



Ash Wednesday, Year B

Repentance Is For Everyone

Ash Wednesday is a significant time, though by no means the only appropriate time, to think about repentance. On this day, we hope you will take time to reflect on repentance both in terms of what it means in general and how it may apply to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people in particular. Repentance is needed not only by those who have wronged us, but also by us as well.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“I reject doomsday threats used against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Yet I also hear a call to change that is tough. Repentance is hard and even painful – especially when it demands a loss of privilege. It is disorienting *and* reorienting.” Jacki Belile



“Sometimes LGBT folk and allies go gang-busters on justice for our communities with very little spiritual underpinning to feed us when it is difficult, or when it produces antipathy, or worse, apathy.” Valerie Bridgeman



“Why is it that liberationists tend to highlight sins but not God’s blotting out of sins? Is there a potential for some kind of a queer atonement to be developed here?” Tat-Siong Benny Liew

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

All the passages for Ash Wednesday talk about God’s acceptance, forgiveness and our repentance. In our conversation together, we began by simply stressing that repentance is good news for it opens us up to good news.



What do you think about the concept of “repentance”? At first glance at today’s lessons, what do they seem to say about repentance?

Although **Psalm 51:1-17** emphasizes that repentance involves an internal and personal change conveyed by a “contrite heart” and “broken spirit,” **Isaiah 58** (particularly verses 6-7) points out that repentance involves an external doing of justice. This speaks to the important reality that repentance is not about simply feeling bad but making amends.

If we follow the tradition of linking **Psalm 51** with the “affair” between the ancient ruler David and the married woman Bathsheba, we must resist and reject the psalmist’s claim that David only sinned against God (verse 4). It is a cop-out to deny, erase or cover up what has been done to Bathsheba or her husband, Uriah the Hittite. On this Ash Wednesday, we must expose and refuse this propensity to not take responsibility for the implications of our actions, but only to bow our heads in prayer to God with no intentions to make restitutions.

2 Corinthians 6:3 helpfully puts freeing others from oppression as “putting no obstacle in anyone’s way.” In other words, oppression is in many ways the problem of obstruction. Perhaps we may phrase repentance, then, in even more positive terms; namely, welcoming others with a kind of extravagant welcome. That is what “righteousness” or being in “right relationship” is about.

LGBT people have known too well and for too long the oppression of being kept out by both the society in general and the church in particular. These real and ongoing experiences in many ways help render the theme of endurance that is found in **2 Corinthians 6** problematic. The reference to “beatings” (verse 5) for example, comes across differently when many of us have

just remembered the tenth anniversary of the “beating” of Mathew Shepherd. As some of us have risked life and limb to live in faith, some have paid dearly for it with the loss of their literal lives. In that sense, Paul’s claim that we are “dying” and “punished,” but “alive” and “yet not killed” (verse 9) may ring somewhat hollow.



Are there limits to absorbing the unjust violence of others? What action does God call for?

At the same time, Paul’s immediately preceding phrase in that passage — “we are treated as impostors, and yet are true” (verse 8) — strikes a painful but helpful chord to many LGBT persons and communities. Perhaps it is our experience of oppression, of obstruction, of oppression as obstruction that has caused many LGBT people and communities to make various kinds of “necessary” but “false” sacrifices. This seems especially true when the rhetoric of endurance — like the one found in **2 Corinthians 6** — is preached without any attention to or social analysis of power differences.

Ash Wednesday, then, may in many ways be a time of mourning for LGBT communities precisely because repentance has not been understood or embraced by their oppressors, or because we have yet to experience right relations between ourselves and those who oppress us. The oppression and obstruction we experience further leads to all kinds of damaged or even lost relationships – including families, friends, jobs and/or the inability to be openly affectionate to one’s beloved. For example, some of us have experienced partners cut out of critical decision-making processes in a hospice after being there through the most difficult moments of our partner’s dying. Instead, a “legal” family may come in and make decisions antithetical to the dying partner’s life.

Through this LGBT experience of having our openness and hospitality toward others rejected , we may come to understand that God’s acceptance or atonement, or what Paul describes as “God making [Christ] to be sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21), is more about solidarity than suffering. Christ – in affirming a right relationship in solidarity with those who are often deemed vulnerable or dispensable – literally becomes, in his opponents’ eyes, an embodiment of sin or what is to be shunned or destroyed.



Accused of being a “sinner” simply for one’s gender or sexual orientation may make repentance a hard pill to swallow. In what ways, however, may God call LGBT people to a deeper and renewed faith and action?

To call us to mourn on Ash Wednesday must not become, as Isaiah puts it, “the pointing of the finger” (Isaiah 58:9). We must avoid the temptation to focus only on the sins of other people.

Yes, homophobia and heterosexism are sins against us. If we, however, endlessly focus on these and give up self-reflection and repentance of our own, then we have become objectified at our own hands.

This is a tricky and difficult topic for LGBT people, as many of us have been raised to think or believe that our very being is a sin or transgression. We know what the dominant society often likes to call “sin” might be questionable and problematic, and hopefully more of us have learned not to sin against ourselves by buying into that lie. At the same time, we should be honest to admit that we are not immune from sinning or hurting others. Some of us, however, are afraid that acknowledging such sins would reinforce the stereotypical images that the dominant society has painted of us. As a result, we may be tempted to hide our sins. To get out of this dilemma, LGBT people of faith must spend time to have an honest and substantial conversation about what constitutes “sin.”

As we think about “sin” this Ash Wednesday, it is important to remind ourselves that sin does not turn on only the axis of sexuality but also on the axis of race, ethnicity, gender, class, abilities as well as their intersections. Many of the passages for this day as **Isaiah 58:7** and **Matthew 6:19-21**, actually point to the need for economic justice. It is imperative then for us to examine our own hearts and spirits in this season, and acknowledge ways in which we have participated in oppression and obstruction, so that, in the words of Paul, “no fault may be found with our ministry” (2 Corinthians 6:3).

LGBT people have long been told by others who we should be or what our story is. **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21** speaks to this temptation to attach ourselves to other’s view of our actions. Rather than rehearsing the emphasis to negate those negative voices and fight for justice, we may want to ask on Ash Wednesday how our efforts to advance justice — with the emphasis on measurable progress — may or may not end up making ourselves over-reliant on external validation. Perhaps some LGBT people have prematurely associated spirituality and spiritual discipline with a form of conservative or oppressive Christianity that we have left behind. Is there a difference between doing the work of justice from our desire for acceptance or doing so from a place of grace and wholeness? Is there liberation in practicing faith and justice regardless of the recognition or denigration from others?

Perhaps the deep and sustainable spirituality that **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21** calls us to is precisely one that allows us to work to place no obstacle before others and to keep our hearts open and unrestricted (2 Corinthians 6:3, 11) – even in response to those who close themselves to us. After all, their need to denigrate us is really their problem, not ours. Perhaps more than pointing out the sins of others and ourselves, we may even share in God’s work of “blotting out transgressions” (Psalm 51:1). To do so would require a different kind of liberation beyond that of our own, but to let people — even those who oppress and obstruct us — repent and change.

If the lectionary reading from 2 Corinthians 6 continued, we would see how Paul expresses this “different kind of liberation” to the Corinthians. In verses 11-12, Paul claims his openness to the Corinthians despite their refusal to be open to him. Out of that hospitality, Paul points to the separation that exists between the Corinthians and calls for a renewed faith joined in Christ (2 Corinthians 6:11-18). Here hospitality and grace leads to repentance and a faithful response –

“open wide your hearts also” (verse 13).

Perhaps we are being asked this Ash Wednesday to repent and develop a spirituality that does not objectify others, not even our “enemies.” This “closet” spirituality is, then, never a privatized or individualized one, but one of solidarity that runs deep and wide.



After reflecting on today’s passages on repentance,
what do you hear God saying? What is called for?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of Transformation,
Touch our hearts anew this day
with tender judgments.
Teacher of Justice,
Show us the fasting that feeds life,
and not strife or debate.
Spirit of Empowerment,
Protect us from bitterness
and stir us to enduring humility.
Show us your world-loving will,
Show us the joys of justice,
Show us the depths of our hearts,
Show us the wilderness way.*

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First Sunday in Lent, Year B

Lent's Call To Care

During Lent, we are asked to be particularly intentional about our spiritual disciplines or practices so we can heighten our awareness to God's call. This is a season to pay attention to and to care about what is going on in us and around us in all of creation.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15](#)

Who's in the Conversation

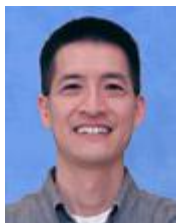
A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The awe I experience in reading something new about Noah's ark is like finding the other expertly hidden liberating images and characters in Scripture – the Ethiopian eunuch, the Sophia-ness of Jesus, the women in the Gospels and the intimacy between David and Jonathan." Jacki Belile



"Actually the mystical life often includes the ability to commune with animals." Valerie Bridgeman



"There is perhaps no other challenges that has more implications for future generations than the one we face regarding the environment and thus the entirety of creation." Tat-Siong Benny Liew

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The passages for today have to do with God's covenant of salvation. Long after **Genesis 9:8-17**'s narration of the covenant between God and Noah, **1 Peter 3:18-22** makes a reference to Noah to talk about salvation through Christ despite our history as a disobedient people. **Mark 9:1-15**, beginning with Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness, will confirm the good news about the availability of God's salvation with Jesus' announcement that the realm of God has come near. Finally, **Psalms 25:1-10** affirms God's steadfast love and its ability to not only save, but also to lead and teach.



As you look at the creation and creatures around you, how do they connect with your own sense of wholeness, redemption and salvation?

The covenant that God makes with Noah is not only for humanity through the generations (Genesis 9:9) but is also always linked to the broader world of creation (Genesis 9:10, 12, 15-17). We see this broader emphasis again in **Mark 9:1-15**. Not only does the Spirit take the form of a creature ("like a dove," Mark 1:10) to descend on Jesus, but Jesus' ordeal with Satan in the wilderness was accompanied by "wild beasts" as well as angels (Mark 1:13). We do not know for sure what the wild beasts are doing there, but there is no hint here that they are threatening Jesus. Does the temptation of Satan also have something to do with one's relations with other creatures and the created order? Do we have to learn something about these relations if we are to go out to proclaim God's message of fulfillment and good news?

In **Psalms 25:4-5, 7-9**, the psalmist states that God will still instruct sinners. Perhaps one of the divine paths that we need to learn this Lent is how to care for creation. This need seems even more urgent in light of the humanity-centered focus of **1 Peter 3:18-22**. While this letter refers to God's covenant with Noah, there is no more reference to other creatures and creation in general. It is way too easy and tempting for humans to see ourselves as the lone focus of God's love and care.



How might God's proclaiming creation "good" connect with God creating LGBT people "good"? What difference does the connection make in the ways we relate to creation, one another, and God?

In committing not to destroy humanity and creation, God's covenant with Noah resists the death-dealing language that is so prevalent and pervasive around LGBT lives. The anti-creation and anti-flesh legacy of much Christian thought is, of course, part of the same fuel that drives homophobic distaste for the diversity of creation and the possibility of God's covenant beyond what we are or recognize.

While it is imperative that as LGBT people we do not focus only on ourselves during this season of Lent, it is equally important that we pay attention to how to care for ourselves. This is especially so given how Californian voters recently voted to pass Proposition 2 against animal cruelty but passed Proposition 8 against same-sex marriage. It seems most people — at least on the basis of this recent election result from California — do not seem to make the connection between caring for animals and the environment and creating a healthy social and emotional environment for LGBT people. We must be even more vigilant of taking care of ourselves and each other.

The psalmist prays in **Psalm 25:2** for God to not let him or her “be put to shame,” and asks God to “remember me” (verse 7). Each of us is larger than any shame, accusations from others or even failures or sin. The psalmist offers us hope. This may also be a central affirmation — something akin to what Matthew Fox calls an “original blessing” rather than an original sin approach — that not only undergirds our lives and ministries, but also provides us with resources in any wilderness of temptation (Mark 1:9-15).



What difference, if any, should baptism make in how Christians live in the world? How do we, together, live out our baptisms in the world?

Instead of — or along with — talking about “baptism” and having a “good conscience” (**1 Peter 3:21**) in personal terms, we wonder how one might think of baptism communally. What does it look like for a community, a church, or a people to live up to its baptism and seek good conscience?

One thing a community or people must do in this regard is to be careful of the idea of being a “chosen” people. We may think about this in terms of Noah and the ark. We must remember that many others drown while those in Noah’s ark are “saved” through the flood of water. In fact, some people do read what precedes **Genesis 9:8-17** as a way to justify their own fear and hatred of others, including their fear and hatred of LGBT people. With what Raedonah Stewart calls a “homomisanthropic” reading, some would legitimate or justify the killing or drowning of others by virtue of Noah being “chosen” or others’ lack of repentance. In this case, homophobia seems related to “apostaphobia” (the fear of rejecting certain beliefs or of association with others who reject traditional understandings of faith because of fear of a vengeful God). What we said earlier about each of us being larger than shame, accusations and sin (Psalm 25:7) is also true of those who oppress and obstruct us (see also 1 Peter 3:8-17). Yes, Lent calls us to care for ourselves and to care for what is beyond ourselves – including God’s creation as well as our opponents.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Maker,
Make of us, still,
creatures of awe,
creatures who know,
creatures who live
in connection.*

*Make in us, still,
the Word-made-flesh,
the water-signed call,
the will to begin again
in connection.*

*Make over us, still,
rainbows announcing hope,
rainbows embracing all,
rainbows calling for conscience
in connection.*

Amen.

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2nd Sunday in Lent, Year B

Hoping Against Hope For A Humble Future

As we spend Lent preparing, reflecting and looking towards Good Friday and Easter, we can rest assured that our God not only hears us, but also secures for us a future.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Lent is about the continuous rigorous journey to repent. As lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians and allies we need to pay attention to how we may perceive our experience and beliefs as superior and negate those of others, especially those from the Jewish tradition.” Jackie Belile



“For all the talk about faiths linked to the shared story of Abraham, when Christians get hold of the ‘promise,’ there is often an appeal to our special-ness that allows for excluding those ‘outside the promise.’” Valerie Bridgeman



“What may one do with the emphasis on worshipping only one God — *our* God — in Psalm 22; the focus on kingship in the promise to Abraham; or the claim to ‘inherit the world’ in Romans 4?” Tat-Siong Benny Liew

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Although **Mark 8:31-38** and **Mark 9:2-9** provide a contrast between identifying with those who are shamed and longing for glory, our other passages (**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; and Psalm 22:23-31**) share a converging emphasis on how God is able to secure a future for those who do not seem to have one.



What do the words “repentance” or “penitence” conjure up in you? Do your thoughts about these words reflect “human fear” or a “divine threat?” How so?

Given the traditional connection between Lent and preparation as well as penitence, this may be an appropriate season to reflect on one’s understanding of God. For too many and for too long, penitence and repentance have been understood in terms of human fear and divine threat. That is to say, if one does not repent, one will be severely punished, even damned by God. LGBT people are no strangers to this kind of reasoning. Repentance has often been used as a weapon against us (“unless we repent and become straight, we will be sent straight to hell”). Yet, **Psalm 22:24** proclaims that God does not “despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted.” In fact, if one reads **Psalm 22:23-31** in light of **Psalm 22:1-22** — verses that are often used by the church during Holy Week — one will see that the psalmist is one who is feeling or experiencing abandonment, suffering and social alienation, including scorns and taunts that God will not care for someone as despised as the psalmist.

LGBT people are, of course, familiar with such scorn and pain. Even or especially as we struggle with contempt or hatred against who we are as a people, we must also struggle to have a different image of God. We need not attribute what we experience to God’s abandonment or punishment. In our rejection of homophobia’s emotional and physical violence, a refreshing result should also involve our claiming of a different God. We can claim God who hears and does not hide God’s own face from those who are vulnerable and victimized.

Psalm 22:30-31 tells us that God is about delivering those we can not yet imagine, or “a people yet unborn.” With the focus on Abram and Sarai, **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**, similar to **Psalm 22:23, 30-31**, emphasizes unexpected descendants and offspring, and hence the wonder of a God

who is able to create a future for people who seem to have none.

We know from our global history as well as our history within the U.S. that limiting or preventing people's biological reproduction is a commonly used strategy to disenfranchise and eradicate marginalized populations within a culture. Biological reproduction is, of course, a complex issue for LGBT people, since we are often delegitimized by our "non-reproductive," and hence "unnatural" sex acts. Yet the amazing message from Paul in **Romans 4:13-25** is that through faith, God not only "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist," but also makes Abraham "the father of many nations" and "father of all of us." In other words, family, lineage and inheritance need not be bound by blood, biology or legality.

We have indeed witnessed Paul's message in many welcoming churches, LGBT communities and allied coalitions that exist among and around us. For many, these flourishing communities and relations were simply unthinkable decades ago. Likewise, for those of us today who cannot yet imagine an "out" life, relationship or community, Paul's words hold the promise that no matter how bleak things may look, what seems or is considered dead will still rise again. This posterity represents the continuation of the promised covenant, generativity, new names, new beginnings, and an inextinguishable future – even when our own finitude and conventional wisdom would say that such a future of a fulfilled promise is not possible. We will find ... we will make a new people with whom we can praise God and pay our vows (Psalm 22:25-26).



In what ways might you "scorn" others? How does God's promised future for you call for your own compassion and justice for others?

In spite or perhaps because of what we have said about Paul's interpretation of God's covenant, we find it important to remind ourselves that Christians have a troubling tendency to adopt a supercessionist practice vis-à-vis Judaism and other faith traditions. By supercessionist, we mean the attitude that negates and sees as inferior other faith traditions that are older or historically linked to Christianity.

Many, for example, would read **Romans 4:13-25** in terms of a "converted Paul" rather than a "commissioned Paul" and then pit a Christianity of faith over and against a Judaism of law. We see these temptations to supremacy or sovereignty also in **Genesis 17** and **Psalm 22**. Instead of interpreting God's "dominion" (**Psalm 22:28**) in imperialistic fashion, perhaps one may think of God as being above and bigger than all of our possessive ideas that have brought about so much oppression and obstruction, whether nationalistic and/or religious. Lenten journeys include the rigors and the disciplines of coming to surrender to the idea that none of us own God.

As we look into the promised future, let us remember the contrast between **Mark 8:31-38** and **Mark 9:2-9**. Rather than longing for or identifying with glory (Mark 9:2-5), our future should be characterized by our identification with those who have been shamed as a social spectacle (Mark 8:31-38). Just as God hears and cares for the afflicted (Psalm 22:24) by becoming a crucified Christ (a shameful display on a Roman cross for all to see), LGBT people who have often been made a "despicable" spectacle should not be ashamed of those who have been

socially shamed and shunned. We must no longer equate a humble future with the denial of one's self-dignity or a self-sacrifice that actually sacrifices justice. At the same time, we must not fall into a "winner-takes-it-all" mentality. Perhaps the best portrayal of a humble future is still the one given by the prophet Micah: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of Names,
old and new.
God of Peoples,
old and new.
God of Promises,
old and new.*

*We turn away this season:
from all pride that would own you,
from all lies that would fear you,
from all burdens that would blame you.*

*We turn for you this season:
from our isolation we turn toward others,
from our chaos we turn to inward calm,
from our crosses of shame we turn toward not glory but solidarity.*

*We hope against hope...
promising, peopling, naming!
Amen.*

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3rd Sunday in Lent, Year B

The Joy Of Surprise

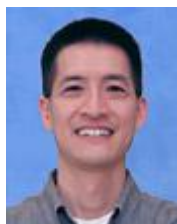
We serve a God who specializes in doing the unexpected and is thus full of surprises! The call to and challenge for us is to recognize, celebrate and rejoice in these surprises.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“The God who gives life to the dead is also the one who turns and turns over the tables.” Tat-Siong Benny Liew



“I referred to Psalm 19 in writing and in sermons as the ‘three-fold’ witness of nature, word and people. Each – nature, word and people – declares God’s glory, but only as an imperfect and incomplete witness without the others.” Valerie Bridgeman



“Recall a popular saying that ‘The past gets a vote on today, but not a veto.’” Jacki Belile

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The passages for this Sunday have much to say about the law, the commandments, or the words of God (**Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19**), including how Scripture might remind the disciples of Jesus' words (**John 2:13-22**), and how even "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom" (**1 Corinthians 1:25**).



What do you imagine the "foolishness of God" to mean and include?

When we looked at **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**, we saw that we cannot use human wisdom to evaluate or limit God. Instead of using what most people desire or value, God chooses to value and work through a crucified Christ – what most people would consider despicable and insignificant. We see this also in **John 2:13-22**. Jesus drives out those who supposedly have not only a place inside the temple, but also a service to offer those who come to worship. These are, in other words, card-carrying insiders who have permits to supposedly help facilitate worship. Yet, they are thrown out, their things poured out, and their tables turned over. With God, we may always be surprised about who are the insiders and outsiders.

This surprise exists throughout the Bible. For example, we remember that while the law was given to the Israelites in **Exodus 20:1-17**, they were previously slaves of Pharaoh and outlaws in Egypt. Moreover, **Psalm 19:1-6** suggests that even those who received God's law cannot monopolize the message or knowledge of God, as these have been made available to all people of all places through the created order.

Lent is a good season for us to remember that we do not own or control God. God often turns the table and does what we do not expect, even what we might consider "foolish" or "ridiculous."

Two human follies that we ourselves often mistake as "wise" or "prudent" are our obsessions with essence and purity, or our incessant attempts to categorize and purify. We see this even in the apostle Paul's own view. In the same letter when he lifts up God's unexpected choice of a crucified Christ, he finds it necessary—or perhaps convenient—to categorize Jews as "demand[ing] signs" and Greeks as "desir[ing] wisdom" (**1 Corinthians 1:22**). Although many of us are, fortunately, attuned enough to the problem of racism to cringe at such generalizations about African Americans, Latinos, or Asian Pacific Islanders, some of us have no problem when we encounter similar statements in Scripture, particularly when they are made in reference to those outside the circle of faith.

Similarly, we may want to pause long enough to think about what is referred to by John as Jesus' "consuming zeal" to purify the temple (**John 2:17**). Studies on how early Christians constructed "orthodoxy" and "heresy" show how "orthodoxy" is established by "purifying" itself and

“essentializing” others as deviant or evil. Note how the psalmist also links his or her own “errors” or “hidden faults” not to him or herself but to some others he or she categorizes as “the insolent” (**Psalm 19:12-13**). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have often been essentialized as aberrant, perverse, or unclean among many other negative characterizations. As one may find in the tradition of our own Scripture, human “wisdom” has long admired things like purity and single-minded zeal. A question we need to explore is how our own “purifying zeal” may be different or similar from those who oppose us as the pollution or corruption that they see?



Have you ever been declared by another as “unclean, impure?” When? In what ways might you declare or act in ways that declare others “impure?”

Although the writers of the Hebrew Bible who gave us passages like **Exodus 20:1-17** and **Psalm 19**, portray the Law as good conceptually, they also understood these words to need explanation and interpretation. For example, what if you kill someone *accidentally*? Or, what if you tell a falsehood *unknowingly*? After all, LGBT people and our reading of Scripture has been criticized as “worldly wisdom” that rejects the “foolishness of the cross,” and thus need to be “kicked out” (**1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22**). How then shall LGBT people work with and interpret the Bible? The Ten Commandments calls on us to look at our idolatry of anything other than God. What must we lay aside to truly hear the God who surprises us with justice, inclusion and hope through Scripture and God’s liberating work in the world?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of Grace and God of Glory,
we yearn for commandments which bring life.
Deepen our longing, fire our questions, order our desires.*

*Deepen our longing to be a journeying people,
known for abiding commitments--
not childish obedience.*

*Fire our questions about commandments of old,
Knowing they bring life--
And sometimes death.*

*Order our desires as the poet orders your world,
in awe traversing the vast creation--
and our depths too.*

Fire us with zeal that opens doors,

*questioning perverse traditions
and ego's house.*

*Deepen our longings for true Glory:
Presence, Love, Wisdom
Unashamed – Foolish Grace.
Amen.*

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4th Sunday in Lent, Year B

Truth-Walking

Truth-walking can be telling the truth of sexual identity – coming out as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or trans person and as Christian. This sometimes in hostile communities feels more like a cross. Yet lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people bear such a cross – coming out again and again and again, and not always to people who appreciate this truth of ours.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“At times it is helpful to also think about what our sins are not. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people know that our sin is not our sexual orientation or who we sleep with. It is not these things that keep us from God. Often, in fact, it is our queerness which brings us closer to God.” Jen Glass



“To look upon Jesus is to believe that living in the truth is worth the pain. To look upon Jesus means to believe that the blessing of God resides in truth-walking rather than falsehood-lurking.” Greg Carey



“The wilderness is a queer place. It is the in-between place that is a place, the place of possibility, the place that is not linear, the place where our stories, disjointed as they may seem, sustain us.” Mona West

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The Bible passages for this week contain some of the most well loved and often quoted verses of scripture: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8) “For God so loved the world the he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16) These verses are good news indeed on this fourth Sunday of Lent when many of us may feel like the Israelites from our Numbers passage—“impatient on the way.”

The book of Numbers narrates the journey of the people of Israel from their deliverance out of slavery in Egypt toward inhabitation of the land of Canaan. This journey takes place in the wilderness. Just as the people wander, so does the book with its disjointed stories. Yet, the book lives up to its name — Numbers. It is a book about who counts and who is counted as Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell indicates. It is a book about the construction of the identity of a people. [See “Numbers” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache, Eds., (London: SCM Press, 2006) 105-106.]

This story in **Numbers 21:4-9**, as well as the entire book, echoes themes that resonate with the LGBT community. Coming out of slavery into freedom is often paradoxical. There are times we long for the familiarity of the closet rather than risk the unknown of freedom. And coming out is a life-long journey that involves the construction of an identity free from homophobia. Numbers reminds us that the wilderness is a queer place — the in- between place that is a place, the place of possibility, the place that is not linear, the place where our stories, disjointed as they may seem, sustain us.

Jen Glass reflects: “I am reminded of the number of times I become impatient on my way, especially impatient with God, particularly during those times I find myself in desert places. Often in that impatience I speak out, ‘Why me God?’ Why am I going through this? Then something further goes wrong or happens to me and I run to a good friend or to a spiritual companion asking for prayer, for advice. At times there is a word or maybe even an e-mail that I hold on to, look to like that bronze serpent, that gives me life, that inspiration to keep going on. I know pastorally I have had situations where people have come to me in a desert place with all kinds of things going wrong and have asked for prayer. A few have come back to me later and explained to me how something I said or a Scripture passage that I referred them to really helped them, they hung on to it for dear life.”

Glass continues, “Sometimes it is a matter of verbally acknowledging a wrongdoing or speaking

about what's going on inside of us, like confession, that becomes part of our repentance and at times I think actually makes things better or turns things around. On occasion it is the thing that harms us that makes us well again, whole once more, i.e. the serpent.



What does the desert look like for you? How or where do you find life in the desert?

Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus (who is dealing with some of his own 'closet' issues when he comes to Jesus under the cover of night!) continues in these verses from **John 3:14-21**. After Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above, Nicodemus replies, "How can these things be?" Verses 11-21 are Jesus' response. The Pharisees of our day need to be reminded that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world but to save it and that LGBT people are part of the 'whosoever' of John 3:16.

John's gospel suggests that, not just the marching Israelites, but all people, suffer from the venom of sin. The gospel does not name what sin is, as so many Christians desire to do, but it does track sin's symptoms. People live out their lives undercover ("in the dark," as John's gospel puts it). As cure, the gospel exalts looking upon Christ. As Moses lifted the golden serpent, so was Jesus lifted upon a cross for our salvation. Looking upon the cross empowers people to perform the kinds of deeds that set them out into the open.

If this sounds like some sort of suspicious magical trick – "Look at Jesus, and you'll be free" – we might recall that Jesus bore the consequences of living out his identity. To borrow the language of John's gospel once again, Jesus lived the truth before all people. His truth-walking led him to Jerusalem, where he confronted the authorities who put him on the cross. To look upon Jesus is to believe that living in the truth is worth the pain. To look upon Jesus means to believe that the blessing of God resides in truth-walking rather than falsehood-lurking.

The themes of life and death are strong in these texts as we journey through the wilderness of Lent toward Easter morning. In **Ephesians 2**, Paul reminds us that we have been made alive in Christ, raised up to heavenly places (verse 5-6), that we have been created for good works (verse 10), and all of this because of God's incredible gift of grace. Many of us felt dead upon first coming out, perhaps particularly to ourselves. Thinking we had to give up our faith, give up our dreams of family, give up the happily ever after. Nonetheless, when we came out to God, we received nothing but love and grace. LGBT people are what we are because God has made us. Queers are created in Jesus Christ for good works. God prepared us beforehand to be queer, our way of life. This is truly a gift from God and our good news to share!

It is so easy to get caught up with 'what we are giving up for Lent,' thinking that somehow it will be our own efforts that produce the new and free life we so desire. In our work and struggle for justice as LGBT people we need to be reminded that our actions dance hand in hand with God's grace.

During the season of Lent people also take on something rather than give something up and we take time to reflect on what our iniquities, trespasses and sins are. At times it is helpful to also think about what our sins are not. LGBT people know that our sin is not our sexual orientation or who we sleep with. It is not these things that keep us from God, that interfere with our relationship with God, or that have caused us to miss the mark. In fact, it is our queerness which has brought us to a closer relationship with God, even if there are some Christians who would still like to consider being queer a sin.



What are your Lenten disciplines? How have they enabled your “truth-walking”?

In **Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**, we hear “Sick from sinful ways and afflicted by iniquity.” LGBT readers of this psalm resist the notion that those who are HIV positive got sick because of sinful ways and were afflicted. HIV people who have been near death have relied on the steadfast love of God and their faith. They certainly aren’t “healed” from their status, but they share their stories of other ways they have been healed. They describe the way they have been loved by lovers, partners, family and friends; the communities who have rallied support; the doctors and nurses who care with genuine compassion; the drugs that turn things around; the ways God continues to shower grace in unexpected ways. Some would agree with and echo the first two verses of the psalm: We give thanks to the God for God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the God say so, those God redeemed from trouble.



What do you resist in today’s Scripture readings?
Would you consider yourself among the redeemed of God who say so?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Good and Loving God,
the one who counts us among the whosoever
and who creates us lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and
Christian,
may we continue to find you and your life-giving grace during this Lent,
especially in our desert places and in our impatience,
so that our truth-walking might be blessed
and we, your redeemed, may share the good news of your steadfast love.
Amen and Amen.*

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5th Sunday in Lent, Year B

Grace Greater Than All Our Sin

During the season of Lent, it is tempting to focus on sin at the expense of grace. When we trust in our own will-power and self-righteousness we fill our time with making sure we are not sinning, rather than living and embracing God's love and forgiveness! When lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people realize that our sexual orientation and gender identity are not sinful, the challenge then becomes "how do I live an authentic life as God has made me?"

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The Bible's book of Hebrews was written to believers who were wavering in their faith. Ostracism and suffering do not indicate God's displeasure." Greg Carey



"God is a God of multiple chances and rather than focus on what we do wrong, let us focus on what God does right—new covenants, new spirits, and clean hearts!" Jen Glass



“God’s grace is at work in all of us regardless of our gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class or ethnicity. And if we want to ‘see Jesus’, to find our true life, then God bids us to come and die regardless of our gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class or ethnicity.” Mona West

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

As a graduate student in Old Testament studies, Mona West would often hear her Aunt’s reminder “we are living in New Testament times!” Her aunt just couldn’t understand why anyone would want to work on a Ph.D. in the Old Testament of all things. Sadly she believed the only place to find grace in the Bible was the New Testament. Yet grace abounds in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**. God promises Israel, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

This grace that the ancient prophet Jeremiah proclaims is a new covenant that God will make with the people; it will not be like the former covenant in which God was Israel’s husband. This grace will not only redeem the people, but will redeem the violent imagery often used in the prophetic literature in which Israel is portrayed as an adulterous wife that God, Yahweh, chastises. (And what does this imagery mean, then, for the men who are also part of the people of Israel for whom Yahweh is their husband?)

God’s writing on the hearts of the people and the inner working of grace that causes all people — from the least to the greatest — to ‘know God’ is echoed in **Psalms 51:1-12**. The psalmist knows that God desires truth in the inward being and the psalmist knows that God is also the source of that truth: “teach me wisdom in my secret heart” (verse 6); “create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (verse 10).

Hope and joy can be found in Lent and particularly in the readings from Jeremiah and Psalm 51: the promise of a new covenant, having God write on our hearts God’s very own desires for us and receiving a new spirit! God’s people are made great not because of their shortcomings, but because of God’s love and grace. God is a God of multiple chances and rather than focus on what we do wrong, let us focus on what God does right — new covenants, new spirits, and clean hearts!



What is God writing on your heart? What are God’s desires for you, your community? What are some tangible ways your church can focus on

what God is doing right?

The Epistle to the Hebrews – from which this week’s epistle reading **Hebrews 5:5-10** comes – poses special problems for contemporary Christians. The letter’s overall argument is that the revelation of Jesus is superior to the gifts offered by Judaism. Too many Christians interpret Jeremiah 31:31-34 along the same lines, completely dismissing the legitimacy of our Jewish heritage. Competitive religiosity does not serve Christians well. We cannot claim any revelation of Jesus unless we embrace the gifts of his Judaism.

Yet we also recall that the book of Hebrews was written to believers who were wavering in their faith. We cannot know with certainty, but it seems the letter addressed a vulnerable faith community, one well acquainted with ostracism and fear (much like the LGBT community today). To these beleaguered folk, Hebrews reminds them of Jesus, who likewise walked through great suffering in his devotion to God’s way. Ostracism and suffering do not indicate God’s displeasure. Ironically, this message of God’s faithfulness to vulnerable people sinks deep roots into Israel’s story. Further, transcending centuries, this message is for us today too, especially for the vulnerable and ostracized of our times, for God continues to be faithful to us, through our “high priest,” Jesus (verse 5).



How do you encounter suffering in your devotion to God’s way? How is Jesus a “high priest” for you in your suffering?

In **John 12:20-33**, the request of the Greeks to Philip, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” and Jesus’ response, “those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” need to be set in the larger context of the raising of Lazarus in John 11 and Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in 12:1-19. People are seeking Jesus out because they are curious, they had heard about what Jesus did to Lazarus. Jesus’ response to their curiosity not only prefigures his own death on the cross, but it also ‘lifts up’ an important spiritual principle in the life of all believers: in order to gain true life in God one must die — daily. We take up our cross daily as we die the little deaths of ego: hatred, revenge, greed, impatience, and being judgmental (to name a few). God’s grace is at work in all of us regardless of our gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class or ethnicity. And if we want to ‘see Jesus’, to find our true life, then God bids us to come and die regardless of our gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class or ethnicity. And God’s grace that Jeremiah and the psalmist speak of, as well as the writers of Hebrews and John, is greater than all our deaths.



In order that you gain life, what ways do you die daily? How do you take up your cross daily? Do you experience God’s grace as greater than any of our human deaths?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Holy One,
Your grace abounds in our lives
as you make new covenants with us
and create new spirits and new hearts for us.
We are grateful for the faithful ways that you walk with us daily
in our sufferings, fears, vulnerabilities
and as we take up our crosses.
Continue your work of grace in us,
for your grace is greater than any of our human deaths.
In your holy names we pray, Amen.*

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Liturgy of the Palms, Year B

Camping It Up In Jerusalem

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk would recognize Jesus' actions of riding on a donkey as a camp performance of Zechariah 9:9-10 – exposing the dominant notion of 'messiah' by subverting the pomp and circumstance of a triumphal entry of a ruler into a capital city.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“It seems to me like this is just the beginning of a big party for the disciples with their beloved friend and leader. For this procession is only the start to a great week of festivities they will celebrate together for Passover – or so it seems at that point -- even if it might be a little campy.” Jen Glass



“In today's reading, Jesus organizes an alternative procession. No soldiers, no chariots, no horses, standards, armor, or weapons. Here we see just Jesus on his donkey and his scraggly cohorts.” Greg Carey



“When we make our entry into the sanctuary on this Palm Sunday, let us wave our branches extravagantly, let's camp it up, so that we might see things differently!” Mona West

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In our conversation, Mona West reflected on **Mark 11:1-11**: “Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey with people throwing palm branches in his path reminds me of LGBT pride parades I have seen and participated in. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* identifies Jesus’ parade as “a messianic demonstration” in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9-10. LGBT folk would recognize Jesus’ actions as a camp performance of this prophecy. Camp is a mode of exaggeration — performance — in order to expose or critique dominant modes of being. In Jesus’ case, his camp exposes the dominant notion of ‘messiah’ by subverting the pomp and circumstance of a triumphal entry of a king into a capital city with his actions on a donkey. “

Greg Carey responded: “Jesus procession into Jerusalem mimicked a familiar scene. Throughout the Roman Empire, officials marched into cities in great pomp and circumstance. Local elites welcomed these orchestrated demonstrations of imperial glory by lining the streets. During Passover season, with Jerusalem severely overcrowded with pilgrims, Jesus organizes his alternative procession. No soldiers, no chariots, no horses, standards, armor, or weapons. Here we see just Jesus on his donkey and his scraggly cohorts.”

Mona continued: “As many times as I have read this story on Palm Sunday I have never noticed what happens at the end of the entry: Jesus gets to Jerusalem, goes into the Temple, looks around at everything, and then leaves. That is what camp does. In its exaggeration it causes us to see things differently – things like messiahs and the church. So, when we make our entry into the sanctuary on this Palm Sunday, let us wave our branches extravagantly, let’s camp it up, so that we might see things differently!”

The response of the crowd to Jesus’ camp performance comes from **Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29**. The people draw on their knowledge and tradition of the psalms — just as Jesus will days later from his cross when he recites Psalm 22, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me.” The power of the psalms is their ability to give voice to people who know them in times of praise as well as times of abandonment.



Imagine yourself as an observer or participant in this Mark 11 story. What is your experience of Jesus, the crowd, the city?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Elusive God,
We seek you most when things are at their worst.
Then you seem absent.
We cry out with the psalmist,
"Be gracious to us, Holy One, in our distress,"
when strength fails and bones decay.
Grant us grace to imagine,
Elusive One,
the faithfulness of Jesus, who
on our behalf and in his extremity,
yet trusted in you.
May that faithfulness be ours. Amen.*

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Maundy Thursday, Year B

Passing Over

On this day, gathered around the table of Jesus, we are set free to love one another and to struggle against oppression.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 12:1-4, \(5-10\), 11-14; Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Rituals are important. They should point us in the direction of recommitting ourselves to seek justice for us and others. Even though the rituals pictured in today's passages seem to divert us from the struggles of people, we can look at the passages in a new way to gain power for the struggle." Randall Bailey



"The remembrance and rituals of Maundy Thursday recall the Jewishness of the Christian faith. They also challenge me to stay in the struggle instead of getting lost in ritual replacement." Angela Bauer-Levesque



"Freedom always comes with a price – in the Passover story it is at the price of the Egyptians first-born. I long for the day when the struggle for freedom and the meal of celebration include all people – no matter where and how they are in the world." Valerie Bridgeman

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The Passover story in **Exodus 12** has become the symbol for remembering the Exodus, the liberation of the people of Israel from enslavement in Egypt. It is being retold in the Jewish liturgical year and has often been appropriated in problematic ways by Christian churches.

In a Christian context, the Passover has often been used to set the stage for the drama of the Jew, Jesus' last days. We see Jerusalem, a crowded city prepared for the festival. However today, in many church's fellowship halls, congregations also "play act" a Passover Seder – attempting a Christian version of the Seder. The event is used to begin the congregation's journey through Holy Week through Easter. Any community, however, struggling against oppression – including those that embraces lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participants – needs to be cautious of loose adaptations of another's faith tradition and rituals. Instead we should remember the particularities of each and build bridges linking to them through conversations and relationship with those particular faith communities and their struggles for liberation.



Does your community of faith have particular Maundy Thursday traditions? What are they? What is your understanding of why your congregation does what it does on this day?

Although the imagery of liberation is powerful, the lengthy ritual descriptions of the laws of Passover (Exodus 12:1-3-11) divert from the struggle. The awe at God's power turns into fear of a God. God delivers Israel, who is viewed as obedient, by going on a killing rampage against the Egyptians, the "others" who "did not serve God." How often do same gender loving and transgender people face violence and/or death because they are accused of "not serving God" the right way? The dangers of claiming God on one's side at the expense of the lives of the "other" is blatantly obvious here. May we not forget this during Holy Week.



What is your response to the "striking down" of the Egyptians in the Exodus passage? What questions does the story elicit from you?

If we are honest, in today's world, many of the readers of this commentary are closer in status to the Egyptians in the story than the Israelites. So what do we have to fear? Identifying both with God's people and "the not-God's people" at the same time, the Passover story challenges many of us to come out and embrace our liberated sisters and brothers. We are called to struggle together against violence and slaughter and the religious claims that aim to legitimate them.

Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19 affirms obedience and praise to God. Celebration is crucial in the midst of struggles for liberation. Yet, affirming a God – who maintains the status quo – interrupts the move toward liberation. Let us be aware when and how we sing our praises!



What are faithful responses to God who provides “bounty” and freedom? What are just ways to praise the liberating God?

In **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, Paul’s “words of institution” for the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper are out of context here, the words do not connect with the Passover story. On the other hand, the gospel writers try to connect the founding event of the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist with the celebration of the Passover – the Exodus event of liberation. In 1 Corinthians, Paul’s focus on the ritual diverts from social struggle and from empowering the oppressed to keep on fighting for freedom. In a strange way, Paul’s focus will define the church in many ways. Its interpretation has been upheld as one of the root causes of church fragmentation and denominationalism. The invitation to Eucharist/Lord’s Supper is often understood as one of exclusion more than inclusion. What would it mean to reclaim the right to reinterpretation? LGBT people are known for their own interpretations, for the “queering” of Bible and church.

In **John 13**, we see Jesus right before Passover sitting around a table with the disciples and getting up to wash the disciples’ feet. In Roman society it was the house slaves that washed the feet of their masters and their visitors. So foot washing is presented as a service. At the same time as Jesus calls the disciples to submit to one another and to love one another, he engages in public acts of intimacy. It is not an accident that the Hebrew word for “feet” is also used as a euphemism for “genitals.” Jesus calls for love of one another regardless of gender, regardless of any particular precondition.

Although the love command recalls Leviticus 19:18, it suggests an equality that the earlier act of foot washing did not. It encourages the disciples to act like “good/happy slaves” as opposed to struggling for liberation from oppression.

The few hours before Jesus’ struggle for liberation from oppression by the Roman Empire ending with his crucifixion, do not get the disciples and by extension “us” ready for what is to come. Rather they focus on ritual that has been at the base of many church debates as who can belong, and who cannot, thus taking away energy from addressing the issues of people who are hurting.

What would it take to turn the remembrance of Jesus’ last meal with the disciples into a meal of solidarity with one who stands up for what he believes, who challenges the political and religious powers, and risks his life in the struggle for freedom?



As you leave the table at Maundy Thursday, what faithful response might God be calling of you?

LGBT people, who so often have been told that we do not belong, may want to embrace the commandment to love one another. Let us turn this Maundy Thursday meal into food for the struggle for freedom.

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of Love and Liberation,
On the last night of Jesus' life,
give us the strength to be present to what is and what is to come,
Let us love one another as Jesus has loved us,
And let us share friendship and food together,
As we continue Jesus' struggle for freedom.
In the name of the One who loves, the One who is loved,
and the Love that sets us free, Amen.*

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Good Friday, Year B

My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Feeling abandoned at times, we are called to live with integrity and risk ourselves for the freedom of all.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; John 18:1-19:42](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Good Friday is a day that does not end as long as people are crucified for their beliefs and killed for who they are.” Angela Bauer-Levesque



“Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are more like Jesus during the Lenten time than ever — as suffering and grief is navigated in personal and communal lives. Jesus would find himself ‘close kin’ with LGBT folk as one ‘acquainted’ with grief, a man of sorrows.” Valerie Bridgeman

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The Good Friday texts are familiar – evoking personal suffering and lament. The sense of

anguish and abandonment permeate the reading from Isaiah and the Psalms. In the sixth century BCE during the Babylonian Exile and soon thereafter, the poet-prophets who are believed to have given us chapters 40-66 of the book of Isaiah tell us of personalized suffering of the people Israel, called a servant of God, who are holding on to hope beyond the anguish. Older biblical scholarship used to call **Isaiah 52:13-53:12** the final “servant song.” More recently, many more passages where Israel is called “servant” and “Daughter Zion” have been pointed out and moved readers away from interpreting the passage as only a single individual voice of one who laments. It is the voice of God’s people.

Because the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek) was the Bible that the early post-Easter Jesus movement heard in temple, they connected what happened to Jesus with the words from Isaiah. Similarly, any community who has lost its leader(s) to torture and suffering, will hear echoes in the lament poetry of Isaiah here. People who know what it means to be despised and rejected by other people, LGBT folks among them, will find themselves close to the servant Israel, and also to Jesus at this moment on the way to the cross. Remember, for example the final hours when Matthew Sheppard hung on a fence in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998, or James Byrd, Jr. was dragged behind a pick-up truck in Paris, Texas; or Brandon Teena was shot and stabbed in Richardson County, Nebraska.



When you think about “crucifixion” what ancient and contemporary deaths come to mind?

In **Psalms 22**, the psalmist faces abandonment, forsaken by family and friends, and calls out to God who seems absent. Nevertheless, the lamenting person does not relent relying on the same God for liberation, for reconnection to community, for reconnection to family and nation. It is the first words of Psalm 22 that Jesus is said to have uttered on the cross according to the gospels in Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46. The sentiments of the psalm have resonated with individuals and communities who have been outcast (or never let in) by those in power. LGBT folks and members of any other group, whose members have been tortured and killed for who they are and what they represent, can relate.



When have you felt abandoned? What has helped you survive?

From empathy with the suffering of the cross, the lectionary moves to two alternate passages in Hebrews. **Hebrews 10:16-25** promises a new covenant, very similar to the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This new covenant is characterized by Torah being written on the people's hearts — thus no longer needing prophets, priests, and pastors as mediators — and by absolute forgiveness. LGBT people can embrace this promise and claim their relationship with God unencumbered by those guardians who have kept them/us out. The subsequent verses in Hebrews, on the other hand, are more problematic, as they reintroduce particular rituals that will again function to keep all out who do not observe them. Yet we are called “to provoke one another to love and [perform] good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).

The alternate passage, **Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9** highlights the perfection of Jesus, and while its intention has been to claim a space for Jewish Christians equal to other Jews in the temple, its impact through the ages has been one of striving for perfection. This has been an issue especially in Christian traditions that over-focus on self-betterment, rather than work for the improvement of living conditions for all.

The gospel reading **John 18:1-19:42** narrates the final hours of Jesus of Nazareth. Focusing both on the religious and political contexts of the crucifixion, the gospel writer introduces the Jewish religious authorities next to the local representative of the Roman Empire. Jesus' life work of standing up to those in power, be it political or religious, culminates in an argument over who he is believed to be. The title “King of the Jews” clearly affronts the Roman powers, who have not tolerated any local rulers. It also runs counter to the current Jewish religious authorities who understand themselves as successors of King David's reign. The gospel writer describes in great detail the humiliation and torture of Jesus on the cross while the Jesus in the gospel of John talks theology. The bystanders, both Jesus' family and followers as well as a Jewish mob, witness the strangely bi-level interrogation. The mob is described as calling for Jesus' crucifixion, and the reciting of these very anti-Jewish verses in the gospel of John has been used to justify innumerable acts of anti-Semitism through the ages.

Nearest to the cross stand Jesus' mother Mary, his aunt Mary, and his closest disciple Mary Magdalene as well as the Beloved Disciple. Others have fled already as those sympathizers are in deadly danger themselves. A weeping mother, an absent father, and closest friends — relational images all too familiar to LGBT folks during their final hour as well as during other challenging times of “coming out.” We know such times of holding fast for the sake of one's integrity, of standing up instead of going along with the status quo of laws and regulations, customs and commitments. Taking risks for change and toward freedom is dangerous business. It may lead to the cross.



When and where have you stood next to the cross of others?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of compassion and integrity,
We bring before you the suffering and torture of this world and our
community,
Give us the courage to stand firm in the face of adversity and threat,
Let us stand by each other in moments of suffering,
and commit us to end all torture anywhere,
as we grieve Jesus' death on the cross,
and continue on as Christ's disciples in the world.
In the name of the One who shows compassion,
the One who shows integrity and courage
that sets us free, in the name of Jesus, Amen.*

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

Easter, Year B

We Are Witnesses

Truth-walking can be telling the truth of sexual identity – coming out as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or trans person and as Christian. This sometimes in hostile communities feels more like a cross. Yet lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people bear such a cross – coming out again and again and again, and not always to people who appreciate this truth of ours.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18 or Mark 16:1-8](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“To rise up and become God’s hand and feet in the world as Jesus was — that is my Easter hope.” Angela Bauer-Levesque



“More than we care to admit, I think lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and communities know about the hard work of staying with grief until finally ‘seeing’ Christ in their lives.” Valerie Bridgeman

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Acts 10:34-43 talks about an impartial God who welcomes all who do what is right. LGBT people have been encouraged by this message of inclusion of all people of faith working for justice. Yet, we also know how this very invitation can be turned on its head to exclude when those who have power to control “what is right” decide, for whatever reason, that we are not included. All of us who follow Jesus need to remember that God is with us, too, as we go about “doing good” and “healing all who [are] oppressed.”



When have you felt welcome to do God’s work of justice making and healing the oppressed? In what ways do you welcome others or exclude others?

In **Isaiah 25:6-9**, we hear the promise of a feast for all peoples on the holy mountain. This promise of hope and joy comes from the prophet who knows of the destruction of the temple and the suffering of those who are exiled. A feast for all people; tears wiped away and the shroud lifted is the best news for the people of God and, we hope against hope, for LGBT folk. Such is the God for whom we have waited, too.



What joyful feast are you planning this Easter?
Who are you inviting?

The psalmist in **Psalms 118** holds on to the assurance of faith that God’s *chesed* (the covenant solidarity of God-with-us, most often translated as “steadfast love”) is always present, even in the midst of utter distress (verse one). Rejected and despised, God brings resurrection life into the most unlikely places – not leaving us to the death of relationships, of disenfranchisement, of despair. We hear in the psalm of the rising up of those who have been put down and the coming out of the closed/closeted places. We know that tough days continue, but there is trust and confidence that God has brought liberation. Those who have put together the lectionary want this Hebrew psalm to deeply connect to Jesus. It does link to Jesus, but its meaning points beyond only the Jesus event.



When have you risen up or will you rise up from suffering or the death-dealing contexts of Good Friday?

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 offers Paul's revised history of the Jerusalem events of Jesus' passion and death. His "testimony" about the resurrection begins with the notion that Jesus appeared to Peter first (no mention of Mary Magdalene). Strikingly, leaving out the witnesses of Jesus' life and work among certain communities is an old and inadequate Christian habit. For example, the witness that LGBT people give, like that of Mary, is often ignored. Paul uses the resurrection witness to point to himself. We do not want to be guilty of Paul's revisionist history.

Isn't the account of the Easter morning events in the gospel of **John 20:1-18** in direct contradiction to Paul's memory? It is Mary Magdalene who came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. And the fact that she alone stayed with her grief in the face of an empty tomb, after Peter and the other disciples had gone home after their quick recognizance mission, allowed her to be present for the miracle of the resurrection. LGBT communities know more about staying with grief to the other side of "seeing" Christ in their lives than we care to admit.

In the account of the Easter morning events in **Mark 16:1-8**, it is also Mary Magdalene who goes to the tomb. Here she has two companions, Mary the mother of James and Salome. They, too, become witnesses of the resurrection being told that Christ has risen. They leave in awe and become the first to proclaim the message of the resurrection. It has happened: Jesus of Nazareth after his death has become the Christ who inspires the Jesus movement to continue and grow and move out and on. *La lucha continua*. The struggle continues.



Whether you count yourself as a member or friend of the LGBT movement or not, what "resurrections" have you witnessed along your way?

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Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*God of Love and Resurrection,
You have wiped away our tears
and, if only for a moment, lifted the shroud over the world.
We thank you for the witness of Mary Magdalene and others who have
come before us.
Let us live through our grief and let us see Christ in our lives,
As we continue the struggle, continue to rise up, continue to do your work
of Easter in a Good Friday world.
In the name of the One who comforts, the One who liberates, and
the One who invites us to the Feast. Amen.*

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2nd Sunday after Easter, Year B

Life Together

We speak about the importance of living together as “community,” however this is not as easy as it sounds.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“These texts invite us to meditate on how we demonstrate God’s blessing, life forevermore, in the ways we engage others.” Holly Hearon



“These texts invite us to reflect on the complex dynamics within Christian community: unity is not conformity.” Wil Gafney



“These lessons force us to ask what community means when you are called to be unlike the majority.” Charles Allen

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Psalm 133:1 sets the theme for the week with joyful the declaration: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Yet this declaration is phrased in a way which suggests that the obverse is more often the case. Charles reflects, “The only unity I’ve ever known with my kindred has been a restless unity.” Each of the remaining texts points to ways in which our life together is characterized by a restless unity.



What does unity look like in your congregation or community? In what ways would you describe this unity as ‘restless?’ Is this restlessness healthy or harmful?

Acts 4:32-35 appears to illustrate the harmonious existence described in the psalm. Holly notes that the text is concerned with material need. Today such unity of spirit might result in equal access to pension plan spousal benefits for members of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, or to medical coverage related to gender identity. Attempts to spiritualize the text diminish these implications. Although Holly finds this image compelling, she recognizes that claims for ‘one heart and soul’ too often mean unity as defined by the dominant group. In the text, this group is represented by the apostles. Wil sees power in the apostles’ testimony (verse 33), but wonders where the testimonies of the rest of the community are: “How can a community function if some voices are perpetually absent or even silenced?” In many congregations, LGBT testimonies of their experiences of the risen Christ are categorically denied. Charles helpfully draws attention to what the text does not say — one heart, one soul, but not one belief. If private ownership refers not only to possessions, but also beliefs, then letting go of private ownership could mean letting go of what we hold as normative.



What are some ways in which your congregation has been able to draw together in “one heart and soul” but not necessarily “one belief?” What would it take to make this happen?

1 John 1:1-2:2 offers a positive word about the forgiveness we receive when we acknowledge our sin. Charles reflects that it is often difficult for those of us who are queer to read, “we deceive ourselves if we say we have no sin.” Too often we hear people telling us to confess that our desires and relationships are “intrinsically disordered.” But we need to reclaim the right to stand before God as welcomed sinners.

Reading further in the letter reveals what sin looks like to the writer of 1 John. It means not showing love towards one another. The sin, notes Charles, lies not in who we love, but in our failure to love anybody, including ourselves, with the love for which we were made. Wil points out that the dualistic language of light versus darkness in the text can lead to another kind of sin. She observes that this language has not only been co-opted by expressions of racist Christianity, but reflects more subtle forms of racism that infect LGBT communities as well. Love, then, becomes something we demonstrate only towards “our own.” Thus, we have to read 1 John at two levels: in terms of what is stated in the text, and also in terms of how we have come to use the language of the text.

The first half of the lesson from **John 20:19-31** draws attention to the power of communities to include and exclude. Holly Hearon notes that we often keep communities divided by identifying people in ways that prevent them from participating as full members of the community. Yet when we exchange the “peace” or expressions of Christ’s love with one another in worship, we ostensibly extend welcome to all. Wil observes that the passing of the peace has degenerated into a mumbled greeting exchanged with as little eye-contact as possible. She writes, “I would like to see the exchange of peace return to a prayer for the wellbeing of our neighbors and the strangers in our midst, looking people in the eye, touching warm, human flesh and breathing the peace of God on and in them.”



What are some of the ways that we are liable to sin in our efforts to identify sin in others?

The story of Thomas in **John 20:26-29** reminds us that the other disciples included Thomas in the community despite his doubts. Charles suggests that Thomas showed more faith than we think. Charles asks, “What was it that kept Thomas loyal to Jesus and his friends despite all his questions?” Do we sense the love of God even when God’s people show little evidence of it? LGBT Christians can claim to be “of one heart and soul” with the Body of Christ, even though they are not of one mind with the majority when it comes to recognizing the holiness of their relationships.



What keeps you loyal to your faith community?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



In your mind's eye, prayerfully in silence, envision God calling each member of your community of faith by name to be present in the community, including yourself. Reflect on what attitudes and behaviors you can cultivate that will contribute to the community as a vital sign of God's blessing, "life forevermore." What attitudes and behaviors could the community cultivate that would bring this blessing to the world?

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3rd Sunday of Easter, Year B

Encountering God

These Bible passages point to the many ways we encounter God – in Scripture, in testimony, in community, the silence of our rooms, in our bodies and in one another.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 3:12-10; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“These Bible passages invite the work of prayer. And prayer is work, and wonder!” Wil Gafney



“Each of these Bible passages causes me to ponder how I both experience and become an expression of God.” Holly Hearon



“We live a thoroughly embodied life, but, thankfully, so does God!” Charles Allen

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

To feel the full force of **Acts 3:12-19**, it is necessary to locate ourselves in the crowd addressed by Peter. We then find ourselves among those charged by Peter with killing the Author of life. This raises the critical question: Do we recognize that which is life-giving when we see it? We all are capable of rejecting or failing to recognize that which is life-giving.

Wil observes that the crowd represents a many-layered community. In verse 12, “people” suggests that both men and women are present. The location in the portico, outside of the Temple, points to the presence of gentiles, the non-Jews. Out of this crowd, however, it is the dominant group identified in the address, “Men (the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible uses “You”), Israelites.” That limited recognition of who is present is most disconcerting. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk often find the dominant culture ignoring their presence and expressions of life within LGBT communities. Wil goes on to note that women, queer folk, children, differently-abled folk, immigrants, ethnic and national minorities regularly find themselves on the margins of events in which they are participating, with the emerging and defining story reflecting the tenor of the dominant community.

Charles observes that Christian claims about fulfilling prophecy made their common Scriptures say things the original authors never intended. They had no qualms about forcing Scripture to speak good news to them in light of their current experience. They didn’t timidly ask, “Does Scripture include us?” They made it include them. Why should LGBT folk hesitate to do the same? Scripture does include and challenge us, but one of its challenges is that it demands that we read it from the standpoint of all that we have found to be holy, gracious and life-giving in our own lives.



Where do you see God, the Author of life, in your community? What gives this vision of life integrity?
Where do you see this vision lifted up in Scripture?

Psalms 4 is a reminder that God, the Author of life, is present to us. This can be a comfort when that which we recognize as life-giving is rejected and trampled by those who reject its life-giving capacity. Charles and Holly are drawn to the physical dimension of the text in the lines, “You gave me room when I was in distress” and “you alone, O God, make me lie down in safety” (verse 1). They are a reminder that we experience fear, danger, comfort, assurance and presence in our bodies and in space. Wil adds that the cry of this psalm makes sense only if there is God who hears prayers.



What experiences cause you to seek out a ‘room’ where you can ‘lie down in safety’? How do you experience God in this space?

In **1 John 3:1**, “We are beloved of God,” affirms that those of us who love unconventionally are authorized to find ourselves included as God’s children. Those who do not know or accept God’s love for all of God’s children simply do not know God (1 John 4:16b). Wil notes that this verse evokes the Jewish prayer, “Ahavah Rabbah,” or “With Abounding Love,” which begins, “With abounding love, you have loved us...”

“Sin” and “lawlessness,” in the context of 1 John, are likely a reference to the command to love one another. There is no justification for tying “sin” to gender identity or sexual orientation. Rather, it refers to how we treat one another. The more radical edge of this text is found in verse 2. Charles comments that recent scholars interpret this verse to mean that our destiny is theosis (deification). Are we ready to accept the astounding idea that our relationships may actually deify us? That they are not just OK, but positively sacred?



How do you respond to the idea that you are beloved of God? If you accepted the idea that our relationships deify us, how would this change the way you view and behave in relationships?

In contrast to the bold words spoken by Peter in Acts, in **Luke 24:36-48** the disciples are described as joyful, yet disbelieving. Holly wonders if the disciples disbelieve because they have to recognize Jesus as the crucified Messiah in order to understand him as the living Messiah. As Wil puts it, “Jesus is divine because of and in his human, Jewish, crucified flesh.” This is a reminder, adds Holly, that our bodies are places of memory. Jesus does not set aside his crucified self. That self is embraced and carried forward, an integral part of Jesus’ identity. This text counters the message heard by many LGBT folk that they need to set aside their identities in order to “be in Jesus.” As Wil comments, the text shows that “our bodies and their particularities are not our enemies or our shame. Our bodies are wholly, holy, Godspace.”



How does this text expand your understanding of where and how God is present in your body? In your life? In your encounters with other people?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*O God,
In every moment, in every place,
may we come to recognize you, the author of life,
to know you as the one who calls us beloved,
to feel you in our bodies, Godspace,
to express your being in each of our relationships. Amen.*

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4th Sunday of Easter, Year B

Jesus without Borders

These texts challenge our desire to box Jesus in.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“When we want to set limits, God tells us that it is precisely those on the other side of the wall who belong to the fold.” Holly Hearon



“These Bible passages leave many questions in their wake: Who are we? To what are we called? And by what name? How do we name God? And what does it mean to be saved?” Wil Gafney



“All these texts hint that our outsiders may be God’s insiders.” Charles Allen

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Acts 4:5-12 continues the story begun last week. The text is a classic set-up between those in charge of religious order and those whose religious experience falls outside this established order. Since the dispute is “in-house” it is important not to use the text to point to a “them,” but to recognize that it is all about “us.” Holly Hearon notes that the image of “the stone that was rejected” describes the experience of many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk who have been denied ordination. This does not claim the status of Jesus for LGBT persons, but recognizes that we too have been called to minister in Jesus’ name. The name “Jesus” is a translation of the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which means “salvation.” Wil Gafney observes that it would be in keeping with rabbinic rhetorical flourishes to ask “Who else could save other than the man named Savior?” adding that the biblical notion of salvation was social, communal and physical, not individual or spiritual. Charles Allen reminds us that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures give us many names for God by which we are saved. The religious rulers were most concerned with what power was at work in the healing, thus overlooking the goodness of the deed itself. This reminds Charles of the debate over marriage equality: “Everybody recognizes that promises to live together in mutual love and loyalty are a good thing—until it’s a same-sex couple making those promises!”



When have you experienced a life-giving event in your life that has been viewed with suspicion by others? When have you found yourself suspicious of what someone else has identified as a life-giving event? What criteria do you think should be used in assessing such moments?

The familiar **Psalm 23** can offer comfort, but it can also be disquieting. Wil remarks that the psalmist’s security is maintained with the threat of violence. Sexual and ethnic minorities, who have suffered violence at the hands of those who justify their violence on religious grounds, may find this imagery difficult. On the other hand, Charles suggests that these same individuals may be comforted in the knowledge that we are already dwelling in the house of God and that no predator can take that away from us.



What image do you find most compelling in this psalm? Can you envision a way in which it might be less than comforting to others?

John 10:11-18 embraces the image of the good shepherd. Like Psalm 23, it bears a double edge.

Phrases such as “I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14) can and have been used to create exclusive communities that shut out those who don’t look, behave or believe like us. But John makes it difficult to press such exclusive claims. There are always “other sheep that do not belong to this fold” yet who belong to Jesus. Nor is it possible to turn Jesus into an exclusive entity; rather he proves remarkably porous. Charles reflects that in John’s Gospel, God, the Word, Jesus, God’s people and even the world all mutually and intimately indwell with one another (John 14:11-20). Another double edge is represented by the language of “laying down one’s life”(John 10:11). Holly notes that Jesus lays down his life *so that* he can take it up again and that he does so willingly. Jesus’ suffering is both volitional and purposeful. Wil adds that the gospel points to the uniqueness of Christ’s suffering. Other human suffering is not “Christic;” we cannot raise ourselves. This passage cuts through the notion, frequently imposed on under-represented groups that our suffering is Christ-like, and we are to bear it gladly in his image. Those who construct and impose these theologies are rarely willing to imitate this lesson themselves.



If the suffering of Jesus is unique and on behalf of the world, what are the implications for how we understand ourselves as those who are in the world?

In **1 John 3:16-24** the measure of love is sacrificing oneself for another. This does not necessarily call for our literal death; there are other kinds of opportunities for self-sacrifice every day. For Wil, the text presents a challenge to those who say they “love” queer folk yet harass, threaten and stalk them and their families. Charles reflects that before we were brothers and sisters, God laid down God’s life for us, so when we follow God’s example with one another we need to remember that this is not just for us. We lay down our lives for those who are not yet our brothers and sisters.



What do you find most challenging about the notion of self-sacrifice? Do you view self-sacrifice as characteristic of God?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Shepherding God,
Whatever we might ask for ourselves,
may we also ask for the world.
When we look at the world,
may we also see ourselves,
And may we come to know that
you reside in both us and the world, equally,
and are drawing us to a place where we may live without fear.
Amen.*

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5th Sunday of Easter, Year B

God's Inclusive Vision

Being inclusive means more than bringing many diverse people together; it is about how we experience and engage each other.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Like the eunuch from Ethiopia, in the book of Acts, we hear a message of inclusion, and we ask, "Why should we too not be marked as God's own forever?" Charles Allen



"Both Jewish and Christian Scriptures note the evolution of the beloved community. How are we changing today?" Wil Gafney



"If we are all in this together, then how I perceive, understand, experience and interact with others becomes *the* most important thing." Holly Hearon

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Acts 8:26-9:1 is an important text for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities because the eunuch represents a sexual and social outsider whose intimate relationships differed from those of the majority culture. Charles Allen jokes that the Holy Spirit helped Philip get over his “eunuch-phobia.” Although the eunuch is a foreigner and a gentile, Philip does not hesitate to share his religious culture, without preconditions, to this stranger become neighbor. Wil wonders whether Philip, a Greek-speaking Jew with a Greek name, found himself marginalized in his own Aramaic-speaking Jewish culture for being too much like the enslaving empire. The meeting of Philip and the African eunuch is a reminder that identity is a complex construction, and that outsiders and insiders are not always easily distinguished. Holly Hearon and Charles Allen are impressed by how pro-active the eunuch is: he has gone to Jerusalem, he is reading the Scriptures, he sees the water and he asks to be baptized. When Philip explains the scripture to him, he offers his own interpretation: “Why shouldn’t I be included in God’s people?”

Jewish Scripture has both welcoming and forbidding things to say about eunuchs. There’s a passage in Deuteronomy insisting that people like him should not even “be admitted to the assembly of God” (Deuteronomy 23:1). But the Ethiopian isn’t listening to that. He likes the book of Isaiah, especially this part: “Do not let the foreigner joined to God say, ‘God will surely separate me from the chosen people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree’. For thus says God to the eunuchs who ... hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:3-5). Instead of letting an isolated passage drive him away, he’s actually become a follower of the God of Israel. This is a powerful reminder that we should never assume that people are without faith or have no spiritual life. In this story we find Philip and the eunuch guiding each other.



Have you ever experienced a spiritual encounter where you felt that you and the other person were guiding each other? What circumstances brought you together? What dynamics allowed it to be a mutual exchange?

Psalms 22:25-31 provides the context of which the story in Acts is an illustration: all nations will be drawn to God. When we envision such an event we often assume that the other nations will change and become like us. But that isn’t what the psalm claims. Rather, the psalm prepares us to expect diversity. Wil Gafney notes that the phrase “God’s deliverance to a people yet unborn”

(verse 31) suggests that God has not completed the work of liberation. God's work is ongoing. This is an encouraging word to those for whom liberation seems, as yet, as distant dream.

1 John 4:7-21 describes a circle of love: God is love, God loves us, everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, we cannot say we love God if we hate anyone God has made because God is love . . . The testimony to God's love is the sending of God's Child into the world. This tangible sign of God's love prevents it from being confined to a feeling; God's love is active; it is sacrificial; and it is in our very midst. Wil sees these verses as pointing to our calling as Christians. We are to love everyone, including ourselves, including those with whom we disagree theologically. Charles raises the question of how anyone can argue that loving another of the same gender goes against loving God? We can't afford to put loving God in competition with loving others in whatever way lies open for us.



The writer of 1 John identifies the antithesis of love as fear. In what ways does fear prevent us from loving one another? From allowing others to love?

Much of **John 15:1-8** stresses our dependence on Jesus. But, as Charles notes, verse 5 suggests that our indwelling is mutual, not just one way. Holly links the text to 1 John by noting that perfect love takes cultivation. Here, cultivation is described in terms of being grafted into a solid rootstock. Being grafted, however, does not mean losing one's identity. A cherry branch grafted into an apple tree still produces cherries. So, the "Jesus branch" should be very colorful. Holly also observes that imprudent or careless pruning can damage a plant irreparably. But, according to the text, we are not given the task of pruning; our role is to bear fruit. We can do this because of the word that Christ has spoken. Wil asks what is this word: Is it life? Is it love? Is it salvation?



What cleansing word have you heard? How does this word help to ground you? To express "perfect love"?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



Enter into a prayerful time of silence and meditation. Imagine the Holy Spirit has grabbed hold of you; where does the Spirit take you? Whom do you encounter? What fears do you need to overcome to engage this person or place? What gift does the person or place have to offer you on your spiritual journey? What gift do you have to offer them?

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6th Sunday of Easter, Year B

Catching Up with God's New Way

God is constantly enlarging the scope of divine love, inviting those who want to worship God to adapt our lives to the pattern of love that is always more inclusive.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“When will we ever stop being surprised by God’s clear message that all are members of God’s family? I continue to pray for that day.” Deborah Appler



“Most of us read the Bible in tension, focusing more on judgment than on love. Judgment allows us to exclude because someone is a eunuch or a gentile. But love – unconditional love – forces us to welcome everyone. Frankly, I would rather be found guilty of loving too much, than judging too much.” Miguel De La Torre



“Today’s lessons want us to remember that God is always changing God’s mind. God is always seeking new ways for expressing grace. That’s what God’s forgiveness demonstrates.” Norman Kansfield

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

When the editors of the Revised Common Lectionary put lessons from the Book of Acts (as last week's lesson, Acts 8:26-40, and this week's lesson, **Acts 10:44-48**) in the place usually occupied by a lesson from the Older Testament, they may have been hoping that we would be reminded of two passages from that portion of God's revelation. In Deuteronomy 23:1, (now, this sounds strange to us today) God commanded: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis has been cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." Then, at a later date, we hear God say, in Isaiah 56:3-5: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

The Scripture documents God's willingness to change God's mind, and to welcome those who once were prevented from full participation. The story of Philip and the one we call the "Ethiopian eunuch" (see last week's commentary on Acts 8:26-40) stands as concrete evidence of the willingness of God constantly to change God's mind in order to welcome more and more persons into the family of God's house. The new life in Christ invites all, in a radically new way, into the waters of baptism.



One of the very first stories of Christian conversion is about the experience of a "sexually different" person. What might that say to you about God and those who the world often today calls sexually different from the "norm?"

In **Psalm 98**, God is alive and moving, continuing to speak new things in our time, and calling us to a constantly enlarged mission. Such a sparkingly surprising God deserves a new song – praise that grows out of this moment. It is perfectly acceptable for us to sing joyously the praise of previous generations. But our own experience of God's grace ought also to be celebrated. Let's write God a new song of celebration.



What songs of celebration do you want to sing?
What evidence do you see of God calling the church
to welcome and embrace all persons?

When God spoke of Jesus as "my beloved Child" (Mark 1:11), God was suggesting a new meaning for family. So, when the author of **1 John 5:1-6** suggests that everyone who believes that Jesus is the "Sent One of God," becomes a "Child of God," this new family is given definition (verse 1). Everyone becomes my brother or my sister. Just a few verses earlier, the author observed: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and the one who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in that person" (1 John 4:7, 16b).



What difference should it make in our daily lives that
God and humankind are so fully at peace with one
another that every person on earth may be called
"child of God?"

In the first seventeen verses of **John 15**, Jesus is quoted as using the word "abide" eleven times. Five of those instances occur with the passage assigned for today. Such word choice is not by accident. It wants us to take note of something very important. In the first eight verses, Jesus urges us to "abide" in him: "Abide in me and I in you" (John 15:4). The great work of God's salvation is done. It's as if Jesus were saying to us: "You need no longer be concerned about your relationship with God. You are already in me. Now, relax and just abide."

In **John 15:9-17**, Jesus sharpens our focus. Our abiding in Jesus is not without work to do. But that work is surprising. We might expect Jesus to suggest that abiding in his love would be demonstrated simply by our love for Jesus. But Jesus has something very different to say: "As God has loved me, so have I loved you, abide in my love. . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." We abide in Jesus' love by giving that love away to others for who Christ died but who do not yet know about his gift. We best abide in Jesus, by constantly welcoming all into the family of God's house.



Whether we regard Jesus' resurrection as historical reality or Christian myth, the *doctrine* of the resurrection remains a powerful image by resides emphatically reminding us that God continues to value the human body that God made. Does this help you feel that *your* body is cherished by God?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Abide with us, Great God of relationship and love;
that we may abide in you—
bravely living each day open to new challenges;
fiercely loving those you have given us to care for;
and earnestly seeking in all we do
to seek justice, to love kindness,
and to walk humbly wherever you lead. Amen.*

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7th Sunday of Easter, Year B

Plant Yourself Near the Source

The work of God's people who lived before us continues in us and onward into future generations. Our joy is in working and living as part of a loving community.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; I John 5. 9-13; John 17: 6-19](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"All of this week's texts speak of intimacy, of living close to the source. When we open ourselves to intimacy – to living close to Jesus and to those who follow Jesus – we are strengthened for the work that God calls us to do." Deborah Appler



"The struggle for justice can become discouraging. These passages remind me of why we 'hope against all hope.' Disconnected from our God, we run the danger of being discouraged and on the verge of quitting. But God connects us with a history that, as Dr. King reminds us, 'bends toward justice.' So we can fight the good fight trusting that temporary failure will not overcome God's eternal liberation." Miguel De La Torre



"When we live close to Jesus, it is a lot easier to understand our true calling. Our work is clear – seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly in God's footsteps." Norman Kansfield

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26 shows what happens when someone loses contact with the source. Even though our lesson from Acts carefully avoids the goriest part of his story, Judas is clearly portrayed as one who has wandered from "the way of the righteous." After Judas "turned aside" from the discipleship which had been his, the other disciples were faced with the question of who should take Judas' place. Their process allows us to see that when those who go against Jesus and his radical hospitality finally move on, they open space for those who will be hospitable.

We may not quite understand what compelled this drive officially to name someone "to become with us a witness to the resurrection." Nevertheless, the remaining disciples identified two persons who had "accompanied" them "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among" them (verse 21). "Casting lots" was used to decide who the one was to be. Is there any suggestion that the one not chosen was in any way inferior to the one who was chosen? As far as we know, Joseph, called Barsabbas and surnamed Justus continued to be an active and productive follower of Jesus. The failure to be chosen was not a condemnation of his person. It simply meant that his gifts were not those most needed for the specific task about which the lots were cast. This was not his calling.



Where might you imagine lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in this story? Can they be identified with the one chosen to take Judas' place? Or do they stand with the disciple upon whom the lot did not fall? Or are they both?

Today, in some churches, there is an increased willingness to make space for and fully to include LGBT people – to recognize their gifts. May their numbers increase and their message increasingly become the universal message of the church. Sadly, there remain other churches who have not yet fully understood the breadth and depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus. Let us pray that those churches will stop "turning aside" from the ministry and apostleship to which we are now clearly called.

Psalm 1 wants us to understand that people are like trees. Those not swayed by the attractiveness of evil – those who stay close to the source of their nurture – flourish. Those who are wicked – who wander away from the source of nurture – dry up (like the hard left-over outside shell of grain that in the ancient process of making flour was simply allowed to blow away). The book of Acts told us that Judas did not walk in the path of righteousness and that he, therefore, withered

away. Meanwhile, those who are planted intimately close to the sources of nourishment, flourish. Because, as the psalm says, God carefully "watches over" the way of those who stay intimate with God.

1 John 5: 9-13 wants us to know that "Those who believe in the Son of God have God's testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made God a liar, by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning the Son" (verse 10). How we respond to God's gifts – God's witness to Jesus, and God's offer of eternal life – affects not only our own being, but also affects how God is viewed. If we turn our backs and walk away from God, we, by our actions, suggest that God is a liar. We say that what God says is untrue. If we stay intimately close to the source of our salvation, others will be able to see God's grace at work in our lives. If we wander away from that source, we become opaque and others cannot see God through us, or know eternal life.

John 17: 6-19 is like the prayer following the sermon. In chapters fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen of John, Jesus has been preaching to the followers, preaching about what things would be like when he is no longer with them. Jesus portrayed himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" and "the true vine," urging his followers to "abide" in him – to remain intimately in touch with his power and grace, in order to proclaim the good news and accomplish powerful acts in Jesus' name. The sermon completed, Jesus did what so many preachers do: Jesus sought to make what he had preached clearer in the prayer.

Jesus prayed that those who are "his people" will be protected. Jesus reminds God that just as God had sent him into the world, Jesus has sent those who are disciples into the world. And this business of being sent into the world is dangerous, because the world "hates" Jesus' followers because they belong to Jesus and not to the world. So Jesus prayed for their safety, their strengthening, their welfare – "that they may be one as we are one." To live life intimately related to Jesus is to stay close to the source of safety and of power, close to the source of reconciliation and of hope. Psalm 1 is right: "Happy, blessed, indeed, is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of God."

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Free us from our closets!
Free us from our tombs!
Free us from a heaven
that does not also embrace earth.
Give us, please,
the ecstasy you enjoy
by bringing us together
in friendship, in community, in prayer,
on earth as in eternity.
Give us, please,
the intimacy you inspire*

*through mutuality and consensus,
in relationships,
political, sexual, spiritual.
Give us, please,
the compassion you manifest
in your exorbitant love
for creation and all creatures
great and small.*

From "That We May Know God's Grandeur" by Chris Glaser in *Prayers for the New Social Awakening* edited by Christian Iosso and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty.
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Pentecost Sunday, Year B

Spirit, Come! No More Dry Bones!

The Spirit of God has the capacity to create life where only death is present. The Spirit also shows us how to live with "newness of life."

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Psalm 104: 24-35; Romans 8: 22-27 or Acts 2:1-21\(not included in this conversation\); John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15](#)

Who's in the Conversation

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Pentecost is my favorite day in sacred time – perhaps because I love birthday parties and on this day we mark the birth of the church through the reception of the Holy Spirit. Can we become a new spirit-filled community of justice and joy? God says 'Yes!' So let's blow up some balloons and have a party." Deborah Appler



"We must put aside definitions of success that are measured by won elections or passed legislation. Liberation and salvation are more than simply material and temporal. The struggle for justice is also spiritual and eternal. Even in failure and death, God's spirit breathes life." Miguel De La Torre



"Remember the story of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead? Would one, who had once died, risk doing anything very strenuous for fear of dying again? Today's lessons speak about the Spirit that gives new life, but also helps us to live that new life to the fullest." Norman Kansfield

What's Out in the Conversation

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Ezekiel 37:1-14**, the prophet Ezekiel is told to preach to dry bones. Living in exile, away from the land that witnessed his birth, he is told to share good news when there is only bad news. What preacher hasn't been able to empathize? Sunday after Sunday, preachers stand behind a pulpit and preach; at times feeling as if only dried out bones are occupying space in the congregation. It is as if God's word comes back void. Hope is gone; death has conquered; oppression rules in the land; and the outcast, the dispossessed, the marginalized sink deeper into their graves. And yet, in the midst of despair, there is a call from heaven to preach to the dry bones – for a promise exists that what was once dead will again breathe life. A hope is given, as faint as it may be, that the wrongs committed and the injustices perpetrated will one day be rectified.

We who exist at the margins of society – because of orientation, ethnicity, gender, ability, or economic status – get so discouraged that we just want to roll over and die, simply wasting away until we, too, become old dry bones.

The words to Job sound like good advice, “Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). Seeing hatred rule through the passage of referendums, propositions, constitutional amendments, and laws that rob humans created in God's image of dignity is enough to make one want to quit, to curse God and die. And yet, in the midst of death's victory and the grave's sting, we are told to preach to dry bones. Resurrection keeps us from falling to the way-side, from wasting away under the burdens of hatred and oppression.

The promise of a new Spirit, new breath, and new possibilities for justice is all we have to hold on to in an environment in which new laws are passed that continue to rob some of their humanity. Full justice may never get to rule in our lifetime, but the struggle continues, turning our dry bones into pregnant seeds that when buried will produce new life for the struggle to continue.



How can one believe or have hope in the midst of death-causing oppression? When have you seen the fresh breath of God's spirit bring life to “dry bones?”

God creates variety! In **Psalms 104:24-35**, the psalmist invites us to sing praises to God's creativity. All of nature, all that is, testifies to variety and differences created through God's

wisdom. God has made us different colors, different ethnicities, different genders, different orientations. It is absurd to look upon God's call for variety and claim one race is better, abnormal to claim one ethnicity is advanced, anomalous to claim one gender is superior, abominable to claim one orientation is normal. God sustains what God creates. Without God's breath, all would dry up and die, becoming dry bones. And yet, because we are, because we exist, we are precious in God's sight. So along with the psalmist, let us rejoice in the diversity God created for diversity is a characteristic of God.

Although with the psalmist, we should rejoice for God's creative variety all the days of life that remain in this temporal body, we confess that at times songs of praise sound more like groans of pain. Many still wait to have their bodies set free from unjust laws. We may grasp the promise of resurrection, we may understand the hope that awaits us, but in the midst of oppressive structures that prevent us from being everything God has called us to be, we are left with our groans.

With what words can we explain to God our despair? With what phrases can we describe the indescribable pain of oppression? All we have are groans from the depths of our bowels. We can only rely on a God who already knows everything in our hearts and minds, so communication is not dependent on us. If this be true, and resurrection is the reality that awaits, then all we can wait for is God's Spirit, God's breath, so that we, too, can learn how to hope for a justice we do not see occurring in our lifetime.



How would you characterize the song you sing to God – one of joy, one of groaning? Why?

In **John 15:26-27; 16: 4b-15**, in the midst of sorrow during Jesus' final meal, Jesus provides his disciples with encouragement. Jesus promises them God's Spirit who will reveal truth and show how wrong the world has been about its presuppositions concerning sin, judgment and morality. But this encouragement is a double-edged sword for Jesus tells the disciples that they will be witnesses to the truth. The Greek word used for witness is *martyre*, from where we get the word martyr. To be filled with the Spirit so as to be a witness to truth means to die – sometimes figuratively, other times physically. To stand before societal and ecclesiastical structures that insist on robbing a segment of the population of their dignity due to their race, ethnicity, class, gender, or orientation is to pay a price. At times the cost of being a witness is to be ridiculed, to be ostracized, to lose your job. Sometimes the ultimate price must be paid. Those who heard the promise of the Spirit so that they could be "witnesses" discover this with all (save one) embracing martyrdom. One should never seek to be a martyr. But, when we choose to be a witness for justice, we have to be prepared for the possibility that martyrdom might very well happen.



Where and how may God be calling you to witness to God's justice? What price might be paid for that call? How and where do you gain your strength to act on the call?

Prayerfully Out in Scripture



*Come Holy Spirit,
incarnate yourself in these dry bones, filling us with truth and wisdom.
Without your presence, all is lost.
Provide us with the courage and the words
to be your witnesses against all forms of oppression.
Teach us how to stand in solidarity with the disenfranchised,
those excluded from full humanity because of
their race, their ethnicity, their class, their gender, their orientation.
The struggle for justice is overwhelming,
but with your indwelling,
we can muster enough strength to struggle toward
realizing your realm.
Do not abandon us now, rather, make your presence real,
manifested in joy, grace, and love.
So be it, Amen.*

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