



# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Ash Wednesday, Year C

### TURNING TOWARD LENT

Have you ever “given up” something for the season of Lent? This year, instead of giving up, try on new practices of discipleship.

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](#); and [Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"In this season of Lent, we may benefit from encouraging ourselves and those with whom we worship to explore spiritual practices that emerge from somewhere deep inside, from our drive toward life and wholeness."

Kharma Amos



"We might also reclaim a classical meaning of *repentance*. Repentance surely means turning away from death-dealing life patterns, but it also means turning toward the way of Christ." Greg Carey



Sometimes ‘giving up’ during Lent is not about giving up entirely, but rather, it’s about freeing ourselves, our minds, our time, our hearts, our servants’ hands, in order to try a new way." Jacquie Church Young

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Marking the first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday evokes images of repentance, mortification, relinquishment and self-denial. When we think of Lent, we often envision people giving up everything from chocolate to sex. Yet many people in our faith communities have already done a life's worth of self-mortification and denial. While we all stand in need of correction and renewal, perhaps devoting a season to "giving up" is not the only way.

Kharma Amos suggests, "If lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies want to give up something for Lent, perhaps we should consider relinquishing shame about our sexual orientation or gender identity, or letting go of guilt about the loving relationships that bring us joy, or emerging from the closets that keep us from living our lives openly, authentically and abundantly."

We might reclaim another classical sense of Lent: Lent allows us time to prepare for Holy Week. It calls us to locate our imaginations along the path of Jesus' disciples as they head toward Jerusalem. We might also reclaim a classical meaning of repentance: repentance surely means turning away from death-dealing life patterns, but it also means *turning toward* the way of Christ. Rather than emphasizing things we should give up, perhaps Lent offers an opportunity to try on new practices of discipleship.



What is your Lenten prayer this year? What might God be calling you to take on in order to live life more faithfully?

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Pointing to the "Sesame Street" song "Put Down the Duckie," Jacquie Church Young offers one promising image for Lent. "The 'Sesame Street' character, Ernie, wants to play the saxophone. But in order to learn, he must put down his beloved rubber duckie long enough to try something new. The duckie sits there waiting. It will still be there later. Sometimes it's not about giving up entirely, but rather, it's about freeing ourselves, our minds, our time, our hearts, our servants' hands, in order to try a new way." Today's passages invite us to embrace a new way. *Now* is the acceptable time for such new ways! *Now* is the day of reconciliation!

Perhaps we might take on a new Lenten practice, the practice of sharing meals with people on the fringes of our lives. We might reach across boundaries of race, status, ability and sexuality to participate in the work of reconciliation. Pastoral leaders might take an opportunity to emphasize reconciliation within today's particular liturgy for Ash Wednesday.

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As you enter this season of Lent, where do you see the need for reconciliation in our world? How might God be calling you and your congregation to assist in reconciling and healing?

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In **2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**, Paul is addressing congregations that have experienced fragmentation. Contemporary scholars see signs in Paul's Corinthian letters that the divisions in Corinth reflected more than simple theological differences. Some believers were suing others in court (1 Corinthians 6:1-9). Other believers were debating issues of gender, sexuality and power. Apparently people of means enjoyed their affluence at community meals, implicitly debasing those who lacked similar means (see especially 1 Corinthians 11:20-22). By the time Paul composes 2 Corinthians, some of these divisions have apparently been addressed, but soreness remains. Reconciliation within the church posed a serious challenge for Paul and his colleagues. Often the church itself provides the first site for the work of reconciliation.

In our current world context, we encounter headlines every week about divisions and splits in the church, many of which claim to be based on disagreements about issues of sexuality. Paul's letter is a powerful reminder to us that rather than being one of the best examples of division in our world, the church is supposed to be the first site for the work of reconciliation. The time is now for pastoral leaders to help congregations rediscover this crucial role through open discussions and concrete expressions of reconciliation.

As if we needed motivation, the prophet Joel cries out with urgency (**Joel 2:1**). "Sound the trumpet!" and "Call the assembly!" The author of **Isaiah 58:1-12** calls forth, "Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!" The admonitions of Joel and Isaiah call us to diagnose the time. Even a cursory glance at society reveals the dramatic need for justice and reconciliation. As one segment of society blames another — and the LGBT community knows this so well — we are tearing our own culture apart at the seams. Isaiah 58 in particular evokes a society that offers pious platitudes while it tears apart the weak within it. God calls for a different response: acts of justice, of freeing, healing, feeding, clothing and sheltering (verses 6-7). As people who seek life, let us sound the trumpet, confessing our own participation in the ways of alienation and death.



Where are the places of injustice where it seems no one is speaking out? How might you and those you know "sound the trumpet" for justice?

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Awareness of our own participation in the brokenness of society provides a context for reading **Psalms 51:1-17**. Psalm 51 evokes introspection, even mourning. The story that the psalm is based on is found in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12. In popular imagination the story about King David is about individual weakness and sin. Poor David, driven by lust, takes the woman of his desire. Caught in the trap of potential scandal, he tries one intervention after another, tying himself in knots until finally he resorts to murder as a cover up. Surely Psalm 51 addresses such individual

weakness and their consequences.

Wise readers, however, see beyond the individualism to abuse of power and privilege. David's act against the woman Bathsheba is hardly the love affair movies have made it out to be. He abuses his royal status by sending men to her door, essentially forcing her compliance. He plots against Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, an outsider, though a faithful soldier. David exposes many others to mortal risk. David's crimes involve the abuse of power and privilege at least as much as they do unbridled lust. During Lent, perhaps we may take on questions of our own privilege and the divisions it creates within our own world of relationships. When we look to our broken world, surely, "Our sin is ever before us" (Psalm 51:3).

The LGBT community and its friends relate to power and privilege in complicated ways. There is cause to celebrate our accomplishments and our potential to influence society. At the same time we live in a culture that largely leverages its power against LGBT and other marginalized groups. Our diverse experiences might open a new way to relate to David, Bathsheba and Uriah.



In what ways might you and the LGBT community connect with the characters and their experiences discovered in the story in 2 Samuel and expressed in the prayer of Psalm 51? What psalms, what prayers for forgiveness, renewal and healing, are you and your community led to offer to God on Ash Wednesday?

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As we explore new paths of faithfulness, **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21** warns of looming danger. These teachings, part of Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:27), caution that whatever practices we undertake, we should be alert to the danger of self-promotion — or, more likely, self-congratulation.

Kharma Amos stresses, "Many LGBT people know all too well the damage that can be done when external actions performed for the benefit and approval of others contradict our secret thoughts and truest sense of self." Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, invites us to explore new paths of faithfulness that root our spiritual practices in souls bared authentically before God. In this season of Lent, we may benefit from exploring spiritual practices that emerge from somewhere deep inside, from our drive toward life and wholeness. We can encourage others to explore such spiritual practices as well. Yet even as we strive for congruence between our deepest truths and our embodied practices, we must remain alert to the dangers of self-promotion or self-congratulation. Our faithfulness is ultimately determined by God, not by the judgment or popular approval of others.

In a time when headlines shout death and division, Ash Wednesday opens a different space. Our sin is ever before us, as the psalmist says, as is our mortality. Lent provides the opportunity, however, to live toward life and reconciliation through new practices of worship and discipleship.

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Reconciling and renewing God,  
we hear your urgent call.  
In this season of Lent, free us  
from anything that would hinder us  
from responding to you  
with our full lives and devotion.  
Give us new hearts, passionate for your peace and justice.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 1st Sunday in Lent, Year C

### POWER, PRIVILEGE AND TEMPTATION

Jesus knew his calling. That vocation made all the difference when he faced temptation in the wilderness. What difference might our own clarity of God's calling make in choosing and living lives of faith?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#); [Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#); [Romans 10:8b-13](#); and [Luke 4:1-13](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"This is how Lent confronts us: it raises vocation as a pressing life concern."  
Greg Carey



"We long for the day when the church will not be such a devil's advocate (literally!) in using a few Scriptures out of context to perpetuate the wrong-headed idea that gifted and called lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are unfit for ministry." Kharma Amos

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### WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Ah, temptation. What would the season of Lent be without it? The word *temptation* conjures particular images in our culture. We have the cartoon character Sylvester the Cat with an angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other. There's Homer Simpson trying to ignore the nearby doughnut. Popular images of temptation share one thing in common: they emphasize individual choice regarding a single moment.

While the temptation story in **Luke 4:1-13** likewise depicts an individual choice on the part of Jesus, his choice involves not a single tasty morsel. Rather, Jesus' temptation involves a broader discernment. It is the very question, "Who will Jesus be?" This is how Lent confronts us — it raises vocation as a pressing life concern.

As the gospel of Luke presents it, Jesus' temptation poses how his messianic identity will relate to privilege and power. Will Jesus stage demonstrations of messianic power? Will Jesus seek glory and authority as ends in themselves? Will Jesus expect God to certify his identity through outrageous demonstrations? In short, will Jesus turn this messianic vocation toward self-aggrandizement?

Privilege and power can tempt. They pose primary challenges for communities of faith in the United States and Canada. Voices within the churches seek growth for its own sake and political influence as a sign of the church's status. They often determine the church's agenda by means of its struggle for influence. Yet consider Jesus' message immediately following his temptation. In the Nazareth synagogue he reads Isaiah's proclamation. Isaiah declares good news to those who are poor, release to those who are captive, recovery of sight to those who are blind, freedom for those who are oppressed. Jesus embraced the prophet's vision as his own vocation. In him, the vision was fulfilled (Luke 4:16-20). This clarity about Jesus' own calling empowered him to confront the temptation in the wilderness, and also offered strength for the ministry and challenges that would follow.



What difference does it make when faced with daily temptations if you have some clarity about God's love for you and God's call about who you are? What difference does clarity of God's mission make in a congregation and how it lives out its mission against all odds?

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The apostle Paul also explores the connections between vocation and privilege in **Romans 10:8b-13**. Many congregations have experienced tension between their new wave and their old guard. In Greg Carey's own denomination, the United Church of Christ, churches sometimes experience this temptation when they consider the prospect of becoming "Open and Affirming" to all persons, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Some ask, out loud even, "Will we become a gay church?" Paul's letter to the Romans apparently addresses how some Gentile believers, the new wave, came to look down upon the smaller number of Jewish Christians in



their midst.

In the church, whose opinion rules? Who does God call? Who ascends to heaven and who descends into the abyss (verses 6-7)? Paul insists "there is no distinction." "All who call on" Christ will encounter Christ's generosity; "all who call" come to salvation (verse 12). The church that follows Christ cannot use its vocation as an arm of privilege.

The passage also invites us to reflect on the interplay between the church's vocation and the vocation of individuals who are called by God. How unfortunate it is that some churches use their power and privilege to deny the pastoral vocation of so many LGBT people. It's a good thing that Jesus was not dissuaded from his vocation by a few scriptural proof-texts quoted by the devil (Luke 1:9-12). We long for the day when the church will not be such a devil's advocate (literally!) in similarly using a few Scriptures out of context to perpetuate the wrong-headed idea that gifted and called LGBT people are unfit for ministry.

How may God's people reject privilege and celebrate a vocation and empowerment that comes as a gift from God? **Deuteronomy 26:1-11** suggests one path — by remembering who we are and from whence we come. Our past may humbly teach us our vocation. Deuteronomy reminds us that we are the descendants of a minority and alien people: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" (Deuteronomy 26:5-9). Diverse ethnic and cultural streams fed into ancient Israel. Some celebrated their ancestors' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. That act of liberation taught vocation. God's people were to celebrate, even with those who were strangers, God's bountiful gifts (verse 11). Jesus' own 40 days in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) evoke Israel's desert wandering, preparing Jesus for his messianic vocation. One way to keep our power and privilege in check is to humbly recall God's wilderness deliverance of us from all forms of oppression.

For some of us, however, our past is devastating, traumatic. It doesn't feel liberating. To recite our past, all of it, poses a great challenge that we must address with pastoral wisdom, sometimes restraint. Yet it also holds the promise that we may celebrate our liberation without turning it toward privilege. Anytime we are tempted to exclude others, we remember that many among us were once an excluded people on the margins of society. **Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16** testifies that trust in God, as well as our vocations, grow from God's faithfulness in delivering us from oppression. God declares, "When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them" (Psalm 91:15). With trust in such a God, what kind of people are we? How do we face our tests of faith? How do we live?



What about your own past helps you discover what God may call from you today? What about your past seems to pull you from God's hope for you?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy Companion of our wilderness wandering,  
draw near to us and give us strength.  
Remind us of the ways in which you have always  
been a God of liberation for the alienated and lost.  
Lead us to embrace our vocation  
to authentically serve you and one another,  
reaching beyond ourselves to empower the powerless.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 2nd Sunday in Lent, Year C

### FOLLOWING CHRIST, SUFFERING IN FAITH

The lectionary passages for this Sunday include a hearty shot of realism about the danger and difficulty those committed to the inclusive vision of Jesus will face.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35 or Luke 9:28-36](#)



### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Woven throughout these passages is a persistent word of encouragement to take heart and persevere on the path of inclusivity, reconciliation and peace." - Kharma Amos



"Who would be the weak and the strong in the LGBT communities among whom we worship?" -Deborah A. Appler



"Can the Jesus who suffers bring good news to marginalized communities today?" -Greg Carey

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The lectionary passages for this Second Sunday in Lent include a hearty shot of realism about the danger and difficulty that those committed to an inclusive vision of Jesus will face. Suffering, sacrifice and humiliation will often characterize life and ministry for those who resist the normalizing influence of the dominant and powerful. Woven throughout these passages, however, is also a persistent word of encouragement to take heart and persevere on the path of inclusivity, reconciliation and peace.

In the gospel of Luke and book of Acts, Jerusalem is home for Jesus. In that holy city, the infant Jesus is presented, the young man Jesus teaches in "his Father's house" (2:49), Jesus accomplishes his "exodus" (9:31), Jesus dies and, on Pentecost, the young church is born. Indeed, the good news begins in Jerusalem and stretches throughout Judea and Samaria, until it reaches the farthest extent of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Preparing to begin his journey home to Jerusalem (see Luke 9:51), Jesus informs the disciples of the fate he will encounter there (9:21-22). Jesus further warns any would-be followers that his path may lead them to the same fate — one must take up one's cross daily, losing one's life for Jesus' sake in order to find it (9:23-27).

Jesus is on his journey home, then, when three of his followers encounter a glorious revelation (**Luke 9:28-36**). Jesus takes Peter, John and James up on a mountain to pray. There, the three see Jesus' appearance totally transformed. Jesus' clothes radiate a dazzling whiteness, and the disciples see Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah.



What are mountaintop experiences or historical moments that have empowered lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith even as they — or we — faced hardships?

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This story of Jesus' transfiguration reminds us how tempting it can be to try to hang on to the brief moments of ecstatic religious experience we have had. There have been moments when and places where we have glimpsed the potential of an open church, when LGBT people have been specifically included and celebrated in worship. Such moments and places include conference worship services like Witness Our Welcome, LGBT pride services in seminary chapels, safe havens of congregations with open and official commitments to be welcoming and affirming and denominations that see the LGBT community as central to their ministry. Yet we must also minister to a world that is not always so friendly.

The gospel is clear that those who follow Jesus will face continuing hardship and frustration. It is

equally clear that such a reality must not slow progress on the path toward peace and reconciliation. We must press onwards toward the mark of our high calling and live by imitation the ways of Christ (Philippians 3:14; 3:17-4:1), who will transform our humiliation.

We also recall the Transfiguration's place in Luke's story of Jesus. In reply to Peter's weak offer of a tabernacle in honor of Jesus, Moses and Elijah, a voice proceeds from the cloud that overshadows the disciples: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). The voice recalls the disciples to Jesus' hard words just eight days earlier: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, as must his followers" (see Luke 9:23-27). The disciples experience this revelation as they prepare for Jerusalem, where Jesus will die and they will be tested.



In what ways might LGBT people of faith connect with the suffering of Christ? What about those connections is disturbing? In what ways might those connections offer hope?

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**Luke 13:31-35** paints a picture of Jesus' ministry as one that will not be stopped or diminished by the influence of those with power — even the power to kill. In the face of danger, Jesus reasserts his commitment to heal those in need of healing, to bring relief to those who suffer, to live day by day according to his calling. Jesus laments, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (verse 34). Those who believe this inclusive vision of all God's children being gathered together must include LGBT people and others living on the margins of church and society. They may find that these words express their own frustration with those who have the power to exclude or to delegitimize bold ministries of inclusion. We are reminded of the courage of pastors who have undergone ecclesiastical trials, revocation of credentials or reassignment to "lesser" ministries when they have refused to cease their bold actions of radical welcome and inclusion, even when faced with real threats and danger by those with power.

**Philippians 3:17-4:1** features some of Paul's most troubling advice: "Join in imitating me" (verse 1). At first glance it appears Paul calls for conformity in the name of Jesus. At this cultural moment, the last thing we need is conformity! Perhaps, however, Paul deserves a closer look. When Paul calls people to imitate him, he always means just one thing: serve others before looking to yourself. Paul appeals to the example of Jesus, who yielded his own privileges for the salvation of humankind (Philippians 2:5-11). Likewise, Paul contrasts his own ministry to those who use ministry to expand their own power and build up their own benefits: "Their god is the belly" (verse 19). Paul, on the other hand, has followed Jesus even to the point of his own imprisonment. Imitating Paul means considering the needs of the community before serving the needs of self. (This emphasis between "imitating" Paul and serving community is elsewhere in Paul's writings. Compare to 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 4:6-13 and also to 1 Corinthians 11:1 and 10:23-33.)

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What examples do you have of people who have sacrificed privilege or power, even their own lives, on behalf of the broader community? How does their witness challenge you and your own community of faith?

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Can the Jesus who suffers bring good news to marginalized communities today? Can Paul's ministry of self-sacrifice empower liberation? Before standing on a yes or no answer, consider the specific situations in which Paul's model works. In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks against those Christians who use their status and gifts to humiliate others. And in Philippians, Paul claims to oppose versions of the gospel that primarily serve their own preachers. In other words, Paul does not call those who are weak to deeper levels of disempowerment; rather, he calls upon those who are strong to stand in solidarity with those who are weak. This example challenges us to discern our own relations with power and weakness.

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Who among our LGBT sisters and brothers especially need encouragement, advocacy and comfort from others in the LGBT community who have strength to share? For you and those you know, is this a time of seeking strength or of offering strength — or both?

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**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18** is the covenant with the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, but also beyond Abraham to his descendants. The three great Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Islam and Christianity — see themselves in this story, celebrating their own inclusion in the heritage of Abraham. Yet LGBT people often experience exclusion from these very traditions. They have been told that they do not belong. For LGBT people the news of election is a cool drink of water on a hot, arid day. For those to whom communities of faith have traditionally said "No," God says "Yes." Many of us know the joy that happens when LGBT people are affirmed within the context of worship. LGBT-affirming communities celebrate their faith in freedom and liberation, in the full assurance of the divine "Yes."

While the Abraham story voices God's "Yes" to Abraham and his descendants, it also implies several "No"s. "No" to Hagar and her son, who will not be Abraham's heir (Genesis 21:8-21). "No" to the inhabitants of the land God promises Abraham. (Note that the lectionary excludes the verses that articulate the more exclusionary aspects of Abraham's covenant: Genesis 15:13-16, 19-21.) Often Genesis characterizes Israel's neighbors and those outside the church as wicked or un-blessed. Occasionally, it seems, LGBT-identified people must say "No" to the Scripture's own contribution to dehumanization and exclusion.

**Psalms 27** celebrates the utter reliance on God in which those who are excluded or scorned must place their hope. LGBT communities — which have long been blanketed by fear of repercussions for being open and honest about the truth of their sexuality — can sing, "God is

our light and salvation, whom shall we fear" (verse 1). Even as we recognize the real danger to life and livelihood that many LGBT people or allies in the church will face if they are "out" in the light of day, we must press on toward the mark of creating a place for all to praise and worship God openly and honestly. Even as we acknowledge that some will be disowned or forsaken by parents and family members, we must not give up our belief that we shall still see the goodness of God for all people "in the land of the living" (verse 13). We may have to wait for it, but we cannot give up the vision. Let our hearts take courage as our waiting is characterized by an active and relentless commitment to create a welcome for the marginalized and excluded.

The lectionary readings for today challenge us to great levels of discernment and courageousness faithfulness. In Abraham's election we find our own sense of belonging. The path of Jesus, articulated by Luke and by Paul, calls his followers to boldly live out their lives in the way of peace. Jesus calls for us to be willing to sacrifice on behalf of those excluded.



How do you express gratitude to God for being chosen, elected and called "follower"? What does the call to sacrifice evoke from you and others in the LGBT community?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Spirit of Jesus,  
who longed to gather all God's children together,  
sustain our passion for welcoming and loving all people,  
especially those who are marginalized and excluded.  
We are aware of the reality  
that following you will entail suffering and struggle;  
yet, comfort us.  
We are not alone or far from your care.  
Empower us to persist in your way of peace.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 3rd Sunday in Lent, Year C

### BEYOND JUDGING — A NEW WAY

Jesus refuses a theology of judgment. Instead, Jesus calls people to turn from violence and exploitation.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 55:1-9](#); [Psalm 63:1-8](#); [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#); and [Luke 13:1-9](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



“Blaming particular human actions or failings for the suffering around us attempts to tidy up the messiness of life. It also keeps God (and often, the rest of us) far removed from human suffering.” -Kharma Amos



“These texts acknowledge our sensual and earthly needs, celebrating them as means through which God blesses us.” Deborah A. Appler



“Jesus refuses a judgment theology, instead calling people to turn from violence and exploitation.” Greg Carey





“God is not fickle. God judges. Yet it’s amazing how often those who use judgment theology usually apply it against marginalized persons.” Jacquie Church Young

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

What sort of world do we live in? Does God look down on the earth, pick out especially wicked individuals and groups, then selectively zap them? The New Testament readings for this third Sunday in Lent confront us with a theology of judgment. Read in conversation with **Isaiah 55:1-9**, our lectionary texts also hint toward something more hopeful. Lent provides an opportunity to reevaluate the "old" way of judgment theology and turn toward the "new."

"Judgment theology" is all too familiar. We know how this song goes. After the 9/11 attacks Jerry Falwell quickly included lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and feminists among those to blame for America's weakness. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, mega-church pastor and televangelist John Hagee weighed the devastation against New Orleans' toleration of homosexuality. These days judgment theology goes hand-in-glove with the scapegoating of LGBT people.



What are other examples of judgment theology directed at the LGBT community? Should LGBT people and their friends oppose judgment theology, ignore it or seek faithful ways to reconsider it?

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God is not fickle. Yet it’s amazing how judgment theology usually applies against marginalized people. Judgment theology appeals to that part of ourselves that tends toward certainty about who God really is. Whether Muslim or Jewish, whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, we often think we have the market on God and understand why God does what God does. We so desperately want explanations and answers. God must be chuckling about our confidence in judging one another. Or is God weeping?

In **Luke 13:1-9**, Jesus grapples with judgment theology. He hears a report that the tyrant Pontius Pilate has slaughtered a group of Galileans, mingling their own blood with their sacrifices (verses 1-2). We do not know the historical origin of this report. If it actually happened, the details are lost to us. In any case, Jesus further alludes to another occasion when 18 perished

when a tower fell upon them (verse 4). To modern readers these tragedies seem random. Pilate, like all tyrants, had a penchant for killing. Many ancient buildings were weak due to human corruption or simply poor engineering. "Things happen," we tend to say. Yet advocates of judgment theology desire a theological reason for everything, especially anything unfortunate or tragic. They also insist on answering the question, "Whose fault is it when innocent people suffer and die?" Being able to blame particular human actions or failings tends to tidy up the messiness of life. It also keeps God (and often, the rest of us) far removed from human suffering.



Have you ever thought that if people suffer it must be a direct result of their sins? Whose fault is it when innocent people suffer and die?

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Jesus turns the tragic accounts of the slaughtered Galileans and the fallen tower into an opportunity to undermine judgment theology. When misfortune strikes our neighbors, it's natural to wonder why we escape while others do not. Survival's guilt is a phenomenon with which we have grown distressingly familiar. It may not be flattering to know this about ourselves, but this impulse also tempts us to congratulate ourselves for our own well-being. Are we fortunate? Virtuous? Blessed? In Luke's story Jesus turns away from such individualistic explanations. Those who have died were no worse than any others. Their fate, according to Jesus, may not have been their own fault, yet those who fail to repent — to turn toward life abundant — bring judgment upon themselves (verse 5).

The experience of HIV/AIDS in the LGBT community provides a poignant contemporary example. In the early years, when the disease wreaked havoc on communities of gay men, religious fundamentalists claimed that AIDS was God's gift to rid the world of the evil of homosexuality. The cloud of that judgment theology was oppressive and death-dealing to the self-esteem and spiritual well-being of many LGBT people. Yet we know that HIV/AIDS was and is no more God's judgment against homosexuality for gay people than it is God's judgment against heterosexuality for the straight people who are infected and affected by it. Yet the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS and its link with this judgment theology was so prevalent that it kept the United States government from even mentioning the word "AIDS" until well past the time that the disease should have been aggressively fought and compassionately treated. Jesus implies what we know is true: blaming the victim never helps anyone, and more often than not, it provides empty excuses to withhold compassionate service to those who suffer.

The repentance that Jesus has in mind transcends personal moral weaknesses. Rather, Jesus, the bearer of peace, calls all people to repent — to turn away from a culture of violence, retribution and scapegoating. Jesus calls those in his company to discern the times. Pockets of resistance subverted the Roman occupation of Galilee and Judea. The path of violent resistance eventually led to a great disaster, the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 C.E. Such violence, even violence in the name of liberation, begets greater violence. Those who pursue violence, unless they repent, bring destruction upon themselves and upon others.

In the midst of this grave warning, Jesus also injects a word of hope. He weaves a story about a

man who has planted a vineyard (verses 6-9). Finding no fruit on a fig tree for three years, he orders the gardener to cut it down. The gardener resists, suggesting that the landowner wait one more year for the fig tree to bear fruit. Thanks to God for God's patience with us and with our judgment-oriented society!

In Luke, Jesus refuses judgment theology. Instead, Jesus calls people to turn from violence and exploitation. Paul, facing very different circumstances, appeals to judgment theology in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**. The Corinthian believers have abandoned the many deities of their pagan culture for life in Christ. Paul, knowing the Corinthians still live in a context in which his gospel counts as foolishness, employs judgment theology as a warning. Israel's ancestors may have been delivered from Egypt, Paul reminds them, but not everyone came to possess the land.



What would you want to ask or tell Paul, or would you challenge him, when he said that our Hebrew ancestors suffered "as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did" (verse 6)?

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For those who find in Christ a "new age" and deliverance, what is at stake when we participate in the present age of violence and exploitation? Paul does invoke judgment theology, yet he also claims the empowering grace of God, who always provides a way to endure (10:13). God delivers believers from a hostile culture, empowering them to live in the "new age" of Christ. Once again, we may think of Lent in terms of relinquishing a past — or we may imagine ourselves embracing the new.

**Isaiah 55:1-9** addresses a people facing the transition from old to new. Most interpreters assign Isaiah 55 to the period of Judah's exile. Having been forcibly removed to Babylon, many people have adapted well to this cultural context. The prophet calls them to abandon life in Babylon for a risky journey "back" to Judah. Very few of them have ever seen Judah, and the path is forbidding. What does God have in store for those who will journey on the way?

In chapter 55 the prophet calls the people to risk. The familiar does not truly sustain them, it is not bread for the journey (verse 2). Their current labors do not truly bring satisfaction. Instead God calls on them to leave the familiar and take the risk to the new: "Come to me ... so you may live" (verse 3).

**Psalms 63:1-8** shares this outlook. Whatever the present circumstance, it counts as a "dry and weary land" (verse 1). The psalmist desires something more, satisfaction of the soul. The satisfaction for which the psalmist pines does not happen in a purely intellectual or spiritual sense. Rather, the author longs for a union with God that is fully embodied, sensual and erotic. The language of flesh fainting (verse 1), full and supple lips offering praise (verse 5) or the bed (verse 6) being the best location for meditating about God may well cause a bit of embarrassment. This is especially true for those who would read these words from lofty lecterns in churches where bodies — and especially LGBT bodies — are seen as objects to subject or

overcome. Again, we may wish to include, in our Lenten reflections, an affirmation of the goodness of the body, including its needs for food, affection and life-affirming touch.

This life-affirming sensuality or physicality is also present in food imagery found in each of the lectionary texts for this Sunday. Isaiah 55 celebrates the sensual pleasures of water, milk, honey, wine and bread. In Psalm 63 the soul thirsts, yet those who have been denied full humanity will receive a rich feast (verse 5). First Corinthians 10 recalls the spiritual food Israel received. And Jesus' vineyard parable appeals to our delight in vineyards and their succulent fruit. These texts acknowledge our sensual and earthly needs, celebrating them as means through which God blesses us.

In this Lenten season, we advocate not so much relinquishment as the exploration of the new way. A theology of judgment warns that God lurks around the corner, ready to "get us" when we misstep. We follow Jesus in rejecting such judgment theology. Yet if we remain stuck in the prevailing ways, we miss out on the way God prepares for us.



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What good news did you discover in today's passages, especially for living your faith in a culture of condemnation? How does the good news offer hope and challenge to the church or, specifically, the LGBT community?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of Grace and Mercy,  
in a world that blames and judges those who suffer,  
we long for a different way.  
Help us turn toward you,  
that we might find ways to embody for ourselves and others  
your spirit of compassion and grace.  
In every circumstance of our lives,  
we thirst for your peace that passes understanding.  
Draw near to us now, and fill our longing.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 4th Sunday in Lent, Year C

### A PARTY FOR EVERYONE

God's grace resides not in our moral ability to repent but in God's free embrace of us, whatever our circumstances.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; and Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The way of Jesus calls us to common tables, not to distinctions and boundaries."  
-Kharma Amos



"No wonder the religious leaders, those invested in judgment theology, complain about Jesus' company — Jesus made his home with sinners." -Greg Carey

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### WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**, the story of the Prodigal Son, has been interpreted differently by focusing on one or the other of its primary characters. A focus on the youngest son, the prodigal, leads to

an emphasis on individual repentance and salvation. Attention to the father emphasizes God's compassionate embrace of the returning sinner. Dwelling with the elder brother recalls the first few verses in Luke 15, in which Jesus receives criticism for holding company with sinners. All of these interpretations ground themselves in the dynamics of the story, and all are meaningful. In our conversation, we were particularly drawn to the elder brother, whose resentment toward his younger sibling ends the story.



Now that many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have found a place in many churches, how do we relate to those who are still excluded and living on the margins, "sinners" of our day?

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All three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) depict Jesus' companionship with sinners, but Luke develops this theme with special emphasis. When Jesus creates the fishing miracle in Simon Peter's boat, Simon calls out, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:9). When Jesus dines with Levi the tax collector, his opponents complain about the company Jesus keeps (Luke 5:27-31). When the "sinful woman" crashes a banquet and dries Jesus' feet with her hair, Jesus' host wonders that Jesus would allow such a woman near him (Luke 7:36-50). When Jesus sees Zacchaeus up in the tree, he invites himself to Zacchaeus' home (Luke 19:1-10). Even at the extremity of his own death, Jesus announces salvation to the criminal on a neighboring cross (23:43).



How does a person become categorized as a "sinner"? What is your understanding of "sinner"?

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Social scientists have demonstrated through research what LGBT people know by experience: The word sinner is a social label, a means of excluding some people by marking them as deviant or morally inferior. "Sinners" need not be morally inferior, however. To earn their label all they have to do is be queer in particular ways. Single mothers, homeless people, the mentally ill, the disabled — all carry social stigma, regardless of their piety or moral heroism. In a gospel that brings reconciliation, however, such labels must be done away with (2 Corinthians 5:16-21). The way of Jesus calls us to common tables, not to distinctions and boundaries. In fact, these common tables are not found in the centrist places of acceptability and majority approval. Rather, the common tables around which Jesus calls us are themselves located on or beyond the margins where the "labeled" live.

All "sinner" stories in the gospel of Luke have one thing in common: in none of them does Jesus correct the sinners or call them to change their behavior. Rather, Jesus simply enters company with them. Indeed, in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus describes a sinner who merely pleads for mercy rather than one who repents. No wonder the religious leaders, those invested in a theology of judgment, complain about Jesus' company —

Jesus made his home with sinners (15:1-3).

**Psalm 32** likewise celebrates the salvation of "those whose transgression is forgiven" (verse 1). In reading the psalm, connections with the Parable of the Prodigal Son emerge. God's grace resides not in our moral ability to repent but in God's free embrace of us, whatever our circumstances. This is the pattern we also see in Jesus' ministry.



What does the presence of God evoke from you and others in the LGBT community? Joy, peace, repentance, forgiveness, fear, comfort, hope, courage, solitude, community or a commitment to justice? What do you feel about a God who is present to those often called "sinners"?

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Israel's sacred story recalls enslavement in Egypt and divine deliverance. **Joshua 5:9-12** expresses how Israel's Scriptures never relinquished this humble heritage. Upon their first entry into the land of promise, the people celebrated Passover.

Passover annually recalls not [RAR1]that God elected Israel not because of its moral, political or military excellence, but that Israel lived its election through enslavement and liberation. Every year the people reenact their redemption from "the disgrace of Egypt" (verse 9).

LGBT people who have been disgraced and excluded by religious communities today, who have been blamed for the disintegration of local congregations as well as entire denominational communions, will do well to remember their own history not as a shameful secret to forget. That history is as an integral part of their, and the wider church's, salvation history.



What are moments in the history of the LGBT community that reflect God's abiding and liberating work? How may traditionally marginalized people and communities rehearse their own stories of marginalization and redemption?

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**PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE**





Prodigal God, we give you thanks  
for the wideness of your mercy  
and the extravagance of your welcome.  
Remind us of the ways in which  
our arms can embrace others  
who may feel excluded from the circle of your love.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 5th Sunday in Lent, Year C

### LOVE IN THE FACE OF DEATH

The story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha reminds us that Jesus' dying resulted from his life-empowering living and his boundary-crossing loving.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#); [Psalm 126](#); [Philippians 3:4b-14](#); [John 12:1-8](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha reminds us that Jesus' dying resulted from his life-empowering living and his boundary-crossing loving." Kharma Amos



"Jesus died not as an innocent victim but as a faithful witness to the ways of God, the author of life." Greg Carey

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### WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

This fifth Sunday in Lent leads us more directly into the anticipation of Jesus' passion. John's

unique narration of the anointing of Jesus features the trio of Lazarus, Martha and Mary (**John 12:1-8**). Very recently in John's story, Jesus raised Lazarus from death. Lazarus' liberation created such a stir that the religious authorities begin plotting for Jesus' murder. The Lazarus story also introduced Martha and Mary, whom we recognize from Luke 10:38-41. In both Gospels, Martha "serves." The Greek has it that she performs *diakonia*, or ministry. And in both Gospels, Mary adores Jesus' feet. Yet in John, Mary receives criticism not for adoring Jesus, but for doing it so lavishly.

Some have found in this Bethany family — of Lazarus, Mary and Martha — a way of understanding family that embraces the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Here is a family constructed not by the bonds of marriage or models of convention, but by alternative ties of love. Whether or not Lazarus was, as some suggest, the disciple whom Jesus loved (a suggestion strengthened by the fact that the authorities want to kill Lazarus as well), it is clear that Jesus found in this chosen family a safe haven.

Among this alternative family, Jesus sought and found camaraderie, love, support and a fitting final preparation for the events of his death. That John attributes the outrage of those who would kill Jesus to his raising of beloved Lazarus from the grave has particular resonance with LGBT people whose relationships have been the source of suffering at the hands of those outraged by them. It is also worth noting that Mary understands that Jesus' physical body must be honored and anointed in preparation for his death. It is no accident that her lavish gift is sensual and embodied, nor that it is her story that Jesus says (in Matthew's parallel account in 26:13) will be remembered wherever the good news is told in the entire world.



What are parallels between LGBT families today and Jesus' beloved family in Bethany? How might the similarities enhance our understanding of what happened in the biblical story? How might the biblical story strengthen or challenge our LGBT families today?

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The entire account in John must be grounded in an appreciation for the gravity of the events ahead of them and behind them: their experience (past and future) was grounded in the sacred convergence of life and death. Indeed, when Mary anoints Jesus we encounter the heart of the Lenten journey — a journey of faith and hope in the midst of death.



How do we, who like Mary and her siblings receive life from Jesus, honor his dying? How do the suffering and death of Jesus relate to the life we receive in him?

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Judas' criticism, that Mary should consider charity above worship (John 12:5), poses a false dichotomy. In this moment, we ponder the value of the life we receive in Jesus. Many churches

commit a grave theological error by separating Jesus' death from his life. The story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha reminds us that Jesus' dying resulted from his life-empowering living and his boundary-crossing loving. Jesus died not as an innocent victim but as a faithful witness to the ways of God, the author of life.

**Isaiah 43:16-21** names this God who is the Creator and author of life. The prophet's God makes ways in the sea and extinguishes the forces of death. Chariots and horses, armies and warriors, all are vanquished by the God of life. Desert and wilderness yield to fresh springs of water. This is the God of Jesus, who nurtured life among the dying and the outcast.



In what ways might our Lenten prayers, worship and devotion reflect life springing up in barren places? How may our Lenten practices help us perceive the new thing that God is still doing in the world today — with its own barrenness and injustice?

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**Psalms 126** celebrates this life-restoring God. This psalm stands among the Psalms of Ascents, which pilgrims sang as they climbed Zion, the holy mountain. The psalm also rehearses Israel's surprising God. Like Isaiah the psalm imagines running water in arid regions, forces of life in forbidding circumstances. The restoration of Zion takes even Zion's people by surprise. It seems a dream, evoking childlike laughter and shouting.



How may our preaching name those astonishing places where life is breaking forth among the forces of death? How might we make room in our rituals and liturgy to allow tears to be transformed into shouts of joy?

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In **Philippians 3:4b-14**, Paul weighs the value of life in Christ. He recalls his life before Christ, and he counts it as nothing. The conventional picture of Paul is wrong. Prior to his encounter with Christ, Paul did not live in anxiety, fearful that he could not possibly live according to Israel's covenant. He did not shudder that one next sin might cast him into hell. No. Paul lived with joy and pride: "as to righteousness under the law, [I was] blameless" (verse 6). For this reason, we marvel that Paul finds life in Christ so compelling that he orients his entire life toward its pursuit. Like Mary, Paul has experienced new life. In response, he abandons all other things to know Christ Jesus. And like the story of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, Paul's testimony identifies the heart of the Lenten journey. To know the power of life, Paul must accompany Christ in his suffering and death. Paul's ministry demands that he journey through suffering so as to bring life to others.

This fifth Sunday in Lent is unique in the church year. Next Sunday, on Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday, we dwell with Jesus within the messy matrix of joy and disappointment, hope and

disillusionment, adoration and debasement, life and death. On Easter, we celebrate Christ's resurrection life, the culmination. This particular Sunday holds together both suffering and death, along with hope and resurrection.



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What does our world and you bring — what suffering, what hope — to the fifth Sunday of Lent? As Mary expressed her faith even in the midst of critics and Jesus' impending death, how do you express your faith and hope?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of life and death,  
meet us as we are,  
with whatever hope, despair, or longing fills our hearts.  
Bless our living and our loving;  
Bless our families both given and chosen.  
Bless our embodied rituals of adoration, our sacraments of sensuality.  
Hasten the transformation of our weeping into joy.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 6th Sunday of Lent, Palm/Passion Sunday, Year C

### WHAT'S THE PRICE OF FAITHFULNESS

The familiar story of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem that begins Holy Week is framed by important Hebrew Bible traditions that emphasize the interplay of suffering with the experiences of vindication in lives of faithfulness to God.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Luke 19:28-40 and Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#)

[\(for observing the procession of the palms\)](#)

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philipians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 or Luke 23:1-49](#)

[\(for observing the passion of Jesus\)](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people this moment when Jesus rides headlong into Jerusalem to confront the unjust powers of his day challenge us as well to consider the price any one of us will pay to transform our larger world of gender and sexual injustice." -Christine Smith



"All people who suffer oppression must be in solidarity with each other in our struggles. We have to make sure that our identification with the lynching of Jesus doesn't keep us from connecting with all who suffer or think that we are the only ones who claim the story." -Randall Bailey



"Many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and others marginalized in churches and society know the reality at the center of this crucifixion story. Suffering and rejection accompany faithfulness especially when it expresses alternative identities and practices." -Warren Carter

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29** portrays the scene of a ruler who enters the temple during a time of war. The scene frames Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. As Randall Bailey points out, the verses of this psalm not assigned by today's reading detail the psalmist's distress that is rooted in powerful and destructive struggles with enemies. The nation is at war (Psalm 118:10-12) and there have been some victories (Psalm 118:13-18), but the war is not yet won (Psalm 118:25). In a festal procession that includes waving branches, the ruler enters the temple to thank God for successes and to pray for God's salvation (Psalm 118:19-29). God's vindication is encountered after the distress (verse 9) and imminent defeat (verse 13) experienced in verses 5-14.

Jesus' "anti-triumphal" entry into Jerusalem echoes this entry liturgy just as it evokes — and mocks — the similar rituals that accompanied the entrance of Roman generals, officials and emperors into cities of the empire. Jesus' entry to Jerusalem and the temple occurs in the midst of a struggle with the foreign ruling power, Rome. His entry is accompanied by praise for God. Jesus is subversively hailed by the powerless as a ruler in the line of David who will bring peace. But only Rome-approved local rulers — who were willing to reign as Rome's allies — exercised power. Ascription of royalty to Jesus was illegitimate in the eyes of Rome and its Jerusalem allies. How Jesus exercises his royalty, how he confronts Roman power and how Rome responds will unfold through the week's events.

A second situation frames Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week. **Psalm 31:9-16** paints a picture of misused power. Again the lectionary selection omits verses and references to the psalmist's distress, thereby silencing the injustice and threat that is at the heart of the psalmist's experience. The exact details of the psalmist's situation are vague. The psalmist has powerful opponents who threaten and plot (verses 31:8, 13 and 20). The psalmist feels persecuted (verse 31:15) and is the object of lies (verse 31:18) — perhaps a victim of false legal charges — and offers a defense. The psalmist knows sorrow and physical decline, perhaps from a resultant illness (Psalm 31:10). Social shame, scorn, isolation and rejection follow (Psalm 31:11). Inner turmoil is pervasive.

The psalmist's distress in confronting the powerful is elaborated in terms familiar to every person marginalized because of sexual orientation, foreign birth, ethnicity, social class or any other



factor. Yet also evident is the desperate trust in God as the psalmist seeks God's gracious intervention (21:12-16). The psalmist understands — at least in this psalm — that God's favor is all-inclusive and empowering despite social, political or even legal experience.

Where the reason for the psalmist's suffering is unclear, the reason for Jesus' crucifixion is understood. He stands accused of crime. His ministry has been one of societal challenge. The crowd's identification of him as a ruler not sanctioned by Rome articulates his threat and signifies sedition. Rome and its Jerusalem allies use their power and system of "justice" to eliminate this perceived provincial threat to their status quo.

How do we encounter those who are powerful today — today's royalty? The number of entrants to the presidential race for the 2008 election is increasing, and, as these people jockey for the favor of the crowd, they talk about the middle class and honoring the troops. At the same time, it seems they ignore the existential plight of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals; those dislocated by Katrina; and people with HIV/AIDS who can't afford expensive medications. Many religious leaders, as well, convene to defrock same-gender-loving clergy who are in partnered relationships.



What and who represent the powerful in today's church and society? Where are alternative witnesses to power who are in solidarity with those who are oppressed? Where do we hear God's liberating "Hosanna" being sung?

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This third Hebrew Bible reading, **Isaiah 50:4-9**, focuses on suffering under imperial power. It especially underscores the experience of absorbing destructive power and of the need for sustaining "the weary," those beaten down by oppressive structures. The suffering servant speaks of the physical and verbal abuse absorbed as the response to faithfulness (verses 4-6). The image of giving "his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard" appears elsewhere to signify situations of persecution of Judeans under imperial power (Isaiah 7:20; 2 Samuel 10:4). Here the reference seems to be to the experience of exile under Babylonian power.

The servant, both an individual and a representative of the people with a mission to sustain the weary (50:4), suffers in a context of overwhelming power. As with the psalmist, the servant draws great strength from God's presence. Violence is not met with violence, nor is the servant's predicament seen as God's punishment or lack of favor. God comes to the servant's aid and is not disgraced. The servant is confident that God's purposes will outlast the enemies (Isaiah 50:7-9).

Are we prepared to deal with the physical price of struggle for justice for those who are denied justice by the state and by the religious institutions? Are we kidding ourselves when we think that the struggle won't take its toll on us physically, spiritually and emotionally? What do we do when our experiences do not allow for us to give testimony to the full vindication of God in the struggle?

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What are the ways that God's people who are oppressed cope with the disconnect between the promise of God's liberation and their current painful realities?

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In **Luke 19:28-40**, the presentation of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem emphasizes themes figured not only in today's Hebrew Bible readings but also throughout the gospel. Jesus has been heading to Jerusalem for 10 chapters. The city is his place of destiny, in which he will conflict with the ruling elite, suffer their backlash (literally) and die (see Luke 5:17; 9:31, 51; 13:31-35; 18:31-34). Jesus' God-given mission to challenge the powerful, confront "normal" ways of organizing society and offer an alternative (all of which the gospel calls "salvation" or the kingdom or empire of God) was announced early in the gospel. You read of this mission in relation to his conception and birth (Luke 1:31-33, 47-56; 2:10-14) and at the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 4:16-30, 43). But while the gospel portrays some people as being on board with Jesus' mission, others are offended and resistant (Luke 4:28-30; 9:22). They have very different ideas of what God is or should be doing and what human society should look like. In this passage they attempt to silence the witness to God's acts of transforming power (19:37-40), an effort that Jesus identifies as futile.

The gospel passage recognizes that worship is a political act in that it bears witness to God's liberating purposes in the midst of oppressive power. It also suggests what many LGBT people and others marginalized in churches and society know, that suffering and rejection accompany faithfulness especially when it expresses alternative identities and practices.

Do we also see that our acts of public resistance to oppression are acts of worship and liturgy? Or do we fall into the trap of dichotomous thinking and separate life into sacred and secular? Such thinking prevents us from seeing that marching for our rights and protests of injustice are worshipful acts. Since in Luke's gospel the crowd cries out what the priests ought to be saying, "Blessed is the one," do our own clergy today too often join oppressors and have the laity fill the voids in the struggles?



When have you witnessed or experienced bold acts of resistance or justice that you would also claim as worshipful acts?

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Chapters 22-23 of Luke comprise the gospel's passion narrative. The word "passion" comes from the Latin word meaning suffering. The story catalogues Jesus' suffering as the consequences for being faithful to his identity as God's agent. Jesus embodies a God-given commission that manifests David's rule in the midst of imperial power (Luke 1:32) and transforms societal structures and norms (Luke 4:18-19 and Isaiah 61). Compare these verses with Psalm 72 for an outline of a ruler's responsibilities to provide justice and resources for the poor and needy.

The Jerusalem elite, allies of Rome in exercising power to defend — not change — the status quo, want to kill this messenger, Jesus, with a different social vision (Luke 22:2, 52-54). Various

followers abandon him and the struggle for a different world (22:3-6, 21, 24-27, 31-34, 47-50, 54-62). Jesus is beaten and verbally abused (22:63-71). The Roman governor sides with his Jerusalem allies and crucifies him (23:1-25).

This passion narrative holds within it the rich kernels of the revolutionary struggles of the colonized Jews against the powers of oppression exerted by Rome and their Jewish upper-class collaborators. The hopes of the marginalized for liberation get dashed not only in the lynching of the leader of the revolution but also in the telling of the story. The liberating and revolutionary story has been all too often reduced to an inner religious struggle devoid of its political overtones.



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When do our own struggles for liberation against oppressive policies and doctrines which crush people along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, age and the like get perverted? When have we lost sight of the struggles by fighting each other and letting our stories be diverted into escapist religion highlighting "dreams" and ignoring the risky demands for justice?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Most compassionate and just God,  
give us the courage to march  
into the sites of danger  
and to struggle with the faith and conviction of Jesus.  
Give us hope  
for the vindications of our sacrifices.  
Give us signs  
of your abiding presence of justice and truth.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday), Year C GOD'S RITES ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Passover, the Lord's Supper and foot-washing are all rites recalled in the readings for Maundy Thursday. In what ways do they convey God's liberating action? In what ways do our particular practices and understandings of such rites reinforce 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](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"There must always be a fit between the rituals we practice and the radical nature of God's actions which they call into mind. As Passover, the Lord's Supper and foot-washing are mixed together in these readings, may this voyage from slavery to struggle to imitating slaves not be embraced as a paradigm for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people to move out of and back into the closet." - Randall Bailey



"If church communities are to embody the all-embracing life, justice and liberation of God evidenced in today's readings, the full inclusion of LGBT people, including the affirmation to serve in all areas of the church's life, is necessary." -Warren Carter



"The radical nature of inclusion and service might challenge LGBT people as much as comfort us. Jesus did all he could do in his earthly ministry on behalf of, and for the sake of, 'all.' Now, he calls out to LGBT people to never forget, even in the midst of oppression, to lead lives that embody radical service in the just transformation of all creation." -Christine Smith

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

**Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10), 11-14** exhibits God's "for you" stance toward those who are oppressed. The account of the first Jewish rite of Passover centers on God's commitment to do for the people what they cannot themselves accomplish: God delivers God's people from slavery in Egypt. Various plagues had not loosened the Egyptian hold on them, so God strikes the first-born of Egypt, exhibiting power to free the people. God spares the first-born of the Israelites by "passing over" the households whose doors were marked by the sacrificial blood of a lamb. This violent and death-bringing act indicates the seriousness with which God confronts oppressive structures that inflict damage on people rather than enhance life.



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What questions do you have about Passover? What might be the powerful outcomes of commemorating the first Passover? How do we make sure that our understanding of liberation struggles doesn't get diverted into only religious rituals as a replacement for the acts of struggles?

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As with psalms 31 and 118 assigned for Palm/Passion Sunday, **Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19** gives thanks for God's deliverance from past distress. And as with those psalms, today's psalm omits the nature of the distress. Verses 3-11 detail a situation in which death seems to have been imminent, suggesting that the psalmist had experienced a life-threatening illness (116:3, 8). In this distress, the psalmist cried out for God's saving intervention and experienced it in a new life (116:1-2, 6). Having been delivered, the psalmist declares to God that the vows made to God (presumably during the illness) will be paid as an expression of gratitude. The psalm challenges us to consider what acts of worship and service we will perform in gratitude for God's life-giving actions.



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How do you express your gratitude for God's life-giving acts? To what expressions of love and what acts of liberation might God be calling you and your community?

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Though the reading from **1 Corinthians 11:23-26** assigns only three verses, the whole section from 11:17-34 discusses the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The instructions about its significance in 11:23-26 are given in the context of Paul's attention to the structures and practices of the gathered community. The apostle Paul is not happy because the community celebrates the Lord's Supper in a context of meals, factions and social relationships that reflect and reinforce societal divisions. At the meal, some have plenty to eat and drink while others do not have enough. Paul describes this behavior as "showing contempt" for the church, humiliating the poor

and invalidating the celebration of the Lord's Supper (11:20-22).

In contrast to such social interactions, the instructions about the Lord's Supper highlight the "for you" quality of Jesus' life and death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Like the bread, his body is broken "for you" (verse 24). His death and suffering at the hands of the Judean and Roman elite impact not only Jesus but also us. The passage elaborates this impact in terms of a new covenant or commitment of faithful relationship with God, remembrance or participation in Jesus' life-giving ministry and death and anticipation of Jesus' return to establish God's loving and just purposes in full. His death is in solidarity with all who suffer unjustly and urges an inclusive communal way of life among disciples marked by the same "for you" quality.



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If your congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion or Eucharist, how does the experience reflect power relationships within your community of faith? How is Christ experienced in the celebration? When have you experienced it as especially liberating or, perhaps, even oppressive?

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**John 13:1-17, 31b-35** comprises part of John 13-17, usually called the "farewell discourse." Jesus knows his "hour" to return to God through his death, resurrection and ascension is at hand (13:1-3). In chapters 13-17, Jesus instructs his disciples about faithful living in Rome's world in his absence, assuring and guiding them as a community of disciples (13:31-35). His absence does not mean abandonment. Rather, as a community of his followers, they are charged with a way of life that participates in God's purposes, which are antithetical to elite imperial values of domination and self-benefit. The followers are to manifest God's transforming love for the world, thereby continuing Jesus' mission to it (3:16).

Two dimensions of this scene call for special comment. In washing their feet, Jesus assumes the role of the slave. The slave occupied an ambiguous role in Roman society. Slaves — both male and female — might be born into slavery or have originated in foreign territories seized by Rome. Often slaves were powerless, degraded sexually and of low status. Slavery embraced racial, status and gender dimensions. Yet slaves could also have considerable honor and power often derived from association with a powerful master. Though having few rights and at the disposal of the powerful, a slave was nevertheless crucial to the economy and social functioning of the Roman Empire. The slave was both subjected to and an agent of Roman domination.

The passage assumes this identity without critique but employs it to model God's purposes. The central task of the slave was to seek the good of the other. Jesus assumes the role of the powerless and silenced to demonstrate to disciples that the struggle for liberation embraces all groups, including those without status and power. His act manifests God's liberating love that seeks the good of the other. Having Jesus wash their feet signified that the disciples were participants in both receiving this radical love from Jesus (13:8) and in Jesus' role of manifesting it to others (13:12-17). Manifesting God's love for all creation, including one another, as well as the rejecting world (3:16), constituted the very identity of the community of disciples. Clearly, as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, among others, know, the church has not always

faithfully embraced Jesus' identity and mission of living God's love for others. Yet Jesus' words continue to call us to this way of life in supportive communities that exist "for others."



What do you think about gospel presentations of Jesus as embracing the horrors of the oppressive society as slavery? Do you see the presentation of Jesus as a foot-washing slave as an acceptance of slavery or as a critique of slavery? How do you personally connect with these questions?

John's narrative also includes some surprisingly homoerotic elements. Jesus takes off his "outer robe" (John 13:4) and, clothed in a towel, touches the feet of the disciples as he washes and dries them (13:5). Peter refuses to have Jesus wash his feet but asks Jesus to bathe him (13:6-10). Subsequently Jesus distributes bread by hand to Judas (13:25-26). The scene demonstrates some of the more intimate and tactile forms of interaction among the group of Jesus and his disciples in their commitments to each other.



What is your comfort or discomfort with this sensual reading of the passage? What comfort and challenge does it bring to LGBT people of faith and to the broader community of faith?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Help us, O God,  
to be prepared  
for the liberation you have in store for us.  
Help us to have the courage to not only engage in it,  
but help us also not to create rituals  
which miss the transformative power  
of what you have done and are doing in the world.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Good Friday, Year C

### WHERE'S THE GOOD IN GOOD FRIDAY?

To follow Jesus is to follow one who experienced the ultimate act of marginalization from society. Jesus met death on a cross at the hands of the ruling elite because he challenged the society's status quo. Yet today's readings reframe this event as the New Testament writers, using Hebrew Bible traditions, defiantly refuse to see it as the victory of hate and exclusion, but as integral to God's good and life-giving purposes.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 52:13- 53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"It is time for our world to recognize that the violence done to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lives is a modern-day crucifixion." -Christine Smith



"This crucifixion narrative graphically reminds those committed to a society of just inclusion for all groups marginalized by sexual orientation, race, origin or any other factor that the empire always strikes back at those who challenge it." - Warren Carter



"Don't forget that our Godly fighting for the rights of LGBT, non-white, economically impoverished, non-Christian, non-U.S. citizens will likely bring us to being threatened and possibly our lives taken from us. The call of discipleship is for us to keep on the path toward justice." -Randall Bailey

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

While Jesus clearly suffers as he undergoes death by crucifixion, John's two-chapter narrative found in **John 18:1-19:42** does not emphasize his suffering. John says only briefly, "Pilate ... had him flogged" (19:1), but does not tell us how many lashes or dwell on the pain of each lash. Jesus' crucifixion is briefly named (19:18, 30), but the description centers not on his pain or suffering but on the inscription that the Roman governor of Judea, Pilate, wants on the cross, on dividing Jesus' clothing, on the presence of the women and on Jesus' final drink (John 19:19-30). Instead of emphasizing Jesus' suffering, John's narrative emphasizes Jesus' control of the events.

Jesus' arrest, carried out by Roman soldiers and police from the temple leadership (John 18:3), does not take Jesus by surprise. Not only does Jesus twice identify himself to the arresting party (18:4 and 8), he also uses his arrest to reveal the power and presence of God. Twice he identifies himself by declaring the divine name "I am" (18:5 and 8). His arresters step back and fall to the ground, a response appropriate to being in the presence of the Holy (18:6). Jesus rebukes Simon Peter for using his sword to resist the arresting party (18:10-11) and challenges the high priest to investigate the teaching he has openly spoken in the temple and in synagogues and to demonstrate that he has spoken in error (18:19-23). When Pilate threatens him by reminding him of his power to have Jesus crucified, Jesus informs Pilate, "You have no power over me unless it has been given you from above" (John 19:11). That is, consistent with the rest of John's gospel, Jesus gives himself willingly to die for others (John 10:15-18).

Jesus' death at the hands of the alliance of Judean and Roman rulers reveals several important things about this Roman-dominated imperial world. It reveals the extent to which the powerful will go to defend their social, political, economic and religious interests. This alliance between Rome and the Judean priestly rulers in Jerusalem was typical in the Roman Empire whereby Rome exercised control by forming alliances with local ruling elites. They ruled so as to benefit themselves at the expense of the rest. Jesus had challenged their way of doing societal business. In his miraculous actions of healing and feeding people, he began to reverse the damage that the imperial system had caused to many people. Noting how popular Jesus and his teaching and life-giving actions were, they decided that it was better for Jesus to die than to have Rome come and punish them militarily for losing control of this part of the empire (11:45-53). The narrative reveals the strength of self-interested power and intolerance for any threat to it or deviation from it. This narrative reminds those committed today to a society of just inclusion for all groups marginalized by sexual orientation, race, origin or any other factor that the empire always strikes back at those who challenge it.

Yet the gospel does not end at chapter 19 with Jesus dead and buried by the brave Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. His enemies do not have the final word. Chapter 20 waits with its narrative of new life and witness to God's more powerful, merciful, just, inclusive and life-giving purposes.



In what ways do the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and people of faith

challenge traditional patterns in our culture? What are some of the ways the "empires" of narrow gender constructions and heterosexist sexuality strike back at LGBT people when our lives become too threatening?

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The Hebrews readings from 4:14-16, 5:7-9 or 10:16-25 reflect on aspects of the crucifixion story. **Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9** emphasizes Jesus' suffering and obedience to God's will as the basis for his providing us with empowering mercy and grace in our suffering. **Hebrews 10:16-25** highlights both forgiveness and renewal of hearts and minds in commitment to doing God's will. It goes on to exhort perseverance, not wavering in hope, provoking one another to love and good deeds, meeting together to strengthen relationships and encouraging one another in faithful living. These are crucial practices for the survival of a small and alternative group in a hostile social context.

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In what ways have you witnessed the LGBT community persevering and meeting together to strengthen each other in the midst of oppression and marginalization?

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The readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, **Isaiah 52:13- 53:12** and **Psalms 22**, employ a spirituality of lament that recurs throughout the psalms and prophetic writings. This spirituality involves three parties: the one who suffers, the enemies and God. A person suffers in some way while being faithful to God's purposes. The suffering is not usually described in great detail but can include illness; physical, emotional and spiritual distress (Psalm 22:1-2); social isolation; opposition (22:6-8, 12-18); and danger from imperial powers. The suffering is usually caused by some "enemies" (22:6, 16). Again the enemies are often not identified, though their fundamental opposition to the faithful person and to God's will is clear. In these circumstances, the suffering righteous absorb the suffering and call out to God for vindication (22:19-22a). Often God seems slow to respond, but eventually vindicates the sufferer who praises God for intervening mercifully, faithfully, powerfully (22:22-31). This paradigm of suffering graphically informs the narratives of Jesus' death.

In **Isaiah 52-53**, the "servant" undergoes great suffering that causes physical harm and impacts his appearance, probably at the hands of Babylonian imperial power (52:14). The servant was despised and socially ostracized (Isaiah 53:3). Yet the passage recognizes that servant does not suffer alone (as in Psalm 22), nor does he suffer ahead of others who will suffer later on (as for example Jeremiah does in Jeremiah 16:1-4). Rather, the servant suffers instead of others: "He has borne our infirmities and carries our diseases." Some mistakenly think he was punished by God for his own sins (Isaiah 53:4b) but they come to recognize that he suffers on their behalf: "for our transgressions ... for our iniquities" (53:5a). They also recognize that his suffering has had great benefit for them: "made us whole ... we are healed" (53:5b). Perhaps this refers to their return from exile in Babylon. The passage recognizes that God has worked through the servant's suffering to bring wholeness and healing in others.

This spirituality of lament does not glorify suffering nor does it glibly affirm that suffering is "good for us." It does not suggest that we should happily and passively endure suffering (nor any

other cliché). But it does recognize that suffering — both individual and societal — is not beyond God's purview, plays an important role in human experience in relationship with God and can be instrumental in human redemption. These passages name situations of oppression, honestly detail the struggles in relationship with God and in human communities and celebrate God's life-giving interventions. Early Christians understood Jesus' death in part in these terms.



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What are some of the concrete ways that LGBT people suffer in a heterosexist world? Where do you see LGBT people serving as the agents of redemption within the Christian Church and the larger society of which we are a part?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



O Holy One,  
we ask you to be with all your people  
who resist modern day crucifixions  
of hatred and violence in your world.  
We ask you to be with the LGBT community in particular  
as it seeks to embody a new kind of humanness  
in a world of narrow gender constructions and sexualities.  
Let the lives of our LGBT sisters and brothers  
be bold in the face of persecution,  
and faithful to your grace and mercy,  
in the midst of a world of relentless "Good Fridays."  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Easter Day, Year C

### WITNESSES TO NEW LIFE

What does the new life of resurrection look like? Who gets to bear witness to new life and victory over death-bringing powers? Today's readings identify important aspects of resurrection life and involve surprising people.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 10:34-43](#) or [Isaiah 65:17-25](#); [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#); [1 Corinthians 15:19-26](#) or [Acts 10:34-43](#); [John 20:1-18](#) or [Luke 24:1-12](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The forces of hate so often seem to win. Today's celebration of resurrection life vividly demonstrates God's 'No!' to hatred, exclusion, violence and self-promoting power." -Warren Carter



"The resurrection of Jesus shows us that after the forces fighting against justice do all they can to stop us from protecting all oppressed people, we 'be anyhow.'" - Randall Bailey



"Not even family rejections or a death on a rural Wyoming fence (as that of Matthew Shepard) can keep LGBT people from proclaiming the new life of resurrection with their loving or their very lives." -Christine Smith

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

**Acts 10:34-43** emphasizes one dimension of the new life of resurrection: the inclusion of all people in God's purposes. This reading is part of a crucial section of Acts in which the mission of the early church spreads beyond Judean and Samaritan to the non-Jew Gentiles. Peter bears witness to the Gentile Cornelius and his household that God shows no partiality but extends grace and life to all people. This declaration is radical news. All are included: Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. Today, it includes both lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and straight people.

Peter rehearses the details of Jesus' ministry to Israel, "doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). Jesus was crucified but raised by God and appeared to various witnesses. He commissioned the disciples to continue to bear witness to him as God's commissioned agent in whom is experienced the forgiveness of sins. While Peter bears witness, another demonstration of the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's purposes occurs. The Holy Spirit falls upon them, and they bear witness to their reception of God's gift by speaking in tongues (Acts 10:44).

**Isaiah 65:17-25** frames the new life of resurrection in the context of God's larger purposes for a new creation that includes both Israel and the nations. In this new creation, there will be full and satisfying lives (Isaiah 65:20), security (65:21-22), God's blessing and presence (65:23-24). In this paradise that exhibits God's abundant life, the right relationships among all of God's creation are evidenced by the lion and lamb eating together (65:25-26). God's purposes enliven and transform all creation.



What special role might LGBT people play in God's purposes of transforming all creation?

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In **Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24**, the psalmist invites members of a community to join in bearing witness to God's powerful steadfast or loyal love. The omitted part of the psalm describes the "distress" or circumstances in which God's deliverance has been experienced. It seems that the situation of "hate" (Psalm 118:7) involves a context of military action from the nations (118:10). While the fighting has been desperate (118:13), there has been some victory (118:15) though the war is not yet finished (118:25). The deliverance is "the Lord's doing" and it is "marvelous" (118:23). The psalmist and the community rejoice in this salvation and bear witness to God's



saving power with each other gathered for worship.



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What might it require for straight members of today's churches to participate in the deliverance of the LGBT community? What kind of power would have to be relinquished by the straight community in order to embody God's steadfast and loyal love for LGBT people?

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In **1 Corinthians 15:19-26**, Paul bears witness to the Corinthian believers that God has raised Jesus from the dead. He begins by recalling the more than 500 believers — including himself — who have encountered the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3-11). It seems that some in the Corinthian church had trouble believing that Jesus' resurrection involved his body and that God's purposes are encountered in an embodied, a somatic existence. Jesus' resurrection matters, says Paul, not only because it shows that God brought him back to life but because it determines the bodily resurrection of believers as part of the yet-to-be accomplished purposes of God (15:12-28). He emphasizes that God's life-giving action has overcome death but Jesus' resurrection is not the final act in God's plans.

Paul describes Christ's resurrection as the "first-fruits" (1 Corinthians 15:20). He borrows this image from the Hebrew Scripture where it signifies the first part of the harvest. The first-parts of the harvest or the new animals in the herd were offered in thanksgiving to God as recognition that the land and its yield belonged to God (Exodus 34:26; Deuteronomy 26:1-11). It was also offered as an act of faith, in anticipation of the rest of the harvest. Paul invites the Corinthians to think about Jesus' resurrection as the anticipation and guarantee of their future resurrection and God's victory over death. He outlines an order of events in verse 23: Christ's resurrection, then "at his coming" (2,000 years later and counting!) our resurrection, and the establishment of God's good and life-giving purposes for all creation. Paul emphasizes that God's will for planet Earth has not yet been completed. All death-bringing powers — hatred, exclusion, destruction, marginalization on whatever basis — have not yet succumbed to God's life. Paul's resurrection "good news" challenges and empowers us, like the Corinthians, to live as participants in this process.

Paul goes on to explain in 1 Corinthians 15: 35-58 that this resurrection will be embodied in a new way. It will be somatic, requiring a transformation to a new body appropriate to God's new creation under the control of the Spirit (a "spiritual body," 15:40-55). Paul's argument shows how important somatic life is. He reminds the Corinthian believers, as he reminds us, that we encounter the world and God's purposes in the present through our bodies. God's purposes are enfolded in relationships and acts of service. Resurrection life is evident in these interactions.



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How do the bodies of LGBT people of faith express the resurrection hope? What kind of "new bodies" will our religious communities need to



become if LGBT liberation and resurrection is to become a reality?

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Both the gospel readings, **John 20:1-18** and **Luke 24:1-12**, begin with the empty tomb and center on bearing witness to God's life-giving power at work in raising Jesus. The Roman Empire has done its worst in putting Jesus to death but it has not been able to resist God's power in keeping him dead. In John 20:1-10, neither Mary nor Peter nor the "other disciple" expect life to triumph over death (20:9). Mary mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener until he speaks her name and reveals himself to her. She then bears witness to the disciples. That is, a woman, hardly the most powerful or central person in the gospel's world, becomes the first proclaimer of the resurrection gospel. Resurrection life gives this low-status person a central role.

In Luke's scene, a group of five or more women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' dead body. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and "the other women" hear the proclamation of the angels (Luke 24:4-5). They remember Jesus' words and this unlikely group of preachers bears witness to the disciples. Resurrection life is inclusive, socially transformative and no respecter of people. The unbelieving male disciples have not yet learned this (24:11), nor often, it seems, has the church. Could it be that those who are not only most marginalized, but even most disdained, will be the very ones to proclaim the truths of resurrection in a world so filled with death and violence?



From whom have you and the broader church experienced a vital witness to the Easter resurrection hope? When has that witness come from those on the margins of society? In what ways do LGBT people witness to the resurrection hope?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Great Resurrecting God,  
may we see in the real lives  
of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people  
the truth of your resurrection power and possibility.  
May we roll back every stone  
that continues to entomb any part of your creation.  
May we invite you to re-create each one of us  
until resurrection and liberation prevail for all.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C

### BEING LOVED AND BEING OUT

God's love for us will not let us go. In fact, God is always coming and returning to us, particularly those who bear scars like Jesus does. Out of this hope, if not deep assurance, and despite our fear, we are encouraged to be out and proclaim our faith and experiences.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 5:27-32](#); [Psalm 118:14-29](#) or [Psalm 150](#); [Revelation 1:4-8](#);  
[John 20:19-31](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"What strikes me first is that the followers of Jesus right after Easter are foremost afraid; afraid that they'll be next, afraid of going outside, afraid of being able to survive in the everyday." -Angela Bauer-Levesque



"The fact that we continue to exist — as black people, as gay people, as HIV-positive people — is every bit as miraculous as the resurrection itself. As Audre Lorde reminds us in 'A Litany for Survival,' 'we were never meant to survive.'" - Alma Crawford



"There is something in these passages that clearly helps lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people not to hide our experience of and call from God, despite what 'they' say in the church." -Tat-Siong Benny Liew

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

All the passages for this week converge around our responsibility and ability to proclaim our faith in God because of the trust in and hope of not only the resurrection of Christ, but also the second coming of Jesus Christ. Both **Psalm 118:14-29** and **Psalm 150** reflect people who have an undeniable experience of God's faithfulness. **John 20:19-31** and **Acts 5:27-32** both emphasize Christ as having resurrected, while **Revelation 1:4-8** points to a Christ who will come again. **John 20:19-31** and **Acts 5:27-32** also emphasize the call to proclaim the risen Christ.



What are all the possible meanings of Easter to LGBT people?

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The traumatic experiences of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion have left his followers paralyzed by fear. They lock themselves in, and are literally afraid to be "out." Yet we find in **John 20:19-31** a loving and patient Jesus who does not only reveal himself to his followers once, but also returns a second time. During this second time, the risen Jesus engages Thomas who has had to give up "faith" to learn to see with his own eyes. The good news of Easter is that Jesus is always coming to us, returning for us. This he will do not once, but again and again. This is not only a promise for the future, but also a reality of the present. Jesus comes repeatedly to give us peace and the Holy Spirit, so that, as the psalmist says in **Psalm 118:17**, we shall live and recount the deeds of God.

The risen Christ comes to us, but comes — according to **John 20:20, 25-27** — also with scars in his hands and in his side. Jesus' scars can be read as a testimony to his solidarity with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who have also borne scars, both metaphorical and physical, of rejection and oppression. As **Psalm 118:14-21** reminds us, God alone opens (and closes) the gates of righteousness. And **Revelation 1:5-6** tells us, there is one "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood." No matter what caused or how we come to understand our identities as LGBT or straight people, God through Jesus Christ has made us a kin-dom of priests for service and ministry. Psalm 118:22-23 proclaims the liberating acts of God that are in fact "marvelous in our eyes." These verses proclaim that God will actually do more than open the gates for LGBT people, but God will vindicate the pain of our rejection. We who have been labeled dead, destructive, useless or worthless are revealed and restored by God's intervention as

worthy, important, constructive, even indispensable.

From a Christian perspective, what God has done for Jesus, God has also done for us in Jesus. We continue to live when we were supposed to die, and we continue to gather when we were supposed to be dispersed and sent away. Despite people's rejection — even making us the very definition of sin in God's name — God has accepted us, and will vindicate us. In the meantime, however, we are also called to a task and a responsibility.



What are LGBT people called to do in light of and because of Easter?

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**John 20:19-23** is clear that Jesus returns to his followers not only to bring them peace, but also to send them out in the company of the Holy Spirit. In **Acts 5:27-32**, Christ's call to proclaim meets with prohibitions from human religious authorities. LGBT people called to proclamation and ministry are too familiar with this kind of "strict orders" to not teach in Jesus' name (Acts 5:28). We know, however, that many, like the early followers of Jesus in Acts, have not stopped doing so. Many have stood before councils and challenged those who try to silence their faith and call. Others have found alternative pulpits in alternative congregations.



What are the ways LGBT people of faith receive "strict orders not to teach"? In what ways do these passages offer strength or challenge LGBT people and those who support them?

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The trust and hope that Easter gives us should not be read to dehumanize or to judge fear as an illness, nor should we downplay tangible and material forms of protection to go along with trust and hope. The heroic acts of Peter and the apostles to stand before the council and the high priest are not the only ways to be faithful resisters in Christ. There is more than one way to be "out," just as there is more than one form of articulation. The disjunction between Jesus' conferring of authority (John 20:23) and the high priest's fallible authority in God's name (Acts 5:27-28) reminds us to be vigilant about the fine line that distinguishes religious/spiritual authority and abuse.

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**PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE**



Read silently or aloud Audre Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival."  
Let the reading lead you into a time of prayer or meditation.

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children's mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours:

For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon  
this illusion of some safety to be found  
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain  
when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning  
when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of ingestion  
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again  
when we are loved we are afraid  
love will vanish  
when we are alone we are afraid  
love will never return  
and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent

we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 3rd Sunday of Easter, Year C

### GOD IS AT WORK, SO WE MUST WORK

God is always at work behind the scenes to change lives, but human beings also have a role to play if change is to happen. The gospel of Easter teaches us that God and humanity can work together to bring about changes leading to acceptance and community.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 9:1-6 \(7-20\)](#); [Psalm 30](#); [Revelation 5:11-14](#); [John 21:1-19](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Psalm 30 reminds me of the depths of humiliation and violence from which I have been raised — the self-hate and self-mutilation that society and church taught me. By God's passion and compassion, however, I experience joy and am authorized not to be silent." -Alma Crawford



"The story in Acts shows God continuously working to open people's eyes, including those who, like Saul, are intent on excluding and persecuting others." - Tat-Siong Benny Liew



"In the Revelation passage, 'the cloud of witnesses' means a lot to me. Those who have come before make my and our agency possible, directly or indirectly. I am thinking of the recent history of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, for example, since Stonewall, which allows for my agency differently." - Angela Bauer-Levesque

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Easter is not only about the resurrection of Jesus and the transformation of the followers from hiding out to coming out (**John 21:1-19**). Easter is also about how God continues to work with people to help those who cannot accept God's freedom to bless and include "others" to change and to see differently (**Acts 9:1-20**).



How do people change from being opponents to being supporters of LGBT people? What leads to such a transformation?

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**Revelation 5:11-14** presents us with a kind of a peek-hole into heaven enabling us to see that more is going on than what we see on earth. God's mysterious work may not be immediately apparent, but we can trust that things are happening in a realm and in a way that will yet manifest.

In **Acts 9:1-9**, we see the post-Easter Jesus working mysteriously. Acts 9:7 makes clear that Saul's companions cannot see that God is at work. Nor could Saul, an opponent of Jesus and Jesus' followers, truly see. Saul is persecuting followers of Jesus' Way, perhaps because he has trouble accepting God's new revelation in Jesus (see Acts 7 about Saul's approval of stoning Stephen), or perhaps he has difficulty accepting non-Jews, the Gentiles, who started to be a part of Jesus' movement (see Acts 8 and Acts 10). Perhaps Saul is doing this simply because Jesus' followers are different, and Saul sees their difference as a threat to his own identity. We must be careful here not to read an anti-Jewish message into the text. The experience of Saul suggests that God is continuously, mysteriously and miraculously removing the scales from eyes that cannot see, including eyes of those who are not willing to see or accept LGBT people as recipients of God's grace and love.



To what might LGBT people of faith and their friends be called to do to assist people in changing their "view" and in opening eyes of faith in a new way?

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This mysterious and miraculous work of God does require human work. Saul has to engage in dialogue with the light and the voice that block him on the road. He has to go through a time of confusion, fasting and praying. More than that, he has to allow Ananias — one of those whom he has tried to reject and bring bound to Jerusalem — to physically touch him (Acts 9:17).

Human cooperation with divine movements for change involves not only people who need to change, but also those who are oppressed. If people are to change how they see LGBT people, LGBT people will have to be willing to engage and help them when the appropriate moments

arrive. It is understandable why Ananias would be reluctant to go to a known oppressor or persecutor's place, particularly given the name of the street ("Straight," Acts 9:11)! And just as Saul has to be willing to be touched by Ananias, Ananias has to be willing to engage and physically touch Saul.

We find a similar message in **John 21:1-19**. The disciples have to go out and do the hard work of fishing, even though Jesus gives them not only a helpful suggestion on where to cast their net. Jesus also ends up providing and preparing for them a fish feast or barbecue. God's mysterious work continues among not only those who need a new vision, but also among those who have received new sight and new life from God.

God has, as **Psalm 30** proclaims, "drawn us [LGBT people] up," "turned [our] mourning into dancing" and "taken off [our] sackcloth and clothed us with joy" (verse 11). Out of the pit of condemnation and self-doubt and self-hate, God has authorized LGBT to "praise ... and not be silent" (verse 12). We must remember, however, that praise and worship are a form of partnership with God, and must lead to further partnership in service and ministry to others.

As Jesus announces in John 5:17, he must work because God is still working. Just as God will send Saul on to become a preacher of the gospel of Jesus after giving Saul a new vision, the risen Christ will rehabilitate Simon Peter from a past of denial to a future of active ministry. We are told, in addition, that both Saul and Peter will be facing a future of risks and dangers.



What might LGBT people have to watch out for in reading and preaching these passages?

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We have already mentioned the danger of making the Jewish people the scapegoats in our reading. We may also be clear what kind of change or transformation we are talking about in today's passages. Change can be an alarming word for LGBT people. We have all heard the talk about how God can help LGBT people change to a "normal," heterosexist orientation. We must emphasize that Saul's real change in **Acts 9:1-20** is from rejecting and persecuting to accepting others. Similarly, the disciples' work in **John 21:1-11** results not only in an over-abundant catch, but in fishing net not torn. In other words, their work to create change always moves toward community. In the same way, Peter is commissioned to feed and nourish, not to humiliate and violate others (John 21:15-17). Finally, given (1) Revelation 5:11-14's emphasis on the enthronement of the slaughtered lamb; (2) John 21:18-19's reference to Peter's martyrdom; and (3) Acts 9:15-16's allusion to Paul's suffering, we need to balance our acknowledgment of debt to those who sacrificed to make things better for us and our temptation to glorify suffering. The promise of joy in the morning in Psalm 30:5 is precious, but its practical use may be contingent on the length of the night.

We must think further about how a call to sacrifice may harm the disadvantaged, while the same call may appear proper and necessary to one of privilege. After all, we must recognize that not all LGBT people belong to the same class or race. Genuine community building requires understanding, not understating, differences.

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Read silently or aloud Pat Parker's poem "legacy."  
Let the reading lead you into a time of prayer or meditation.

It is from this past that I come  
surrounded by sisters in blood  
and in spirit  
it is this past  
that I bequeath  
a history of work and struggle.

Each generation improves the world  
for the next.  
My grandparents willed me strength.  
My parents willed me pride.  
I will to you rage.  
I give you a world incomplete  
a world  
where  
women still  
are property and chattel  
where  
color still  
shuts doors  
where  
sexual choice still  
threatens  
but I give you  
a legacy  
of doers  
of people who take risks  
to chisel the crack wider.

Take the strength that you may  
wage a long battle.  
Take the pride that you can  
never stand small.  
Take the rage that you can  
never settle for less.

These be the things I pass  
to you my daughter  
if this is the result of perversion  
let the world stand screaming.  
You will mute their voices  
with your life.

From *Jonestown & Other Madness: Poetry* by Pat Parker published by  
Firebrand Books, 1985.  
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## 4th Sunday of Easter, Year C

### LIFE — IN SPITE OF AND IN LIGHT OF — DEATH

Death is real, but the reality of death does not overshadow God's gift and sustenance of life.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 9:36-43](#); [Psalm 23](#); [Revelation 7:9-17](#); [John 10:22-30](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

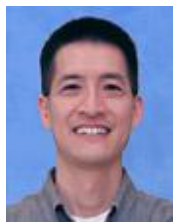
A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"I want to ask what the life-giving traditions are for LGBT people? As Psalm 23 puts it, what protects, comforts, sustains or nurtures us?" -Angela Bauer-Levesque



"Those Revelation verses are so real to those of us with more friends and family in heaven than on earth – so true of those of us living in HIV/AIDS epicenters. They also ring true to persons living in war, famine and the wilderness of America's cities." -Alma Crawford



"We need to focus on our ability to live 'abundantly' here and now despite the threat of death." -Tat-Siong Benny Liew

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Acts 9:36-43**, we find a Christ-following community that is made up of a good number of widows. In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, widows were — in a way analogous to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of today — marginal people outside of the traditional male-headed households. Worse, their livelihood was often at risk unless they had children who could provide for them. In Joppa, a group of widows obviously formed and found an alternative family in the Christ-following community. We do not really know if Tabitha or Dorcas is a widow, though she undoubtedly is dearly loved by the widows. We also do not know if Tabitha or Dorcas is a Jewish woman who was given a Greek name, or a Gentile woman given a Hebrew or Aramaic name. In any case, the fact that this woman of ambiguous identity has fallen ill and died provides an occasion not only for a miracle of life in Acts, but also for reflection of several issues that are of particular relevance to LGBT people.



What are the ways LGBT people experience loss and face the reality of death?

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We need to confess that it is in many ways inappropriate to "use" a person's death as an occasion for anything. This is particularly true within LGBT communities who live especially though not exclusively in the threat — and with the experience — of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Many in our communities have wept and witnessed our loved ones trying but failing to draw that precious last breath. We must also acknowledge the outrage that some of these "raising-of-the-dead" passages provoke among those who have prayed over deathbeds, only to see breathing stop and heartbeat cease. We must not overlook or minimize the painful and inevitable reality of death. Tabitha/Dorcas did die.

We must guard against the temptation to read passages like **Acts 9:36-43** as a miracle of life without death. Otherwise, one may become so focused on one's hope for a miraculous healing that one ends up silencing or abandoning the dying person. The Christ-following community in Joppa does not do that. They understand the miracle of life that extends beyond death. Not only do they take care of Tabitha's/Dorcas' body, but they also go out, share the news of her death with Peter, and even ask Peter to come to them to provide support and help. Just as Acts 9:39 tells us that the widows weep and try to remember Tabitha/Dorcas through the garments she has made and left behind, **Revelation 7:16-17** acknowledges the reality of not only hunger and thirst, but also the scorching heat and fallen tears. Deaths and losses must be grieved rather than denied or explained away, even or especially by reference to the promise of resurrection.

In addition to the tangible presence of others, we may also need a vision, perhaps fantasy, to face and acknowledge the pain and loss of death. Scholars have suggested that apocalyptic literature like Revelation is a form of fantastical or fantasy literature. A passage like **Revelation 7:9-17**,



with the white robes and palm branches, should remind LGBT people of how dressing up, drama, creation, invention and imagination have helped many of us through painful moments of loss and death. There is no need to sanitize death, and there is no shame in admitting our need to grieve and cope with loss. God's promise in **Psalm 23** is not only to "restore" and "comfort" us, but also to do so through the "darkest valley" and "in the presence of enemies."

At the same time, the promise of resurrection and eternal life does give us strength and promise to deal with the death and loss of our loved ones. The scenario described in **Revelation 7:9-17**, with its multitude "robed in white," is more than a fantasy and a promise of the future. We know — for example, not only in cultures of many tribes and languages but perhaps also in our personal experience — people or ancestors whose presence continues in an active and abiding way despite their passing. From the way the widows in Joppa respond to Tabitha's/Dorcas' death, one may safely assume that even if she was not raised, she would still live on in the life and memory of her community.



How do you understand life beyond death? In what ways does your faith guide you to care for the dying and face your own death?

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We have mentioned earlier Tabitha's/Dorcas' ambiguous identity in socio-economic and/or ethnic terms. Perhaps she is with her people, so to speak; perhaps she is a boundary-crosser who sees the needs of the widows, identifies with them, and joins them in solidarity and in support of their needs. What is unambiguous about her is that she is a community builder. She has been a part of these widows' lives, making tunics and other kinds of clothing. She, Acts 9:36 tells us, "was devoted to good works and acts of charity." Perhaps her garment making is her good work of charity, her way of meeting the material needs of the widows. Given the way the widows in Joppa remember the person of Tabitha/Dorcas through her works of making clothes, one may perhaps make a link between the white-robed persons in heaven in Revelation 7:9-17 and the clothing that Tabitha/Dorcas makes in Acts 9:39.

Whether we are LGBT or straight, whether we are working to meet the needs inside our community or in solidarity with marginalized people, it is in giving life to others — in paying attention to and providing for the real needs of vulnerable people — that our own lives live on. Jesus, in response to the request that he make known his identity in John 10:22-30, pronounces that his works have been testifying to his identity and his credibility. Similarly, our works — particularly when we give life to those who are assumed to be dead, both within and without our community — will not only constitute the real story of our lives, but also determine if the story of our lives will continue beyond our death.



How may we live in light of death?

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In assuring life beyond death, our passages today, particularly John 10:28-29; Acts 9:36-43 and Revelation 7:9-17, actually affirm the inevitability — if not the finality — of death. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has helped many LGBT people face this inevitability. As John's Jesus is always aware of his coming "time" or "hour" of crucifixion (see John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27), many LGBT people have learned to live life in a way that is fully present instead of living preoccupied solely with providing for the future. This has allowed many to defy the conventions of the dominant society, and live according to a different drumbeat. By being fully present, we are also freed and empowered to trust in and live out the promises of Psalm 23, so we may invest in the good works of giving life by being in solidarity with and in support of the needy. If we do, the promise is that others will continue to experience "goodness" and "mercy," even long after our passing. (Psalm 23:6).

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Read silently or aloud David Whyte's poem "Self-Portrait."  
Let the reading lead you into a time of prayer or meditation.

It doesn't interest me if there is one God  
or many gods.  
I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned.  
If you can know despair or see it in others,  
I want to know  
if you are prepared to live in the world  
with its harsh need  
to change you. If you can look back  
with firm eyes  
saying this is where I stand. I want to know  
if you know  
how to melt into that fierce heat of living  
falling toward  
the center of your longing. I want to know  
if you are willing  
to live, day by day, with the consequence of  
love and the bitter  
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even  
the gods speak of God.

David Whyte, from *Fire in the Earth* [www.davidwhyte.com](http://www.davidwhyte.com). © copyright  
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## 5th Sunday of Easter, Year C

### EASTER IS COMMUNITY

God's gift of new life in Easter announces not only God's acceptance of us, but also our acceptance of one another in spite of our differences.

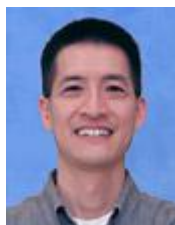
This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 11:1-18](#); [Psalm 148](#); [Revelation 21:1-6](#); [John 13:31-35](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"What makes things difficult for those who desire and work for change is that change often requires a commitment for the long haul." -Tat-Siong Benny Liew



"The reiteration and reframing of the love command in John 13 is a message that I like to preach. As a preacher the challenge I face is that many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have experienced not being loved, and hence also the pain often evoked by such awareness." -Angela Bauer-Levesque



"The notion of the new Jerusalem as a bride shows the erotic, romantic and passionate dimension of God's love for us, even though we have often been taught that sexual feeling is totally anathematized by our texts and traditions." - Alma Crawford

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The passages for this Sunday suggest that Easter is about creating community. In contrast to a conservative rapture theology where the righteous fly up to heaven, **Revelation 21:1-6** depicts the new Jerusalem coming down to earth from heaven. This direction affirms not only our world, but also us as human beings. This is particularly powerful since the passage further announces that God dwells among mortals. Given the following declaration against death and the pronouncement that God makes all things new, one may say that the new life God gives in Easter is geared toward a new community on earth. This new community concerns more than God's amazing acceptance of and longing to dwell among humanity.

As **Psalms 148** repeatedly emphasizes, God's community includes "all." This new community includes not only creation beyond humanity, but also humans who are different in terms of rank, race, ethnicity, gender and generation. We could add to that sexual orientation, since **Acts 11:1-18** repeats the pivotal event in which people who have long been viewed as "unclean" are revealed to be accepted by God. This inclusion of other identities, like sexual orientation, in addition to race and ethnicity is also justified by the way Acts itself moves fluidly from circumcision and eating with Gentiles to dietary laws and eating "non-kosher" food. In like manner, **John 13:31-35** features "love one another" as the "new commandment" for Jesus' new community.



How long do you imagine it will take before God's acceptance of LGBT people will be accepted by others in the faith communities? What will it take?

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The books of Acts demonstrates that it takes a long time for the community of the early Christ-followers to accept Gentiles whom they have culturally been conditioned to see as both "profane" and "unclean." **Acts 11:1-18** contains Peter's retelling of his experience in Acts 10, in which Peter learns the hard but important lesson of not calling any human being "impure" or "unclean." It is a hard lesson for Peter because God actually has to repeat the miracle and the message to Peter three times to get it through Peter's hard head. In both passages where Peter's experience is narrated, we are told that Peter comes up not only with a counter argument to defy the divine voice, but also a justification of his resistance as a matter of following "time-honored" tradition (Acts 10:14; 11:8). Just as Peter has resisted the divine voice repeatedly, Peter himself will need to retell his story many times before others become willing to accept those they have long been taught to despise and fear. In addition to Acts 11:1-18, Peter will allude to his experience with the non-Jew Cornelius and Cornelius' household again in Acts 15:6-8. All these repetitions for Peter and by Peter show that going against long-held traditions and assumptions is

a lengthy process for most people.

Another way to highlight the patience and persistence needed to change people and institutions is to think about the overall coverage Acts devotes not only the particular episode of Peter and Cornelius, but also to including the Gentiles. All the way back in Acts 8:26-38, we see God's acceptance of an Ethiopian eunuch through Philip, who also ends up making his home in the same town where Cornelius is stationed (Acts 8:40; 10:1; 21:8). In other words, it takes Acts seven chapters until the community of the early Christ-followers is able to settle the question about accepting the Gentiles in Acts 15:1-35. In the scope of these seven chapters, we find numerous people patiently and persistently engaging in repetitions and conversations; many also have to face threats and acts of violence.

Perhaps that is also why we find yet another picture of a new community in **Revelation 21:1-6**. In a sense, that new community of acceptance that LGBT people long for is sadly always out there in the future. At the same time, Revelation 21:1-6 does reveal the hidden future or the promise that this vision of a new community will one day become a reality. We have mentioned a couple of weeks ago that we must keep working with God for change to take place. As we keep working and praying "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 21:20) to hasten the fulfillment of our future vision, we may also need the laments of the psalmist, "How long, God, how long?" (Psalm 6:3), to help get us through.



What work do LGBT people and their friends need to do as God creates this new community?

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**Psalm 148** helpfully reminds us that our vision of community can easily be too narrow or too partial. It is easy, for example, to limit community to humanity and ignore the rest of God's wonderful creation. This is, in a sense, the shadow side of Acts 11:1-18, when Peter is told to "kill and eat" beasts, reptiles and birds in its creation of a new community to be made up of both Jews and Gentiles. One may push further and ask the hard question of whether Acts' new community ends up erasing the central ethnic markers of the Jewish people. Likewise, many scholars of John's gospel have suggested that the new love ethic of John 13:31-35 is presented and understood by John as limitable to only those who are part of John's community.



In what ways may LGBT people be falling into the trap of envisioning a "new" community that is based on a single dimension (as the inclusion of only their own particular community)?

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This is an important question to ponder because LGBT people are also diverse in terms of other identity factors, like — to name just a couple of examples — race, ethnicity and class. It may also be important and helpful for us to remember how transgender people have struggled to be

fully accepted even among those who are lesbian, gay or bisexual.



What are the qualities of this new community that God is calling LGBT people to envision today?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



We did not choose to be created in your image, God.  
And we did not choose to be related to the rest of your creation,  
so much of which seems to us to bear such a striking lack of resemblance.  
And yet, we are a part of one another.  
Despite all of the things,  
real or imagined,  
understood or denied,  
recognized or ignored,  
that manage to set us apart from one another,  
Help us to recognize and celebrate our kinship to one another,  
and to you, our Source. Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 6th Sunday of Easter, Year C

### A NEW VISION OF HUMANITY

God's saving love challenges all to embrace a new vision of community that accepts and affirms the equality and legitimacy of both those in power and those on the margins.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 16:9-15](#); [Psalm 67](#); [Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5](#); [John 5:1-9](#) or [John 14:23-29](#) (not included in this conversation)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"As we see our own culture made up of haves and have-nots, insiders and outsiders, those in the mainstream and those on the margins, Lydia, as encountered in the book of Acts, represents all of these." -Bridgette Young



"This is the experience of so many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people — that we are spiritually healed not according to the rules we have been taught, but by trusting someone who stands beside us in love." -Mark D. Jordan



"Our imagination is stirred by God's new vision for human- ity. We are challenged and inspired by this vision." David O. Jenkins

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

**Acts 16:9-15** marks the beginning of the Gospel being preached in other parts of the Roman Empire beyond the confines of Palestine. In this passage, we travel with the newly converted Paul and his companions to places of power and to the outskirts. Paul journeys to Philippi, a leading Roman colony (in what is now northeast Greece) filled with soldiers, merchants, government officials and aristocrats. Here, in the middle of imperial power and privilege, the Gospel will be preached both to Gentiles and to Jews. The dominant culture, the legal customs, the social and religious practices will be challenged with a new vision.



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When you envision a just and loving community who does the vision include?

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Paul and the travelers search for the place where the local Jewish community prayed. Paul steps outside the city gates of Philippi and pauses on the banks of a river to preach to a group of women. Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman, is stirred by the Gospel message and opens her home, as well as her heart, to Paul and his companions. The river, a place for outsiders, now becomes a river of life.

This small event carries large lessons — perhaps especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender believers. It reminds us how often we have been forced to live as wanderers and how much we rely on LGBT hospitality to survive or to make a new home. The passage proclaims the good news that the Gospel's place is both in the seats of power and on the margins. The soldiers, the nobility and the policymakers are confronted by a new vision of the world. Those on the margins, such as the women who have taken their place outside the gates, also hear the good news and become the bearers of it for the world.



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Where are the places, the banks, of isolation in our society where the Gospel can bring new life and hope to people both inside and outside those communities?

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**Psalm 67** has the theme of God's universal blessing to all the nations. It reminds us that God's saving love, grace and justice are open and available to all. If we failed to hear it, the message is repeated: God blesses. God shines. God saves. God blesses. The blessing and shining is not only for the individual, but also for nations and for the entire earth.

**Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5** echoes the themes of blessing and hope in the revelation to St. John. It is a word of hope for God's ultimate and eternal blessings to those who have been faithful in spite of being excluded, oppressed or even exiled. However, that initial exclusion can be problematic to many readers. Revelation 21:27 says that "anyone who practices abomination or falsehood" (New Revised Standard Version) or "does what is shameful or deceitful" (New International Version) will not enter the city. Most members of the LGBT community know the pain of having the words "abomination" and "shame" as labels placed on them and their lives. LGBT people should not internalize these words as a particular condemnation of them. All of humanity is subject to the shame of idolatry. It is not sexual orientation or gender identity that creates an "abomination" but our raising those things of the created order to the level of "gods" in our lives.

God calls us to be good stewards of all the gifts and blessings given to us, including human sexuality. When we make idols of money, power, institutions, relationships and, yes, even our sexuality, then we are in danger of not entering the city of light — simply because we'd rather stay in the shadows.



How can we remain faithful even when we are excluded or oppressed?

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In **John 5:1-9**, we learn that healing comes from unexpected directions when selfishness gives way to trust and courage. The one, unable to walk, who has been waiting long years, has been told he must reach the water first in order to be cured. No one will help him to the water. Everyone rushes ahead of him. But Jesus tells him, "You do not need to reach the water. I will help you walk." Jesus exemplifies the kind of help many LGBT people have experienced. We are spiritually healed, not according to the rules we have been taught, but by trusting someone who stands beside us in love.



When have LGBT people been blessed or healed by those from whom you would not expect such compassion?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of our journeying,  
in our joy, our sorrow, our anger,  
we trust your unfailing love and guidance.  
Sisters and brothers of many colors, ages, sexual orientations and abilities,  
we are one in Christ!  
Together let us journey.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Ascension Day, Year C

### GOD, WHERE ARE YOU?

Even when it seems that God has abandoned us, we are not alone. God continues to guide us and to reign over all people and things.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 1:1-11](#); [Psalm 47 or Psalm 93](#); [Ephesians 1:15-23](#); [Luke 24:44-53](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"We have a God we can trust. God does not disown us, but rather adopts us. God does not abandon us, but rather draws us into a community of people empowered to love and to change the world." -David O. Jenkins



"Our lives witness to our faith as the Holy Spirit guides and comforts us — even during the times we think Jesus has left us." -Bridgette Young



"Jesus' teaching wasn't finished at his death or ascension. That is why he sends the Spirit to each believer." Mark D. Jordan

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Both the texts from **Acts 1:1-11** and **Luke 24:44-53** tell an ascension story. In Luke, Jesus departs into heaven after appearing to his disciples on the day of his resurrection. He gives them a blessing as he is taken up into heaven, and the disciples go forth with great joy praising and worshipping God. In Acts, it is presumably 40 days later, and when Jesus appears to them again, they ask if he has returned to restore the nation of Israel to its former political glory and power. The answer he gives them is not particularly clear or comforting. Jesus basically says, "It's not for you to know this now." Then, he promises that the Holy Spirit will come to empower them in being witnesses throughout the world.

In Luke, the disciples are joyous and hopeful. In Acts, they are confused and clueless. They are literally left standing staring off into space. Often, our encounters with God leave us feeling one way or the other. When we feel that God has not been present with us, and left us to struggle on our own, any sign of the Divine presence makes us leap for joy and praise God for answered prayer. When we're lost and confused and God's cryptic answers to our pressing questions leave us asking more questions, we are prone to stare off into space, thinking, "Say what?"



When have you felt God was close? When have you felt God was far?

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The power of the ascension story is that the followers of Jesus continue to have an experience of the living Jesus. In both Luke and Acts, Jesus teaches right up to the moment that he is taken away about the meaning of the Hebrew prophets and the realm of God. Obviously his teaching was not finished at his death. It is not even finished when Jesus' risen body disappears from our view but continues through the Spirit, which Jesus sends as a continuing teacher.

In **Ephesians 1:15-23**, the gift of this same Spirit is what Paul prays for when writing to the new Christians at Ephesus. Becoming a Christian means receiving "a spirit of wisdom and perception" (verse 17) that will carry us to fuller knowledge and confidence in Jesus' ultimate power over the world — no matter how fearsome worldly power seems.

The confidence in Jesus and the gift of his Spirit ought to comfort lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians. It assures us not only that there is a power deeper — and sweeter — than earthly oppression, but that we too have received a share in that ongoing power. The Christian Bible teaches us that Jesus needs to say more than the Bible alone says. That is why he sends the Spirit to each believer. Christians shouldn't be surprised by growth in their understanding of how God works through human sexuality. They should expect it.

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In what ways can we grow in our understanding of how God works through human sexuality, customs and human interactions?

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**Psalm 47** attests to the ongoing presence of God by focusing on the sovereignty of God over all creation. In the midst of Israel's struggles, wars and famines, this psalm reminds the people of God's continued reign over all things and all people — even when the morning news isn't so convincing. We are called to celebrate God's reign, to live joyful lives. When the signs of the world suggest God has abandoned us, the ancient psalms remind us of the possibility of bearing witness to hope and trust.

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What evidence do you see around you that God's reign of justice, love and equality are breaking forth? What are your prayers — where are you asking God to reign?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Sustainer God,  
we yearn for the feeling of your presence,  
especially when words alone bring little comfort.  
Come Spirit, grow in us  
that we may root ourselves in your visions of justice and mercy.  
Open our arms  
that we might console another's burdens  
Speak through our mouths that we might comfort the afflicted  
Move our feet that we might march  
in solidarity with the those on the margins.  
In name of the risen Jesus, Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## 7th Sunday after Easter, Year

# C

### GOD CALLS OUT "COME TOGETHER!"

Despite forces which divide, God's love and power make reconciliation and unity possible.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 16:16-34](#); [Psalm 97](#); [Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21](#);  
[John 17:20-26](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"We call out passionately for Jesus with the Spirit we have been given. We call eagerly for the divine revolution that will transform us from out-casts or captives into beloved partners." -Mark D. Jordan



"The continuing reign of God extends through Jesus Christ to those who are prepared for his coming, having lived faithfully." -Bridgette Young



"Everyone, stop vilifying and dehumanizing one another. Rather let us watch together for God's justice and transforming grace — a vision of the beloved community re-emerging." -David O. Jenkins

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Paul the apostle is not a favorite of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians. Passages excerpted from his letters — or letters attributed to him — are texts most often used to condemn our love. (Jesus, by contrast, speaks no condemnation of same-sex desire in the official gospels.) Even in the many other passages that have nothing to do with sex, Paul can come across as unsympathetic. The passage in **Acts 16:16-34** seems at first to fit in with that negative picture. Paul becomes irritated with a woman kept in slavery and casts out a demon from her without considering her vulnerability or the consequences for her.

In many ways, we might identify with the enslaved woman. She figures much of our experience in church. She is compelled to speak the truth to the point of angering someone in authority — and, demon or no demon, she is speaking the truth about Paul. And then there's the attitude of her owners: they make money off her gift for truth-telling. When the gift disappears — or becomes disruptive — their concern is not for her, but for the lost money.



How often have churches profited from the gifts of LGBT people of faith without any regard for the consequences on their lives? How can we change this vicious cycle and break the silence?

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The masters of the enslaved girl stir up the Roman authorities and the crowd: "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which are not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans" (Acts 16: 20b-21). Although Paul is a Roman citizen and even legally protected as a Jew, the mob is encouraged to beat and imprison Paul and Silas. An earthquake opens the prison doors and releases the prisoners from their chains, but scares the hell out of the jailer who tries to kill himself. Paul intervenes, rescuing this man who that very night welcomed Paul and Silas into his home. After washing the wounds of the two men, the jailer is saved and baptized.

This drama serves many purposes. Paul has the opportunity to do the work of Christ (cast out demons). God's might is made manifest in the earthquake, saving Paul and Silas from the mob's worst intentions. Captives are set free. Enemies are saved.



What are the Christian works we can do in our communities as instruments of God's love and power?

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What also occurs is a sacred reconciliation between the jailer and the prisoners. Paul and Silas spend the night in the jailer's home, eat at his table, sleep in his guest room and are cared for.

We are reminded not only of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), but also of Nelson Mandela's prison guard standing beside Mandela at his presidential inauguration. Even as the LGBT community suffers from mob mentality, denied rights and privileges afforded other citizens, perhaps God's hope is for the transformation and reconciliation of those who persecute and those who are persecuted.



How can we begin the process of reconciliation within our communities and churches?

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**Psalm 97** glorifies the reign of God, and proclaims the ultimate justice of God: "God loves those who hate evil. God preserves the souls of the faithful. God rescues them from the wicked" (verse 10). For Christians, this psalm speaks to the saving events in Acts. Recall God's deliverance of Paul and Silas as well as God's deliverance of the jailer. Our call is to hate evil, not other people, not even the hateful mob. We believe God desires that all people be freed from captivity to the sins that bind us — whether those sins are homophobia, racism, greed and consumerism, xenophobia or hatred of those who persecute us.

**Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21** gives witness to the same glory and ultimate justice of God at the end of days. These final passages in Scripture are words of comfort: "Come. And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (verse 17). We are drawn back to the riverbanks with Lydia, to the pools in Bethesda, to the village well where Jesus offers the waters of life to all those who desire to live this abundant life. It is free. It is offered to all.

In **John 17:20-26**, we see Jesus praying for this very outcome of good news for his followers. Jesus asks God to unite these followers with each other and with God so they may be faithful in sharing God's glory and love. Once more we are called to be reconciled. This unity is an earthly witness to the very unity of the triune God. In the midst of the powerful realities and forces that divide us, reconciliation and unity are possible because of the reality of God's powerful love. This godly love has always been available to us. As LGBT people live in the world, we must be careful not to be driven by rage, despair, revenge and hate. The love of God — for friend and foe — will be a transforming witness in the world as we strive together for justice and reconciliation.



How can we love our enemies in a way that transforms the world around us?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Sustainer God,  
we often grow tired of this fight:  
tired of demanding a place at your table,  
a voice in the pulpit, a seat in the pew.  
With your help, however, we will carry on.  
Guide our words and actions and may they honor you.  
We ask for strength in the struggle  
and your presence with us on this journey.  
Amen.

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# Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

## Pentecost Sunday, Year C

### THE SPIRIT CONTINUES

Just as God gave the new Christian community the gift of the Spirit; we can offer our communities the same spirit of truth and reconciliation.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Acts 2:1-21](#); [Psalm 104:24-34](#); [Romans 8:14-17](#); [John 14:8-17](#)

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### WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The gift of the Spirit bridges human division." -Mark D. Jordan



"For the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans- gender community, one of the gifts the community can offer the church and the world is this word of truth." -David O. Jenkins

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## WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Our experience of life is often more like the tower of Babel (**Genesis 11:1-9**) than Pentecost (**Acts 2:1-21**). We speak different languages. We don't understand one another. It feels as if we have been scattered, broken apart, rather than gathered and fit together.



In what ways are members of our society, local communities, churches and families broken apart and scattered? How does language contribute to this disconnect?

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In **Acts 2:1-21** the promise and hope of Pentecost is that the gift of God's Spirit bridges human division. It gives the capacity to communicate across language and race. People from different cultures and religions, with different values and worldviews, were given a common language. They appeared to be simultaneously[RAR1] given a desire to listen to one another. A holy possibility — human understanding — was made manifest in the crowd gathered in Jerusalem. It is a gift for prophecy that is poured out on all, women and men, the young and the old, enslaved and free, the straight and the queer.

Our Pentecost drama calls us to build a bridge, not a tower. That bridge is built on the promise and hope of Christ that makes a way in the desert of our misunderstanding. The common language might be creative enough that it's new for all sides, uncomfortable and awkward when we first try it out. But every day we learn new words within our culture, words which usher into our lives new meaning, possibilities, even new creations.

Pentecost reminds us that we have this capacity and God gives us the desire and the words to speak to one another in ways that lead to peace. In the middle of the chaos and confusion, misunderstanding and brokenness, God was and is present in creative, life-giving ways.



How can we begin to create a common language that unites rather than divides our communities?

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The psalmist in **Psalms 104:24-34, 35b** also speaks of a present and live-giving God: "You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; You renew the face of the ground. You look at the earth and it trembles; You touch the mountains, and they smoke." We hear the echoes and see the signs of a creative God who refuses to withdraw from the created world.

In **Romans 8:14-17**, the apostle Paul — courageous enough to go to Philippi and also to Rome, the center of imperial power — now calls forth that same courage from new believers who live in Rome. Stop acting so afraid, he tells them. Stop being a doormat for those in power! You're not a slave to those who would do you harm and keep you quiet! Quit your passive ways! You,

too, are children of God, heirs to the promises and to the love of God. Stop acting like displaced, unwanted stepchildren and get on with your lives. God's powerful, creative, sustaining Spirit rests on you, lives in you and gives you what you need to live abundant lives. Claim those promises. The Spirit makes anyone who receives it a beloved child of God, a daughter or son — not a servant or subordinate stranger.



What habits do we need to change in order to start acting like true children of God?

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Since at least the 1940s, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians in the United States have founded communities of welcome and witness. These bands of prophets spread the gift of the Spirit of God. Now, after half a century, their witness has found unexpected fulfillment in the policy changes of many Christian churches. But the important work of the small communities continues.

When Jesus promises his spirit in **John 14:8-17**, he describes it as an advocate or defender, but also as a teacher and reminder. Telling the truth about the realities LGBT people live every day — our stories — is made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit that helps us to be brave. The Spirit enables us to tell the truth (sometimes painful, embarrassing, humiliating, maddening, funny and redemptive). This is the Spirit that gives us the new, creative vocabulary we need to build bridges and new vision, not just for our community, but also for the church and the world.



In our attempt to build bridges, what ways of speaking and words should we relentlessly avoid and relentlessly utilize?

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## PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,  
open us to the movement of your Spirit.  
You call us through your Spirit  
that we may gather and celebrate the new community.  
We are all different and still we share a yearning  
that touches and compels us to join together with one another.  
Gather us so that the winds of love will blow through us,  
and the fire of passion will burn within us. Amen.

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