

*A Preacher's Guide to
Lectionary Sermon Series*

VOLUME 2

THEMATIC PLANS FOR
YEARS A, B, AND C

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Contents

xi Using This Resource

YEAR A

3 Advent Series: Waiting Well

Five Parts: First Sunday of Advent through Fourth Sunday of Advent, plus Christmas Eve

Advent gives us a lesson in waiting—and knowing when to act.

BRUCE REYES-CHOW

10 Epiphany Series: Gifts That Keep On Giving

Eight Parts: Epiphany through Transfiguration Sunday

Discovering the gifts God offers—and the challenge to accept them.

BRUCE REYES-CHOW

21 Lenten Series: Heart-to-Heart Talks

Seven Parts: First Sunday in Lent through Easter Sunday

Conversations in the Gospels prompt questions about our own relationship with Jesus.

MARTHA K. SPONG

31 Easter Series: Building Blocks

Seven Parts: Second Sunday of Easter through Pentecost Sunday

Stories of the early church teach us the fundamentals of faith.

MARTHA K. SPONG

41 Summer Series: Family Reunion

Eleven Parts: Trinity Sunday through Proper 15

In the trials of one family, we find hope for our own.

CAROL CAVIN-DILLON

56 Fall Series 1: Learning to Love Our Enemies

Four Parts: Proper 18 through Proper 21

Though it often seems more easily said than done, loving the unlovable is possible with guidance from our Scriptures.

ANTHONY J. TANG

63 Fall Series 2: Thriving

Four Parts: Proper 22 through Proper 25

A stewardship series that guides our congregations in generosity while honoring and respecting their rationality, personhood, and value.

ANTHONY J. TANG

70 Fall Series 3: Entrusted

Four Parts: Proper 26 through Proper 29

Matthew's Gospel encourages us to accept the mantle of responsibility for the work to which God calls us.

ANTHONY J. TANG

YEAR B

79 Advent/Christmas Series: Where We Belong

Six Parts: First Sunday of Advent through First Sunday of Christmas, including Christmas Eve

As Christ came to dwell among us, we too seek a place to dwell.

TUHINA VERMA RASCHE

- 88 Epiphany Series: Created Anew**
Six Parts: First Sunday after Epiphany through Transfiguration Sunday
Celebrating God's creativity—and our own—in the season of new beginnings.
TUHINA VERMA RASCHE
- 98 Lenten Series: The Power of Sacrifice**
Six Parts: First Sunday in Lent through Palm Sunday
Jesus shows us how subversive radical self-sacrifice can be.
BRANDAN J. ROBERTSON
- 107 Easter Series: Living in a Postresurrection World**
Eight Parts: Easter Sunday through Pentecost Sunday
What it means to have faith in the resurrected Christ.
BRANDAN J. ROBERTSON
- 119 Summer Series 1: More Than Meets the Eye**
Four Parts: Proper 4 through Proper 7
Discovering God's surprises through Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians.
KYLE E. BROOKS
- 126 Summer Series 2: Everyday Prophecy**
Four Parts: Proper 9 through Proper 12
Examining four prophets, we see how we too can respond to God's call.
KYLE E. BROOKS
- 134 Summer Series 3: Soul Food**
Four Parts: Proper 14 through Proper 17
Biblical food and table metaphors invite us to a feast of discipleship.
KYLE E. BROOKS
- 141 Fall Series 1: A Good Life**
Five Parts: Proper 18 through Proper 22
Wisdom for living well, from Proverbs, Job, and Esther.
AMY K. BUTLER

149 Fall Series 2: Take Up Your Cross

Three Parts: Proper 23 through Proper 25

A study in discipleship from Jesus' encounters in Mark 10.

AMY K. BUTLER

154 Fall Series 3: More Than Enough

Four Parts: Proper 26 through Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)

A stewardship series about living with a sense of abundance, not scarcity.

AMY K. BUTLER

YEAR C

163 Advent Series: Boundless

Six Parts: First Sunday of Advent through First Sunday of Christmas, including Christmas Eve

God offers us so much more than we could ever want or need.

MIHEE KIM-KORT

173 Epiphany Series: Living with Joy

Four Parts: Epiphany Sunday through Third Sunday after Epiphany

Living with purpose and joy in our everyday lives.

MIHEE KIM-KORT

179 Epiphany Series 2: The Art of Hearing

Four Parts: Fourth Sunday after Epiphany through Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Discovering the power of God's voice through stories from Luke's Gospel.

MIHEE KIM-KORT

185 Lenten Series: Character and Calling

Seven Parts: First Sunday in Lent through Easter Sunday

A Lenten journey with Paul to discover the essentials of Christian character.

MAGREY R. DEVEGA

- 196 Easter Series: Living with the End in Mind**
Seven Parts: Second Sunday of Easter through Pentecost Sunday
Revelation's guide to embodying our faith as a resurrection people.
MAGREY R. DEVEGA
- 207 Summer Series 1: Called In**
Seven Parts: Proper 6 through Proper 12
How God can use our mistakes, weaknesses, and experiences to help us grow.
JASPER PETERS
- 218 Summer Series 2: Final Instructions**
Four Parts: Proper 14 through Proper 17
Guidance for enduring in the life of faith, from the book of Hebrews.
JASPER PETERS
- 225 Fall Series 1: RE:boot**
Four Parts: Proper 18 through Proper 21
Life-changing challenges from Paul's letters to Philemon and Timothy.
BRIAN ERICKSON
- 232 Fall Series 2: Four Prayers That Don't Work**
Four Parts: Proper 22 through Proper 25
A series on prayer from the Gospel of Luke, with applications for stewardship.
BRIAN ERICKSON
- 239 Fall Series 3: It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)**
Four Parts: Proper 26 through Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)
When things seem out of control, we trust the road Christ walks with us.
BRIAN ERICKSON
- 246 Calendar of Sundays**
- 253 Contributors**

Using This Resource

I've heard colleagues explain why they prefer to avoid the lectionary: people respond better to thematic preaching, sermon series on a particular topic. . . . They have to surrender the rich experience of preaching the lectionary, they argue, in order to give people what they want.

This reasoning is problematic for me, fundamentally because of the dangerous theological assumption that church is about giving people what they want. It's not. But this argument also assumes that lectionary preaching and series preaching are incompatible. And that's just not true, either.

—Amy K. Butler, in the Foreword to the first volume of
A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series

Some church leaders love the Revised Common Lectionary for the consistency it brings to proclamation and education across congregations and denominations. Others consider lectionary preaching boring and limiting.

Some church leaders prefer to preach in topical series, crafting sermons that explore a book of the Bible, a meaty section of Scripture, or a significant theme in Christian living, over a period of weeks or even months. Others say series preaching is hokey or contrived, and that choosing one's own texts biases a preachers toward their favorite passages.

A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series is designed to offer the best of both worlds with this comprehensive manual of sermon series ideas designed to frame consecutive weeks of lectionary texts into seasonal and short-term series. Taking into consideration both the liturgical calendar and the secular calendar, this resource includes plans for twenty-eight thematic sermon series using the Revised Common Lectionary, series that both celebrate holy days and seasons *and* respond to typical patterns of church attendance, maximizing visitor retention and member engagement.

Twelve experienced preachers from seven denominations—some dedicated lectionary preachers, others accustomed to topical series—accepted the creative challenge of developing these thematic series plans using the assigned readings of the lectionary. You will find among their work series exploring specific books of the Bible and significant biblical figures as well as lessons for discipleship from across the Bible's sections and genres. You may wish to use these outlines as they are, adapt them for your congregation's needs, or get inspired to design your own thematic series from the lectionary.

What's Included Each of the twenty-eight series plans includes:

- A series overview, introducing the overall message of the series
- A chart outlining the sermon titles and focus Scriptures for each week of the series, along with a very brief description of each sermon's theme
- Tips and ideas for the series, with suggestions for worship elements, visuals, fellowship activities, and outreach efforts that enhance the congregation's engagement with the series topic
- Sermon starters for each Sunday to summarize the week's message, prompt your research and writing process, and offer sermon illustrations to enhance your preaching

In the back of this volume, you will find a calendar listing the Sundays for Years A, B, and C for three lectionary cycles, from the 2019–20 liturgical year (Year A) all the way to 2027–28 (Year C). This nine-year calendar enables you to plan your preaching schedule to make use of all the series plans this book has to offer, regardless of when you begin to use it.

While this resource respects the liturgical calendar, and the lections designed to accompany them, a few exceptions are made for floating holy days like Trinity Sunday and special days that may fall on weekdays but be observed on a Sunday (Epiphany and All Saints' Day, for example). In those cases, the assigned lections for the special day may be substituted for the regularly scheduled lections, or vice versa. You will also find that not every Sunday is included in a series. There are breaks between some series, allowing for quirks in the liturgical calendar and for weeks you may wish to have a guest preacher, special service, or other stand-alone sermon.

Making the Most of a Series

Exploring a theme or book of the Bible across several weeks (as short as three weeks and as long as eleven in this resource) gives congregants and visitors a memorable handle to latch onto from week to week. Knowing what is being preached on the following week keeps people engaged, coming back, and telling friends. Like a television show or miniseries, preaching in series can create a “don't want to miss it” desire to be there for each week of worship.

Maximize the impact of each series with the following tips:

Use consistent visuals. Even without a dedicated graphic design person in your church, you can create one image or typographic treatment for the series that can be used on your printed materials (bulletins, flyers, etc.) and digital media (website, Facebook page, or worship screen if you use one). Some of the “tips and ideas” sections

of series plans include ideas for altar displays and other visual elements to enhance the worship space.

Go beyond the sermon. We all know that worship and spiritual growth do not hinge entirely on the sermon. Incorporate the theme when planning music and special moments in the service like testimonies or dramas. Plan special events at which congregants can discuss or put into practice the ideas being preached on in the series. Many “tips and ideas” sections have suggestions for such events.

Spread the word. Visitors may be more likely to give your church a try if they know an upcoming service will be addressing a topic or question they have wondered about. Promotion of the series can be done through church newsletters, posters, special mailings, and social media. The week before the series begins, send a special email about the series to all members, encouraging them to attend and asking them to forward the email to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

Get your congregation excited about the opportunity to explore biblical stories and themes in depth across a number of Sundays, and watch their engagement grow.

Year A

Advent Series: Waiting Well

Five Parts: First Sunday of Advent through Fourth Sunday of Advent, plus Christmas Eve

Advent gives us a lesson in waiting—and knowing when to act.

BRUCE REYES-CHOW

Series Overview Waiting is generally something that the world does not like to do. Waiting is inconvenient and, depending on the source of the waiting, can be seen as some kind of affront to our personhood or perceived as the result of incompetence or malice. Sure, there are times when the frustration of waiting is justified and worthy of challenge. But I believe that learning to wait well, no matter the reason or the season, is a spiritual discipline that contributes to emotional health, spiritual

| | Sermon Title | Focus Scripture | Theme |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--|
| Advent 1 | Quick, Look Busy! | Matt. 24:36–44 | How do we challenge the narrative of faith being just about what we do? |
| Advent 2 | Not All Actions Are Created Equal | Matt. 3:1–12 | How do we determine what actions are worthy of God and bear good fruit in our world? |
| Advent 3 | That's OK, I'll Wait | Matt. 11:2–11 | Sometimes, waiting is wise; but sometimes we'd rather keep waiting than make a daring move. |
| Advent 4 | Don't Drop the Baby | Matt. 1:18–25 | How do we prepare for and handle what comes to us during the immediacy of waiting for an impending moment? |
| Christmas Eve | The Gift of Fragility | Luke 2:1–14 (15–20) | What is our calling in response to God's embodiment in such powerful fragility? |

vitality, and actions that are grounded in faith. This series will look at ways in which we can wait well, challenging the negative assumptions that waiting means inaction, apathy, or a lack of passion, and moving toward waiting that is deliberate, disciplined, and just.

Tips and Ideas for This Series

The theme of “waiting” invites a number of poignant sermon illustrations. To introduce the theme, awkward worship moments always work well. You might make people wait in silence for something and name the uncomfortable reactions to waiting even for a minute or two. Later in the series, demonstrate the importance of waiting with a story about something being sent out before it is ready. I think about any kind of food that simply needs time before it is ready, such as bread and baked goods. Please avoid the possibility of a salmonella outbreak, but an undercooked cupcake would be a very simple opening illustration.

Advent 1: Quick, Look Busy!

Matthew 24:36–44

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”
(Matthew 24:42)

When I read this passage, all that pops into my head is the bumper sticker that says, “Jesus is coming. Hurry up and look busy.” As if Jesus would not be able to tell that we are faking it. That said, in a society that (over)values productivity, deliverables, and always being busy, too often it is easy to see how individuals, institutions, and communities fall into the trap of measuring faithfulness by what gets checked off on the to-do list.

There is value in waiting, in being still and remaining watchful, instead of filling those awkward spaces in life with action for the sake of action—that is, busy-ness. We are reminded of this time and again during Advent, when Scriptures focus our minds on some future event. We cannot rush God’s coming through any particular action.

At the same time, we cannot just let folks pretend that what we *do* has no impact on the world and God’s hopes for it and for us. As today’s Scripture suggests, we carry on with life—raising families and working at our jobs—but with the awareness and anticipation of Christ’s coming. Leaning on the belief that we have already been reconciled to God, that we can wait with faithful and hopeful hearts, our urgency to *do* must be born from the idea that God so loves us

that we can do nothing else but act in the world every day as if that love matters.

How can a community find that space where what it *does* is a faithful response to God's calling upon its life, while guarding against the danger of actions morphing into an exercise of busywork? This is the challenge: to find and name those places in the world where God is calling us to be and act . . . and to be there, not with an expectation of instant solutions but of relationship that lasts. At the same time, we must find ways to determine what actions, while seemingly productive, actually take energy, time, and passion away from those things that we need to do.

I encourage the preacher to be specific about the kinds of things that draw us away from doing what God would hope, while also naming those actions that God is probably pleased with. This way, doing in itself is not our faith, but what we do is a manifestation of that faith.

Advent 2: Not All Actions Are Created Equal

Matthew 3:1–12

*“Bear fruit worthy of repentance. . . . Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”
(Matthew 3:8, 10)*

After last week's challenge of productivity and busyness, Matthew comes back with this challenge to “bear fruit”—not just any fruit, but fruit “worthy of repentance.” During this season of waiting, we are reminded that waiting is not about inaction, but discerning the action that has meaning and actually changes the world.

I am loathe to try and make a list of those actions that would qualify as repentance worthy. Yet this is what we are being challenged to do: both to determine the repentance-worthiness of what we do and to decide what actions we are called to take in the first place.

Repentance and faithful living are about much more than sin-avoidance. There are sins of omission when we fail to act in ways that God is calling us to. Talk about these different types of sin, but of course also about forgiveness and the idea of unconditional grace. There are “slippery slopes” with any argument, but when it comes to sin and grace, who gets it and why, the preacher should aim to set the record straight. A good example of this would be to take on the idea of ranking sin and help people to differentiate between secular and spiritual repercussions and responses to sin in the world. For instance, pride is often considered an invisible sin; it doesn't do as

much harm as, say, murder. A court of law would certainly see those offenses very differently, but our need for spiritual repentance goes beyond any criminal code.

We have to unpack the idea of “repentance worthy” or the idea that our actions and faith are truly about turning away from sin and narrowing the space between our actions and God’s hopes. Does the living of my faith result in my moving closer to God? Am I resting on the laurels of past successes, or am I engaging in acts that result in widening the division between God and humanity? Are there things going on in the world where the need for human unity (comfort, not rocking the boat) is working against what may bring us closer to God?

Be bold here. Dive deep on this and land in some places where people will be forced to examine core understandings of their faith. Name some things. Call out situations that demand our response and reactions. For even in this season of waiting, if we fail to acknowledge that our faith must actually impact the world, then we only further contribute to the brokenness and divide between us and God that we claim we want to heal and narrow.

Advent 3: That’s OK, I’ll Wait

Matthew 11:2–11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see.” (Matthew 11:2–4)

One of the best parts of waiting can be the opportunity to rest: rest our hearts, rest our minds, rest our spirits. This time is definitely needed, but sometimes that’s not what God has determined we need.

I can imagine that Jesus’ command to the disciples to tell what they have seen, while exciting, also made it very real that this whole “following Jesus” thing is no joke. They might have preferred to keep waiting for another messiah—maybe one that wouldn’t challenge them quite so much. It would have been much easier if soft robes, physical security, and comforts of the institutions of power were the vehicles for Christ to come into the world; but nope, that was actually *not* what Jesus was about.

The disciples and we are being invited into a new reality. They and we have waited long enough, and now our waiting has revealed new ways of seeing and navigating the world! So now we must make a choice: do we follow Christ into this new reality?

As I think about these things for myself, I wonder if sometimes my “self-care” can turn into an idolization of that which is easy and comfortable. Self-care is vital, but we must take care that we do not put so much stock in comfortable things that we fail to see the disruptive nature of Christ’s acts in the world. Again, this is not a call to burn out or overfunctioning, but rather a challenge to find ways to remain open to the ways that Jesus walks into our lives, lets us know about ways that God is active in the world, and calls us to follow in faith.

Ponder together what you or your community have been waiting for, spiritually. Recall the last time you waited on God for something and God surprisingly revealed something life-changing. How might we all be more open and ready to hear the ways Christ may be calling us to follow?

Advent 4: Don’t Drop the Baby

Matthew 1:18–25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

There are plenty of themes gifted to us in this text: unpacking “virgin,” thinking about God speaking through dreams, and the patriarchal focus on Joseph’s role in it all. The awesome responsibility of child-rearing is one that many will relate to, though we should approach parenting examples with caution, out of sensitivity to those who have struggled with infertility or the loss of a child. Knowing that by choice or circumstance not everyone will raise children of their own, we can ask questions like what it means for the church to welcome children into the world today. How might your congregation better raise the children and support families that live in the surrounding community?

Many congregants may identify with the terror one may feel when suddenly handed a tiny, fragile newborn to hold even for a minute.

When my second child was born, a friend came to visit. He clearly had never held a baby . . . or he had, and no one had the heart to tell him that he was doing it wrong. In any case, we could sense his reluctance to take this newborn in his arms. Did that stop me from placing my child in his hands? Nope. You see, this was the world that he stepped into, and by choice or circumstance, he too was now responsible for raising up our child.

We may not be ready for it, we may not seek it, and we may not

even really want it, but here we are. The baby Jesus is coming into the world, and now we have to decide how we respond. What are the responsibilities we take on when we claim faith in the coming of the Christ child?

Before you get too caught up in the broader theological or social issues that are brought up in this passage and that question, be sure to acknowledge the very human feelings surrounding the impending birth. We have anxieties, expectations, and fears that may be stirred up by the prospect of meeting God in the flesh. We may have lived our whole lives waiting for such an experience of the Divine. Can we ever adequately prepare ourselves for a life-altering moment? How can we try?

While you should hold some Baby Jesus sermon brilliance back for Christmas Eve, it is OK to name that it is this moment, as the end of the waiting comes into view, that we are prompted to think about what the birth will mean for us.

Christmas Eve: The Gift of Fragility

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Too often church people make a big deal about people coming to church only on Christmas Eve and Easter. While this may be a reality for many, the preacher must hold in tension being honest about this reality of faith life today while avoiding coming off as shaming or judgmental.

That said, there are few days when preachers will have the ears of those who may not often attend church services. These are also the folks who may someday recall “that church where that preacher said [insert profound idea about life and faith here].” Seeds of faith are planted every day and, no matter the longevity of the person’s presence, we can inspire movement with words of love, hope, joy, and peace.

Visitors and members alike are interested in the basic “So what?” of Jesus’ birth, and this is a great chance to do some teaching on why this event is crucial to the church’s understanding of Christ in the world. We don’t know exactly what will be going on in the world on any given day, but we do know that whatever the political, social, or cultural turmoil, there will always be suffering, pain, and brokenness that need to be addressed.

The birth story is rich with moments of grace, so the preaching will have to determine the most compelling aspect of the passage. Some people will challenge the sanitization of an inherently “messy” narrative, while others will focus on political parallels between then and now, and yet others will speak to the radical nature of God being “with us.”

More than those other approaches to a Christmas sermon, however, I am often drawn to the absurdity of the Christ arriving as a baby. While baby humans are resilient to most parental gaffes, at the end of the day they would not survive if left on their own. How could God trust humanity with such a fragile presence in the world? This culmination of so many years of God’s people waiting for Messiah—this “long-expected Jesus” on whom so much depends—is placed in the hands of mere mortals. Yet we are entrusted with this gift and must take it seriously.

At the end of the day, the incarnation is about our coconspiracy with God to bring about the promises promised in the birth of Christ into the world: love, hope, peace, and joy. We have a job to do, and the world is waiting.

Epiphany Series: Gifts That Keep on Giving

Eight Parts: Epiphany through
Transfiguration Sunday

Discovering the gifts God offers—and the challenge to accept them.

BRUCE REYES-CHOW

Series Overview Due to the beautiful complexities of culture, ethnicity, family, and society, participating in the giving and receiving of gifts is fraught with potential conflicts, confusions, and perhaps outright *bad* surprises. Accepting gifts graciously can sometimes be a challenge. With the commercialized “gift-giving season” behind us, let’s focus on some of God’s unexpected gifts that we can enjoy long after the Christmas tree has been hauled away—gifts that reveal themselves in new ways as time goes on. This Gospel-based series is about recognizing the often-surprising gifts that are extended to humanity and are ours to receive if we are bold and loving enough to accept them.

| | Sermon Title | Focus Scripture | Theme |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Epiphany¹ | The Gift of Unexpected Gifts | Matthew 2:1–12 | What does it mean for us to see and accept unexpected gifts? |
| First Sunday after Epiphany | The Gift of Committed Community | Matt. 3:13–17 | How do communities embody the vows offered in the event of baptism? |
| Second Sunday after Epiphany | The Gift of Unbridled Curiosity | John 1:29–42 | Encouragement to keep searching for God and God’s intentions for our lives. |
| Third Sunday after Epiphany | The Gift of Bold Action | Matt. 4:12–23 | Taking on bold challenges to live differently in the world—individually and together. |

1. The congregation can observe Epiphany on the Second Sunday of Christmas if January 6 does not fall on a Sunday.

| | Sermon Title | Focus Scripture | Theme |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Fourth Sunday after Epiphany | The Gift of Poetic Challenge | Matt. 5:1–12 | How creative means of expression can provoke meaningful and faithful action in the world. |
| Fifth Sunday after Epiphany | The Gift of Public Witness | Matt. 5:13–20 | Learning how to faithfully and respectfully give public witness to our faith. |
| Sixth Sunday after Epiphany | The Gift of Outrageous Grace | Matt. 5:21–37 | Seeing and honoring the God-created humanity in those with whom we disagree. |
| Transfiguration Sunday | The Gift of the Unpredictable Jesus. | Matt. 17:1–9 | Staying focused on our goals while also being open to the ways God may surprise us. |

Tips and Ideas for This Series

Using wrapped packages (perhaps in white, silver, and “ordinary time” green to mark the change in liturgical season) in graphics and around the worship space offers a good segue out of the cultural Christmas season and into the faith we live as a result of the incarnation. Depending on your level of comfort with cheesiness and props, the first week might begin with images or actual gifts as a lead-in to help people explore and expand their understanding of “gifts” today. With the unexpected, surprising, and unpredictable nature of God’s gifts explored in this series, take the opportunity to try new things in worship to start a fresh new year.

Epiphany: The Gift of Unexpected Gifts

Matthew 2:1–12

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (Matthew 2:9–10)

Not all gifts are freely given.

Far too many gifts come with emotional or expectational strings attached—some spoken, some unspoken. Some gifts are given with the expectation of some kind of reciprocation; others are given as a way to purchase forgiveness. Sometimes these gifts are genuine

expressions of one person's gratitude for the other; at other times gift-giving only perpetuates the commodification of unhealthy relationships.

We've all experienced some type of gift-giving awkwardness: the inappropriate gift, the obvious regift, or a stark difference in the size or significance of the gifts two people exchange. Giving or receiving a gift when none is offered in return can be awkward, depending on the circumstances, but it can also be an occasion of deep sincerity, generosity, and gratitude.

The gifts brought by the magi were completely unexpected by the household of Jesus. The gifts given were not self-centered in any way. The magi weren't obligated to give gifts to this family (they didn't even know them!), and certainly they weren't given out of guilt or the expectation of anything in return. No, these gifts were completely born out of a genuine realization of the reality of Christ—an epiphany.

Gifts that are offered freely and out of a deep sense of joy, generosity, and gratitude are powerful both for the one who gives and for the one who receives.

In our world today, we so often give in to cynicism and distrust that we become unable to recognize and receive the offerings of others. This inability to receive gifts is not just about material things, but about other ways that we are able to receive the gifts of love and affirmation as well. Too often if someone affirms something about our personhood, we too quickly want to deflect and deny the gift that has just been given. We can't accept a simple compliment. No, we do not want to become arrogant in our assessment of ourselves, but at the same time, when someone gifts us with a gesture meant to acknowledge the holy, beautiful, and just that we embody, we must be able to simply receive it as offered.

What keeps us from graciously accepting the unexpected gifts we are offered? What holds us back from *offering* a gift that is born out of joy, generosity, and gratitude? How can today's Scripture show us how to give and receive more faithfully?

First Sunday after Epiphany: The Gift of Committed Community

Matthew 3:13–17

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16–17)

If I was forced to choose a favorite Sunday in the church year, it would be this one, Baptism of the Lord Sunday. I say this because my own life has been so shaped and formed by the promises made at my baptism: a community that vowed to care for me and the knowledge of a God who loves and forgives more than I could ever imagine. The committed community of Christ's family is one of the greatest gifts God offers us.

Throughout my life there have been moments when individuals have failed to fulfill promises. Some disappointments have been cursory events, while others have left places of still-discovered pain. I have also been on the side of letting others down, breaking promises to loved ones, and not valuing my own createdness in God.

Throughout all these events, one thing has remained: my church community has loved me. They are not always perfect, but there has always been someone to remind me to whom I belong. From food being placed in front of me that soothed much more than my hunger, to the challenge to take seriously the idea that I was to always seek God's intentions for my life, this church raised me. And for this I will always be grateful.

Make no mistake. My church would have this approach with anyone, baptismal vows or not, but in the act of affirming these vows, they were also reminding me that I was not marked for myself, but for the well-being of the entire body.

People often wonder, as John himself did in the text, why Jesus—sinless Son of God—would need to be baptized. This question itself reveals our bias toward the individual, focusing only on questions of sin and salvation. The culmination of this story, in which God claims Jesus as beloved son, demonstrates the too-often-overlooked significance of our own baptism. We too are being claimed as children of God, joining a family with all our siblings in Christ.

In this day and age, when people may not know the nitty-gritty of church life, this Sunday offers a great chance to do some actual teaching about baptisms, the hows and whys of our theological and denominational traditions. Examine what baptism means, not just for the individual being baptized, but for the whole church community, who often make vows to help nurture each baptized individual in their faith.

Think about what our baptismal vows mean even beyond the congregation or Christian faith. On this day, we remember the commitment that people of faith have to all members of the community, baptized or not. In fact, in the commitment to these vows of baptism taken toward anyone means that we, in all ways, are called to care for, raise, and love all.

Second Sunday after Epiphany: The Gift of Unbridled Curiosity

John 1:29–42

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. (John 1:38–39a)

I have had the privilege of raising three human children, and I love them with all my heart, body, mind, and soul.

Yet from infancy to adulthood they could also be annoying to no end. I am sure they would say the same things about their parental units, but in our house it was common to say about a frustrating characteristic, “Wow, that will sure serve them later in life, . . . but right now it’s a pain in the butt.” The annoyance was not usually about a particular action or habit, but rather about one of those burgeoning personality traits: claiming agency, oppositional behavior, unbridled curiosity.

It’s hard to get from point A to point B when your four-year-old wants to stop and examine every tree or ask questions about every building.

Curiosity is a gift.

Curiosity is a gift.

Curiosity is a gift.

Repeat that phrase however many times you need to—until you truly believe it.

In my experience, curiosity is often more of a theoretically awesome idea than a settling and secure practical act. What I have found is that curiosity, this yearning to see what may be just ahead or to understand why something is the way it is, can be disruptive to the surrounding community.

If you think about this moment in the disciples’ journey, they could have simply walked on, but no . . . they kept answering the internal prodding to see what was next: who was this Jesus and what did it all mean? There was a nagging curiosity that kept them moving despite the fact that they were at the seminal stages of a life transformation beyond their own imagination and, at times, even beyond their ability to truly follow Christ.

This curiosity was also not just about them. With every person who chooses to follow Jesus, from the first moments to today, there are larger communities that look upon this curiosity as a disruptive annoyance. Be it family, friends, or faith community, our default choice is comfort and stability; so anytime anyone begins to question the status quo and explore ways that we may be called out of that

space, there is going to be disruption and resistance. Some people handle these moments with grace and openness, while others become more calcified and belligerent.

No matter how people respond, curiosity changes us and changes the world. How does our community handle curiosity and the possibility of change? How have we seen curiosity lead to meaningful transformation in our selves or our community? How do we discern whether or not the path down which our curiosity is leading us is a good path?

The end of this passage sees the disciples brought fully into the community where new names are given and lives are committed to being in the world differently. Not every path must be traveled, but being open to new paths at all times is a must if we are to grow in faith.

Third Sunday after Epiphany: The Gift of Bold Action

Matthew 4:12–23

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18–20)

There will come a time in everyone’s life when bold choices need to be made. From deeply personal actions like publicly calling out sexism, racism, or ableism in our daily conversations, to more global actions like how we engage in our political systems, there will be a time when we need to answer the words “Follow me.”

Following Christ is complex. We have made many aspects accessible, built structures to support, and collectively agreed that certain ways of people are just and right. And yet . . . there are still times when we will have to step out and away from what we have been, in order to discover what God hopes for us to become.

A difficult aspect of following Christ out into the unknown is that so many others may be dismissive, confused, or downright oppositional. There will always be rational reasons not to follow Christ: our own safety, the security of our families, and the burden of communal judgment. That said, our faith demands us always to discern where God is leading. Not only do we have always to be alert for the ways in which God’s path is being revealed before us. We then have continually to decide if we are going to walk it.

What ordinary people have you seen make bold choices despite

the risk or opposition they faced? It is easy to hold up as heroes people who have chosen bold actions, but we should be wary of encouraging the idea that one has to be some kind of larger-than-life figure to follow Christ in bold ways. Often real, lasting change is made when many ordinary people make a bold choice as a group—the Montgomery bus boycott, for example. How might we as a community discern what it means to follow as a group of people?

As difficult as discerning God’s calling can be, I have always found that what seems bold or risky to others seems quite normal and natural to those who genuinely trust that they are following where God is leading. Holding this tension between the unstable and unknown and a clarity of calling is a gift that allows us to be bold in how we live our faith and gives us the courage and calm to follow.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: The Gift of Poetic Challenge

Matthew 5:1–12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”
(Matthew 5:3–5)

I am one of those people who loves musicals. Musicals move me, not just because of the stories, but because I am in awe of people who have excelled at the craft. Being able to sing well and dance with joy are gifts in themselves, but when exercised at the same time, they are mind-blowing! The ways in which my heart, mind, and soul are beckoned forth by an individual’s command of a vocal movement, a communicative facial expression, and the well-timed delivery of a line are truly holy.

I feel the same way about the craft of the spoken word. The way in which individuals can craft word and tone in order to challenge and comfort an audience is also holy and awe-inspiring. Some inspire with soaring oration, while others captivate listeners through their calm and careful speech. Like many others for whom using words well is part of our calling, I too often allow myself to be confined to a narrow understanding of how the gospel can be shared, usually defaulting to *too many words*. It takes discipline and discernment to preach or write with brevity. As some have quipped, “I didn’t have time to write a thousand words, so I wrote two thousand.” Twitter has its faults, but sometimes we need some encouragement to rethink the verbosity we too often rely on.

I believe that the Beatitudes are the best of Christ’s poetic expres-

sions of faith, not only a challenge to what we do in our faith, but a challenge for me to express myself in different ways. Jesus is still using words, but this captivating portion of the Sermon on the Mount is a challenge to think about not only *what* we share but also *how* we share. In this passage, not only are we given insight into the kinds of things we need to be attuned to in the world; we are also being challenged to hear and express those profound challenges in different and more creative ways than we have been in the past.

The simplicity and nakedness with which Jesus talks about who is blessed is brilliant. This is a radical message, made clear and memorable for his hearers because of its poetic power. This should be held as a reminder that in order to share the challenges and calling of faith we must be creative in our expressions. More words, fewer words, better crafted words, no words—expressions of faith must take many forms in order to speak to the many ways in which people take in information.

If you have the space and ability, try to do some more creative things in worship today to demonstrate how different ways of expressing an idea—story, poetry, a painting or sculpture, dance, for example—affect people in different ways. Be wise in gauging how much creativity a community can take in one dose without rebelling, but because there is built-in permission given by the focus, don't pass up the opportunity.

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: The Gift of Public Witness

Matthew 5:13–20

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14–16)

Scripture is filled with apparent contradictions, especially when it comes to what we do in private and what we do in public. Jesus himself often tells people to go and tell no one of miracles that they have witnessed; at other times, the mandate is clear: go out and heal people, free people, feed people . . . all very public acts of faith.

One of the greatest challenges of being people of faith in an increasingly secular world is knowing the whens, hows, and wheres of expressing one's faith. When is the right time? How should we do this? Where is the right place to be public? Of course there is no one answer to the methods of our faith, no one way to express faith, and

no one time to act on our faith. Some might say to avoid talking “religion” or values altogether because you’re bound to offend someone. Given the diversity and complexity of theological expressions in our world and even just within Christianity, there may be a risk of being misunderstood or having your message contorted.

Yet it is clear that there *are* times when we are called out into the world to bear a public and powerful witness to Christ. If we do not, then we pay lip service to a faith that so clearly calls us to both private and public expressions of faith. Without public actions and expressions of faith, we risk becoming that bland, tasteless faith that draws fewer and fewer people *and* stands directly in contradiction to the ways Christ “took on” many people he had known for quite a while.

What are some of the ways in which you or your community has boldly lived or expressed faith in public? What are the biggest obstacles to living faith out in public? What is at stake if you don’t?

Public expressions of faith can be difficult and anxiety laden, but barring any odd circumstances, talking with family, friends, mentors, and others will help you better to talk about and share the ways in which God has called you into and onto this journey of faith.

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: The Gift of Outrageous Grace

Matthew 5:21–37

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23–24)

Every day whenever I check my phone for the latest political or social kerfuffle, my blood pressure rises and metaphorical steam comes shooting out of my ears. I assume that I am not the only one who has this reaction, as there are plenty of events for us all to become angry about. When I see someone do something horrible, I usually react in a couple of ways. At my best I see each person, no matter what they have done or said, as a created and complex child of God. At my worst, I question the very humanity of my enemy, wondering if they are not really an evil alien in disguise, sent from another planet with a mission to prove why human beings should not have nice things.

Then I realize that, just as I am judging them over there, the odds are pretty good that I am someone else’s “them” and I am being judged right here. Yes, humanity’s capacity for goodness is vast, but our proclivity to chip away at the dignity and humanity of the other is also strong. Throughout the political and social history in the United

States, a tactic used to “win” in struggles big and small is to dehumanize and other our enemy. This tactic knows no ideological bounds, as all people fall into this trap of creating distance between themselves and others with drastically different opinions and perspectives.

But no matter what we do as human beings, God somehow still loves us as God’s own. This love does not mean acceptance or approval of acts or thoughts that dehumanize, but it is a love that is grounded in grace that goes far beyond anything that my heart or head could ever imagine. Jesus knows we are nowhere nearly as gracious with one another, but he calls us to repentance and reconciliation, with his command to repair the breaches in relationship that we have created, before we make our offerings to God.

The teachings in today’s Gospel reading may seem like mere rules (a stricter standard than the Law of Moses, in fact) but at their core are a call to see the humanity in one another first and foremost, treating one another with the grace we would want for ourselves. This does not mean glossing over differences for the sake of “unity,” or accepting abusing behavior. We can maintain healthy boundaries of behavior and belief while still acknowledging that all human beings are God’s.

Like so many elements of the magnitude of God’s presence, we humans often only hear whispers or feel glancing touches. This loving presence is extended to *all* of us: the people we feel are “deserving” of it, as well as those whom we may feel have lost the right to God’s love.

Transfiguration Sunday: The Gift of the Unpredictable Jesus

Matthew 17:1–9

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. . . . And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. (Matthew 17:2–3, 8)

I often wonder if the disciples ever just looked at Jesus and said, “Seriously, Jesus, one more thing we have to try and understand?”

In this passage, everything that makes total sense to do, the disciples do, and then Jesus shifts. The disciples must have been so frustrated. Why not build a home for three prophets? Seems like the hospitable and welcoming thing to do. Why not tell everyone what they have just seen? This seems like a pretty good example of why they were following Christ in the first place.

Yes, there is a holy moment in the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus. Again, this was *proof* of the divine nature of Jesus, but the

fact that Jesus challenges reactions that seem perfectly understandable should not be overlooked. Too often we act simply because it's what we are "supposed" to do. But what if there are things that we have been doing for generations or for a few days that are simply not what we should be doing?

This moment points to the need for us to be discerning and open to the ways that Jesus may want us to be a presence of unexpectedness in the world. We may instinctually move toward an action, but having the discipline and commitment to think, pray, and discern individually and communally may sometimes point us toward new responses that are beautifully surprising.

This goes far beyond simply challenging the idea that we too often do things a certain way because we have always done certain things in a certain way. Sure, many things do need to change, but how unexpected would it be to discern that not *all* things need to change? And for the things that we do believe need to change, what are the unexpected places toward which Jesus is directing us? We need to plan and discern while always being open to the surprises that our faith may introduce.

While we may sometimes react in fear like the disciples, if we remain open to the ways that Christ surprises us, maybe we can join in on the unexpected ways that Christ shows himself to the world.

Now *that* would be unexpected.

Calendar of Sundays

This nine-year calendar enables you to plan for up to three lectionary cycles, as well as to observe some of the variation in the liturgical seasons. Due to the varying dates of Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, the seasons of Epiphany before and Ordinary Time after can vary in length. Therefore, you may see blanks in this calendar, denoting Sundays that are not observed in a particular year. For those Sundays that are observed only one or two of the three cycles included in this calendar, you may see “stand-alone sermon” in place of a series sermon. Stand-alone sermons are also suggested for certain weeks between series to allow for special services, a preacher’s vacation, or to address a topic independently of a longer series.

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