says that the Israelites might not believe that he was sent by God and therefore won't follow him through the desert toward the promised land.

God lifts all doubt whether from Moses or the at this time unaware Israelites with the sentence: "I am who I am... I am has sent me to you."

For me this sentence is the ultimate guideline for meeting God. It is "I am". It is just this moment. It is this now, this place, this being that enables us to meet God.

The question of when one has met God or even first met God implying that, yeah it happens all the time, can be quite daunting.

Suddenly our mind can be filled with sentences and misconceptions. “I haven’t met God. Not even once. Does that mean he doesn’t care about me? Did I do something wrong? Do I not have a job on this earth? Am I maybe not worthy of a job or meaning? Maybe God loves me more and that’s why he doesn’t want to stress me with his presence or his demands?”

What I ask myself is, maybe you have experienced God but you just haven’t called it or named it a “meeting with God”. Have you ever experienced moments of utter

silence and awe? Have you ever witnessed the miracle of childbirth? The miracle of sunsets? The miracle of friendship and forgiveness? The utter focus and flow whilst doing something you are so immersed in that you forget time, space and your name?

I believe everyone has if they look closely. I believe people live these kind of moments multiple times. I believe we meet God every day, if we listen carefully and patiently enough.

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## 4. Elijah’s story

*A meditation on 1 Kings 17-18, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



When two weeks ago Kat spoke here about wilderness experiences I rediscovered my old love for Elijah, the prophet.

I’m going to lead you through a meditation again, just as I did some weeks ago. It’s Sunday evening and a time for you just to rest. So that’s what I want you to do.

I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed. Try to be still, open, curious and at peace. If you want to, close your eyes and use your imagination to enter into the scene of our story...and all you have to do is listen and rest.

Imagine yourself meeting Elijah, the prophet. Hear him speak to you...

Things had been going incredibly well for me. I had won an enormous victory over the opposition. All had ganged up against me, all these political and religious leaders who represented all that was false. Their worshipping the wrong gods stood for the concentration of power in the hands of a few wealthy and greedy, while the peasants who did the real work, had no voice, no vote, no land.

Their religion sanctified cruelty and injustice. I was called to put all my energy in

stopping this. And I won. I killed all their prophets. All of them against me alone, and I won.

What a triumph! What a victory! What a confirmation that I had been right all the time, when I seemed to be so entirely alone.

And then I heard that one woman had set her heart on destroying me. One woman against me, who had beaten all those men. But it knocked all the energy and confidence out of me. I was limp and helpless. I had to flee for my life. I ran from the city, from the meeting places, and the cultivated land.

I came to the edge of the desert. And I went on, another twenty miles or more.

In the sun-baked desert, I found a little bush; if I sat under it, there was enough shade to protect me.

This was the end, I thought. My success had faded away.

I was a failure, like everyone before me. They had not been able to stand up against all that was wrong on the world, and I had done no better. So, I made a prayer: “It is enough, Lord; take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors before me.”

The prayer settled me. I was able to sleep.

The next thing I knew was this angel waking me up and telling me to get up for breakfast. Breakfast? Where was that going to come from – in the desert?

But, sure enough, somehow there was some sort of bread, and a jar of water, all ready for me. So, I nibbled at the bread and took a few sips of the water. There was nothing else to do, so I went back to sleep.

Not for long. The angel was back again.

“You’ve got to have a good breakfast, if you are going to do a good day’s work...” – but

I was not planning on any work – all I wanted to do was die.

However, the angel made it clear that I was not going to have a nice quiet death. I was to be on the road again. And it was a long road. I was on that road forty days and forty nights. I landed up at Mount Horeb, God’s home in the desert.

I found a cave in the hillside. I was able to crawl into it and curl up.

I felt safe and sheltered, curled up on myself. I felt secure and happy with my messed-up sick self. I was alone with the wounds which were the only possessions left to me. This would be a nice way to die.

But suddenly there was a question at my ear: “What are you doing here?”

Was it God? It was a sensible, enquiring question, which needed a straightforward answer. So, I told my story:

“I am here because I have been so keen to stand up for the true God. All your people have abandoned you, they have ruined your places of worship, they have killed all your ministers, I am the only one left, and they are chasing me, to kill me too.”

There was only one thing still true about me, that I was alone and hated; all my securities and successes had failed. There was no ground under my feet. The only thing left was my death wish. The voice came back: “Get out of that hole, and stand up straight on the mountain, and face God.”

I knew that God was very close. And it was chaos. It was terrifying.

There was a powerful wind that broke up the landscape. But I realised that God was not in the wind. It happened but God was outside it.

And then there was an earthquake. It happened, but God was outside it.

And then there was fire. But I realised that God was not in the fire. It happened, but God was outside it.

After all this there was nothing left but a gentle murmuring sound. And that was God.

So, I did uncurl myself and I went out and stood straight up at the cave's entrance. I picked up my cloak and wrapped it round my face: the dust had not settled – I was almost choking.

And the same patient question came again: "What are you doing here?"

The wind and earthquake and fire had not changed the question. So, they did not change my answer: "I am here because I have been so keen to stand up for the true God. All your people have abandoned you, they have ruined your places of worship, they have killed all your ministers, I am the only one left, and they are chasing me, to kill me too."

But this time there was something more. There was a job for me to do. I was told to go back into politics and take responsibility for a change of government. There were specific people who had to be found and

put into positions of leadership. There was a plan. And a future. I was no longer alone.

What made all the difference to me was the persistent quiet questioner. The questions and the questioner were there after the events of chaos just as before. In a sense, nothing had changed. But my all-embracing depression was lifted: my damaged nature was no longer the main thing that was true about me. I could get on with the job of standing up for a truth and a purpose outside myself.

The chaos was not the end of everything, but the beginning of a new stage of work. So, I went and found a friend and did the job.

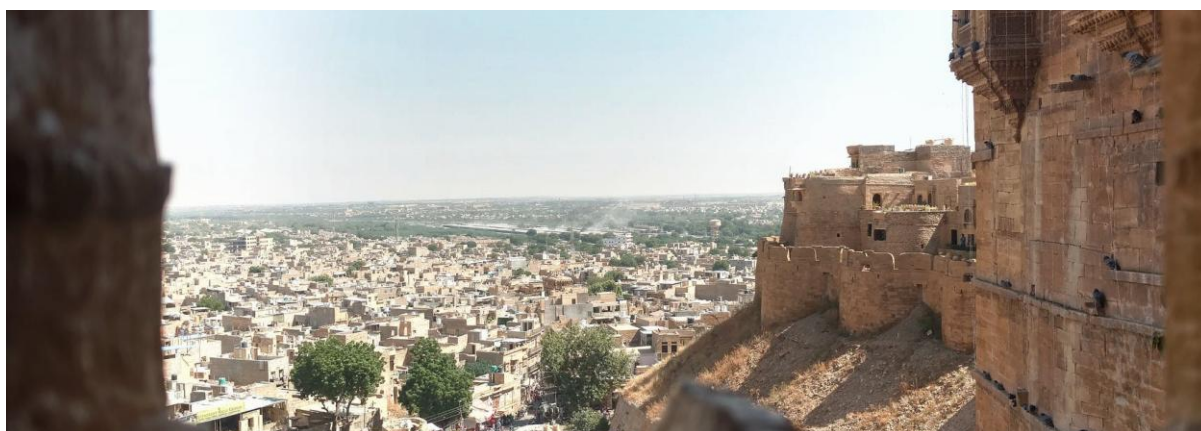
And the message of all this? God, the sender of angels and friends, wants us, calls us, feeds us, meets us gently, and has a job to do for us.

So, go from this place strengthened and blessed by the eternal presence we have felt here, and be glad and loving to all we meet, for we have been with God, who has smiled on us with divine favour, and teaches us to smile on the world with a similar favour.

Amen.

## 5. Sheerah, the city builder

*Sermon on 1 Chronicles 7: 24, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



Sisters and brothers, believe it or not: I found a new mother of faith. She is of course not new, she is ancient, but she only gets mentioned in one verse of the Old Testament, and even in Biblical commentaries she is sometimes overlooked. It was a complete accident that I “stumbled over” her... I was reading to do research on the prophet Huldah, when her name caught my eye.

I sought for her and found her in the Book of Chronicles. Her story is hidden in a long list of genealogies with names hard to pronounce, and family connections even harder to understand.

Her name is Sheerah. She did what no other woman in the Old Testament did. She built cities. She built three cities: Upper and Lower Beth-Horon, and Uzzan-Sheerah, which means “listen to Sheerah”. She’d named her third city after herself, claiming that one would listen to her.

So, let us listen to Sheerah’s story.

There is this one verse, thrown in the midst of all these names – as you have heard in the reading. We have heard of Sheerah’s family, her grandfather & great-grandfather. The text is a little bit unclear on how many generations, but she was a granddaughter of Joseph. Joseph, whom the ending of the

book of Genesis is devoted to; Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, the great-grandson of Abraham; Joseph, who saved his family and all of Egypt from famine...

Joseph was given a home and a most important job in Egypt. He married an Egyptian woman. Her name is Asenath. Together they had two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh.

Ephraim had sons. But these sons caused him much pain. Not only did they die, but they died committing a crime. They were murdered when they tried to steal cattle.

Ephraim was devastated, and after a long time of mourning decided to carry on with life as best as he could. He and his wife had another child, Beriah. Ephraim named his late born, his youngest son, “weeping”. Life from then on held only sadness for him. Pessimism took over...

And in all that we find this one verse about a daughter of Ephraim. With her, a new story begins: a story of hope, of building up, of building new, - a story of optimism. Instead of remaining trapped and caught in this awful family tragedy, Sheerah escapes its grip and says No. “No, I am not letting that define me! I am building something new!” She did not let the family pain enslave her! She had a vision and made it come true.

Sheerah built three cities. Two of the three cities, Lower Beth-Horon and Upper-Beth-Horon were on a hillside, one high above the other. Their names mean House of the Hollow or House of the Shelter... Her cities are safe places! The third city is Uzzen-Sheerah which as I said means "Listen to Sheerah". I imagine, only a famous & highly respected woman can name a town after herself.

So, I imagine Sheerah as she has work to do. You don't just build a city, whether you are a woman or a man, without planning or preparation, not even in those far-away times. But a question first: How did Sheerah become a city-builder? Was it her childhood dream? Maybe her family had nurtured her dreams? Or maybe her family and friends, neighbours and strangers told her she was crazy. "You can't build a city. What makes you think you can build a city? What city was ever built by a woman? Go get yourself a man and have children. Your people aren't city-builders. Your people are cattle farmers. You can't do it!" If there were No-sayers, Sheerah didn't listen to them.

Sheerah started building. She had a dream, she had a plan, she had a vision, she had a calling, she had a commission. She was born to do this work. It was in her bones and in her blood, in her heart and in her hands. And it didn't matter if nobody else understood. It didn't matter what other women or men were saying.

She planned her work and worked her plan. Somehow, she learned to design and build cities. She chose the sites for her cities, taking into account water and other natural resources with an eye to defence. Maybe she had to go back to the drawing board over and over again. It can be hard to give shape to your ideas... But I imagine Sheerah not giving up when it got hard – and it got hard – she had to hire and supervise contractors and subcontractors. She had to manage her workforce: paid labour, forced labour and slave labour were the only options. She

couldn't be everywhere on the building sites, so she had to appoint other men and women to share in the responsibility. Maybe she had to commission other architects? Could she read? We don't know.

Since it was in ancient Israel, it may have mattered to some folk that the chief architect and project manager was a woman. They could be kind of sexist in those days... But God has been using women to build, lead and change the world so often... Sheerah built her cities. But she did not do it alone. She needed a whole community to get the work done. Her dream wasn't hers alone. Someone else had to be inspired through it and impressed with it, too. It takes loads of people to raise a city, to clear the land, to quarry the stone, to transport the building materials – there had to be some men who did not mind taking orders from a woman, men who could see the vision, men who trusted the woman with the vision, the plan, the call and the commission.

I don't imagine that Sheerah stood around giving orders all the time – although I am sure that she had to do this at times. I see her tying up her hair, rolling up her sleeves and doing the work with her own hands.

When you are giving birth to a vision, when you are making your own dreams come true, when you are doing what God called you to do, you don't mind getting a little dirty, you don't mind putting in the hard work and long hours.

Sheerah had to build her city in the right order. She couldn't start with the wallpaper and the flower arrangements. She had to start in the dirt. She had to lay her foundation. She had to build her walls, and those walls had to hold – they were still at war with some of the surrounding nations, – the place had to be safe.

Sheerah had to choose which buildings to build first. Maybe she built her own house first; maybe one for her parents – if they

were still alive, one for her brother and his family. She built houses for her workers and her people and maybe even for people who she didn't know. And when she finished building her city, Sheerah didn't retire. She built another city, and then she built one more.

I guess she never married or gave birth. That wasn't her calling. Sheerah became the mother of cities. And her name lives on in the Bible through her cities, the work of her hands.

The Bible tells us of two of Sheerah's cities involved in fighting and war. And when it had come to the worst God stood up and fought for them.

We read in the book of Joshua how full of violence and war the old times in Israel were. A battle here, a murder there, a conquest one day, a defeat the next. Nothing was ever stable or safe. (Joshua 10). And in this instability and mess we find a note that God stepped in and fought for his people.

This is of course an image of God that we do not favour today. My God is no warrior, my God is love and love and love again, and we are infused by this love, we are surrounded by it, carried through by it and live in it. God's love is my universe. That helps me believe...

But the old Israelites needed something else. They needed a fighter at their side who gave them courage & strength. They needed those stories of a mighty warrior God and all the battles they fought with him victoriously because in real life they were almost always the losers.

Research proves that the stories in Joshua have no historical evidence. Jericho was never taken by the Israelites. They simply moved in with the people who were already there and mixed with them and lived with them more or less peacefully.

In their storytelling however they needed the power and the victories to give them identity and strength. It is the storytelling of a people that was constantly conquered and oppressed. A plaything of the mighty nations surrounding them...

The Israelites were dreaming of greatness and a God who fought for them...

But back to the story: It also has this image of a God who listens. God listened to Sheerah, who'd named her city after herself. God listened to her hopes and prayers for her cities and the people in them. When Sheerah's cities were in trouble, God came to rescue. God saved Sheerah's cities. God saved Sheerah's work.

Sheerah's cities endured through the end of the Old Testament into the period of the Maccabees, more than a thousand years after she had built them. The Maccabean warriors who took back the temple in Jerusalem from the Greek who had desecrated it, used Sheerah's cities as their base of operations. And today, more than 3000 years after Sheerah built her cities, the remains of Upper Beth-Horon and Lower Beth-Horon are still visible in Palestine.

Let us take Sheerah's story as an image of our lives.

What dreams do we have? What unusual and nonorthodox ideas and visions do we have? What are we building? What are we building for God? What are we building for our community? What are we building for those who come after us? What legacy will we leave behind for the people of God to build on? And how are we building? Do we have a plan?

What ever plan or vision you have... Build on your foundation. Build your city. Raise the walls; let the towers touch the skies. Fill it with your folk: family and friends, neighbours and strangers. And when your city comes into danger God will stay with you and strengthen your hands to

repair and build again. God will stay with you, listen to you and help you survive and carry on.

Tonight, Sheerah's story has come out from oblivion into new life. Let's listen to it and write our own stories. May they not be hidden and forgotten. May we too, as Sheerah was, be women and men of faith who lead the way, as we dream of something new, and build the world as God intended it to be.

*"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly father. (Matthew 5)*

Amen.

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## 6. God invites us to his table

*A meditation on Psalm 23, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



Sister and brothers, we are at all times invited to God's table.

And, of course the invitation to God's table is not only an invitation to communion.

It is an invitation to live life with God, at his table, because God's table is the place where we are nourished best.

God has prepared a table for his people.

We are invited to come and meet each other and God – even if it is at a time when we have to observe social distancing.

Psalm 23 speaks about God preparing a table before us...

The whole psalm is a confession of faith by a person who dedicates her life to God who is watching over her, protecting, guarding and guiding her, and caring for her...

You prepare a table before me...

God invites us to his table – not only on Sundays, not only at communion – and never alone!

God invites to his table the whole family of his children in this world.



God invites us to a life in all its fullness.

I must say, I love the image of God's table as an image for our lives, and of course as the image for life in community.

My life takes place at God's table - every moment of my life - with all I live and do. And there at God's table I meet you...

We come to this table and it is already set for us.

Prepared...

There is food and drink, delicious things which we are invited to share and enjoy.

Come, and be fed, God seems to say.

Come, sit down, make yourselves comfortable.

Come and stay.

Come and rest.

Come and celebrate.

Here is all you need.

Abundantly...

Our life takes place around God's beautiful table.

If not today, then tomorrow... is what Christians at all times believed.

Here is food for us.

Plenty of food and drink.

And more: all we need for life.

Around God's table our dreams and visions are nourished.

Here ideas are shared, plans made, and hands given.

Here help is offered, support and strength.

Here we can find the courage for new

beginnings and exciting life journeys.

At God's table not only our bodies get fed, but also our souls are nourished.

At God's table people meet and speak and touch each other.

Here they work for peace, discuss justice, claim human rights.

God's agenda with which we meet round his table, contains issues of freedom and happiness for all people, equality between men and women, equal chances of education for boys and girls, fair forms of economy, and an end to any exploitation.

God's agenda does not only allow but requires overthrowing rules and traditions when they harm people more than they serve them.

Jesus saw meals together as part of God's plan for our lives.

He understood organising meals together as part of his divine task.

He ate with those who were on the margins of society as well as with everybody else who asked him to come and stay.

So often we have stories of him celebrating and eating with the poor and sick people, with prostitutes and tax collectors.

He sat at God's table with all who followed him: men, women and children.

He accepted invitations to all sorts of people's tables.

Only think of Simon, the leper, of Zacchaeus, of Martha and Mary, of Peter and his mother-in-law, and many more...

A congregation is an expression of God's table, too.

Peace Church & the prayer meetings shall be for us God's table!

Here we meet: saints and sinners, friends and strangers.

God wants to feed us all, to strengthen, encourage and heal us... to send us out to invite others to his table.

Come, taste and see, he seems to say, live at my table.

## 7. A smile on God's face that no pandemic can stop

*A Harvest sermon on Psalm 65, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



Harvest is one of the most beautiful times of celebration in the church year. We all are dressed in colourful clothes. We all are cheerful and excited. And we come together to offer our thanks to a caring and loving God. We thank for God's goodness and care, and we see the fruits of the earth as an image for all that God has given to us throughout the seasons of the past year. We give thanks for all that helps us live day by day, and we ask God to crown our lives with his grace and abundance.

At harvest time we thank God for all the gifts which have been given to us, and for all the opportunities made available to us from the world and its resources.

Yet, this year showed and shows us more than the years of the past that we are not in control. Covid-19 and with it the Corona crisis came into our lives, almost unnoticed in its beginning – and then like a whirlwind that put our lives completely upside down. Everything changed. Church life too.

2020 – what a year. Who would have thought a year ago that this here is the way we are celebrating our beloved African-style

Harvest Festival? Nonetheless, it is good not to cancel it! It is good to mark a point in the turning of the seasons when we remember God's goodness to us.

The words of Psalm 65 remind us that Harvest Festival celebrations are as old as humankind is. People have been celebrating the harvest over the centuries. We are in one long line of tradition with people all over the planet.

Here in the psalm is King David, the great poet of Israel, writing words for the director of music. Our God is an amazing God, says King David. God is a God of real abundance. He lavishes us with good things.

Picture the scene the poet is building up... You may see carts overflowing with good things as they roll home in the warm evening sunshine. The tired workers sitting on the top of the corn or the vegetables. Beautiful landscape, fertile soil, flocks of sheep on a hill... King David writes of creation shouting for joy and singing. That's what we are thanking God for today. We cannot but praise him for it all. And thank him for our very lives.

Psalm 65 is positive – through and through. That’s what attracted me when I first read it. It holds a beauty of words and images which is almost overwhelming. High mountains, roaring seas, crowds of happy people, morning light and evening sun, splashing water and golden grain, tender rain showers and the steady growth of plants, green pastures with flocks of sheep, hills & meadows, valleys and rivers... And as the climax of it all the sentence that God crowns the year with bounty. Crowns the year... what an expression: the work of the people is crowned by God’s doing. He tops what we can do with his blessing... Who could ask more?

Psalm 65 is full of praise and joy, goodness and satisfaction. It begins with a God who listens and forgives, who provides a home and feeds. The people of the earth celebrate and praise a God who created the earth not as an outsider but from within it... “You,” says the poet, “You, God” visit and water... provide and prepare. God is in there with his people...

God is in the middle of earthly life and cares not only with the most necessary things but with richness and abundance. God is a rain-giver, a gardener, a guardian of a good and beautiful world.

God is a lover... a lover of life and a lover of humanity. No matter who we are and what we have done, God’s grace is always embracing us. God wants us happy, healthy, full of love, wonder and awe.

We are invited to trust that God is in all things, and we shall see the creator in every creature. Nothing is separating us from God. The universe is the body of God, earthly life and the divine spirit are knit together and in constant interaction. In all this, nature (all that has been created: human beings, animals, plants, mountains, seas and skies) is shouting and singing for joy. What a beauty! And what hope that lies in such beauty. “You are the hope of all ends of the earth.” (v5)

On days when the newspaper gives us the latest Covid-19 infection numbers, and tells us of political & racial conflict across the ocean, when social media publish messages of political leaders denying the ecological and medical dangers with which humankind has to deal this year, when the television shows us the desolate faces of hungry and hopeless people in Greek refugee camps, when we fear for our job and are threatened with a second lockdown, when our kids have to do home schooling again, and public places are closed down for the second time this year, it is hard to feel that hope. An overload of bad news can weigh heavily on our hearts and make us numb.

As a way of remaining faithful to God, of remaining hopeful, let us emphasize God’s undying love for the world. Let us remember that he wanted us to be his partners and co-workers. God wants us to care for this world with its stunning beauty. He assures us that deep down where all life began there is a power and a will to persist and survive, to recreate and transform that no pandemic can stop.

What an image of hope in a chaotic and restless world of crisis and fear! And we are meant to be in the centre of the hope-picture: we are the protagonists, those who transport God’s hope to others. We are those with a godly task to heal and transform.

God’s hands are full of healing stuff. He wants to shower the earth with it. He wants to equip us with it. We must only see it. We must take it and use it. It will help us sing and dance in our life’s chaos and have hope in the future of our planet. In the image of God, our creator, we are invited to a creative response and responsibility to his calling – not just dutifully but resourcefully and creatively, and with an extra portion of humour...

The earth is waiting for us, the undying flow of creation will help us move, and the beauty of grace will embrace us. Amen.

## 8. Jesus, justice and joy

*An Advent reflection on Isaiah 9: 6-7 & Luke 2: 8-12, by Kat Wagner*



These readings bring a happy nostalgia to me of candle-lit carol services. Of Handel's Messiah, Christmas trees, mulled wine, and a warm feeling of familiarity.

With our annual Christmas traditions we get so used to the nativity story: of the angelic announcements, of the baby Jesus being born, with the various visitors of shepherds and kings. And even though the story contains many twists and turns, we all know how it goes.

But before the actual events happened in Bethlehem, no-one knew exactly how it would all work out. The whole concept of a Saviour, the son of God, coming to earth as a baby, born to a virgin, born in a highly risky and unhygienic stable, to very normal parents ... was both prophesied and totally surprising.

On this 3<sup>rd</sup> Advent Sunday I would like to use this time to reflect on four aspects of the nativity story which I have come to realise were actually quite surprising at the time, and are hopefully also insightful for our lives today.

### 1. The announcement of the promised king and saviour emphasises his arrival as a *baby*, not as an adult ready to rule and save.

- a *child is born* (Isaiah 9: 6)
- *You will find a baby* (Luke 2: 12)

There was no 'oven-ready' saviour striding onto the scene. But rather, the Messiah came *to* humanity *in* full humanity and vulnerability. The baby which would become the Lord was conceived and carried in a woman's body, he was unceremoniously birthed and cared for, so that he would survive, grow and develop, to learn, and eventually leave home...

Jesus did not come to earth in isolation. He was born of Mary. And there is much we can learn from the example of Mary, Jesus' mother:

- Mary's "let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1: 38);
- her praise of God even during her scandalous pregnancy;
- her delivery of the baby in sub-optimal conditions;

- and Mary and Joseph's protection of the baby as they sought refuge in Egypt.

It was not an easy entry to the world. But Mary's simple acceptance and trust and practical actions had world-altering effect. Dare we live as she lived?

Like Mary, let us give our consent to the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, intimately transforming us through our vulnerability.

Like Mary, let us accept the unexpected and rejoice at what is stirring within us, even before we see it fully revealed.

Like Mary, let us carry God's precious gift of life within us, as we take in each breath of air, and as we take each step, knowing we are blessed.

Like Mary, let us give birth to hope in a world of hopelessness.

Like Mary, may *we* also say: "Let it be to me according to your word."

Like the words of the Beatles' song: *Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be. Whisper words of wisdom: let it be.*

## ***2. The saviour is born to us.***

***– For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. (Isaiah 9: 6)***

***– A Saviour has been born to you (Luke 2: 11)***

When a baby is born to a couple that we know, we congratulate them and send our best wishes as they undertake the responsibility of parenthood: of caring for and raising a child. When a baby is born to *us*, *we* take on that momentous responsibility.

But for "a saviour to be born *to us*"; for "a son to be given *to us*"... What can that mean? Surely we are blessed! But do we also have a new responsibility? Why has God the Father given us his son? And especially at

Christmas, my question is: Why does God want people to receive Jesus, first of all, as a *baby*?

Maybe God wants us to relate to God's self as we would relate to a newborn, as a baby cradled in our arms. Here, our words do not matter so much compared to a loving gaze. And in the baby's need for comfort, we must hold it close to us, close enough to share the warmth of our body and even the sound of our heartbeat. This touchable God is to be treasured and adored.

We might whisper prayers of love to him:  
O, how sweet you are!  
You are beautiful!  
I love you so much!

And we might sing: *O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

## **3. God identifies with the poor by being poor himself**

***– He will reign... with justice and righteousness. (Isaiah 9: 7)***

***– You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. (Luke 2: 12)***

Our God is a God of justice (Psalm 50: 6); and Isaiah tells us that the Messiah comes to establish and uphold the kingdom with justice and righteousness. But this isn't a justice according to theory alone or a policy from the head-office, it is from first-hand experience of injustice. Through Jesus' life on Earth, God knows the pains and fears of our everyday life, from the best of days to the worst.

Jesus was a baby born into poverty, his family forced to cross borders as refugees in order to save his life. He grew up in a land under occupation, where the people were under the heel of not just external forces but also their own religious leaders. The kingdom that the Messiah came to establish is good, it is peaceful, it is just, and it will never end. But there's still work to do to usher in this kingdom....

In my previous job I had the responsibility of procuring funding for a maternal healthcare project in rural Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a country with a very poor health infrastructure, and where most women in rural areas give birth at home without any medically trained assistance. Even if they wanted a midwife or doctor, it may not be possible to physically get to a health centre because of the long distances, difficult roads, and deep snow in the winter. The women rely on knowledge passed on from woman to woman, but unfortunately, with limited education, many traditional practices and customs are unhelpful or even dangerous to the mother or child. Many women die in childbirth as a result. And as many do, giving birth on a dirt floor has the risk of the baby contracting tetanus.

When I visited these villages, my mind was drawn to the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. Mary was without medical assistance, maybe even without the help of fellow women. She probably gave birth in unhygienic surroundings, with every risk to herself and the baby. It is therefore even more of a relief to Mary and Joseph that all was well. In an Afghan village, where many parents experience the loss of several babies to unknown diseases, their joy is even greater when, as a result of simple knowledge about safe and healthy birth practices, they eventually deliver a healthy child.

Let us rejoice with Mary and Joseph for Jesus, coming in vulnerability to give us new life and to bring in a kingdom of justice.

And we remember this when we sing: *Away in a manger, no crib for a bed.*

#### **4. We can experience joy in the midst of chaos and waiting.**

***– I bring you news that will cause great joy for all the people. (Luke 2: 10)***

For the shepherds on the hills outside Bethlehem, the news of “great joy” came in a terrifying form. But in their isolation and coldness and fear, the promise of joy seizes their hearts and overcomes their inhibitions and concerns.

In the busy streets of Bethlehem, there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the Inn, but God came anyway. In the disregarded place, Jesus was born.

We might define joy as salvation sneaking into our normal lives. Joy can come to us when we step outside of the busyness, when we find a deserted place, a forgotten place, a dirty place, a hopeless place, and discover that God is there.

At Christmas, we celebrate God with us, in our normal, messy world.

At Christmas, we celebrate the possibility that we can birth something of Christ into the world.

And that’s why we sing: *Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee.*

Amen.

## 9. Finding compassion and transformation in the wilderness

*A reflection on Isaiah 51: 1-3, by Kat Wagner*



Our passage today was written to a people in distress, who had been through terrible trials, and had almost lost hope. But it is a passage of transformation, of hope restored.

In these times of uncertainty, in the middle of a pandemic, when we don't know what the future will hold for us, let us hold onto these hopeful words that we *will* be able to sing once again with hearts full of thanksgiving.

Our passage in Isaiah 51 is written to the people of Israel who were living in exile in Babylon. They had been torn away from their promised land and the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. It was a devastating situation. The words we have read today speak of God's compassion and salvation for a desperate people out of hope.

The prophet urges the people to remember who they are: the chosen and holy people of God. And to remember the promises that God has given them.

Verses 1 and 2...

*Look to the rock from which you were cut  
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;  
<sup>2</sup> look to Abraham, your father,  
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.*

*When I called him he was only one man,  
and I blessed him and made him many.*

These are helpful reminders for us too, when we feel out of our depth.

- Who does God say you are?
- What promises has God made to you?
- How has God blessed you and your family in the past?

### **Biblical examples of wilderness experiences**

Our passage in Isaiah 51 speaks in the metaphor of a 'desert experience'. Of being in the wilderness, of wandering in the wastelands.

Last week, we heard of a mountain metaphor in Psalm 121, of looking up to the mountains and beyond and asking, "Where does my help come from?". And Izzy reminded us that God is not 'up there' at the top of the mountain, but God is closer to us than our breath, that God is as close to us as a shadow, protecting our vulnerable right hand. This week, we continue the same theme, moving from mountains to the wilderness.

A wilderness is a vast, uninhabited space. A desert is dry and arid, with little to support a comfortable life. A wasteland is a place where nobody chooses to live. It is full of dangers: the risk of exposure, of heat, of dehydration. There is no clear path, and you find few fellow travellers.

The Bible has many stories of people fleeing to deserts or being led into the wilderness. Often when they have come to the end of their own resources and strategies, and the only place left to go is into the inhospitable unknown.

Here are some examples:

- Hagar, pregnant with Abram's son, was treated so badly by her mistress Sarai that she ran away into the desert (Genesis 16).
- The Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt into the wilderness, where they wandered and camped for 40 years (Exodus 12-13).
- The prophet Elijah fled for his life from Jezebel into the desert (1 Kings 19).
- John the Baptist lived a wild life in the wastelands eating locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3).

### The desert as a place of transformation

But the Bible also tells us that the desert is often a place where transformation happens.

Verse 3...

<sup>3</sup>*The Lord will surely comfort Zion  
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;  
he will make her deserts like Eden,  
her wastelands like the garden of the Lord.  
Joy and gladness will be found in her,  
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.*

Isaiah speaks a message of hope and compassion, that even in such disastrous situations, God *can* bring new life:

- Making deserts like the Garden of Eden.
- Turning wastelands into a lush garden.
- Bringing a song of gladness out of ruins.

Let's go back to the Bible characters who found themselves in the desert:

- In the midst of her distress in the wilderness, Hagar met the angel of the Lord, who called her *by her name*. Hagar in return gave a name to God: "You are the God who sees me", saying, "I have seen the God who sees me."
- In the desert, the Israelites received daily provision of food, protection, and direction by day and night.
- Elijah walked into the wilderness, exhausted, overwhelmed, afraid and ready to die. But there he encountered the *kindness* of God, with an angel letting him eat and sleep and eat again so he was ready for the journey ahead. In the solitude of the desert, Elijah was able to hear God in "the sound of sheer silence".
- The wilderness was John the Baptist's *place of freedom* to preach his radical and unpopular message of the coming Messiah.

In these examples, their harsh situations were not automatically ended. The cause of their terror was not necessarily removed. But their experience in the wasteland was often transformative to *how they continued onwards*.

- Hagar returned to her mistress, having a new sense of being seen, known and cared for by God.
- The Israelites learned to be the People of God as they sought their promised land. They had decades of miraculous experiences and learning to draw upon in the centuries to come.
- Elijah's zealotness and compulsiveness was softened, as he learnt to see God not just in powerful and mighty deeds, but also in a gentle whisper.
- John the Baptist met his Messiah, as Jesus walked out to where John was in the wilderness to be baptised.



Someone has said that this wilderness experience is like a swimming pool. When you enter the pool in the shallow end, there are lots of people, children having fun, its busy and noisy. But when you are at the deep end, it's a different experience. Your feet can't touch the bottom. There are not so many people around you. And the sound is different. All the noise is at the shallow end of the pool; at the deep end, in the vulnerability, you can listen deeply and ask deep questions.

### **Personal wildernesses**

The desert represents physically arid places, but also personal and spiritually arid places.

Where have you experienced 'wilderness'?

- maybe it was on a hospital ward in the middle of the night.
- or when your dreams and expectations came crashing around you.
- maybe you felt like you were on the outskirts of society.
- or a death, or a loss of a job or a relationship has left you devastated.
- or it's when you sit in silent prayer and hear nothing.

For me, my most significant wilderness experience was 10 years ago when I was newly married, and all my hopes and expectations of marriage and a happy family life were pulled apart. My husband started to relapse into his addiction to alcohol, and it spiralled out of control. Each month it got worse. The binge drinking increased, the bank balance went into the red, his behaviour became more paranoid and controlling, there were threats of violence, and soon the threats started to become realities. I felt utterly trapped in my situation. I could not find a way to help him; I could not see any 'good' solution, or even any good way out. But I knew I couldn't stay. With the help of my family, I somehow

found the courage to get to a safe place, and the clarity to make decisions.

This situation challenged my understanding of love, of marriage, of forgiveness, of divorce. It forced me to re-imagine a new future. It opened me see other peoples life situations with more grace. It challenged my theology and my understanding of God. It challenged my concept of who I was and what was important to me. And it introduced me to people who had similar experiences to me, and I realised I was not alone.

My wilderness was a terrible experience. But looking back I can see there were angels who helped me when I was in the midst of it all. And I can see how I've changed, and how I'm growing as a result of that experience.

### **Conclusion: What is the significance of desert experiences?**

A desert can be a place of learning, of growth, of fresh perspective, of encounter, of discovery. But let's not be romantic and sentimental about clouds with silver linings. The desert *is* a hard place, and there's a reason we are there. When we are in the desert it can be difficult to be comforted or reassured or to feel that we'll get through it. This is when we need the solidarity of friends, of sisters and brothers, who sit with us, and wait with us, and pray for us, and cry with us.

Isaiah's message is that even in the wilderness there is the possibility of hope and transformation. But sometimes we may not recognise this transformation until years later.

Now I look back and I can say that I survived, and I can see that I have changed because of my experiences. And that for me is a transformation, like a wasteland to a garden.

## 10. Turning ‘boos’ into applause

*A reflection on Isaiah 58: 6-12, by Nico Kanzleiter*



*“My friends, we have come to the end of a long journey.*

*The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly. A little while ago, I had the honor of calling Senator Barack Obama — to congratulate him on being elected the next president of the country that we both love.*

*In a contest as this, his success alone commands my respect for his ability and perseverance. But that he managed to do so by inspiring the hopes of so many millions of Americans, who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president, is something I deeply admire and commend him for achieving.*

*This is an historic election, and I recognize the special significance it has for African Americans and for the special pride that must be theirs tonight.*

*I've always believed that America offers opportunities to all.*

*Senator Obama believes that, too. But we both recognize that though we have come a long way from the old injustices that once stained our nation's reputation and denied some Americans the full blessings of American citizenship, the memory of them still had the power to wound.*

*A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters.*

*America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States.*

*Senator Obama has achieved a great thing for himself and for his country.*

*I applaud him for it, and offer my sincere sympathy that his beloved grandmother did not live to see this day — though our faith assures us she is at rest in the presence of her Creator and so very proud of the good man she helped raise.*

*Senator Obama and I have had and argued our differences, and he has prevailed. No doubt many of those differences remain.*

*I pledge to him tonight to do all in my power to help him lead us through the many challenges we face.*

*I urge all Americans who supported me to join me in not just congratulating him but offering our next president our goodwill and earnest effort to find ways*

*to leave our children and grandchildren a stronger, better country than we inherited.*

*Whatever our differences, we are fellow Americans.*

*And please believe me when I say no association has ever meant more to me than that.*

*It is natural tonight to feel some disappointment, but tomorrow we must move beyond it and work together to get our country moving again.*

*I am so deeply grateful to all of you for the great honor of your support. The road was a difficult one. But your support and friendship never wavered. I cannot adequately express how deeply indebted I am to you.*

*You know, campaigns are often harder on a candidate's family than on the candidate, and that's been true in this campaign. All I can offer in compensation is my love and gratitude, and the promise of more peaceful years ahead.*

*Every candidate makes mistakes, and I'm sure I made my share of them. But I won't spend a moment of the future regretting what might have been.*

*This campaign was and will remain the great honor of my life. And my heart is filled with nothing but gratitude for the experience, and to the American people for giving me a fair hearing before deciding that Senator Obama and my old friend, Senator Joe Biden, should have the honor of leading us for the next four years.*

*I will never regret a fate that has allowed me the extraordinary privilege of serving this country for half a century. Today, I was a candidate for the highest office in the country I love so much. And tonight, I remain her servant.*

*Tonight, more than any night, I hold in my heart nothing but love for this country and for all its citizens, I wish Godspeed to the man who was my former opponent and will be my president.*

*Thank you, and God bless you."*

What you just heard was an abridged version of late Sen. John McCain's concession from 2008. I came across this speech due to the events of last weekend and the week before, which resulted in Joe Biden being elected as the next president of the United States of America, winning against and replacing his opponent Donald Trump. Twelve years ago, McCain had been running for president against Barack Obama and, as you probably all know, lost, making his opponent the first African American president of the United States. A historic election, as he called it.

I had completely forgotten about this speech until I heard it again last weekend. I do however remember having heard it when I was fifteen years old. A German news channel broadcasted it just a few hours after it had actually taken place. I was too young to understand how great a speech that was back then, but I remember how impressed I was by the sportsmanship he showed on that day, admitting defeat to a competent opponent and offering his support as a fellow politician and American citizen.

Now, twelve years later, and me being twelve years older, it impresses me even more. 'This is how things should be', I thought. Hearing him speak, there was no negativity in his voice. No hatred, no anger, no pity or revenge. Not even disappointment, even though he admitted that in his speech. Just honest and genuine respect for his colleague and soon to be president and pride for having had the honour to compete against a man like him.

Over the last four years, the US had had a president, that made me forget a little, that this kind of behaviour is possible in politics.

When McCain's audience realized that he was about to congratulate his opponent, some of them started booing.

They wanted him to be president and not Obama. McCain, however, patiently kept talking, kept expressing his respect and

understanding of how important and symbolic the presidency of his colleague was and would be.

As he kept talking, Boos turned into the sound of clapping hands and in the end, cheering and applause.

Simply by staying calm and showing dignity and humility, he turned the crowd around. For McCain, the presidency was never about him. It was about what it means to be president, leading a country and taking care of its people. Knowing that task in good hands, there was no reason to be upset and or attack his opponent.

While I was writing this, something came to my mind, which Jonas had said to me last Sunday, talking about Biden becoming the next president and all the tasks that were waiting for him. 'The most important competence of a world leader is probably not how much he knows or can do, but what mood he sets for his country.'

Wise words!

Donald Trump had set a mood of aggression and disrespect, and slowly but surely shaped the political and social discussion that way. He encouraged people to be aggressive and hateful, by being like that himself, implying that this is how it's done. McCain did the exact opposite. By showing dignity, strength and confidence he turned boos into applause.

This is how you lead by example!

And not only in politics, but in every situation in life. If a toddler falls and hits his knee, he looks at his parents. If the parents show shock, he starts crying, if they tell him that it's okay, and to try again, he gets up and tries again.

We set the mood, no matter when, no matter where!

We are the ones who decide whether we want to live in a world shaped by hate and jealousy or by love and mutual respect.

McCain said it and I can only agree: There will be differences. There will be topics on which some of us will never agree. We will argue, discuss, fight over it. We will get angry and frustrated And I think that is okay. We don't have to like everyone and everything around us. But a perfect world is not one in which there are no disagreements, but one in which we accept, respect and listen to each other's opinions. And even then, it is possible to get along and be friends.

My best friend and I have such a history of constant disagreement and fighting, that for a while some people didn't even realize that we were actually friends. And still, he is the person I trust most in this world, because I know that, even though I might do things differently, he will always do what he genuinely thinks is best, and that is what counts to me!

I will end here by giving you this on your way:

Let us not be consumed and influenced by our own hatred and anger.

Let us remind ourselves to be patient, respectful and humble.

Let us accept that it won't always work as well as it did then. But let us try to follow the example of people like John McCain and many others. And let us lead others the same way.

Let us be the ones who turn boos into applause.

Amen.

## 11. God needs you here!

*A New Year's Eve meditation on Jeremiah 29: 11, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



Jeremiah was a lonely voice in a time of great darkness. He was a prophet. He was the voice of God, who wanted to speak through him. Jeremiah knew he had to be in touch with those in exile, who had been put in chains and led away to a hostile land. And he wrote this beautiful letter, that ends with the most comforting sentences a believer can hear from his or her God:

***For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.***

Those whom the letter was for were full of despair and hopelessness, whenever they allowed themselves to remember what had happened. They could see no way out, no tomorrow, no future, no more happiness...

In those days of brutal warfare between the small country Israel and the superpower Babylon, many of the Israelites had been deported; dragged from their country and forced to settle far from home. Cheap labour they were meant to be.

And weakened and terrified as they were, there was not likely to be a rebellion. Intimidated and frightened as they were, they wouldn't dare rise up against their oppressors. So, the Babylonians did not scatter them across their huge empire but allowed them to settle together.

And there - in exile - they tried hard to care... to care to remember the past, to care for their people, to care about their faith and keep it going. They tried to behave as calmly as possible, to keep their heads down and keep out of everyday Babylonian life and reality.

They cried a lot. They lamented. They sang sad songs... And some of them couldn't help it: they were literally heartbroken.

And then, one day, came this letter from Jeremiah. A sign of life from home. A message - so clear:

Don't allow yourselves to fall into despair. Don't fall silent.

Don't withdraw...  
Care!

Try to live in this foreign country.  
Build houses and live in them; plant gardens  
and eat what they produce; get married and  
give birth to children.  
Support the place that your complicated life  
story has brought you to.  
Pray for the people you have to live among,  
and do know: if they are fine, you will be  
fine, too.  
Do whatever you can that you and others  
can be happy and live together in peace.  
Care!

Jeremiah today would insist on us working  
for mutual understanding in this church, for  
better living conditions in this city and for  
peace in this world.

And he would tell us never to let go of hope.  
“There will always be difficulties. Life is  
never easy”, he might say. “And often you  
will be discouraged, frightened or frustrated.  
But you can keep going! All of you. You can  
contribute to the changing of things – just  
care and be part of it all, and there will be  
hope!

There is always the chance of a better life on  
earth. Believe me.

And don't withdraw into exile – inner or  
outer exile.

Don't just live in your small private world  
but connect your personal little dreams with  
God's great vision for the future of  
humankind.

Join the community of believers, find people  
who share your hopes and your faith and  
work together with them.

Offer your time and talents and bring forth  
changes that an individual could not even  
dream of achieving on his or her own.

Join forces and show solidarity with those  
who need you.

Support the place you live in.

Care for it.

Because in its well-being, you will find your  
well-being.”

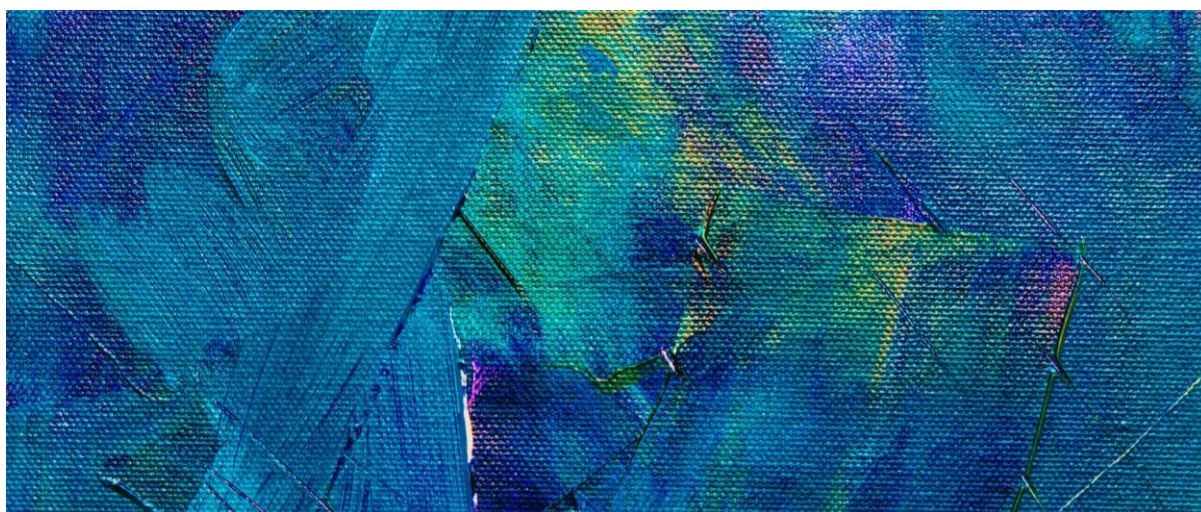
“Believe me”, Jeremiah might say today,  
“God needs you in this church and in this  
city. God needs you in this country. God  
needs you for his world.

You can make a difference, if you just do  
what Jesus has taught you to.

Follow him, care and heal and help and save.  
You can do it – especially in the year to  
come.”

## 12. Joseph – remembering God’s promise

*A meditation on Matthew 1: 18-25, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



The circumstances of Joseph’s future marriage were significantly less than ideal. The year they got engaged, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. How? By whom? Who could possibly believe Mary’s absurd claim that the “Holy Spirit” had made her pregnant? How dumb did she think he was?

How devastated Joseph must have been as he wrestled with his hurt and anger over what he assumed was her unfaithfulness, and the betrayal of all his hopes and dreams for marriage. And yet, he attempted to do “the honourable thing.” He planned to end the engagement quietly, so as not to draw negative attention to her, but certainly also not to his own embarrassment.

But things came differently... ..in the very moment of Joseph’s despair, God sends him a dream. Not just any dream. Not just a dream of explanation. God surrounds and embraces Joseph with God’s own hopes for a glorious future, God’s own great dream for humanity. God’s dream of a future when humanity is reconciled with a God who desperately loves God’s own creation.

Through Jesus, God will transform the world itself. Through Jesus, God will save his people from their sins. God needs Jesus

– no doubt. And to save Jesus, God needs Joseph. And the message, the promise, the dream that God gives Joseph then and each one of us now is: Jesus is Emmanuel. God is with us.

In his book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes that “we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end” but, he continues, “...there is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now — in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally... Indeed, God is transforming the world now — through us — because God loves us.”

Joseph’s life certainly didn’t work out the way he had expected it would. Joseph’s life was totally and completely transformed; he’d given his consent to play a key role as father to God’s own Son. Joseph and Mary were given the monumental task of raising Jesus into the man he would become. In order to live in God’s dream, in order to play his role in God’s story, Joseph had to be willing to

give up some of his own dreams. Small as they were in comparison to God's. That surely was a painful process, full of uncertainty and full of the unknown.

But in the midst of the uncertainty, Joseph clung to the memory of the message God had given him, the promise of the glorious future which Joseph would help come into being.

God doesn't come to save our dreams; God gives us new dreams and by doing so he saves us.

When facing life's heart-breaking moments of loss and grief, what can save us is to remember. ...to remember God's promise that God is with us.

Remembering God's promise is not a passive acceptance of whatever happens to us. Remembering God's promise is an active choice to trust that God will never abandon us, even in the moment of our greatest need. Remembering allows us to let go of the illusion of control we have over our lives, and it gives us the strength to let go of our dreams and expectations in favour of God's great dream. Remembering God's presence with us allows us to move forward without fear—even into an unknown future. It helps us to believe in dreams, to listen to God's voice, to save lives, and to enable new beginnings.

Joseph's dreams must be dreamed so that the saviour of humankind can be born and remain safe. As easy as that...

### **Like Joseph**

like Joseph  
doing the job  
building a house  
like Joseph  
choosing a wife  
and expecting the child  
like Joseph  
listening to the angel  
and being open to dreams  
like Joseph  
finding meaning even in the dark sides of life  
like Joseph  
not losing faith in all the contradictions  
like Joseph  
caring for Mary and the child  
caring for the hope of the world  
seeing the dangers  
and facing what comes  
leaving the friends and fleeing  
like Joseph  
staying in the foreign land and waiting  
like Joseph  
listening to God's call  
and doing each day simply  
what needs to be done



## 13. Be the womb. Become Bethlehem...

*Reading the Wise Men's journey inwardly with Hildegard of Bingen:  
a reflection on Matthew 2: 1-12, by Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



I would like to invite you this evening to read the wise men's journey as a journey of our souls. "Be the womb. Become Bethlehem..." says Hildegard of Bingen, the medieval abbess.

She was a lover of wisdom, and she shows us ways of growing through wisdom. Hildegard was born as the last of ten children to a noble German family in 1098. Her parents offered Hildegard as a tithe to God and placed her in the monastery-like place of Jutta, a family friend, at the age of eight. Jutta taught Hildegard monastic disciplines, and after being joined by other women, they formed a nunnery that embraced the Benedictine Rule. After Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard became the abbess of the convent.

In 1141, at the age of forty-three, Hildegard received a dramatic vision and a call "to cry out and write." Initially she had self-doubts, but she began to write down what she saw and what she heard and thought... After ten years of writing she completed a work called "Know the Ways" (Scivias).

Hildegard became not only a writer of spiritual things, she also wrote medical books, and composed more than 70 liturgical songs.

Hildegard was famous and sought for her wisdom and smart advice on matters ranging from theology to family counselling. Several hundreds of her letters written to abbesses, abbots, priests, kings, bishops, the Pope, and lay people survived.

Unafraid to speak out against injustice on any level in church and society, Hildegard had not only friends. Yet, she persisted in speaking, preaching and writing until the end of her life at the monastery which she had founded in Bingen.

Today I would like to look with you at Hildegard's interpretation of the wise men's journey.

We have come a long way from Christmas. Starting at the manger in a humble stable, we walked through desert and plains, pausing at the threshold between the years. We have begun the new year, and from here

we come back one more time to the manger scene.

In her Christmas meditations Hildegard of Bingen invites us to translate the Epiphany story (when the three kings arrive at the manger, and mad King Herod fears the “newborn king” might get all the attention..., Matthew 2,1-12) into the soul’s journey towards new life.

Without questioning the historic validity of the story Hildegard invites us here to read the text almost like a dream or a fairy tale, in order to unpack the rich symbolism, it holds. The three kings, says Hildegard, symbolize the well-educated mind, filled with all sorts of worldly wisdom, power and knowledge.

But then a star in the East arises, just where the sun awakens, like a guide from beyond, from another world, pulling them on a journey towards their **"heart's knowledge."**

Following the promise of this star, led the wise men away from all the cherished stars (and values) they held before, even away from their own stardom (their homes and riches, their palaces, and their power). This star "which went before them led them to "God's grace" swaddled in the clothes of an innocent child.

They found divine gifts in this little child, gifts which frighten rulers and threaten their worldly powers. The wise men’s heart's knowledge enabled them to see the divine gifts and to follow the star.

When they found the "new king", surprised by the sight of a newborn - they rejoiced in this new wisdom which they had found. **"Their souls tasted heavenly things,"** says Hildegard.

Though arriving in Bethlehem at the scene of the birth the three seekers also arrive in that innermost “chamber,” “where the

sinner lets go of sins, and holiness arises,” as Hildegard has it in her symbolic language.

Overcome by that very moment the wise men open their heart and offer their innermost riches: gold, the beginning of divine knowledge, frankincense, the becoming transparent to our shortcomings, myrrh, the deepening of the self. So far Hildegard’s thoughts.

Let me try to put this in our everyday 2021 context. Hildegard calls us to see four aspects in the wise men’s story.

### **I The Journey of the three kings - our inner pilgrimage**

Hildegard helps us to see that we have, all along, already been traveling with the wise men on their journey. This is the journey of the heart cradling the hope of Christmas, the journey to the place where God’s wisdom dwells, - away from what we considered urgent and important and towards the living light, who wants to dwell in us.

It is a journey from “dead” knowledge to “living” wisdom, when God’s spirit becomes alive in the human heart.

### **II The little child - birthing hope and grace**

So, who is the new king? A little tender child, symbol for peaceful innocence (or as the German theologian Paul Tillich has it: “dreaming innocence”) cradled by Mary, mother of all wisdom.

There is no doubt in Hildegard’s reading that this child is to be born in each of us, the spark of hope and peace, kindled by eternity.

This inner child is not childish, but offers childlike innocence, as when Jesus calls us to become childlike. Finding your inner child, as an adult, saves and heals us. Recognizing the little child, and God in the child, and the

child we are ourselves, brings grace and hope into the hearts of all who seek a new way...

### **III The evil king Herod - the shadow self's deceptions**

We know exactly who that evil king Herod is, who plays nice to the faithful just to trick them into worshipping him instead of the godly child. We know exactly what that proud man looks like, killing the innocent children of the land. The story translates so easily into our world today.

But this is not where Hildegard's interpretation is leading us. Hildegard works in the long monastic tradition of inner movements. They can transform us and make us grow.

So sorry to say, Hildegard interprets that Herod is within us, too. We might understand him as the shadow or false self, the deceptive part of the ego who does not want to let go of its own importance, and by doing so silencing any divine spark calling to us to new life.

### **IV To Bethlehem - our heart's heart**

The wise men's journey to Bethlehem becomes our inner pilgrimage to our heart's heart. It clears us of all excess baggage and

ballast, and lets us see who we really are, or who we could be, or who God wants us to be.

It is, so Hildegard, here where we find our true self, not as something waiting to be picked up, to be possessed and held fast, but as something that travels with us and makes our hearts maturing on the way... We see who we are, as we journey through life, through a life with God who we met in the baby in the manger, and who lets us find the divine as the most precious purpose of our lives.

Our journey from Christmas on does not come in pre-packed wisdom bits and pieces, but instead becomes a constant gathering up, a process, a walking, and deepening every year anew - guided by a star from beyond...

Here is Hildegard's good news.  
We are all Bethlehem.  
We are all vessels of the God.  
We are all Mary.  
We are all the womb able to deliver the good news into our time.  
We are also the wise men on the way.  
At Christmas and beyond.

Amen.

## 14. The story of the carpenter

*An Advent reflection on Matthew 11: 2-6 by Reiner Kanzleiter*



*Once there was a carpenter who met a friend whilst he was walking home from work. It was late in the evening and his friend asked him: "Brother, why are you looking so sad?"*

*"If you were in my situation, you'd feel like me!" the carpenter answered.*

*"Let me know what you are talking about!" the friend said. So the carpenter began: "Before tomorrow morning, I have to prepare eleven thousand eleven hundred and eleven pounds of sawdust, made from hardwood, for the king. If I don't, I'll lose my life".*

*The friend smiled, put his arm around his shoulder and said: "My friend! Take it easy! Let us eat and drink together and forget about tomorrow. The Almighty God will care for tomorrow as long as we worship him by eating and drinking!" So they went to the home of the carpenter where they met his wife and the child, both crying. The tears were put aside by the eating, drinking, talking, singing, dancing and in other ways of worshipping and trusting in God.*

*In the middle of the laughter the carpenter's wife suddenly cried and said: "You, my beloved husband, will be killed tomorrow morning, and all of us are enjoying our lives and this party?" "Trust in God!"*

*the carpenter said, and the worshipping went on. They laughed and danced the whole night.*

This is an Advent story, but it is a very strange and peculiar one. What the carpenter is waiting for is his own execution! And what does he do? He celebrates! His friend has a very strange influence over him.

He transformed his grief immediately into an overwhelming joy!

He seems to be blind to the reality.

So we can understand how his wife reacts.

She is really shocked.

How can they have fun when facing a disaster?

I can feel with her because her tears are saying what I feel as well, when I am facing a disaster.

When the death of a friend switches off all lights, there is darkness in my heart and soul as well. I feel like this woman: "I can't understand how you can have 'business as usual'. No, not even 'business as usual' – you are celebrating, you are eating and drinking and dancing – you must be completely crazy!"

What is the matter with this friend?  
At least, he doesn't leave him alone. He stays at his side. And this is not such a rare experience: When one brother or sister is mourning, the other one is strong enough to comfort him or her.

When one brother or sister's plans for life come to nothing, the other one discovers the opportunities that lie in this breakdown.

Experiences like these are possible – that's of what Advent reminds us. It is the hidden subject of Advent.

The same concept can be found in the gospel. John the Baptist is imprisoned.

He sent word via his disciples to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come? Wasn't there the promise of a new king to stop the misery? I can't see it!"

The answer of Jesus seems to be careless, like the carpenter's friend: "Look twice!" Jesus says, "Something new has already begun! It begins with two or three people who stay together."

Two or three people – that isn't much. Especially not, when one of them is blind and another one is deaf and the third one is lame. But: two or three! This is an incredible amount more than one who is alone. Even so, when one of them is blind and another one is deaf and the third one is lame. Because the blind one can be the ear for the deaf one. The deaf one can be the eye for

the blind. Together they can carry the lame. There is future for all of them. A stone turns into bread. Loners become friends.

The two or three who stay together – how ever limited or hurt they are – they can hear the music and see the splendid lights and they already can begin to celebrate. They can begin to eat and drink and dance. They allow themselves a crack in their hopelessness.

Remember the friend in the story: The almighty God will care for tomorrow!" Of course the story has another ending and I don't want to withhold it from you. This ending is drastic but it emphasizes again: Faith is powerful!

*"When light broke through the darkness and dawn began, everyone stopped talking and laughing and became full of worry. The servants of the king came and knocked on the carpenter's door. The carpenter said: 'It is time to die now' – and opened the door. 'Carpenter!' the servants said, 'The king has died! Please make a coffin for him!'"*

It seems to be a fairytale. But we can understand what the story wants to say: The evil in the world, the threat that tries to stop us acting – in the end they will lose.

It is already time to celebrate, it is time for hope and faith, and it is already time to eat together, to drink and dance, to share bread and wine.

It is already time to wait, throughout this Advent, with all calmness for the coming day and the coming Christ.

## 15. Pharisees and shame

*A meditation on Matthew 21: 33-36 & Philippians 3: 4b-9, by Megan Bedford-Strohm*



When I first read the lectionary readings for this week, I was a bit nervous. Pharisees. The hypocritical religion leaders of Jesus' time, full of critiques and trick questions who show up over and over again, confronting Jesus, then scheming behind his back, ultimately playing a part in his death.

The story that we see in the lectionary reading, Jesus tells a parable of a landowner who had tenants working his vineyard. He kept sending messengers to him, thinking they would respect them, but the tenants kept beating up or even killing the messengers. Finally he sent his own son, and the tenants even went so far as to kill his own son.

They are not so fun to talk about. Thinking about them, reading the ways that Jesus talked to them - in stories such as this one, using somewhat cryptic language that is biting and critical . . . it gives me kind of an icky feeling. Then I thought more about that. What is that feeling?

Oh those nasty Pharisees. . .

*shame*

I feel ashamed for them and of them

I feel ashamed of the Pharisee I fear in myself

the whole system that the Pharisees operated within and upheld was a system of shame:

'why are you healing people on the Sabbath?'  
'why didn't you wash your hands in this way?'

'why are you spending time with these kinds of people - they are dirty, they are sinners.'

God was sending messengers (like the landowner in the story) but the Pharisees couldn't see past the dirt on their hands, couldn't see them for what they were because they didn't look or sound or act the way they imagined a 'man of God' should.

Their irritation with ppl not succumbing to their system of shame, with Jesus disregarding their shame-triggers, mounted and mounted to the point of hatred, aggression, violence... ultimately persecution of Jesus then his followers. They thought of themselves as the holy ones, the men of God, but they became the oppressors, the perpetrators, the farthest from God...

The Pharisees did not produce the fruits of the kingdom. Instead, they sewed, produced, and ATE the fruits of shame.

Why do I say that they ate the fruits of shame?

Well, what do you think made the Pharisees into what they became?

I started wondering about this: why were they so bothered by Jesus?

He was just a guy, a poor guy from a carpenter's family without even a home of his own. *They* were in positions of power.

Why did Jesus' parables about them, his critiques of them, make them so angry that they wanted him arrested and ultimately crucified?

I don't know for sure, I'm making some guesses here: but they were probably used to being praised and revered: or at least that is what they craved. They lived for the 'righteousness' that their perfect obedience to the law afforded them. Many of them probably sought out the power and praise that their position gave them. But also, if they could follow the law perfectly, they could be seen by others—but even more importantly *by themselves* — as blameless, as free of shame.

But do you think they were really free from shame?

If they were free from shame, why did Nicodemus the Pharisee, come to Jesus under the cover of darkness, why did he sneak to him in the night to ask him his questions?

If they were free from shame, why did they find it so necessary to put people down, to parade their righteousness before others?

Shame has been a big topic of conversation in our times. Maybe some of you are familiar with the name Brené Brown? She is a social-science researcher, speaker and writer in the U.S. Her research on vulnerability, shame and empathy have led her talks to have millions and millions of views on YouTube and her books to be on best-seller lists.

Here is a quote from her where she creates a distinction between shame and guilt”

*“There’s a huge difference between shame and guilt. And here’s what you need to know. **Shame** is highly, highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders. .. **Guilt** is adaptive and helpful — it is holding something we have done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.*

*I define **shame** as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging — something we’ve experienced, done or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”*

Guilt: or being able to recognize when we have sinned, when we have ‘fallen short of the glory of God’, which we certainly ALL do, and often. That is important and necessary, it is something the Bible encourages.

We have to be able to say, ‘oh no, I’ve messed up. And repent: apologize to God, to our kids, to our friends, to whoever we have hurt.’ That is very healthy.

**But** there is a big difference between saying ‘I *made* a mistake’ and ‘I *am* a mistake.’ Shame makes us do the latter.

And when I believe that I *am* a mistake, when I believe that I am *beyond* redemption, that I am *unworthy* of love and belonging, shame eats away at me and my whole life begins to revolve around fighting it: I compare myself to others, I either hide or lash out, I become *weary to the bone* trying to live up to whatever standards society or religion or culture or whatever tell me I need to in order to to BE OK.

I become aggressive towards anyone who challenges the notions I have of what it means to be OK, OR dare to see through my thin mask of OK-ness. And why does it hurt so much when someone points out that I’m actually not perfect, great, righteous, whatever it is? Because *I* know it already, deep down. It confirms all the fears and

brings me right up to the edge of my own swamp of shame.

This, by the way, is at the root of white supremacy.

Which is something that I learned from civil rights activist and public theologian, Ruby Sales. She is speaking to the American context, but I think it applies more broadly. Let me read something profound that she says,

*“I really think that one of the things that we’ve got to deal with is . . . how we develop a theology or theologies in a 21st-century capitalist technocracy where only a few lives matter? How do we raise people up from disposability to essentiality? And this goes beyond the question of race. What is it that public theology can say to the white person in Massachusetts who’s heroin-addicted, because they feel that their lives have no meaning. . . ? What do you say to someone who has been told that their whole essence is whiteness and power and domination, and when that no longer exists, then they feel as if they are dying? . . . There is a spiritual crisis in white America. It’s a crisis of meaning. . . I want a theology that begins to deepen people’s understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch the goodness inside of them, rather than call upon the part of themselves that’s not relational. Because there is nothing wrong with being European-American (or European). That’s not the problem. It’s how you actualize that history and how you actualize that reality. It’s almost like white people don’t believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed.”*

So what is Ruby Sales saying here?

If you build your sense of self-worth on *feeble* identity markers:

like the color of your skin,  
like the amount of money you have,  
your level of education,  
the passport you have,  
on your gender, your position,  
or how much better you are than others  
because of how perfectly you have followed  
the rules all your life

... you have built your house on sinking sand.

You will be crushed when someone dares to challenge the narrative you have built your life upon.

You may find yourself lashing out, becoming the aggressor, the perpetrator of violence

All because of the intensely painful feeling of shame telling us we are unworthy of love and belonging.

### **Is this not what Paul is saying in Philippians?**

Paul was a Pharisee.

Paul says: I had EVERY reason to be confident in the flesh.

I did everything RIGHT. My parents did everything right. I am from the right people, the right gender, the right tribe. I followed the rules and I did it with zeal. By all the standards of the culture, religion, society around me I was *blameless*.

**BUT I count it all loss.**

All of the things I built my life on, my identity on, my righteousness on: “I regard them as RUBBISH,” he says

“because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

In order that I may gain CHRIST and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

*Christ Jesus has made me his own.”*

Though Jesus speaks to the Pharisees with harshly critical words at times, it is out of love. He pokes holes in their whole sense of self, he tears apart that “righteousness of their own that comes from the law” . . .



because he knows that ultimately they were *slaves to shame*.

What he wanted for them was the transformation Paul experienced

Paul, the one who wrote, **It is for freedom that we have been set free.**

If you have been set free, truly, if you know that righteousness comes through *faith*, and that Christ has made you his own — Basically if you know that GOD LOVES YOU —

Then you don't *need* to lash out at those who would critique you.

You don't need to *earn* your redemption through all your striving. Or hide in fear that your flaws will be exposed.

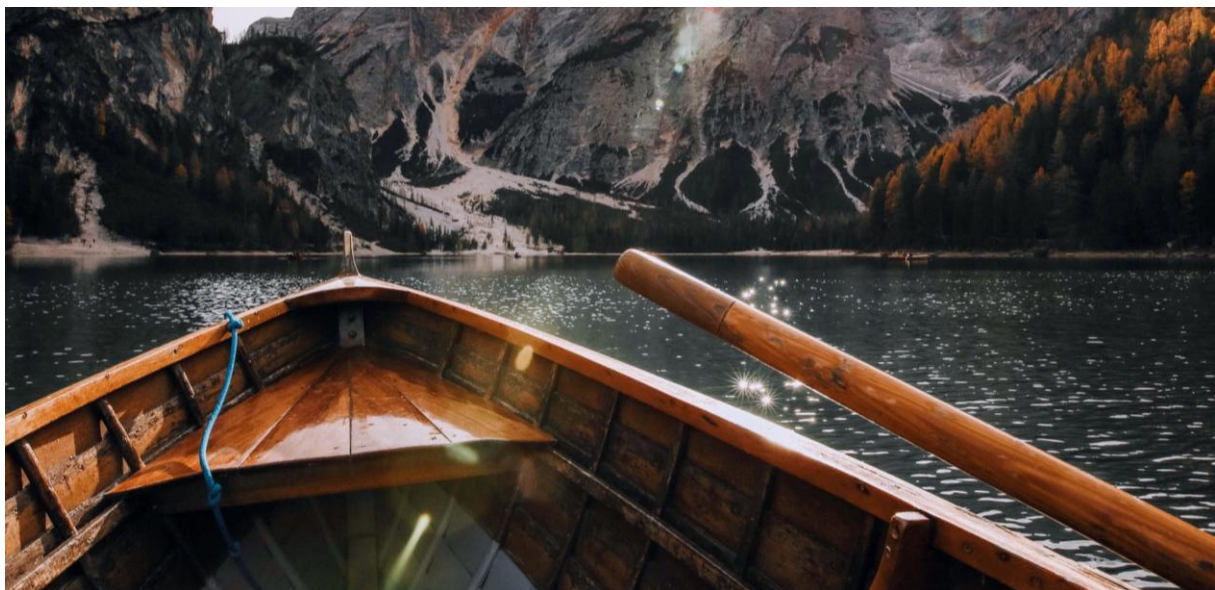
Truly. Believing that you are *beloved*, is actually the *only* way you can be safe enough and free enough to have real empathy for others, to have true love for others. It's revolutionary love.

So let's confront our inner-Pharisees. Let's ask ourselves where we have been letting shame rule and instead let Christ speak Truth into our lives and set us free: to love and be loved.

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## 16. Walking on water

*A meditation on Matthew 14: 22-33, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



I'm going to do something a little bit different today. I'm going to lead you through a meditation, which is simple & beautiful.

It's a nice, beautiful summer day and a time for you just to rest. So that's what I want you to do.

I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed. Try to be still, open, curious and at peace. If you want to, close your eyes and use your imagination to enter into the scene of our story...and all you have to do is listen and rest.

Imagine yourself on the mountain, and it just is the time right after the feeding of the

5,000. Jesus has just worked this miracle where he took the loaves and the fish, and he broke the loaves and he gave them to all of the people, and they were fed. And not only were they fed, but they were satisfied, and had baskets of leftovers.

So, imagine yourself just having this experience of being fed by Jesus and completely satisfied, completely content. You're at peace. You're at rest.

And after this miracle, Jesus walks with you down to the sea of Galilee, down from the mountain. He asks you to get into the boat.

And maybe you're not ready to get into the boat, and you start to realize that he's asking you to go without him to the other side. And so maybe part of you is a little bit anxious.

Maybe a part of you is excited.

Maybe you ask him, "Lord, can't you come with us," and maybe you try to grab him.

And you notice he gently pushes the boat out to the sea. And you are alone in the water with other disciples, and it's calm as you start to drift out and the wind blows you.

And you notice Jesus beginning to walk up the mountain by himself.

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Now I want you to imagine being Jesus and walking up that mountain by yourself.

Your best friend, John the Baptist, has just been killed and beheaded.

You've just worked this wonderful miracle.

You've been dying to spend some time with God alone, in solitude, to let him comfort you.

You tried earlier that morning to go off by yourself on the boat, and the crowds gathered around you. And so, you worked a

miracle and you fed them, and now you just want to be alone with God.

So, you climb to the top of the mountain, and when you get there you look out. And if you've ever been on the top of a mountain and overlooking, you know that feeling. Try to picture the mountain, the hillside, the sea of Galilee off in the distance, and it's just you alone with the God, and you're so glad to finally have this time just to be at peace and feel close to God.

Maybe - when you go to solitude - you experience wonderful peace. Maybe you experience anxiety when you are alone. Maybe you are afraid to be on your own. But you realize, as Jesus, that God is right there with you. You feel comfort. You notice the sun beginning to set, and the sky is covered with the beautiful colours of orange and reds, and it's evening, and you're there, and it is just the perfect moment...

And after the sun sets and it gets dark, off in the distance you see lightning, and you hear the rumbling of the thunder coming across the shore, and you realize that the disciples are out in the boat alone and so your prayer is interrupted once more, and you go out to them walking on the sea.

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Now, imagine for a moment you are one of the disciples in the boat.

Maybe you're Peter. Maybe you're one of the other disciples. But you're in the boat, and the winds have picked up, the winds are against you, and the waves are beginning to crash and come over the boats, and you experience these moments the fisherman near the Sea of Galilee know just so well.

The boat's being tossed around mercilessly in the waves. And as you look around at the faces of your friends, you realize that they are beginning to be afraid. You see the fear in their eyes. And at the fourth watch of the night, when it's completely dark, the darkest point of night, you see something off in the

distance. It looks like a ghost, and one of the disciples screams, "It is a ghost." They're terrified. And at once Jesus speaks out to you and you hear his voice, "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid."

Now, I just want you to imagine all your anxieties, all of your fears, whatever it is in life right now that you can't control. Let those be the waves. Let those be the wind. And you hear Jesus's voice, "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid." And immediately his voice cuts through all of that. His voice has the power to calm you and to bring you to peace despite all of the waves and despite all of the wind. And with great excitement and great joy, you look at him and say, "Lord, if it truly is you, let me come to you. Let me walk on the water."

And you look at Jesus, and instead of saying no, he says, "Come. Come."

And as you look at his eyes, you realize he is commanding you to walk on the water.

And so, with a little bit of hesitation, you put one foot out and you touch the water.

Then you bring your other foot over, and you realize that instead of sinking you're walking.

And you're filled with excitement, and you begin to take a step towards him and another step, and you realize you're walking on water.

But the storm is still raging and the wind blowing against you, and suddenly you realize this, and you look down and you begin to sink fast. And before you can

realize this, your mouth is under water. So you cry out, "Lord, save me." And immediately Jesus grabs you by the hand and pulls you up. And he looks at you with a smile and he says, "Oh, you of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

It's not written in the scripture, but somehow, you've got to get back to the boat.

So Jesus carries you, walking on water, or he walks you back to the boat, and he places you in the boat and joins you. And the moment he steps on into the boat, the storm subsides and in an instant the clouds vanish, the thunder stops, the winds cease, and you're at peace.

The water is absolutely calm.

It's like glass.

And after Jesus gets into the boat with you, the disciples look at him and one of them says, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

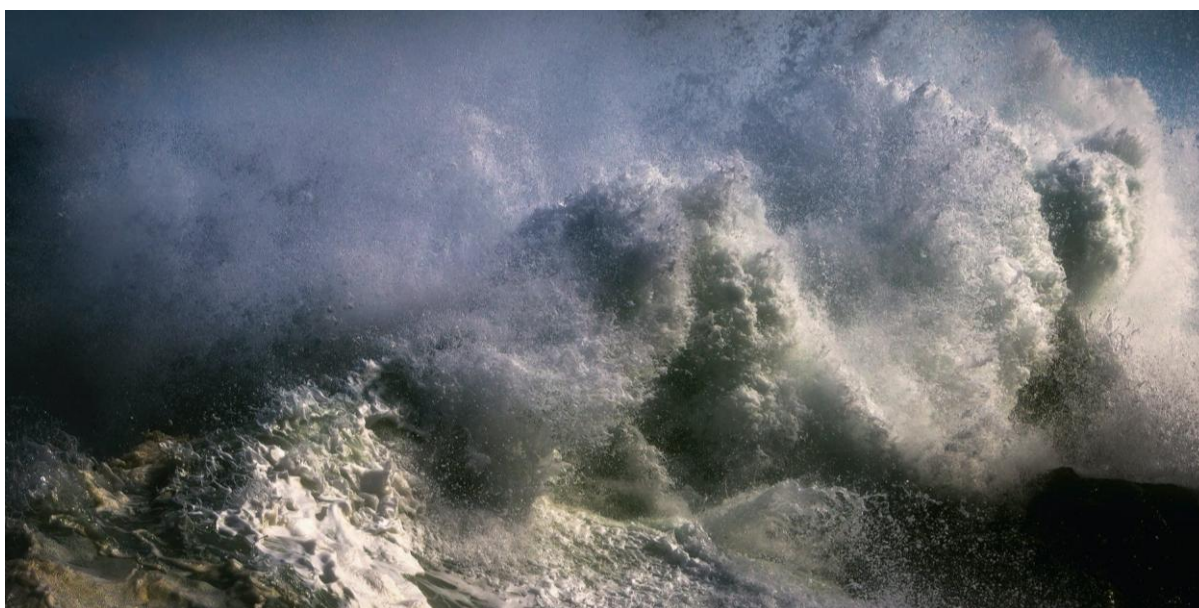
And at that moment you realize that Jesus does have the power to calm the storms in your life. He does have the power to allow you to work miracles. He does give you the ability to walk on water...

And once more you're restored to peace. Once more you're taken out of that anxiety and out of that storm, and you experience his peace, and you too look at him and you say, "Truly, you are the Son of God." And you think: And I am a child of God, too.

And Jesus looks at you with great love because you've understood it.

## 17. Life on a wild, restless sea?

*Reflections on Mark 4: 35-41, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



Thoughts on “Stilling the Storms” have been on my mind quite a bit this summer. There were sermons and services on “Jesus stilling the storm”. There were books I read, stories people shared...stories of serious personal storms in their lives, fears which came up, breathless anxiety, and the deep, deep longing for peace.

Whether it is a family conflict, a sudden illness, a disaster like this Corona crisis we are facing in the whole world, we sometimes find ourselves asking, “God, don’t you care?” Imagine yourself on this life-threatening voyage. You’ve bailed water for hours. Your legs are bruised from being banged about the boat by the heaving waves. You are cold, wet, and bone-weary. With a hoarse voice you ask, “Teacher, do you not care...?”

What about this passage touches you most? That Jesus could control an uncontrollable force? That Jesus was surprised by their fear? That the disciples expected Jesus to intervene but then, when he did, were astounded that he could help?

What does this passage say to us about the mystery of God’s presence in seemingly uncontrollable circumstances?

The Bible has various stories of the sea as a place of trial and uncertainty, a dangerous place. In the story from Mark’s gospel Jesus orders his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee. Soon the sea, once blue and beautiful, turns troubled, stormy, dangerous, and uncertain. As the disciples battle the waves, Jesus sleeps. And when they call him in despair and fear, he awakes and rebukes the wind and the waves.

There is a well-known old hymn. “Jesus calls us; o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea, day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying ‘Christian, follow me’.” Maybe you know the hymn?

Some years ago, an old American colleague of mine who I met at a gathering of people leading international churches, said he’d like to sing “Jesus calls us; **to** the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea...”. Because he believed that Jesus calls us not just o’er our life’s wild and restless sea, but straight into the middle of that restless, terrifying sea. She

said, she believed that Jesus calls us to serve in the midst of the storm.

I was impressed. Had I been waiting for the stilling of storms, had I hoped for peace and quiet for so long and so often in my life, I then understood that the storm would not necessarily go away, but that Jesus calls me to live and cope in the storm.

Jesus calls his followers into the midst of the raging sea which our world often is, to bring about God's plan and purpose for the world. And more than ever before, in this times of Covid-19, we have to listen carefully to God's voice, learn new things daily, be flexible, patient, and over all confident that at some point all will be good again...

Great windstorms, waves beating into the boat... aren't these haunting images of our world? I can see them.

I can see them in conflicts all over the place. I can see them in the growing racism in too many places. I can see them in the unceasing terrorism. I can see them in diagnoses that threaten us and make the ground under our feet shake. I can see them in fatal diseases, in the climate change, in the divisions that go through nations, political parties, and churches. I can see them in the injustice of our immigration policy and practices. I can see them in the people living without access to affordable health care, in people who lack adequate housing and education, in children still living in disgraceful poverty.

"The mission of the church that would follow in the way of Jesus will always be headquartered at sea", writes Michael B. Curry and calls us out to live bravely in the storms of our time.

Not a comfortable image of the life, Christians live. But we are not living in comfortable times either. These are not easy days for our world.

Sometimes it is hard to know what decision to make, which way to go. But we will not give up. We will not grow weary, even in the midst of the storm. We will not be among those who shrink and fall back, as the Bible says.

God has made us, all the people of the world, into one family. And as sisters and brothers in Christ, we will need God's summons for us to witness to the gospel of God's compassion, justice, and love, even in the midst of the wild sea.

*In a world so torn apart by  
rivalry, anger, and hatred,  
we have the privileged vocation  
to be living signs of a love  
that can bridge all divisions  
and heal all wounds.*

Henri Nouwen

## 18. Jesus' baptism

*A meditation on Luke 3: 1-22, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin and the son of Elizabeth.

Jesus and John had a special relationship that began when his mother and Mary were both pregnant with them.

John leapt in his mother's womb when Mary, came to visit her.

John preached throughout the river Jordan. He encouraged people to get baptized to cleanse them of their sins and to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

He told the people that the Messiah would come and baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

In Luke Chapter 3, we are told that John the Baptist "went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins..." ...and "crowds" of people were coming to be baptized by him.

Was John the one whom they had been waiting for?

Was he the Messiah?

Was he God-Made-Flesh?

Would he save them from their sins and bring them new life?

We are told that "the people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ."

But John put a stop to that.

"I'm just a sinner like you.

The Christ you are wondering about is so great that I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

And then we are told that "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too."

Jesus got in line with all the other folks - with all the sinners who were in desperate need of repentance, forgiveness and salvation...

Does this surprise you?

I think it's safe to say that John the Baptist was surprised!

Imagine you are going to a huge rock concert, packed to the doors with eager and excited fans.

Everyone is excited; they are waiting for the thunderous music to begin.

This will be music for a battle, for a victory,  
thunder and lightning,  
an explosion of joyful noise!  
The concert promoter comes on stage and  
declares that the famous musician has  
arrived...  
Everyone gets on their feet, to welcome the  
man who is going to fulfil their expectations.

As you stand there eagerly, a small figure  
comes on the stage.  
He doesn't look at all like what you  
expected.  
He is carrying, not an electric guitar, but a  
small flute.  
As you watch, shocked into silence, he plays,  
gently and softly,  
...a tune quite different to what you had  
imagined.

But as you listen, you start to hear familiar  
themes played in a new way.  
The music is haunting and fragile,  
winding its way into your imaginations and  
hopes and transforming them.

And, as the song comes to its close, as  
though at a signal,  
the drums, bass and guitars respond with a  
new version of the music you had been  
expecting all along.

Now listen to John as the concert promoter,  
talking you into excitement about the hero  
who is about to appear:  
"He's coming!  
He's more powerful than me!  
He will give you God's wind and God's fire,  
not just water!  
He'll sort you out.  
He'll clear out the mess.  
He'll clean up God's farm so that only the  
good wheat is left!"

We're on our feet, expecting a great leader,  
perhaps the living God himself,  
sweeping into the arena with a great  
explosion, a blaze of light and colour,  
transforming everything in a single blow!  
And instead... - we get Jesus.

The Jesus we have only met so far...as a  
baby with a price on his head.  
A Jesus who comes and stands humbly  
before John,  
asking for baptism, along with everyone else  
who has been broken by the "wear and tear"  
of this world.  
A Jesus who is identifying himself, not with  
a God who sweeps everyone before him in  
judgment, but who is with the people and  
loves them, forgives them, befriends  
them...

John, of course, is disturbed!  
Why would Jesus be coming to be baptized?  
What's happened to the agenda?  
What's happened to the wind and fire, to  
the clearing out of God's barn?

In this story of Jesus' baptism we are  
offered to follow a Jesus who submits to  
God's grace and finds identity and  
affirmation.  
May we find that too.  
We are offered to follow a Jesus who  
expresses trust and faith.  
May we express these too.  
We are offered to follow a Jesus who hears a  
voice from heaven proclaiming that he is  
God' beloved son.  
May we here this voice too – throughout the  
weeks and months to come.

In the story of Jesus' baptism we are offered  
to play the music of our lives to a different  
tune...  
...not the tune of fear and scare but the  
tune of love and gentleness.

Hear the music of the flute.  
Feel the blow of the wind.  
Hear the ripple of the water.  
Hear the birds in the bushes.  
Feel the breeze in your hair.  
Feel the sun's warmth on your face.  
Smell the earth beneath you.  
Smell the scent from the plants.  
Look up to the sky.  
See the mountains in the distance.  
Feel their vastness.  
Feel your smallness.

Feel your happiness.  
Turn your eyes upon Jesus...  
The heavens are opening.  
There is a light, like a dove.  
It is the Spirit of God coming.  
Can you hear that?  
There's a voice from heaven:  
"You are my beloved Son, you are my

beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased."

Take this loving affirmation into your often so complicated lives and be still.

Amen.

## 19. Water into wine

*A reflection on John 2: 1-11, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



There is something almost magic about this story. The abundance in it, the extravagance – water into wine -, the celebration – a wedding, friendship and love -, I love them.

The image of God revealed in the story, and the role of Mary, who has this important part of making her son aware of a needful situation, were fascinating me.

This story invites the reader to see and experience what the people at the wedding saw and experienced.

It invites us to share in the wonder of this miracle, to enter into the joyous life made possible through Jesus' gift, and to catch a glimpse of the character of an abundantly and graciously loving and caring God.

- The story of the wedding at Cana inspires my faith. It strengthens my

belief in the goodness of God and in a better future.

- The story of the wedding at Cana shows me what the life of Jesus means, and what life with Jesus can mean to me... It gives me hope – not hope for the quick fixes but hope to be able to carry on because this image of the big feast with abundant bread and wine can lift me up and help me through. It is not so much about the feast coming really true but much more about believing in it, bearing its colour and glory in mind as a beautiful image of hope and joy when times are painful and dark...
- The story of the wedding at Cana provides for me images which are helping me not to be satisfied with



the normal (=water) but seek for the extraordinary (=wine). Jesus has come that we might have life and have it abundantly! Not just life, but fullness of life!

Wine and feast are symbols of joy and warmth, celebration and abundance, symbols of transforming the whole world, making the good even better...

- The story of the wedding at Cana shows us people who are already at a feast. The feast is good. But Jesus is making it better. The disciples understand that here the unfathomable extravagance of God is offered to them, and they learn that they are invited to serve a God whose name is not primarily duty but LOVE, FREEDOM, JOY, CELEBRATION. Not just water but wine...

At the same time this doesn't mean that people then and now are promised a life free from suffering and pain. Fullness includes it all... I suppose.

It means that when the water of our lives becomes wine through the touch of Jesus, that even the worst circumstances that life

can offer have a richness and a depth that they never had before...

If life is everything else but a feast, why then tell the story of a feast?

What do people see when they look at my life?

Do they see that I have not only access "to the living water", but that my God "turns water into wine"?

Do people see that my faith leads to a life in fullness and abundance? I do not mean the material things, no. I do mean the spiritual side of it, the philosophy of my life, the way I cope in good times and in bad times, the way I love and work?

Does my life reflect the miracle at Cana? And invite others to the feast because Jesus is at the centre of what I do?

Water into wine?

I pray to God: **Loving God, turn the water of my life into your costly wine. And use me for the good of the world. Amen.**

## 20. Friends make your life better

*A Pentecost meditation on Acts 2, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



Sisters and brothers, it is such a joy to see you all here in church. I can hardly express how lonely it has been without you – not only in here on Sundays when I still came to be available...

...but also, in my everyday life. We were in touch, in so many ways, but it is not the same. The hugs and the closeness were missing, the physical contacts were missing: no touches, no handshakes, no backing you up and easing your pain, no... So many “nos”. And even though we can now meet physically there are so many rules which shape the way we are allowed to meet and not permitted to meet...

Some of us are / were only lonely and alone, others got quite depressed, and still others fell ill, physically ill, really ill because of the aloneness the shutdown was forcing on them. The pain was / is unbearable, - and uncurable – no painkillers help when the soul aches to an extend that the body gives in... It is heart-breaking to see how poor many of our lives have become!

A congregation is a school for love - ...I came across this sentence in Bishop Robert Schnase’s book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”. I have known this book

over ten years now, and it still inspires me, and I know many of its passages by heart. I love the fact that Schnase says that it is God’s plan for us to live in community, and that it is the community in which God’s Spirit forms us, that it is the community where we learn – learn all sorts of things, and last but not least how to give love and receive love. And Schnase means the real, the physical community, the community in which so many of us have found really good and life-changing friendships.

Let me share with you some sentences from an article in the New York Times:

“Researchers are only beginning to pay attention to the importance of friendship and social contacts in overall health. Older people with a larger circle of friends are less likely to get brain damage, and they are dying at an older age.

Friendship has a bigger impact on our physical and psychological wellbeing than family relationships... Having friends is protective, it makes strong and confident and healthy... Practiced friendship is an undervalued resource. The message of so many studies of sociologists, psychologists and brain researchers is that friends make our life better...”

And with all that we look back on 2 & 1/2 months of social distancing, and shutdown of our everyday lives... We haven't seen and touched each other for over 10 weeks...

Today is Pentecost Sunday. It was a heart's desire to me to be able to open the church today. Pentecost is the day on which we celebrate the coming of the holy spirit. The spirit which came as it is described in Acts, like a rushing wind, a flickering tongue of fire, which sent those gathered together out into the streets to the crowd, to tell them what was happening. This is the Spirit which made them so excited that people thought that they must have had too much to drink – at nine o'clock in the morning. This is the Spirit which calls us to move as well – to act, to take courage, to live the heights and depths of the life God gives us, to pray, to weep, to sing, to grieve, to be angry, to laugh, to confess, to challenge, to change – ourselves and the world we live in.

The story of Pentecost begins with the disciples on their own in a room, shut up alone, in their tight-knit group. The Spirit comes, and suddenly they are on the street amongst the people gathered from throughout the world, shouting about what God had done. The Spirit turned them, opened them, shifted their focus: they were now free from fear. The events of Pentecost had called the Jesus followers into the freedom of God! God's grace sets people free and gives them courage.

God's spirit at Pentecost came to a group of people, not to lonely individuals. And the group grew bigger the more courageous and outgoing the spirit-inspired followers of Jesus became... That has always been and

will always be the message of the Pentecost story in Acts 2, but also the message of countless Bible stories in the Old and the New Testament. Many great deeds were done, many miracles worked, many processes of liberation brought forth by people living and working together - in community.

So, how do we deal with these insights in a time in which we are forced to stay away from each other and have only virtual or spiritual or theoretical relationships?

What does it mean in these times of Corona to do what is right in God's eyes? To be called out to move beyond the narrowness of many lives into the wideness of God's mercy, God's love, God's friendship? How can God's spirit of freedom inspire our limited lives? How can rushing winds break into our lives with a freshness that we haven't felt for weeks? How? I have no answers to that.

I only have the knowledge and the deep genuine experience that sometimes – sometimes when our lives seem to have reached the lowest point, dreams can carry us through! Dreams which God is giving us... Visions of a new heaven and a new earth that will come true. And while we are waiting and dreaming, let us stick to the faith that God is in there with us, to the hope that one day things will be different, and to a love that blossoms surprisingly and unexpectedly between people, because it is God who is giving it – now and forever. Amen.

Let us now sing: We lay our broken world in sorrow at your feet...

## 21. The beggar at the Beautiful Gate

*A meditation on Acts 3, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



We are just a few moments away from Pentecost – in our present lives, but also in the story from Acts 3. A few moments away from the spirit-filled, inspired and enthusiastic friends of Jesus, who discover which power they now have...

Peter and John are not just filled with the holy spirit. They are just beginning to find out what wonderful things they can do – in the name of Jesus...

The man in our story was lame from birth. Never in his life had he taken one step alone.

Because of this he must have been very sad. He may have dreamed that he could run and jump, that he could move freely, that he could take the steps he wanted to take, go where he wanted to go, and not constantly be organised by others.

He may have dreamed of being able to do things by himself and not to be so terribly dependant on others.

How often may he have tried to dream himself away... imagining he would climb mountains, run long distances, work hard and live his own life?

But then he'd always wake up from the dream and realise that he was still sitting at the temple gate.

Never had he come any further.

Never had he been inside.

He lived from the regular visits faithful Jews paid the temple.

Many of them went three times a day.

Peter and John are among them.

After the horrible times of fear after Jesus' death, they are now experiencing that the holy spirit can transform their lives and empower them to do things they would have never thought they could.

Peter and John walk towards the beautiful gate, pass this crippled man that sits there every single day and see his outstretched hand with which he begs for alms day in day out.

Some people don't even look at him but walk past as fast as they can.

Some search through their pockets looking for the odd coin they can give him, and then carry on...

On feast days, because spirits are high, some of them may give a little more...

How surprised must the beggar have been, when no coin was thrown in his hat, but a

strong deep voice of a grown-up man urged him to lift up his eyes and look at him.

“Look at us”, Peter told the man.  
“I have no silver or gold - “

Had Peter & John disappeared after this sentence, nobody would have been offended or surprised.

The difference only comes in what Peter says then: “...but what I have, I give you.”

That is the highpoint of our story.  
In fact, the climax is maybe even the moment of silence...  
that short but so important pause that changes a whole life...

I have no silver or gold,  
but what I have,  
I give you...

And then comes the crucial point:  
in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

What Peter does, he does in the name of Jesus.  
He was just beginning to realise that what Jesus had done before,  
they now could do themselves:  
preaching with conviction,  
enabling people to live new lives,  
healing men and women...

The highpoint in our story is that the person who follows Jesus does not give as everybody expects but discovers that beyond the general expectations, there is something so totally different to give, something much more valuable... that there is life to give – in the name of Jesus: new life, support, love & care.

While everybody else pushes past the crippled man, Peter stops in front of him, looks at him and challenges him. “Look at us!”  
Then he takes him by the hand and lifts him up.

Just imagine Peter: fully concentrating on what he is doing – in Jesus name.  
Giving this man a hand,  
touching him,  
feeling him,  
getting so close that the man’s feet and ankles which he’d never used in his whole life, were made strong, so that he could stand.

Peter’s undivided attention sets in motion what is then described at almost breathless speed.  
Immediately, the Bible says,  
the man jumps up,  
stands and walks,  
enters the temple and praises God.

There is no hesitation in the man’s reaction...  
no time to wonder much, to worry or even mistrust.  
The man takes what Peter offers – and is healed.

Peter’s simple but through and through honest “Here I am for you”. sets the lame man on his feet and heals every aspect of his pitiful life.

Let’s be honest, the trust and confidence and the spontaneity of the man, is just as much a miracle as is the healing.  
There is no second in which he has doubts or shows fear.

He jumps up – and praises God.

And I wonder how I would react?

Would I mistrust the healing?  
Would I dare to stand on my feet?  
Would I hide my new condition – rather wait a bit, to see if it is really true?  
Would I be ashamed?  
Try not to draw people’s attention towards me?

Would I rather behave as the crowd did in the story?

Stand back at a distance and be filled with wonder and amazement?

Why did these people not jump and leap and dance and praise with the healed man? Celebrate his new beginning? The new chance in his life? Rejoice with him?

Why not let the healing of an individual become the shared joy within the community?

Where would we stand in the crowd? Close to the man, in some distance, or even among those who will completely reject the healing some verses later in the book of Acts? If we were in Peter's shoes, what would it be that we would have to give?

And is it worth considering that Peter could so freely give, because John was there at his side reassuring and supporting him?

If we identify much more with the lame, when would there be the moments in our lives where we'd need healing and renewal?

On the background of our Biblical healing story, in which not Jesus heals, but those who follow him, I wish for us: outstretched hands to help us, complete commitment, undivided attention and people to help us find our own way and give us courage.

And I wish for us that we will have the courage ourselves to be Peters and Johns, to reach out our hands to others in the name of Jesus and raise them up again.

I wish for us that we give what we can give and fill the world with wonder and amazement.

Amen.

## 22. The tenth Sunday of Advent?!

*A reflection on Romans 13: 8-12, by Reiner Kanzleiter*



Today we are celebrating the tenth Sunday in Advent - according to the calendar of Aldi, Penny, Tengelmann, Möbel-Segmüller and Co.

Although I should know by now, it still leaves me stunned every year when I suddenly find myself in front of gingerbread, Santa Claus, spiced Christmas biscuit or even a decorated Christmas tree while shopping in the last week of September.

The Advent and Christmas business begins right after the end of the summer vacations. In business terms, 27<sup>th</sup> September was the first Sunday in Advent, and today we have just reached the tenth Sunday in Advent.

These forward prolonged festive seasons - it is the same with Easter - have consequences that we do not necessarily perceive immediately.

When the light of the August and September sun merges seamlessly into the light of the Advent candles, then there happens more than just the fact that we can buy Christmas cookies in late summer.

Besides the fact that it is all about business, we have to ask:

What does it mean when October and November are skipped, when autumn is faded out as a season, and as a lifetime, as a symbol of deeper truths?

What happens there, when in the course of the year the darkness of November, the fog, the bad weather, the melancholy, the night, the Sunday in commemoration of the dead do not occur anymore?

There is a deep truth - in the course of the year and the church year - that after the summer comes the time of volatileness, the autumn, also the autumn of our life, the time of surrender, of dark thoughts, of death - a time into which then surprisingly the light of Advent breaks, first small with a single candle, then more and more until the bright light of Christmas shines on us.

And with it the message: Not into the summer with its light, but into the darkness of the world, into the transience of our life, into our thoughts and fears of death, the light of God comes, God himself comes.

"Those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9, 2)

When Advent begins in September, it becomes banal, empty and has nothing

more to tell. Then it's all about money anyway. Next to the golden calf is the golden manger, the golden baby Jesus, and later the gilded Easter Bunny.

Behind it not only the coming of God disappears - behind it all those disappear, who need the coming of God more than anything else - the November and Good Friday people, who live in darkness, full of grief and pain, who are totally desperate in their search for a perspective for their life, who die in the Congo and are shot in the West Banks, starve to death in North Korea and are tortured in China.

The Advent season in September makes them invisible - all who are unimportant for the Christmas business or who might disturb it because they do not fit into the glittering artificial world.

The message that God comes into our world to give light and salvation, bread and a roof over their heads to these very people is also declared meaningless. Meaningless, that God has these very people in mind and puts those in the center of attention, who are nothing but needy, nothing but hungry for light and life, for something to eat and a warm blanket, for attention and medicine, for a word of consolation and encouragement on their deathbed.

Gingerbread and spiced Christmas biscuits on September 27th tell more than that it is all about business. It is a profound and fundamental attack on the roots of our faith.

So what?

We need light in Advent. The light of our human mind that perceives and the light of the Word of God to reflect on our roots. Remember from Romans 13: "It is now the moment to wake from sleep. The night is far gone, the day is near."

No one is rushing us into an unconscious pre-Christmas stress, which then leaves us exhausted under the Christmas tree. Here

we are tempted to get up because there is a tense anticipation in the air.

Not a gray everyday life, a bright morning announces itself. Paul draws the curtain a little bit, so that our face is touched by the first rays of the sun as soon as it rises. It is time to wake up. It is time to rise. Something is coming towards you that needs all your vigilance! Rub the night from your eyes, Christians! For the night has far gone, the day is near!

Now this does not necessarily apply to our present attitude to life, that the night is fading away and a new morning is approaching. We are rather under the opposite impression that darkness on this earth is increasing: Worldwide political and religious conflicts. Growing social tensions. Love seems to cool down more and more. It looks dark. Because we still see so much darkness, we Christians, too, tend to pull the blanket over our heads.

Paul contradicts: You Christians, do not remain lying there tired of hope! Do not hide yourselves away like so many others in fear of the future.

Yes, it is still dark. But the day, God's day, is near. Since Easter morning the bad dream is over, the nightmare is over, that this earth has nothing good to expect anymore. Christ is coming to this world - and with him comes light. Therefore wake up, go to meet him by spreading light yourselves!

Whoever gets out of bed in the morning hangs up his pyjamas and puts on his or her every day outfit. We, who are going to meet the coming Christ, should do the same - take off our nightdress. Take off the clothes that we still wear from the Sunday in commemoration of the dead - now it is Advent. Take off resignation and indifference. Discard all ruthlessness. Take off the grey cloak of indistinctness, because we do not want to be identified.



Paul introduces us to the Advent dress code: Take off the nightdress, he says. Dress for the day, dress festively! "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light"

Advent becomes the symbol of our existence: on the way through the night, towards the morning. „My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning," sighs the author of the Psalm 130.

He has already become a watchman of the morning. Night watchmen have only one fear: that their fire and their light are turned off. That is why we so often are a nation of night watchmen: we are only interested in keeping our own fire burning. As morning watchmen, we have no such worries, for we know that soon there will be an abundance of warmth and light. Our own lantern soon will become worthless. So: Why don't we share our light now?

Here we are in the middle of this second part of the Ten Commandments, with which the Roman text began: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Now a candle can be lit up for the neighbor. For he is like you! For she is like you!

The person next to us needs the light as we do, needs love as we do. So let us owe no one anything except to love, to care, to live a clear and open life. Let us also not owe our society our contradiction when political decisions are declared as fair and just, which only cost the weak and small ones something.

Contradiction to the status quo can also be a way of loving - loving those who otherwise have no voice, who are in the dark, who are of no importance for the world of business.

Let us share Christ's love.

God walks with us through the night. God shows us how to turn from being night watchmen into watchmen of the morning.

Hope and love will return into our society; there will be bread for the world in our bags and a candle, an Advent light from which darkness flees.