

# THE ABOLITION LECTIONARY



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CHRISTIANS FOR THE ABOLITION OF  
PRISONS

The Abolition Lectionary

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*First edition*

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The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed.

Jesus Christ, Luke 4:18 (CEB)



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# Introduction

First Things First: What is Abolition and what is an Abolitionist Christian?

We use the term “abolition” rather broadly. Inspired by the movements to abolish slavery, Jim Crow, and the like, we advocate for the abolition of prisons, police, immigration detention, and other prison industrial complex (PIC) institutions. According to Critical Resistance, an international abolitionist advocacy group, “The **prison industrial complex (PIC)** is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems. ... **PIC abolition** is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.”<sup>1</sup> At the core, modern abolitionists advocate for these sweeping social changes because PIC institutions are immoral, harmful, perpetuate systemic inequalities, and are ineffective at keeping communities safe. For the most part, we are abolitionists *because we are Christian*, and the goal of this book is to do serious theological

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>

reflection about how to lives as abolitionist Christians.

That said, *you don't have to agree 100% with every contributor to this book in order to consider yourself an abolitionist.* We don't all agree with one another on everything, and that is okay. There is a wide spectrum of beliefs that fit under the category abolition (not unlike the diversity of beliefs within Christianity itself).

## What is the Abolition Lectionary and Where Did it Come From?

The Abolition Lectionary began in Advent 2020 as a resource and preaching aid for pastors. Using Scriptures associated with Sundays and holidays from the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), a variety of contributors highlighted the connections between the Bible and abolition. These essays were originally hosted as blog posts on the website of Christians for the Abolition of Prisons ([www.christiansforabolition.org](http://www.christiansforabolition.org)).

These entries were written in a specific context, a time and place different from yours right now. For a good portion of the Abolition Lectionary, the Covid-19 pandemic was raging around the world (and badly affecting incarcerated people). George Floyd was murdered in the summer of 2020, leading to a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the mainstreaming of many abolitionist concepts, especially when it came to the police. Donald Trump was president of the United States at the beginning of this writing and attempted to thwart the transfer of power to Joe Biden.

Billionaire oligarch Elon Musk bought Twitter in this period, which was a vital organizing platform. Some of the conversations referenced in this book have disappeared as a result of the acquisition and ensuing exodus of users. And now, in 2025,

Trump and Musk are central figures in the US government again.

Entries have generally not been changed when they reference the context in which they were written. Where appropriate, an endnote may have been added to help with that context (there are well over 100 endnotes that provide both context and further reading). The Abolition Lectionary isn't simply a resource for perusal but a historical artifact about what we were thinking about and organizing around in these tumultuous three years, 2020–2023.

As we prepare to publish this collection in 2025, abolition may seem further away than ever in the face of regression and repression in US politics. Why are we asking the church about this utopian ideal now?

The themes in this book have a lot to teach this current moment. In these pages, you will find concrete liberation based on the Scriptures. We point to restoration, accountability, and the possibility of reconciliation, the tools Christ gives us for trying to find a way forward with our enemies without ever denying the harm they've done. We share movement and coalition-building strategies, often based on our own experiences organizing for justice. Perhaps most importantly, we highlight God's ever-present action on the side of the oppressed.

In these pages you will find creative interpretations of Jesus' words and actions. You'll find theology drawing on the wisdom of movement organizers and restorative and transformative justice practitioners. You'll find faithful, if not always conventional, wrestling with scriptural passages and how they can be brought to bear on the needs of the world. You'll find stories of the Spirit moving in places of need in biblical times and also in ours.

The reality is that state repression has been a fact of life for incarcerated people for centuries. Prisons are a model and laboratory for oppressive governance. The tools and strategies of abolition are based in real experience to provide care, meet needs, and build power under the most difficult and oppressive conditions. So perhaps abolitionist readings are not irrelevant for this moment at all.

The contributors who have provided these reflections come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are pastors, some are organizers, some are writers and artists, and many are some combination of all of these things. We come from The Episcopal Church, Methodism, various free church traditions, Roman Catholicism, and more. You can find out more about our individual contributors in the section with their bios.

While the Abolition Lectionary was originally intended as a preaching aid, there's good reason to use this book devotionally, as well. Abolition is in part about expanding our imagination and tearing down what has colonized our minds when it comes to PIC institutions and practices. Reading entries each week can help liberate us from the ideas that bind us and open us up to new ways of reading Scripture. Feel free to use it as best serves your own liberation.

## A Note on the Contents and Arrangement

You'll find thousands of words about our Scriptures and abolition in this text and they are organized largely by the Scripture's occurrence in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). The RCL certainly has its limitations, but it is widely used by Christian communities around the world. If you are looking for a specific Scripture passage, you can find where it occurs in the RCL and

then navigate to that chapter of this book.

While the RCL served as the base for the Abolition Lectionary, it is not followed completely. Each entry will not address every Scripture addressed on that day, usually only one (though sometimes more). Most Scriptures chosen were from the Semi-Continuous readings, but some are from the Complementary readings. (If that means nothing to you, don't worry about it and move on). If you're using this book as a preaching aid, you may not find precisely the Scripture you're using in this book. Regardless, the readings are paired together for a reason, so there may still be some beneficial content in an entry for you. If you're using this book devotionally, the selection of readings covers all kinds of biblical literature from every corner of the Bible (Law, Psalms, Prophets, Gospels, Epistles, etc.) so you should find a breadth of resources here.

## Disruption and Endurance

In 2023, Wesley (one of the editors) spent time in Northern Ireland learning about peacemaking with folks who lived through the Troubles there. Many were actively engaged in the peacemaking process that (contrary to popular belief) was always going on, struggling to break through. Two things learned there are particularly relevant to the work we've described and done in this volume: (1) peacemaking was a long, often-ignored process that didn't make the headlines until the end and (2) criminal justice reform was integral to making peace and establishing the power-sharing arrangement that exists to this day in Northern Ireland.

Almost every text we dwell on in this book speaks to work that requires disruption and endurance. That kind of work typically

does not make the headlines. The slow work of abolitionists in establishing non-retributive paths to justice, ministry to those harmed by our criminal justice system, and the push for alternatives to our system of policing don't make the headlines unless they're being used to scare people. Abolition usually only makes the headlines when it's useful to those in power to stir up fear and get people to circle their wagons around them.

Nevertheless, this disruptive work is at the core of movement toward a more just, merciful, and peaceful society. We will not change the political temperature and the escalating political violence of the United States in particular unless we disarm the criminal justice system that perpetuates both of these threats. Like in Northern Ireland, changing the way the State treats everyday people is integral to establishing a more peaceful society. How can the individual look at how the State treats people (either through policing, incarceration, or even the death penalty) and believe they shouldn't behave likewise?

Resistance to the State's story of redemptive violence and justice through violence is central to the slow work of abolition. Many of the stories of our Scriptures are prime examples of how to tell a different story than this one. It's difficult work, but it's worth it. Keep at it, or as the Gospel of Mark puts it, "Keep awake."

# 1

## Advent 1

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11–14;  
Matthew 24:36–44

Contributor: Leeann Culbreath

This Sunday begins the season of Advent—a time of preparation and anticipation leading to the feast of Christmas. While typical Advent practices include soft candlelight, melodic carols, and clever calendars, the Scriptures leading up to Christmas are anything but soft and sweet and cheery.

Advent scriptures are often apocalyptic and startling, pointing toward a future vastly different than the current reality. Dramatic contrasts, portents, tribulation, and admonishment are all the stuff of Advent Scriptures. They warn of changes to come—a revolution, really—as the Messiah enters the world in the form of a baby. That tiny, helpless, vulnerable baby will

overthrow all systems of evil, bursting in from the heavenly realm to confront them from the inside.

This week's passages are no exception: weapons of war destroyed and turned into tools for abundance, waking up to a new reality, light overcoming darkness, and the sudden arrival of God's reign, so abrupt and sweeping it is likened to the worst catastrophe the people of God have ever known.

The Isaiah passage in particular sets forth God's vision of a non-violent world in which God teaches the ways of peace and people joyfully seek a new way. The Psalm echoes this vision, singing of a Jerusalem that is intended to be a place of unity, praise, prosperity, and peace. In Romans, Christians are exhorted to "put on the armor of light," pursuing peace and dignity in a world literally hell-bent on violence and degradation.

Essentially, these Advent passages present us with a vision of abolition, of a world transformed so that all of Creation may live in peace and abundance. That transformation began abruptly with Jesus' first breath and continues today. That transformation began from the inside, within humanity, from one who seemed utterly powerless throughout life and in his death. It started with direct confrontation of evil powers.

Like Jesus, persons in prison and immigrant detention centers appear powerless to the world, but they are a formidable force in God's ongoing mission of transformation and reconciliation. They are in direct, daily confrontation with systemic evil and know its weak spots. Working together, organizing for others' dignity and liberation as well their own, they tap into divine power to dismantle oppressive structures so God's peaceful reign can flourish.

From the inside, among the vulnerable and "powerless," grows a radically non-violent world. Advent challenges us to

deepen our solidarity with those inside who are organizing for a peaceful future. Along with special observances and traditions in this season, our Advent practices can also include actively supporting and collaborating with imprisoned and detained persons for liberation. What would it look like if our Advent practices were as shocking as our Advent Scriptures? At the very least, we would catch glimmers of eternal hope that outshine all of the season's candles and lights.

## Year B

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*  
(Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

Most people think abolition is a fantastical idea—they always have. Abolitionists who wanted to end slavery in the United States heard again and again about how disruptive it would be. Those who sought to abolish Jim Crow, lynching, and discrimination at the ballot box heard again and again about how unsettling it would be. Today, calls for the abolition of police and prisons hear the same thing—it's too troublesome, unruly, and even destructive! Abolition is an impossible consideration because it would upend everything.

Yet, when we come to Isaiah this week the opposite impulse is on full display. The writer invites the tumult!

*Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*

*The mountains would quake at your presence!*

*The nations might tremble!*

Like much of the prophetic writings, here God is disruptive, unsettling, and troublesome. Instead of shying away from a wild, liberating God, the writer clings to the very things opponents of abolition fear. The writer knows that what some call disruptive and troublesome is actually freedom, justice, and deliverance.

The season of Advent compels us toward this vision of God. Mark's Gospel this week begs us to keep awake and stay alert for God's arrival, and Isaiah unflinchingly depicts the advent of God as something that upends the earth.

This upending will not be comfortable, as the writer of Isaiah suggests. God's arrival unmask our sins, revealing that "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." Commitment to abolitionism likewise draws us to consider our iniquities. To challenge systems of incarceration and policing demands that we confront the prejudice, malevolence, and evil within ourselves that invented and props up these institutions. To advocate for abolition is to challenge national myths of freedom and greatness, instead pointing to the original sins of this nation.

But the disruption is good news! The writer of Isaiah reminds us that God can make a new thing in us. "We are the clay, and you [God] are the potter; we are the work of your hand." God can make a new world among us—one that sees as its foundation mutual care, neighborly affection, and shared abundance instead of surveillance, punishment, and violence. If abolition is a fantastical idea, it is no more fantastical than the God we claim to serve.

## Year C

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In Advent, the church focuses on the eschatological promise of the coming reign of God. The anticipation of Advent reminds us that the incarnation of God on earth is a prolepsis—an experiencing-in-advance—of the true and complete fullness of creation, of the justice God promises.

The promise of coming justice is central to the text from Jeremiah, a promise from God to bring the “righteous Branch” from David, who shall “execute justice and righteousness in the land”—justice so complete that the land shall be renamed: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

The promise made to Israel, which is a promise for the whole creation through Israel, is the promise of justice. And not only of justice as an abstract value, but of just government—in biblical terms, of a just ruler. Or, as we might put it in modern political terms, of just ways of organizing our society. Of just interpersonal relations. Of social relationships structured by justice and righteousness.

The point is that the promise is not separable from the realities of government and societal relationships. The promise to Jeremiah is not an unearthly paradise but a human society structured by God’s justice.

The challenge is to recognize that such justice has not yet fully appeared. Christian theology has tended to separate this promise from its historical context and associate it with a coming future age or the end of history.

Reading this text in Advent can be a reminder to Christians, though, that the promise of God for justice is a promise for the renewal of this world and society. For Christians, the incarnation of God in Jesus is the beginning of the age to come. We live on the edge of apocalypse. In this space, where God has become incarnate within our society but where justice has not yet won, is a profound place for transformation: a creative womb where we can build and experiment and construct new alternative ways to the death-dealing ways of the world and new ways of healing and transforming harm. In this liminal space of tension and creativity, we work alongside God, bringing to birth God's justice and righteousness from within the societal structures where we find ourselves.

## 2

### Advent 2

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10

Contributor: Jay Bergen

If you could have any superpower, what would it be? Flight? Invisibility? Super speed?

A few years ago, my then-partner definitively answered this for me: The power to create forests. Corporations are burning down the Amazon? Bam, forest. Developers want to build a new subdivision? Speak the word, forest appears. I have yet to find a better answer to this question.

But creating forests at whim is not just a reparative power. An invading army is about to attack your city? Poof, instant forest disorients the invaders. Trying to blockade an ICE detention center? Every time the trucks try to leave, more trees suddenly appear in front of them!

It's hard to operate a carceral system if suddenly a forest is growing in the middle of it, and won't stop. If roots begin to buckle the concrete and branches tear open the fences. If giant oaks suddenly tear through the ceiling of the police precinct.

While we don't have the power to magically generate forests to confuse our enemies and set our people free, this famous passage from Isaiah invites us to imagine what might be growing out of seemingly-dead wood. The small shoots of hope grow, in a few short verses, into one with the power to bring righteousness to Earth, to judge for the poor and oppressed. All is not lost. In fact, all is about to be totally transformed. Children will live in safety. All of creation will find a new harmony. Out of these tiny green leaves, a whole new world is born.

Abolition seems impossible. So often, a new world feels not just far away, but totally beyond our reach. Thankfully, it is not our reach that matters. It is not up to our individual superpowers. It is our collective reaching that transforms this fragile new life into a new world. We make abolition possible.

## Year B

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

We sometimes preemptively expect the comfort of God. I often find myself in situations where I almost say, "God, I am here, comfort me! I didn't do anything; it would be great if I don't have to and I can get the comfort without the mercy or justice." Yet throughout the scriptures, the status quo of all societies (from the Egyptians to the Israelite Judges and Kings to the Romans)

rests upon injustice. The prophets were the voice of God for the people hurt again and again by those in power.

The comfort here comes in the midst of exile, and yet I want to lift up verse 6: “a voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?”” God is calling us this day, telling us to cry out. Do not be satisfied with the way things are. If these things of God are true, the structures and principalities are not eternal. The prison system is not eternal. Abolition is an act of faith in a better world, in a world possible precisely because every valley shall be lifted up. A voice says, “cry out.” Are you crying out? Are you seeing what God sees? Are you lifting up those society tears down? Are you seeking comfort before justice? Offer comfort to those seeking justice. Speak tenderly to those responding to the voice of God.

The Lord is coming, mighty in power. Let us not act as if this were a lie. Taking comfort in the status quo of our judicial system assumes an absent and indifferent God, but our God is on the side of justice. Our God is justice. A voice says, “cry out!” This advent, we have the chance to cry out with God at the injustice around us. We have a chance to speak tenderly to those who have been abused and hurt. We have the chance to welcome a savior who is making all things new.

Year C

Scripture: Philippians 1:3-11

Contributor: Bailey Pickens

It is sometimes easy to forget that Paul wrote while incarcerated. As a citizen, he had access to many privileges and rights that were not on the table for Jesus or John the Baptist, or any of the apostles or most of the people who came to listen to Jesus preach the good news. But even with all his legal privileges, Paul was a prisoner for five or six years. His “sharing in God’s grace” with other Christians was in two senses: that they all “defended and confirmed” the gospel, and that Christians in the cities in which Paul was imprisoned attended to his physical needs.

Imprisonment is, following Orlando Patterson, “social death”: an incarcerated person is cut off from friends and family, from physical or material care from others, and from voluntary meaningful work. Yet during Paul’s imprisonment, this death was absolutely refused. Christians carried and copied his letters, part of his life’s work; they visited him and attended to him; and Paul knew himself still to be fundamentally in community and communion with other Christians and their Lord, in a position to encourage, teach, and exhort them. Paul was known to be alive, as we all are alive in Christ; neither his bond of love with those he wrote to, nor his life, nor his faith, nor the worth of his teachings or perspective were in question.

How can we live in this way today? Paul wrote from prison not as a supplicant or one to be pitied but as a teacher and a brother. Yet how easily those of us who are not incarcerated make appeals for incarcerated people based not on siblinghood but on pity. The good news of God’s liberation and the kingdom brought near to us by Christ is not that God has felt sorry for people worse off than us, but rather that death is over and we are all and will all be freed, restored, healed. Prison is become a

nothing as sin is become a nothing: this is the foundation upon which Christ works the good work being done in us. We can live this way now.

# 3

## Advent 3

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 11:2-11

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The appointed reading for this Sunday gives us the voice of an incarcerated person: John the Baptist, asking for confirmation of Jesus' identity from prison.

As Liza Anderson has written<sup>2</sup>, John's question to Jesus might seem like a "pointed challenge"—as Jesus' response to John "alludes to Isaiah, noting that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. However, it is a selective quotation,

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, "The Beheading of John the Baptist and the (Post-)Traumatic Church" in *The Living Church* (August 30, 2021): <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/the-beheading-of-john-the-baptist-and-the-post-traumatic-church/>

omitting the promise in Isaiah 42:7 about bringing prisoners out of the dungeons and freeing captives. Given that John asks the question while in prison, this is presumably the part that he is the most concerned with, and it's hard to imagine that he would have been comforted by the reminder that Jesus was doing everything else in the messianic job description!" Anderson suggests that one way the church has historically addressed this challenge is by recognizing that Jesus' mission to free prisoners includes freeing the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19) and that "it was part of the vocation of John the Baptist to be the forerunner and proclaimer of Christ not only among the living but also among the dead—even though this was by its nature a vocation that required him to die." John precedes Jesus into criminalization, incarceration, and death.

In any case, I think the challenge offered by John the Baptist from prison is essential as we think about the nature of Christ's coming and mission. How are we, in this world, to know that Jesus is the promised messiah who makes all things new? The answer that Jesus gives does not rely on his descent from David or his divine nature, but on the fruit of the work itself. The confirmation of Jesus' identity comes about in the community of healing and liberation he leaves behind.

I've written elsewhere<sup>3</sup> about how the key question regarding the world to come is not "What must I do to gain eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) but "What is the nature of the life to which we will be raised?" and that Jesus' answer to John here gives the answer. The renewed community Jesus brings—which includes

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Bowman, "Advent, The Four Last Things: Heaven" in *The Living Church* (December 16, 2019): <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/advent-the-four-last-things-heaven/>

the promise of freedom for prisoners and forms of justice that heal rather than punish—is a picture of the “eternal life” of the age to come. Jesus’ identity, the renewed community around him, and the expectation of eternal life coalesce in the work of liberation and healing itself. John’s voice reminds us that those who are incarcerated continue to advocate for and demand their own liberation and inclusion in healed, renewed communities, and those on the outside must listen and act in solidarity.

## Year B

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

Those who have been involved in prison abolition are well aware of one of the first questions asked by those who are unfamiliar: “What will we do with criminals?” Abolitionists are well aware of the need to push back on several assumptions that this question holds. First, that any group of people can be separated as “criminals.” We are all one body, the children of God, and what a legal system labels one cannot impugn that those in prison are still our neighbors. Second, that the community’s role is that of punishing, rather than holding accountable. Still, the question behind the question is what abolitionists must answer: “What will be different from how we do things now?”

The prophet Isaiah provides a template for how God answers that question. After forcefully declaring that God proclaims release for the imprisoned (a declaration Jesus would later name as the focus of his ministry), Isaiah spells out what God plans for “all who mourn.”

“They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”

God’s vision, for all who mourn, is that they actively pursue the rebuilding and restoring of what’s been ruined. This justice of God is not a retribution, it’s restoration. The vision God has is for people – those who’ve been harmed *and* those who have harmed others– to rebuild. And God goes further than just seeing restoration for current wrongs, saying that the devastations of many generations will be repaired.

In light of these prophecies, the church must communicate that abolition is for the good of all the community. When God is involved, God involves all in the work of resurrection, and the restoration goes back generations. For U.S. Christians, this also means supporting financial reparations for harms such as slavery, Jim Crow, and the drug war. Christians must involve themselves in giving land back to Indigenous communities, protecting current lands from unwanted development, and seeking to support expungement of marijuana crimes any time their jurisdiction seeks to legalize marijuana.

Christians follow in Christ’s steps by also embodying this prophetic vision that Isaiah lays claim to, and seeking to rebuild and repair all that has been broken.

Year C

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The reading from Philippians for this Sunday—from which it takes the traditional name “Gaudete Sunday,” from the Latin translation of the text—is all about rejoicing. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul writes. “Again I say, rejoice.”

Joy is all over the letter to the Philippians, which is full of repetitions of Paul’s own “rejoicing” for events in his own life and for the church in Philippi (e.g. 1:18), as well as exhortations to “rejoice.” This is particularly striking given the reality that Paul wrote this letter from his incarceration.

It is important to name that the exhortation to rejoice can be an oppressive one—to demand a sort of performative joy in the Lord from those who suffer is itself an unkindness. But I find the exhortation to rejoice in this letter to be a comfort. Partly, this is because Paul’s exhortation to rejoice comes out of his own confidence and joy—it is less of a demand than an invitation. Another reason, I think, comes from what he identifies in 4:5: “The Lord is near.” Rejoicing derives from the nearness of God; from God who comes down in compassion, sharing in our sufferings so we can share in God’s joy.

And the nearness of God does not only imply God’s self-emptying compassion, but also the promise of deliverance. “The Lord is near,” bringing freedom, liberation, and healing. The very nearness of the Lord implies freedom and liberation, because freedom and liberation are God’s own nature.

This all makes me think of the role of joy in abolition and transformative justice. Sometimes it is easy, in organizing and activism and ministries of presence and solidarity with those who are incarcerated, to see the injustice and suffering of the world so much that we forget how central joy is to the work of

abolition. Joy is as essential as struggle.

If abolition is about what we build<sup>4</sup>, not just what must be torn down, then it is enacted in building structures of joy. Solidarity by those of us on the outside with those who are criminalized and incarcerated is based on the joy found in the communities people build within carceral spaces. Restorative justice spaces are spaces of reparation, but they can also be spaces of joy as we deepen connections with one another's truth. Transformative justice practices build on joy too: in *Beyond Survival*<sup>5</sup>, Janaé E. Bonsu of BYP100 writes about how "healing-centered organizing requires habitual self-care and collective-care," naming how organizing spaces draw on "Indigenous and ancestral practices" to build those spaces of care. The work of justice begins with finding joy through practices that have been marginalized by mainstream culture.

"Hope is a discipline," Mariame Kaba says. And perhaps joy is a discipline too, one that we find as we invest in deep relationships and caring community.

For me, this text is a necessary reminder to search for practices of joy that sustain the work of building a just world.

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<sup>4</sup> Reina Sultan and Micah Herskind, "What Is Abolition, And Why Do We Need It?" in *Vogue* (July 23, 2020): <https://www.vogue.com/article/what-is-abolition-and-why-do-we-need-it>

<sup>5</sup> *Beyond Survival: Stories and Strategies from the Transformative Justice Movement*, edited by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (AK Press, 2020).

# 4

## Advent 4

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Joseph thought he was doing the right thing. Matthew even portrayed his actions favorably, calling Joseph “righteous” (v. 19) and framing his actions as about Mary’s protection. Once he found out that Mary was pregnant, Joseph determined what he believed was the best path to keep him and Mary as safe and secure as possible. That is how Matthew framed it, at least.

Joseph’s plans to “dismiss her quietly” may have avoided a public spectacle or shaming *for him*, but I have my doubts about what it would have done for Mary. Unless she were to find a way to end the pregnancy, which by all accounts Mary was not interested in doing, everything would inevitably become public. At that point, Mary would have been alone and subject

to whatever “public disgrace” Joseph imagined they might be avoiding by their separation.

We approach crime and punishment in the United States much like Joseph. The problem for Joseph was that he did not believe Mary and did not genuinely care for her long-term welfare. Similarly, when we care so much about the amorphous concept of ‘crime,’ we miss the point. At the root of ‘crime’ is an unbearable social condition. Until we address the social conditions which produce breaches in an already broken social contract, we won’t achieve our stated goals of a just society—no matter how “righteous” an outside observer might characterize us as Matthew sees Joseph.

The other way we follow Joseph’s lead is in prisons themselves. Prisons seek to remove those labeled ‘criminals’ from public view. Much like Joseph attempted to remove Mary from public view rather than seek her welfare, we incarcerate those who suffer from our social ills whether they have truly committed injurious actions or not. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge’s solution to poverty and homelessness: “*Are there no prisons?*” Rather than expose ourselves to the “public disgrace” (that is, our own social sin) that resulted in the phenomenon of ‘crime,’ we hide people away in prisons, subject them to violence and degradation, and exploit their labor. All the while, like Joseph, we think we’re doing the right thing.

All of this is not to say that the people who commit crimes are blameless and purely a result of social sin and structural evils. Some people do bad things, sure. Victims also need restoration and justice, of course. However, when we build our entire idea of justice around dismissal and the avoidance of any sort of reckoning with the social order, we miss the point entirely. We don’t get true justice from prisons. We don’t solve problems

with prisons. At best, we avoid them.

To his credit, when confronted by an angel of God, Joseph changes his mind. He's willing to subject himself to the trials that come with welcoming Jesus into the world. According to Matthew, Joseph doesn't hesitate. Now, when God confronts us with the evils of incarceration, we can only hope we do the same.

## Year B

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Mary's song of justice, commonly referred to as the Magnificat, does not accept the status quo. The powerful are brought down low. The rich are sent away empty. Mary's words prefigure the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man later in Luke 16.

The song is powerful and convicting, but the words of Mary hinge on her 'yes' to God in our Gospel reading for this week. God is going to shake some things and break some chains. An angel comes to Mary, a messenger of the Lord who probably looked more like a steampunk villain (with wheels and heads and strange words) than a glowing figure with white wings. Mary is scared but she does not run. Mary is confused but she does not doubt. She doubts in herself, not in God. She asks the angel, "How can this be?"

And then we have the answer that comforts Mary and should open our eyes to the radical possibility of prison abolition and society being remade. Gabriel starts with giving the deets about the Holy Spirit and Elizabeth and then says, "For nothing is

impossible with God.”

This, at its heart, is why abolition is a faith issue. Prisons and jails and the justice system from the top down exist in an immanent continuum where the only justice is ours, where institutions are fixed, and where the imagination is limited by what we have seen before. As a society, we continually find ways of saying ‘no’ to God that only could come down to a lack of faith. We say ‘no’ or ‘not yet’ or ‘let’s be reasonable.’ We say, ‘what about so-and-so,’ describing the horrors that have happened in many people’s lives without questioning the system of justice that perpetuates horrors just as heinous. We perform whataboutism to God, like God is some online poster and we are internet trolls.

Mary does not. Mary says yes to God. Mary says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

May it be so with us all. May we see a world beyond the status quo where we can say yes to God. Where we see the powerful torn down, and the captives go free.

Year C

Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

The Magnificat is one of the clearest statements of God’s priorities when it comes to power, yet we frequently ignore it. None of the classic Christmas hymns sung in my tradition (and most likely yours too!) utilize the Magnificat as its biblical referent. It’s a regular feature of some liturgies, but it has

disappeared from the popular imagination of Christmas in the United States. Mary's declaration of what the Nativity will mean is very different from what American Christians frequently ascribe to "the reason for the season," "the meaning of Christmas," or "the Christmas spirit." Why? Because the Magnificat is about power.

The Magnificat outlines God's agenda for society: scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, and sending the rich away empty. God wants to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things, because that's frequently not what is happening in our world.

The reversals of the Magnificat are inherently uncomfortable for a culture that would be subject to them. The prison industrial complex, of course, would be torn apart under Mary's divine vision. All the authorities and powers Americans feel they depend on for their safety and security (despite how wrong-headed that notion is) would be unseated according to Mary. The police would lose their gargantuan budgets, the private prisons would lose their profits, and the politicians who support them would lose their seats.

And, contrary to the ingrained assumptions of many of us, that's good news! With these dramatic reversals and massive upheavals come liberation, freedom, and the world God wants. Victims of the carceral system would be lifted up, those left without resources and opportunity because of it would be filled. If we listen to Mary's song, we hear a call to abolition and liberation—one we can't ignore.

# 5

## Christmas Day

December 25, All Years, Proper I

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

The words of the prophets are not just words of the past predicting the Messiah, they are words about the present need for a savior. The church has often drifted into this position of not adequately articulating why anyone would need Jesus. A lot of people are fine and dandy now. Maybe we have a supernatural end after we die. Maybe we can think about our loved ones and seeing them again.

The darkness of which the prophet Isaiah spoke was not the darkness of death at the end of a long life but the darkness found in the brokenness of this world. The people who walk in darkness are here and now people who are hurting in this world; people who society marginalizes and dismisses.

Abolition is one response to the claim of Isaiah 9 that God “will establish justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” The word justice has been entirely appropriated and hollowed out by the criminal justice system, but righteousness has not. In Greek, they are the same word.

If the child is to be born who brings light in the darkness, then we need follow that child in the authority and righteousness even now. Not just with tasks that are easy, but with tasks that are hard.

The yoke of their burden will be broken. May we work to break those yokes this today. May the Incarnation remind us that God’s light is not just for the future, but for now. May we work towards that future of righteousness in all things, especially in ways of justice, now.

## December 25, All Years, Proper II

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

“Because there was no room for them at the inn.”

An abolitionist perspective forces us to recognize prisons and policing not as a necessary consequence of trying to build safe communities, but instead as a social construction intended to draw boundaries around those who are worthy of compassion and a place in an accountable human society, and those who are excluded. The logic of prisons and police is the logic of “no room at the inn”:

- no room to hold in our communities those who have done

harm as they fumble toward accountability, but only to banish them and lock them up;

- no room for those who are criminalized by the intentional acts of those in power to define harmless acts as crimes in ways driven by racial inequity and anti-Blackness;
- no room for entire communities that have been subjected to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “organized abandonment,” considered unworthy of investment but only to be threats to be policed. Prisons and policing are about who counts as a community member, and who is considered “social pollution” (Rima Vesely-Flad’s term, from her book *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives, and the Struggle for Justice*, Fortress Press, 2017), subject to exclusion and control.

This is the story into which Jesus is born at Christmas. Christmas is the story of those who are turned away from shelter, from love, from community, because there is no room for them at the inn. The story of Christmas begins with this fact: the light shines in the darkness, but the world does not know it. How often, as a society, do we close our hearts, our country, our communities, our homes, and leave the Holy Family with no room at the inn?

But this is not the end of the Christmas story. Because the Christmas story tells us that God makes a way. When there is no room at the inn, God is born into the world in a stable and laid in a manger. When people would not receive Mother Mary and her holy child, the animals brought gifts. We sing that favorite old carol “The Friendly Beasts:”

*Jesus our brother, kind and good  
Was humbly laid in a stable rude*

*And the friendly beasts around him stood  
Jesus our brother, kind and good  
Thus every beast by some glad spell  
In the stable dark was glad to tell  
Of the gift he gave Emmanuel  
The gift he gave Emmanuel.*

In the story of this hymn, every animal offers the baby Jesus a gift: the cow the manger to cradle his head, the dove a song to sing him to sleep.

When human justice and community fail, God makes another way.

But this is the judgment against the ways of our world: when we ignore the way God is making and look for safety in structures that exclude and criminalize, we miss Jesus.

There's a beautiful story by Ray Bradbury in *The Illustrated Man*, called "The Man." In it, a starship captain arrives on a faraway planet – but the people there are not interested in him, because a far more important man, a miraculous healer bringing peace, has just been there. At first the captain is skeptical that anything so good could be true. But when he is finally convinced that the coming of "the Man" has been real, he demands to know where he went, and how he can catch up with him. Refusing to stay behind in the healed community of peace he has found, he gets back in his spaceship, determined to catch up to "the Man." But as one of the bystanders says after the captain leaves:

*Poor man, he's gone. And he'll go on, planet after planet,  
seeking and seeking, and always and always he will be  
an hour late, or a half hour late, or ten minutes late, or  
a minute late. And finally he will miss out by only a few*

*seconds. And when he has visited three hundred worlds and is seventy or eighty years old he will miss out by only a fraction of a second, and then a smaller fraction of a second. And he will go on and on, thinking to find that very thing which he left behind here, on this planet, in this city—<sup>6</sup>*

We are always too late. There is no room for the holy child Jesus in the inn of our hearts.

But God makes another way. God's way is the way of that healed community of peace left behind by the Man. God's way is the way of abolition: the way that does not look up to heaven, or beyond the sea for the word of God, but recognizes that "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:14). The presence and peace of God occur when we live out God's justice in our own communities of reconciliation. The hard work of community accountability for harm — of restorative, compassionate accountability — which allows us to imagine a world without prisons is the work where God becomes present to us.

And, God promises, he is present as well, in a special way, with those who are oppressed: with those who are poor, homeless, or imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–46). Abolition derives from our recognition of the reality that Jesus comes among us as a prisoner. Jesus is closest to those who are imprisoned, criminalized, excluded, and constructed as socially polluted. If we look to the communities of solidarity being built for liberation — in prisons and more broadly in our punitive and carceral society — we will find him there.

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<sup>6</sup> Ray Bradbury, *The Illustrated Man* (Bantam, 1982), 52.

If we look for Jesus within the confines of communities that exclude, we will always be too late, and we will always miss him. But if we look for him among those seeking liberation—

If we look for him in the work of abolitionist accountability and reconciliation in healed communities—

Then we will surely find him there, because that is where he dwells, God with us.

Jesus is born in us, born among us, born on the side of those who are left outside, because God has made another way of liberation—because there was no room for them at the inn.

December 25, All Years, Proper III

Scripture: John 1:1-18

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

The prologue of John is our gospel lesson for Christmas day. John does not begin his account of Jesus with a story about his ancestry and birth, but of the birth of all creation. This is a midrash on the Genesis creation story and it also plays on Jewish wisdom tradition, in which the *Logos*—God’s wisdom proclaimed—is personified. God creates through God’s wise word. This is in stark contrast to other creation accounts in which the world is born out of violence between gods. For example, the Genesis account probably dates from the times of exile in Babylon, and in the Babylonian creation the world is created out of the slain blood and body of a god. Here John harkens back to how the Hebrew people’s Genesis creation story was a counter-story to Babylon’s. We are not born of blood or human desire and passion, but out of the word of God, light that

transforms chaos and darkness. Furthermore, this Word does not abandon us to violence and suffering, but becomes flesh like us, intimately entering into violence to bring transformation through our relationship with God's wisdom.

For the abolitionist preacher this reassures us that no one is violent at their core and when our lives are marred by violence the solution will arise out of wise, loving relationship. The violence and suffering of the world will not be transformed by more bloodshed and passionate, fearful reactivity. We must seek wisdom born out of communication and relationship. We can trust that even in the most desperate situations the wisdom of God is with us, within us, working to shine a light on vulnerable, shame-filled places. Bringing the seeds of violence and places where we have been traumatized into the light breaks the cycles of violence which are enabled and exacerbated by the violence of the penal-justice system.

## 6

# Holy Name of Jesus

January 1, All Years

Scripture: Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)*

The Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus is a lesser-known feast in western Protestant churches. It is observed every year on January 1, the eighth day after Christmas Day, when Jewish

families circumcised their baby boys and traditionally gave them their names. The whole day is covered in only one verse, Luke 2:21, which reads, “*When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*” There is an element of this feast that just celebrates the name of our Savior, Jesus, and the fulfillment of the prophecies spoken to Mary (Luke 1:31) and Joseph (Matthew 1:21).

But this feast is also an important reminder that Jesus is not a generic Savior. He was born into a body in a real time and place, into a real ethnic group called Judeans, into a real cultural and religious context of 1st century Judaism. All these particularities shape the story of salvation and liberation.

When writing to the Gentile Christians in Galatia, St. Paul emphasizes that Jesus, the Son of God, was born to a Jewish woman and “born under the law” revealed in the Old Testament (Galatians 4:4). I am a Gentile Christian too, as are most Christians around the world today. As a Gentile Christian, the Feast of the Holy Name is a humbling occasion. I am reminded once again that Jesus, the Jewish Son of God, provides the path for our “adoption as children.” It’s a reminder that being a Christian (especially as a Gentile) is not something I earn, but a pure gift of grace. It’s a reminder that through the grace of Jesus Christ, I am freed from any form of slavery and embraced as “a child” of God and “heir” of God’s love, liberation, and new life.

Freedom from slavery and adoption as children are common New Testament images for salvation. These spiritual realities can and should inspire our vision for justice here and now. If God desires for all of us to be free, to be treated like beloved children, then how can we continue to support social structures like the prison-industrial complex? How can we justify locking

God's children in cages? How can we remain silent in the face of bondage and suffering for so many millions of people in the USA and so many tens and hundreds of millions around the world? Salvation is an unearned gift mediated through a Jewish baby named Jesus to people of all backgrounds in all times and places. We didn't earn our adoption or emancipation, so why should we expect others to?

# 7

## First Sunday after Christmas

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

Contributor: Jed Tate

Perhaps the most important, or at least the first, question we might ask on the first Sunday after Christmas is: Christ has come; now what? The incarnation — the very presence of the Son of God among the people, and especially among people who suffered oppression — should stir us and move us, form us and transform us. If the savior we follow entered into the world and lived with, first and foremost, people who experienced the abuse of injustice, how, then, should we follow him now?

Of course, that question is one we would probably prefer to avoid this time of year. Most of us would rather spend more time in the comforts of the season, warm by a fire, enjoying the glow of Christmas tree lights. And yet Matthew invites us to

remember that the Christ child and his family fled persecution and the threat of death. Many families were terrorized by Herod and his forces, and were devastated by the loss of their young sons to state violence. Jesus and his earthly parents were forced into exile, becoming refugees until they could safely return to Nazareth some time later. We may be tempted to turn away from this story, but we cannot because that story continues even now.

For the privileged and comfortable, descriptions of state violence may sound scary but also foreign. Isn't this the sort of thing that happens to unfortunate people in other places? Surely, it doesn't happen here and now. We may be shocked to discover that, as Patrick Ball notes, "one-third of all Americans killed by strangers are killed by police."<sup>7</sup> And as Samuel Sinyangwe reports, "For every person who police kill, they also report using non-fatal force against 300+ additional people."<sup>8</sup> The threat of state violence continues here and now. Those of us who have experienced police violence or incarceration are well aware of it. Those of us who haven't, and are tempted to look the other way must acknowledge it.

Matthew reminds us today that from the very beginning of his story, Jesus lived with and for people who were marginalized, abused, and even killed by the state. As we read that story, we have to consider: how do we live as his people now? Because, even now, that violence remains a threat for so many. As followers of Jesus Christ, what is our calling and our responsibility as that sin continues?

Put another away, on this first Sunday after Christmas, what

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Ball, "Violence in Blue," *Granta*, June 8, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Sinyangwe (@samswey) <https://x.com/samswey/status/1836177037083476397>

is the work of Christmas? That's the question Howard Thurman invites us to contemplate in his poem when he writes that after all of the celebrations of Christmas morning are over, the *work* of Christmas must begin. "To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner..."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the work of Christmas, then, includes the struggle to abolish state violence, to "bring peace among people" somehow.

## Year B

Scripture: Luke 2:22–40

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple, assigned for this date, is a familiar one. Simeon sees Jesus and sings his famous song, the *Nunc Dimittis*, in his joy for finally seeing the Messiah, the consummation of his hopes: "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

This song is used in the service of Compline, in the recognition of our mortality and the hope that we too will see the consummation of our hopes. Simeon is usually portrayed as an old man, facing death. The poignancy of his song is that seeing

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<sup>9</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas," in *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (Friends United Press, 1985).

Jesus means he knows that he can die—but he can die in peace, knowing that redemption is at hand.

The story of Simeon is a powerful one that speaks to many aspects of Christian life, perhaps most pertinently to the promise of eternal life and the ways we find peace with our own mortality and finitude. It is not—unlike other passages discussed in this collection—inherently political or inherently ethical. It does not, in itself, discuss the freedom of captives or just ways of living.

Yet I think abolitionists can draw comfort from the image of Simeon seeing the beginning of a new reality, really present in this age in Jesus. Even when Jesus was only a baby, Simeon sees already that he is bringing something new, the reign of God. Simeon names salvation as light, revelation, and glory. I see revelation in the tremendous paradigm shift that can occur when people give up on paradigms of punishment and exclusion and turn toward restorative and transformative alternatives. This is an epiphany that can have the sense of a revelation—for me it came with a profound sense of relief, to stop defending incarceration and instead turn my energies to looking at what else we could do and what new ways of living opened up. And he names Jesus as glory for Israel. It is important that the promise is for Israel, not appropriated more generally for us. At the same time, I see in the promise of “glory” the ideas of vindication, liberation, and triumph over death. What Simeon is seeing is the new reign of God that brings abundant life. The revelation for Gentiles and the glory of Israel in the new life of God in Christ is the hope that our (ethical, this-worldly) efforts at abolition participate in. Abolition is but one small piece participating in

that revelation and glory, but it does participate in that newness of the reign of God.

And so the image of that consummation of new way of being breaking into our reality remains a powerful one for abolition. Our eyes have seen God's salvation. We hope to see it more and more, in the actual and material liberation from and transformation of systems that exclude, punish, and kill.

Year C

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The ethical injunctions in this passage from Colossians remind us how to be communities of reconciliation:

“Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

Forgiveness is a challenging topic in Christian discussions of restorative justice (RJ), because forgiveness *can* be an outcome of RJ processes, and yet Christian communities have long and harmful histories of pressuring victims to forgive. RJ does

not have to be a process that leads to forgiveness. So what interests me here is what proceeds the commandment to forgive in this list: “clothe yourselves with compassion...Bear with one another.”

I think compassion and “bearing with” each other are sometimes easier starting points for the difficult processes of accountability and holding harm and conflict. Transformative and restorative justice practitioners emphasize, over and over again, the need to recognize with compassion the humanity of all people, including those who have done harm. See, for example, the moving testimonies in *Love WITH Accountability* edited by Aisha Shahidah Simmons (AK Press, 2019), which repeat this injunction over and over. Forgiveness may be — at best and not always — the endpoint of an accountability process, but compassion can be its start. Even if we no longer desire to maintain relationships where harm has been done, we can aim to have compassion upon all people. Our compassion for others is the starting point that leads us to reject punishment. Compassion makes space for those who have done harm to take accountability.

And I suspect that “bearing with one another” takes shape as accountability processes start. Community accountability processes can take a variety of forms.<sup>10</sup> Transformative justice (TJ) practitioners and communities of practice offer various models. Yet all these models require a supportive community to

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<sup>10</sup> See the Christians for Abolition accountability toolkit for more details: <https://christiansforabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Accountability-Toolkit.pdf>

help harm-doers as they seek to change and become accountable. All these models involve relational work that can be challenging and frustrating (and, if not handled with care, retraumatizing — which is why accountability processes must be approached with skill and experience). Accountability is slow work, work that requires “bearing with one another” as we are able.

This does not mean that the burden of “bearing with one another” should be borne by those who have been harmed. It is often the role of the wider community or supporters of those most immediately harmed to support survivors as well as make space to “bear with” those who have done harm. Listening to, respecting, and “bearing with” survivors is always a paramount value in any effort at accountability.

Compassion and bearing with one another can be starting points along the process of justice and accountability that transforms. Forgiveness, love, and peace may follow, as Colossians calls the community to enact. These are hard concepts in the face of harm, and I find I am not always comfortable with commands to love, forgive, or find peace. Yet I can retreat to the earlier commands here, as I am able, and begin again: hold to compassion, bear with others. Build on the foundation of the love of God in Christ, and hope that in the ongoing life of accountability and transformation, moments of love, forgiveness, and peace will follow.

## 8

### Second Sunday after Christmas

Years A-C

Scripture: John 1:(1-9), 10-18

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

*Adapted from the original entry for Christmas Day, Year A.*

John does not begin his account of Jesus with a story about his ancestry and birth, but of the birth of all creation. This is a midrash on the Genesis creation story and it also plays on Jewish wisdom tradition, in which the *Logos*—God’s wisdom proclaimed—is personified. God creates through God’s wise word. This is in stark contrast to other creation accounts in which the world is born out of violence between gods. For example, the Genesis account probably dates from the times of exile in Babylon, and in the Babylonian creation the world is created out of the slain blood and body of a god. Here John

harkens back to how the Hebrew people's Genesis creation story was a counter-story to Babylon's. We are not born of blood or human desire and passion, but out of the word of God, light that transforms chaos and darkness. Furthermore, this Word does not abandon us to violence and suffering, but becomes flesh like us, intimately entering into violence to bring transformation through our relationship with God's wisdom.

For the abolitionist preacher this reassures us that the core of no-one's nature is violence and when our lives are marred by violence the solution will arise out of wise, loving, relationship. The violence and suffering of the world will not be transformed by more bloodshed and passionate, fearful reactivity. We must seek wisdom born out of communication and relationship. We can trust that even in the most desperate situations the wisdom of God is with us, within us, working to shine a light on vulnerable, shame-filled places. Bringing the seeds of violence and places where we have been traumatized into the light breaks the cycles of violence which are enabled and exacerbated by the violence of the penal-justice system.

## Epiphany

Years A-C

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

The Feast of the Epiphany is focused on the Gentiles recognizing the Jewish Messiah as their Savior. It is a feast of inclusion and unity across the differences of race, ethnicity, and culture. The magi came from the East to worship the child Jesus and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the story of the Epiphany can hardly be told without the political context of the Holy Family's escape into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15) and King Herod I's massacre of the Holy Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18).

The magi informed Herod that a child had been “born king of the Jews”, and that immediately placed a political target on Jesus, Mary, and Joseph (Matthew 2:2, NRSVUE). Herod would use this knowledge to try to assassinate the child. Decades

before Jesus would be crucified, Herod passed judgment on him, sentencing him to death for the crime of treason. (Arguably, Jesus was, in fact, guilty of that crime.) In this case, the criminal-legal system chose to bypass incarceration and jump straight to execution.

God sent an angel to warn Joseph to flee to Egypt with his wife and child, and they did so to avoid this sentence. We know very little of the Holy Family's life in Egypt as political refugees. I wonder if they were scorned by their neighbors as "illegal immigrants." I wonder if they were held in a detention center for months or years to wait for a judge to rule on their asylum claim—as many refugees must endure today in the United States. I wonder if the Egyptian provincial government would have cooperated with Herod if he had discovered Jesus and called for their extradition back to Judea.

In Herod's blind rage, he wielded the full force of the empire's sword. Unable to find the child King Jesus, Herod ordered his military-police to slaughter "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" (Matthew 2:16). (I wonder if God sent angels with warnings to the parents of all those children.) This genocidal tragedy all stems from the use and abuse of the authority of the criminal-legal system.

There are many differences between the criminal-legal systems in the 1st-century Roman Empire and the 21st-century United States, but both have the tools necessary to execute a massacre on the scale of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. Both can collect foreign intelligence to mount a case against a perceived criminal threat. Both can use police to harass and threaten people into exile. Both can murder civilians with impunity or near impunity. These are the sorts of reasons that we stand as Christians for Abolition. We want a complete

and total reimagining of the relationship between a people and its government when it comes to crime and public safety. We want to live in a country where families do not need to flee for their lives, refugees can find safety and welcome here, and our government cannot wage war against its people.

# 10

## First Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of our Lord

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The text from Second Isaiah appointed for the feast of the Baptism of Christ leads to an *Abolition Lectionary* entry that nearly writes itself: the promise of this text is that God has appointed God's servant to "bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (v. 7, NRSVUE). As Michael J. Chan writes, this text is one of the famous Servant Songs from Second Isaiah, and can be applied "to the whole world": "The ministry of the servant is what it looks like when the Kingdom of God arrives *anywhere, anytime*—whether that by the 6th century BCE, the 1st century CE, or the 21st century CE. When the servant arrives, so do justice,

light, and freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

The text, in other words, provides one of the most explicit abolitionist promises in scripture: the servant appears in order to bring out prisoners. This promise is more than literal—freedom for prisoners is a metaphor for freedom from any kind of suffering and bondage, physical or spiritual—but it is *not* thereby *less* than literal. Spiritual freedom derives its power as an image from the concreteness of physical freedom. The freeing of prisoners is the work of God’s servant. (An excellent deeper explanation of this connection, and how freedom for prisoners became such a central biblical theme, is in Lee Griffith’s book *The Fall of the Prison*).<sup>12</sup>

But perhaps the most poignant part of this passage is not its explicit emphasis on freedom, but is its image of what it looks like for God’s servant to “faithfully bring forth justice”: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench” (v. 3). I’m reminded of this heartbreaking interview Radley Balko conducted with criminal defense investigator Andrew Sowards.<sup>13</sup> Sowards answers the question of how he works with people who have committed serious harm and violence:

*When you do mitigation, you look far back into these people’s lives. And it got to the point where I could read these mitigation reports and I could pinpoint the exact*

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<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Chan, “Commentary on Isaiah 24:1-9” in *Working Preacher* (December 16, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Lee Griffith, *The Fall of Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Eerdmans, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Radley Balko, “On broken brains, a broken system, and burning it all to the ground,” in *The Watch* (January 3, 2023).

*moment in some guy's childhood when he was broken. You could isolate the precise event that changed him, that just froze him emotionally in that moment, that halted the maturation process. Before that event, this was some kid with all the innocence and potential of every other kid. And I swear I could often look into a client's face and see that little kid, still frozen in there, just frozen in time.*

Even in cases of extremely serious harm, justice requires seeing people as “bruised reeds” not to be broken; “dimly burning wicks” not to be quenched. The justice of God is the work of healing and freedom in every circumstance.

Of course, cases of extreme violence such as those Sowards investigates are a tiny minority of those persecuted by the criminal legal system. In most cases, people are swept into a system that criminalizes them because of race or poverty or social location. Their own marginalization or trauma are used against them as the system piles injustice and trauma upon systemic injustice and trauma.

The contrast is clear. The prison-industrial complex breaks bruised reeds and quenches dimly burning wicks. The servant of God does justice faithfully and sets prisoners free. Jesus' baptism shows his fidelity to that ongoing mission of servanthood to God.

Year B

Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

On this Sunday every year, I recall a parable about soldiers and baptism.

Once there was an emperor who demanded all his soldiers be baptized in a peculiar fashion. The emperor wanted the favor of God, but he also wanted to wage war against his neighbors. Knowing deep down that these desires were incompatible, the emperor told the priests to baptize his soldiers by full immersion—except for their sword hands. In doing so, the soldiers of his great empire could commit the emperor’s misdeeds with the only part of their body not pledged to God.

This story probably doesn’t have any historical grounding, but as a parable it strikes me as painfully true. Despite warnings that we cannot serve two masters and admonishments to cut off our hands if they cause us to sin, many Christians still go about their lives as if their sword hands had not been baptized.

*Abolition Lectionary* contributors come from a variety of Christian traditions with different theologies and practices of baptism. In my Baptist congregation, we baptize like they do in the parable—but we make sure your sword hand goes under the water, too. Like John’s baptism in today’s Gospel reading, our baptismal rites involve renunciation and repentance. Borrowing from sibling traditions, we have baptismal candidates renounce “the powers of evil and death” before they can be baptized. We emphasize that your life as a Christian demands full loyalty and accountability to God, not just in part but the whole.

In conversations about the abolition of police and prisons, many Christians act as if they believe repentance and a total loyalty to God are unnecessary. Someone must do the work of policing our communities and keeping prisoners away from the

rest of us, the line of reasoning goes. Someone must be baptized in all but their sword hand so the rest of us can live peaceably.

That's not how John the Baptist puts it, though. That's not how Jesus' baptism goes. When Jesus undergoes his baptism, the heavens tear apart and a beatific vision occurs. This event launches a ministry that ends in death perpetrated by law enforcement. Nowhere do any of the Gospels endorse a piecemeal approach to our baptisms. Nowhere does it say that our baptismal vows only apply some of the time.

One of the first axioms of conversations about abolition (and any Christian ethic!) is that discussions should take place in terms of our loyalty to God, not in terms of 'practical' or utilitarian solutions. When considering abolition in the context of baptism this week, ask yourself: which is more important to you and your community—your baptism or your commitment to prisons and police?

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 3:15-22

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

The Baptism of Jesus is always a curious text. Baptism is something the church does (or at least, should be doing). But when we baptize a person in our churches, it doesn't look like the baptism in the Jordan. John the Baptist isn't there with me on Sunday morning. The heavens don't open.

Baptism has been incredibly divisive in the history of the church because of this disconnect. Schisms took place over believer's baptism or infant baptism. Schisms took place over

baptism in moving water versus still water.

And yet we come back to the river, to the water, to the savior willingly receiving the washing of another. Luke doesn't spend too much time on the act of baptism itself. Jesus is baptized with the crowd. As Katherine Sonderegger writes,

*He stood with all sinners when He awaited John's baptism, the washing in the Jordan as sign and act of repentance. He did not hold Himself apart and aloof from this evil generation; rather He joined it. Not for his sake. For ours.*

14

All of this gets us to abolition because if baptism is true, if Jesus is true, if Jesus stood with sinners, if Jesus stood with us, we must with all. The baptism of Jesus did not take place in the middle of Jerusalem but on a margin, outside the city, at a location that looks a lot like where many of our prisons are located today. Out of sight. The kind of society that hides people, that dehumanizes people, that shuts them up far away, this kind of society does not believe in the power of baptism.

Did the heavens open? Did Christ stand with us? Then let us not rest in the brokenness of society that we ourselves have built. Let us dismantle it to offer new life fully, honestly, transformationally to all.

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<sup>14</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology I*, 217.

# 11

## Epiphany 2

Year A

Scripture: John 1:29-42

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John the Baptist proclaimed as he saw Jesus coming toward him and his followers. The phrase became central to Christian worship, particularly in the Latin liturgical traditions. The *Agnus Dei* is part of the Roman Catholic Mass and many of the Protestant traditions whose worship evolved from it. Thousands of mass settings repeat this phrase in prayer and song, usually turning it into an intercession to “grant us peace.”

The *Agnus Dei* that originates in our Gospel passage for this week contains within it a paradigm of justice frequently unfamiliar to us. In the retributive frame, there are crimes (or sins) for which perpetrators must be punished. The solution to sin is

to punish the sinner. Presumably, this retribution should “grant us peace.” The *Agnus Dei* and John 1:29 present a different form of peacemaking.

Here God’s desire for the world does not come through retribution but through the Lamb of God (the *agnus Dei*). It is the Lamb of God who takes away sin and brings peace, not the punishment of the wrongdoer. Within the *Agnus Dei* we obviously do not receive a detailed plan of how justice, peace, and restoration are achieved, but what is clear is that retribution is not at the heart of this reshaping of the world.

John the Baptist invited his disciples to take up the way of life described here when he urged them to follow Jesus. The evangelist John invites us to do the same in this Gospel. How can we claim to be a Gospel people if we place our hope in retribution (the motivating force of the carceral system)? How can we claim to follow Jesus when we hope for a punitive justice system to take away the sin of the world and grant us peace?

As many of the *Agnus Dei* settings also ask: have mercy on us. God, have mercy on us for putting our faith, hope, and security in the hands of sources other than you. May we keep the Lamb of God at the center of our hope and work, rejecting retributive claims to our peace.

## Year B

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The reading from 1 Corinthians this week at first glance seems not to have much to do with abolition — but perhaps there is a liberating truth under the (difficult) surface.

First, though, it is important to name the harm done by this passage, and particularly its problematic treatment of sex workers. Paul filters what it means in practice for our spirits to be united to the Lord (6:17) through his particular cultural and personal opinions about sexual ethics. (Thanks to Rev. Lura Groen for this insight.)

But nonetheless his emphasis on *bodies* is instructive. Bodies do not only have to do with sex, but with the importance of material realities. If our bodies are made members of Christ (6:15) then the liberation of Christ is intended for our bodies, not only for our souls. This is an essential insight in resistance against the carceral state which derives its power from perceived control over bodies — both physical and social ones. Perhaps the most central concept in doing Christian theology for abolition is that we should not unite our bodies to the carceral state, but that instead we should live out in practice now, with our physical bodies and social bodies, the liberation that we believe Christ has already accomplished for our souls and for the entire creation at the end of history. As Wesley Spears-Newsome wrote last week,<sup>15</sup> we should understand ourselves *entirely* baptized, not reserving some part of us for the service of empire — or of prisons.

Paul does not only use the language of sex here in relation to bodies, but also the language of food: “[You say] ‘food is

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<sup>15</sup> See Baptism of our Lord, Year B.

meant for the stomach and the stomach for food.’” We might paraphrase that, in light of our concern for abolition, in terms of justice: “You say ‘the prison is meant for justice, and justice for the prison’ — and God will destroy both one and the other.” But in truth “God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.” The reality of resurrection life is the reality of a justice which leaves no place for prisons, neither here nor in the world to come. God has raised us, our physical and social bodies, to the new life of union with the risen body of Christ. We are members of the liberated social reality of Christ’s body.

A final important concept in an abolitionist reading of this passage is the idea in 6:20 of being “bought with a price,” a reference (as Lee Griffith and André Trocmé have written at length, see *The Fall of the Prison* and Trocmé’s *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*) to God’s role as the “kinsman-redeemer” for God’s people, the one who pays the ransom to liberate them from captivity. God, as kinsman-redeemer, pays the bond to free every one of God’s people. We are “not our own” to rededicate ourselves to carcerality, but are instead committed to the work of abolition that God has started in us. I want to also call out here that this language of bondage, that we are “not our own” in relation to God, remains problematic! But again, I hope that perhaps there is a liberating truth to be uncovered under Paul’s perspective. What I would emphasize here is our own personal commitment to the liberation God has given us, and to the idea of God’s paying of ransom for us as a liberation that has real concrete consequences for how we act. The way we “glorify God in our bodies,” the way we construct our material realities toward liberation, is a response to the liberation accomplished by God who “bought us with a price.”

God has made liberation real, but we are the ones with bodies

to put it into practice. The way we use our bodies and the way we construct our social bodies make bodily present the promise of abolition begun by God.

## Year C

Scripture: John 2:1-11

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In the story of the wedding at Cana, Jesus shows up in power to bring *sufficiency* — enough wine, enough joy, enough celebration, enough strengthening of community through communal life — to an event strengthening family and community.

What does this have to do with abolition?

As Josie Pickens wrote yesterday on Twitter,<sup>16</sup> about how abolitionists should avoid over-focusing on “alternatives” to policing and prisons: “Often, the question isn’t what the “alternative” should be to an oppressive/harmful system, but rather how people can have their needs met when these failing systems cease to exist. And also what individual and community needs look like.... abolition work is about presence— not absence. We should be focusing on the many ways we can imagine and build safe and sustainable communities where folks needs are met.”

Abolition is presence; life-giving sufficient presence in community relationships that already exist, instead of the enforced absence and exclusion provided by police and prisons. What

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<sup>16</sup> See <https://x.com/jonubian/status/1480694417216397313> (accessed September 2024).

Jesus is offering to the wedding at Cana is the power of presence. We can imagine him there, already bound by relationships of family and community, and able to meet needs as they are pointed out to him by those in those existing relationships (in this passage, memorably, by his mother!).

And this passage reminds us that the needs of communal life which we invest in by presence, in order to make possible a world without police and prisons, are not only basic, minimal needs for food and shelter, but also the needs for connection, beauty, celebration, joy. Jesus is blessing a wedding, a time of deepening relationship. He provides wine for the sake of the celebration. Sufficient presence is presence that meets every person's need for beauty. Beauty, joy, and relationship are the opposites of the ugly goals of dehumanization and exclusion that feed the prison-industrial complex.

The question for abolitionists is not only about how to deal with harm — although that is essential — but also about how to make visible the sufficiency of communities that already exist, and how to strengthen communities through existing relationships. The wedding at Cana provides a picture of God's action, alongside us, in that community work.

# 12

## Epiphany 3

Year A

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

The epistle and gospel passages have some interesting connections for an abolitionist preacher. The Gospel passage begins with the statement that John the Baptist had been arrested and Jesus withdrew to Galilee. This provides the contest for Jesus' ministry, which is being characterized as "a region and shadow of death" where, due to Jesus' message of repentance and healing, "light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16, NRSVUE). The backdrop of the first Epistle to the Corinthians is similarly dark. Paul is writing to a community mired in conflict, yet it is not "those who are perishing" who hear the good news of the cross' message, but "us who are being saved," (1 Corinthians 1:18). In our own world, which is mired in conflict and state oppression,

how do we understand these two statements?

Some more context for 1 Corinthians is helpful. Paul is clearly concerned about the people who understand themselves as being powerful and enlightened. He is writing to admonish them. Some nicely placed sarcastic jabs within the letter make that very clear. When he says “the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” he is talking about people like that. People for whom the society is working too well, at the expense of those for whom it is not working at all. The fact that they *don't know* that they are perishing leaves them in that condition. On the other hand, the cross, which proclaims good news to those who are suffering, is a message of hope to “us who are being saved by the power of God.” It is precisely the fact that they understand their condition—the need to be saved—that they are “being saved.”

Our passage in Matthew speaks to that experience. Jesus' gospel is a great light for those who understand they are in darkness. But what is the nature of this darkness? That is a very important question for the Abolitionist preacher and those languishing in prisons. Is the darkness a matter of individual guilt calling us to “repent” (Matthew 4:17) or is it more like an illness, perpetuated by on-going life-long systemic and communal harm which one's imprisonment is a deadly symptom of? Do we need repentance and forgiveness or a cure of “every disease and sickness” (4:23)?

Both the Matthew passage and Epistle suggest it is a little of both, and within transformative justice practices we seek to do both. When harm is done we help people take accountability for the harm they caused *and* seek systemic and interpersonal solutions to heal systems and communities that are leading to the “symptom” of harm. The cross' message is the power of God to those who are being saved, because it reminds us that we

do not bear the weight of harm alone. God is present within it, calling us to repent (be accountable) and curing every disease (changing the contexts that lead to harm). If we can believe it, this is the path of salvation. It isn't a one and done (we are "being saved"), but if we continue to either refuse accountability, only point figures of judgment at others, and/or wallow in shame, the message of the cross will be foolishness... and we will continue to unwittingly perish.

## Year B

Scripture: Psalm 62

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

In Psalm 62:5-12, the Psalmist dually interprets God as a refuge and a hope, and as one with a power to complete God's work.

The work of abolition is not our work joined by God, it is God's work joined by us. For those on the outside, and especially for those whose lives have not been touched by the carceral system, we need to remember that this is God's work, we simply join in. This means that we ought to be especially careful not to see ourselves as doing charity work, or as bringers of salvation, because that power belongs to God. And, as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 25, God is first found in those outcast and downtrodden by our society.

When this Psalm refers to God as a refuge, rock, and fortress, they are calling us to see God as the primary source for this work. Not theory, not theology, but God, the everlasting power and might that repays all according to their work.

And lest we miss this as a warning and caution, the Psalm

exhorts the reader to “put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them” (v. 10, NRSVUE). This warning is not just for individuals, but for systems and communities. This is a warning for our racial capitalist systems, where riches are built off extortion and oppression.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The gospel appointed for this week is one of the texts most often used by Christian prison abolitionists, to show how Jesus, in declaring his mission, points to the liberation of captives as essential work for which he has come. The key questions abolitionists ask are these: why are we quick to apply Jesus’ words in this passage to spiritual captivity and not also to material ones? And — without restricting the broader vision of liberation from both material and spiritual powers presented in this text — how do we see the spiritual forces of sin, captivity, and death playing out in real material ways in our current systems of policing and prisons? The point is not to restrict Jesus’ message to the issue of abolition, but to allow Jesus’ promise of new creation and the coming reign of God to really “dwell richly” in our current material reality.

Many Christian abolitionists have written on this extensively elsewhere; including additional resources you can study:

- Illustrated introduction to Christianity and prison abolition by Hannah Bowman (hosted on the Christians for Abolition website), which includes discussion of this passage.<sup>17</sup>
- “Prisons and the Bible,” an excerpt from Lee Griffith’s book *The Fall of the Prison*, which goes into great detail about the context and interpretation of this passage.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah Bowman, “Illustrated Introduction to Christianity and Prison Abolition” on *Christians for Abolition*, <https://christiansforabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Illustrated-intro-Christian-case-for-abolition-February-2021-1.pdf> (accessed September 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Lee Griffith, “Prisons and the Bible” in *The Fall of Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Eerdmans, 1993).

## Epiphany 4

Year A

Scripture: Psalm 15

Contributor: Jay Bergen

In reading Psalm 15, the moral standards may at first seem insurmountable. It seems like the author is asking for perfection! If you grew up in a more conservative Reformed community, these texts may remind you of your total depravity, powerless but for a merciful God. We may be able to say that we have never taken a “bribe against the innocent,” but whom among us can say we “walk blamelessly”?

The good news is that this short psalm is not about trying to be perfect. It’s not even necessarily about God’s mercy available through confession of Christ as Lord. When the Israelite people worshiped God while traveling in the wilderness, no one actually abided in God’s tent, the Tabernacle. Similarly, while people

lived in Jerusalem, “on your holy hill,” no one actually lived in the Temple.

But who could enter into the Tent of Meeting? Who could come to visit the Temple on God’s holy mountain? Precisely those who had failed the tests of Psalm 15: Those who had become ritually unclean, had harmed their neighbors, had broken oaths. People came to offer grain and sacrifice animals and share the food with everyone else gathered there. In order to even just briefly abide in that holy place, you had to have something in your life that needed repair.

Who can gather in our sacred places today? Precisely those of us in need of mending the harm we have caused. God calls us to come together, to tithe our resources to nourish our communities and repair the broken places in our shared life.

Psalm 15 is an abolitionist ecclesiology. It doesn’t ask for moral perfection. It asks instead for our imperfection, our failure, our dishonesty, our complicity in injustice. It asks for honesty about these things, and promises that it is precisely in being honest that we might be welcomed onto God’s holy mountain.

## Year B

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

In comparing two of this week’s readings, we notice something about the character of God, a character that — if emulated by the church — will lead to abolition.

In Mark 1:21-28, the power and authority of Jesus is put on

full display. This authority was obvious to the synagogue's attendees based on his teaching alone, Mark notes that "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Again, Jesus as God's prophet is put on full display as he heals one who is demon possessed.

In this interaction we can see what God meant when, in Deuteronomy, he told the Israelites that he would raise up a prophet from their own people. God's promise, that prophets would come and that some would evidently have his authority while others — either those who presumed to speak in his name or those who spoke in other's name — would die.

Turning back to Mark, we see that the demon also recognizes Christ as God's prophet. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus then rebukes the demon and casts him out of the person. But it's the demon's phrase before this that should catch our eye and juxtapose itself with God in Deuteronomy.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? *Have you come to destroy us?*"

The demon accuses God of being a destroyer. But turn to Deuteronomy,

"Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, *I myself will hold accountable.*"

Here, in the Old Testament where anti-Semitism has driven Christians to often accuse God of being violent and destructive, God declares that accountability will be had. This is in contrast with destruction. Accountability does not destroy individuals, it instead restores and elevates them. This is a vision of abolition. Punishment and carceral systems can not fulfill the vision of God, which is a vision of accountability.

Lastly, God's warning that those who do not heed the prophet will be held accountable is a restraint on those of us who would

feel a white-hot rage at those systems and those who perpetuate them. Don't forget that Godself will be holding them — and us — accountable. When we feel a desire for vengeance and want to destroy those who advance such inequalities, God wants to bring them to account and build a better world for all.

## Year C

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

We typically relegate 1 Corinthians 13 to the province of sentimentality, using it at weddings and even funerals to do the emotional heavy-lifting for us. While Paul's exposition on the significance and nature of love is entirely appropriate for those occasions, limiting it to those type of events is not. The understanding of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is a radical ethic that we need to embrace in every part of our lives — it's not just the proprietary of loved ones gained and lost.

Abolition is an ethic of love, one that rejects patterns of retributive violence and vengeance that dominate much of the world. The entire police state and prison industrial complex is based on an ethic of punishment, fear, and profit. Punishment because the system believes (or teaches us to believe) that punishment will satisfy the demands of justice and somehow make up for whatever crime the system claims has been committed. Fear because the system believes (or teaches us to believe) that police and prisons deter criminality rather than create and expand it. Profit because the system knows (and wants us not to know) that there's money to be made in prison beds, militarized

police, and complex legal systems.

1 Corinthians 13 rejects all of those things: punishment, fear, and profit.

In particular, Paul rejects rejoicing in punishment, itself a “wrongdoing” (v. 6 NRSV) meant to correct another “wrongdoing.” Instead of an ethic of punishment, an ethic of love rejoices in telling the truth (again, v. 6), being patient and kind (v. 4), and not embracing resentment (v. 5). Systems and ethics of punishment obscure the truth of what people need to change and create a culture of resentment toward those who have experienced the systems of police and prisons.

Elsewhere, Scripture says that love is the rejection of fear, the currency of police and prisons. “There is no fear in love,” 1 John says, “but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment” (4:18, CEB). Fear reinforces the things that love is not. Fear is rarely patient (v. 4), it does not prioritize kindness (v. 4), and it certainly does not hope (v. 7).

Paul’s ethic of love here, too, presumes that profit is not the point. Before you can even entertain the idea of love, Paul presumes that acts of charity are second nature (v. 3). Systems of fear and punishment do not presume the sharing of resources, mutual aid, or any sort of generosity. Yet these things seem to be part and parcel of the culture of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

Love is eternal, according to Paul. It never ends. If that’s true, we can have hope that love will outlast systems of punishment, fear, and profit. We exist in an imperfect world dominated by these ethics, but Paul promises that we will fully see love in time (v. 12). In the meantime, with that hope we need to act with love and that means letting every aspect of our lives (both individually and collectively) be governed by love. That means

police and prisons have to end.

## Epiphany 5

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

If you celebrate Ash Wednesday in your church tradition, Isaiah 58:1-12 is likely a familiar text. It is a call to fasting, and it hits on many points that are relevant to traditional Lenten practices. But this isn't just a text for Lent. It's a text for ordinary times too because injustices permeate the world all year round. Even though Isaiah doesn't use the word, this text is really a call to repentance.

In this passage, the Prophet calls out religious people who perform their pious duties without changing their hearts and lives. The audience was full of people who followed the tradition of fasting from food, humbling themselves in prayer, and covering themselves in ashes (58:5). But those actions did not

change their business practices: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist” (58:3-4, NRSVUE). Isaiah accuses them of manipulating wages, exploiting workers, and abusing employees. They are creating poverty in their community, not helping to alleviate it.

So what is the solution? Through Isaiah, God commands listeners to “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (58:6). This text literally speaks about ending economic injustice, slave labor, and all forms of oppression. It is a call for abolition of prisons, jails, and all systems where people are bonded and yoked. It is a call for freedom from the oppression of corporations making profits off of sub-minimum-wage or wageless prison labor. It is a call for people who run those systems and benefit those systems to dismantle them. Later, Isaiah promises that God will bless, help, and answer the prayers of those who “remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil” (58:9). Isaiah, like most of the prophets, wants to disabuse us of the notion that we can live in right relationship with God without working toward just relationships with our neighbors. It’s not that we have to be sinless, but we cannot be complacent about the sins that we profit from. We cannot live as hypocrites.

Psalm 112 approaches similar themes a bit more subtly. The Psalmist tells us that “the righteous are merciful and full of compassion” (112:4). That’s precisely the problem that Isaiah points to in his prophecy. Abusive employers, jailers, and prison wardens are in the wrong because they lack mercy and compassion. They fail to see the enslaved and the incarcerated as children of God — made in the image and likeness of God

(Genesis 1:27) — just like them.

As Americans, we have a collective responsibility for the things our government does “for the people.” And America is notorious for trying to incarcerate our social problems away. We are doing the same thing as Isaiah’s audience. We are denying “criminals” of their basic human dignity. In the US, crimes are most correlated with poverty, institutional racism/oppression, and social trauma. And our laws often define “crime” in a way that often punishes people because they need mental, physical, psychological, and economic help. We lack mercy and compassion. We would rather lock people up and throw away the key than do the hard work of reconciliation and restitution. We would rather exact revenge than seek God’s definition of justice. And there is a whole caste of people who are the victims of this systemic, societal sin. One of the most important things a preacher can do is continue to remind people that we all deserve mercy and compassion. That is the moral and spiritual key to transforming the criminal-legal system into something that helps people more than it hurts.

Year B

Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

It would be great to live in a society without prisons, but... It would be great to support people who are struggling, but... Forgiveness is great, but... I would love to give that person money, but...

The ‘yes, but’ it is the continual scourge of the church’s

engagement with the world. Ideals can be preached on Sunday but the reality of crime and profit must be faced on Monday. The ‘yes, but’ is about maintaining the status quo, it is also about who is Lord. Isaiah has some words for us this week. And the words of the prophet seem a direct response to any ‘yes, but...’ we could think of. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” (41:21, NRSV)

Who are we protecting by maintaining the status quo as a society? Abolition comes down to the question: “who do you serve?” Isaiah asks if we have known or heard? The prophet goes on:

*It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. (40:22-23)*

The rulers of this world are brought to nothing by the God of all creation. Do we believe in the God of all creation to step out in faith by advocating and working towards the liberation of all? But even in taking that step, we are not alone. God “gives power to the faint,” (40:28) and in the struggle for abolition, it is common to feel faint staring at the prison-industrial complex. God “strengthens the powerless,” (40:28) and boy do I feel powerless sometimes in Texas when looking at our prisons and government and common misconceptions of Justice.

Honestly, though, most activities in life are tiring and I feel faint chasing my kids up the hill. I can tire myself out working for my own wants and needs, or I can listen to Isaiah, strive towards

justice, and remember that “those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (40:31).

We don’t have to say “yes, but…” to God or to justice. We can boldly say yes, and we will run together with the Lord.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 5:1-11

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

In Luke’s first “call to discipleship” narrative, Simon Peter has spent the whole night fishing with no luck. Jesus asks him to cast out his nets again and Simon Peter notes his objection: “‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I’ll drop the nets,’” (5:5 CEB). He casts his net and it is suddenly overflowing with fish. Simon’s response is “‘Leave me, Lord, for I’m a sinner!’” This is often read as a righteous humility and Jesus’ “don’t be afraid” as divine mercy. Is this a merciful response to Simon’s appropriate humility or is it a correction to a logic of shame and fear? It might be both, and in both ways it speaks against the logic that undergirds our prison and policing system.

On one level, carceral logic relies on the idea that some people deserve to be dehumanized through violence, exile, or withholding of necessary resources. Ultimately this logic flows from fear: the fear that there won’t be enough, that we need to protect ourselves from the pain that comes from mistakes, that a lack of due-deference for another person

should result in condemnation. This fearful logic legitimizes the policing and prison system, which exists to force the most vulnerable populations to bear the weight of the consequences of economic austerity and dysfunctional social systems. From that perspective, Jesus' miracle and response undermine carceral logic and the dysfunctional, austerity system it upholds. Jesus creates overabundance, corrects Simon when he attempts to exile himself (after his mistake of objecting to Jesus' request), and asserts that his authority should not evoke fear in Simon Peter.

On another level, there is a sense that Simon's response is appropriately humble and Jesus' response a show of mercy. Dysfunctional systems are, at their heart, dysfunctional relationships. Dysfunctional relationships, at their heart, arise from *misplaced* fear. They result from imbuing temporal things and relationships with ultimate weight or what Paul Tillich calls "ultimate concern." When we relate to experiences of suffering or acts of harm as ultimately defining experiences, then we create a reality in which a victim of harm is universally a victim and a perpetrator of harm is universally a perpetrator. The dichotomy of victim/perpetrator is also a part of carceral logic and at its heart is the fear of being either. We want the police to protect us from being victims by isolating and punishing perpetrators. We dehumanize perpetrators because we do not want to identify with them. We go to great lengths to analyze "what went wrong" that created a victim, often to the extent of victim-blaming. This is a dysfunctional reality because it is based on placing our ultimate concern on the avoidance of being a victim or perpetrator.

From this perspective, Simon Peter's confession, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner," represents a transitional space from the

fear I described above. Simon can avow his identity as a sinner, but if Jesus does not show mercy he will be stuck in that identity. Jesus does immediately show mercy: “Don’t be afraid.” If Simon has placed his ultimate concern in the appropriate place, God’s regard for him, then he can be free of all the fears that perpetuate dysfunctional relationships. Consequently, Simon Peter must recognize Jesus’ ultimate authority as the only rightful object of fear. Only then will he internalize Jesus’ merciful “don’t be afraid” and his identity will be transformed. When this is realized within himself he can also become a mediator of God’s “Don’t be afraid,” and begin to “catch” people into life-giving relationships.

From a transformational justice perspective, we must also be able to acknowledge the reality of harm that we do and harm that we experience, but we must also hear and relay God’s response: “Don’t be afraid.” Only through courageously facing the reality of harm (and our role as victim and/or perpetrator) and believing in the possibility of transformation, can we build a system that nurtures life-giving relationships.

15

## Epiphany 6

Year A

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage from Deuteronomy which promises “life and death, blessings and curses” is often a challenging one from a restorative-justice or abolitionist perspective. The stark contrast made here in Deuteronomy and the promise of reward and punishment for human action drive the Deuteronomic History of Israel, the telling of Israel’s history which unfolds over the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings which sees Israel prosper when they are faithful and be punished when they do wrong. Such a simplistic narrative of reward and punishment is at first glance opposed to the more transformative understandings of accountability which derive from transformative justice practices.

I think this is a misunderstanding of the Deuteronomic History, which in fact offers a more nuanced and dialectical attempt to point towards the difficult-to-express reality of accountability without punishment. (I've written more about that, in connection with the prophet Jeremiah, in Lent 5, Year B.)

But I also think there is value in facing the stark choice between life and death in this passage as an existential reality, reading it on its own terms and not just in light of how later authors use it to interpret Israel's history. Because abolition, fundamentally, requires us to make a stark choice between life and death.

Prisons and policing are “death-making institutions,” as Mariame Kaba says.<sup>19</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” in *Golden Gulag*.<sup>20</sup> To uphold these systems is to support death-dealing. In place of them, abolitionists demand solutions aimed at *life*: caregiving, community. As Kaba and Andrea Ritchie put it, abolitionists demand “safety,” which depends on strengthening all the things in communities that can help promote well-being, rather than “security” provided by the exclusion and violence enforced by carceral systems.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between safety and security is perhaps why the solutions abolition provides to violence don't always compute within a carceral framework. Safety requires holistic approaches.

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<sup>19</sup> Mariame Kaba, quoted in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “The Emerging Movement for Police and Prison Abolition” in *The New Yorker* (May 7, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, “Reclaiming Safety,” *Inquest* (August 30, 2022).

It requires strengthening communities and practicing safety and accountability in small and partial ways, as Mia Mingus suggests, not simply looking for solutions that immediately remove or make invisible harm when crises occur.<sup>22</sup> Supporters of police and prisons sometimes seem to think abolitionist responses are unserious because the response to violence is the ongoing production of care and safety, rather than insisting on violence in return for violence. But this turn to such deep, lasting work that can prevent violence in communities and defend against it is precisely the work of “choosing life,” the work of building beautiful things, which is—as we see in Deuteronomy—*opposed to death-dealing systems, which are idolatry.*

Ultimately, Deuteronomy poses an existential challenge we cannot avoid. To choose safety instead of security, to choose life over death, requires complete and unreserved commitment on our part.

## Year B

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1–14

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The strange story of Naaman’s healing points to the ways human institutions can get in the way of the work of God, as well as how they can facilitate it.

Naaman comes to the king of Israel seeking a cure, because the healing power of God is found in Israel. First, the king of Israel is afraid that this is a trap, an excuse to start a conflict.

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<sup>22</sup> Mia Mingus, “Dreaming Accountability,” in *Leaving Evidence* (May 5, 2019).

The prophet Elisha promises that indeed the healing is possible. But once Naaman goes to Elisha and Elisha tells him to wash in the Jordan River, Naaman is then the one who balks, and has to be convinced to wash and be healed.

In this confusing back-and-forth, the desire to be healed warring with the fear that God's goodness will somehow bring danger or that the simple ways of God are insufficient to bring about the kingdom, I see some of the fears that provoke resistance to abolition. What if demanding justice that is restorative and follows the desires of God is naive, and leads to further harm and lack of safety? How can it be possible that the "easy" small solutions abolitionists propose—getting to know your neighbors, caring for one another in mutual aid, investing in education and health care—will be sufficient to eventually remove the need for police?

I particularly see a reflection of Naaman's disdain for the "easy" solution Elisha proposes. As his servants say, "if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?" Often, the struggle to imagine abolition is that a future without police or prisons is a radical change yet one that can only be built by tiny everyday steps. It is hard to see, and to convince skeptics of the value of, these small steps toward freedom. When those who are afraid that abolition will bring danger or disorder want to see plans for a dramatic, different way of doing justice before giving up their commitment to the current system, I see the desire for something that feels more complete, more appropriate to the enormity of the problem, more *final*, just as Naaman wishes a more grandiose response to provide his healing.

Yet sometimes the biggest changes can only come from small fidelities to the ways of God. The minor, practical steps that

abolitionists can suggest are the seeds of the radically new way of being. We turn to the “easy” ways of God and find healing there.

## Year C

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, by logical syllogism, to combat the belief that there would be no general resurrection of the dead. For Paul, the resurrection of Christ points to the resurrection of all; to the promise of life beyond death, the vindication of those denied justice in life, and the renewal of the creation.

Of course, Paul’s insistence on resurrection here is about victory over death and life beyond our deaths in this world. But—as in Daniel 12:2 and Jürgen Moltmann’s interpretation of that passage in *The Crucified God*—resurrection also points to justice and vindication. The resurrection is also the resurrection to judgment: not the criminal legal system of punishment that passes for “justice” in this world, but God’s true judgment of accountability. Belief in the resurrection of the dead is hope that justice can be done — that is one reason why, as Paul writes, if there is not resurrection “we are of all people most to be pitied” (15:19, NRSVUE).

Resurrection of the dead is victory for those who have perished (and vindication for those who have perished due to injustice and oppression). Resurrection of the dead is also what frees us from remaining “still in our sins” (15:17). The divine judgment

at the resurrection of the dead is linked by faith, in 15:17 to our freedom from our sins, to the transformative possibilities of real accountability and divine compassion.

Lee Griffith, in *The Fall of the Prison*, also reminds us that prisons in the Bible are identified with the powers of death—so resurrection is opposition to the power of the prison, and abolition is an act of resurrection. Resurrection is the freedom of those bound by death and the grave. Resurrection empowers the promise of freedom for those subject to the civil death of incarceration, too.

And this resurrection is not only a promise for the world to come but a *present reality*. As Paul writes in 15:20: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” While the resurrection of all, victory over death, hasn’t come about yet, *it has started*. Paul’s faith in the resurrection of the dead is based on the reality of the vindicated Jesus who lives. And for us, living in the presence of the living risen Christ, in a world where the resurrection of the dead *has already begun*, abolition becomes a sacramental act of making-present the living Jesus. The risen Christ comes close to us in every act of liberation that resists the powers of death and brings forth transformative and creative community and accountability. Abolition flourishes in the already-risen presence of the living Christ and anticipates the promise of the divine judgment of real accountability—for in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

# 16

## Epiphany 7

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 5:38–48

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

What this passage offers is a famous introduction to the peaceable way of Jesus and his ethic of non-retaliation.

The injunctions in this passage are controversial. I would not encourage those under abuse or oppression to continue to bear that abuse or oppression, nor would I condemn their desire to resist and seek freedom and flourishing for themselves.

At the same time, I think non-retaliation or non-punitiveness – a commitment to giving up the right to seek retribution for harm – is an essential part of an abolitionist vision of accountability.

Christianity has often abused victims of harm with its insistence on forgiveness. I do not believe forgiveness or reconcil-

iation are always possible or, therefore, required. But I do see a call in Jesus' commands here to a commitment to mercy or non-retribution. Mercy and compassion are a first step in a process of accountability. For example, Communities Against Rape and Abuse, in their guidelines to community accountability processes, list as their first principle "recognizing the humanity of everyone involved."<sup>23</sup>

A compassionate commitment to non-punitiveness informs the start of the process. But forgiveness and reconciliation, if they occur at all, occur only later in the process, when the responsible party has taken steps towards accountability. Perhaps this is a way of maintaining the Christian emphasis on mercy and non-retribution while disavowing the ways forgiveness is too often used to excuse harm or maintain oppression.

The Sermon on the Mount provokes us toward a deeper understanding of what mercy looks like in Christian ethical life.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 2:1–12

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage, Jesus uses a material healing to make a spiritual point. The particular allegorical use of changes to material conditions here perhaps offers a model for what abolition can

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<sup>23</sup> See Alisa Bierria, Onion Carrillo, Eboni Colbert, Xandra Ibarra, Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti, and Shale Maulana, "taking risks: implementing grassroots community accountability strategies" in *The Revolution Starts at Home*, <https://www.transformativejustice.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Taking-Risks.-CARA.pdf>.

offer to the church's proclamation of the Reign of God.

Three key points in this text:

1. A paralyzed man's friends bring him to Jesus.
2. Jesus tells him his sins are forgiven.
3. Faced with incredulity over this audacity, Jesus heals his paralysis in order to show that he has the power to forgive sins and inaugurate a new way of being.

In our modern context, I think the church's work for justice can act as such a material sign of a new reality. Abolition is *not* the coming Reign of God. The eschatological fulfillment of God's design for the world is much bigger and more transcendent than any political reality, even the liberation of captives. But abolition may be parallel to the physical healing Jesus performs as a sign of the new reality that underlies his actions. Abolition makes material changes for the better in ways that are consonant with the coming Reign of God. Abolition can be part of the sign and promise of God's liberation kingdom to come.

Also of interest is the role of the friends in this passage, who bring the man to Jesus for healing. I wonder where we see friends in our context of abolitionist work. What are we and others doing to bring people impacted by the carceral system into places of solidarity, healing, and liberation? How do we locate people within social spaces where the material signs of the Reign of God can be experienced and therefore its new reality can be signaled and understood? We cannot bring people into the kingdom of God — only God can do that — but perhaps we can bring them to the sites of liberation that provide signs of its fulfillment.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 6:27-38

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

I never found it difficult to love my enemies until I had some. I grew up in a cozy suburb with little police presence and not a prison in sight. The most I saw of police was the inexplicably present “School Resource Officer” at my public high school. Raised among evangelicals, I remember being taught that my enemies were people whom I didn’t like or with whom I didn’t get along. The most dramatic enemy was an abstract foe in a culture war. These are not the kind of “enemies,” I think, of which Jesus spoke.

In my first years of ministry under the Trump Administration, I finally made some real enemies. One of our church members was kidnapped by law enforcement while attending what was supposed to be a routine check-in regarding his immigration paperwork. As I waited for him to come out after doing his biometrics, I received a panicked call from him that they’d put him in handcuffs and were taking him away. Then the line cut out.

I made a list of enemies over the next 45 days as we fought a losing battle against his deportation. Kelly. Kunde. Gallagher. Nielsen. Trump. Officials all up and down the authoritarian ladder, from case officers to paper pushers to the ones dictating the policy that got our friend incarcerated and ultimately deported.

The 45 days our church member spent in immigration detention should be enough to convince anyone that abolition is necessary. He was hospitalized several times because of

negligence toward his medical conditions. He spent time in at least three prisons and not a care was given to his struggling body in most of them. For most of his detention, he was isolated in a remote notorious prison designed to alienate immigrants from support in rural Georgia.

But the Scripture passage this week isn't about that. It's about the people who made that world possible and continue to maintain it (because it did not leave office with the first Trump administration). I can't tell you exactly what it means to love those people. I'm still struggling to figure that out myself. But what I can say is that this passage demands we don't wish the same depraved system of incarceration on them, even though they made and maintain it. And if we don't wish prison on the only people who we really might think deserve it, we certainly can't maintain that status quo for people who aren't our enemies and certainly don't.

For all the focus we put in this passage on turning the other cheek, I believe the answer to the vexing questions here may lie elsewhere. In v. 30, Jesus makes a remark that seems out of place when talking about enemies. "Give to everyone who begs of you." The response to a cruel and shattered world is not to wield its own weapons against it and against your enemies. The response is abundance. The response is to make plain God's provision and love to the world.

The project of abolition is not merely the ending of incarceration or the abolition of police. The project of abolition must necessarily involve the creation of a world that obviously has no need for such things, where the existence of these systems would seem absurd to everyone present. We need to recognize and distribute the abundance that God has given us in this world so that everyone has what they need. Then everyone can thrive

and not just attempt to survive.

Even our enemies.

## Epiphany 8

Year A:

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1–5

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The abolitionist value in this passage is its radical insistence that judgment belongs to God alone. “It is the Lord who judges me,” Paul proclaims. Paul’s trust in divine justice leads him to think it “a very small thing to be judged by any human court” (4:3). The promise of justice in the age to come renders irrelevant the decisions made by sinful human systems of “criminal justice.”

To give judgment to God is *not* to abdicate our responsibility to work for justice in the world. Instead, it is to proclaim that justice exists, even when human structures fail. Christian work toward abolition is informed by the idea that the church always lives on the edge of the eschaton, at the brink of the coming divine judgment at the end outside of time. The fullness of

justice may not be seen until the Lord “brings to light the things now hidden” and “discloses the purposes of the heart” (4:5). Paul’s text is, undoubtedly, a warning not to pre-judge. Yet perhaps it is also a provocation to us, to ask: where do we see glimpses already of the divine vindication? How is the very rejection of the current system as providing “justice” already a glimpse, in hope and faith, of the true justice found in God? We should not judge one another the way God does, Paul says, as though we are already living at the end of time. Yet we *should* reject systems of condemnation and punishment that arrogate to themselves the power of judgment.

Abolition cannot promise a perfect system to replace the prison-industrial complex. Abolition cannot promise that a world without prisons and police will find a perfect way to bring justice when harm occurs. Perhaps the provisional forms of accountability that we *are* able to build — what transformative justice practitioners Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan call “fumbling towards repair” — is the best we can hope for.<sup>24</sup> We cannot achieve perfect eschatological justice here and now. Instead, as Paul demands, what is required is that we be trustworthy (4:2). In rejecting systems that claim ultimacy for their justice, we can find partial and provisional ways to move forward as trustworthy servants, seeking to build what justice we can now, in light of the perfect justice of God.

## Year B

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<sup>24</sup> Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* (AK Press, 2019).

Scripture: Mark 2:13–22

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus proclaims an entirely new reality breaking into the current one, in this passage. “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak,” he says, “otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. Similarly, no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” The new way of being, he is saying, is entirely different from the old. The reign of God is not something close to the realities of death, violence, and repression that grind us down here, but is something entirely different.

For abolitionists, this eschatological reality of the Reign of God provides, I think, the space of moral imagination that abolition requires. Too often, what we hear in response to pleas for abolition is that it’s not practical, not safe, not reasonable. It’s a lovely idea clearly in line with the gospel, we’re told, and yet the church can’t commit to it. It’s too different. Yet different is what Jesus is promising. And different is not only what he says is coming but what he says is *here now*, in his life, death, and resurrection, in his practices of table fellowship and ethics for this world. As followers of Jesus, we commit now to a way of living that we can barely imagine.

And what does Jesus do to live out this new way of living? In this passage, before declaring the unfathomable *differentness* of the reign of God, he calls a tax collector — those who worked for the Romans — and eats with tax collectors and sinners. Or to put it in provocative terms for abolitionists: he eats with cops as

well as harm-doers. The newness he is declaring isn't only for those who are oppressed, but also for those who have really done harm, interpersonally and/or as part of systems of oppression. And yet the character of his ministry is still something *new*, still a participation in the world to come. He is not only welcoming cops and harm-doers, he is calling them to follow, and forming them in the shape of the new, *different* reality. This newness is the transformation that holds harm without participating in it, that demands accountability based on compassion not punishment. The newness comes into the world and this world, in all its difficulties and evil, is transformed, in ways that seem unimaginable.

We, as Christians, do not live in the realm of the practical or common-sense, but seek the newness, the “unshrunk cloth,” of God’s compassionate reign.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 6:39–49

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage is very similar to the warnings and stories in Matthew 6:21–29, which appears in Proper 4 (Year A) in this lectionary.

There, I wrote:

*Jesus’ words here in the Sermon on the Mount offer a powerful warning to remind us that discipleship requires material action here in this world. We often hear, in Sunday school songs, about the “wise man who built his*

*house upon the rock,” understanding the rock to be faith in Jesus. Yet we’re wise to remember that what Jesus says here is that the “rock,” the solid ground, is not only faith or hearing but acting on his words.*

In the Gospel of Matthew, the emphasis on acting on Jesus’ words is tied to “doing the will of his Father in heaven” as opposed to deeds of power. Here in Luke, the emphasis is instead on bearing fruit in line with the way we claim to live. To put it in the terms often used by abolitionist organizer Kelly Hayes, this is living in line with our own values. Luke’s focus is on personal accountability. Where are we seeing our failures to live up to our own values, the log in our own eye, and addressing those so that our actions come closer to the values we hold? How are we building “good treasure of the heart” that will allow us to live our values in the world.

As transformative justice practitioner Mia Mingus reminds us, we practice accountability in small things. “Accountability is a skill we can build and practice,” she writes.<sup>25</sup> We practice apologizing to one another and caring for one another. As we practice our values, we become better able to engage them in the world. This is the solid rock that makes radically different systems possible.

Abolition is the fruit of trust that God is bringing about a new world. Abolition requires us to dream of possibilities beyond our current social order. If we believe that the reign of God is characterized by freedom and mutual love, then we act in ways

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<sup>25</sup> See Mia Mingus, “Dreaming Accountability,” *Leaving Evidence*, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/05/05/dreaming-accountability-dreaming-a-returning-to-ourselves-and-each-other/>.

that bear fruit. The ways we as Christians live and order our social structures in this world are the fruit of our belief and trust in the loving possibilities of God to come.

Shortly before this in the gospel of Luke, Jesus proclaims that he has come to bring good news to the poor and to set the prisoners free (Luke 4:17–21). Here, he asks: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” The question could be aimed at us, in light of his proclamation of freedom. The conformity between our confession of faith and our actions is the firm foundation on which we stand. Why do we call Jesus Lord and yet not proclaim good news to the poor and freedom to prisoners through the social structures for which we advocate and which we build among ourselves?

Abolition is not the only fruit our lives must bear. Yet abolition arises from the “good treasure of the heart” (6:45), as it is the fruit of love and compassion for all people, including those who have been criminalized or have done harm, and of trust that God is bringing about a reign characterized by life and freedom rather than death and punishment.<sup>26</sup> As we advocate, we practice the impulses of compassion and trust that characterize following Jesus.

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<sup>26</sup> I am indebted here to the thoughts of James McCarty and Johonna McCants-Turner on a panel discussion we presented jointly about abolition as faith, hope, and love to the Canadian Theological Society in May 2022.

## Epiphany 9

Year A:

Scripture: Matthew 7:21-29

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus' words here in the Sermon on the Mount offer a powerful warning to remind us that discipleship requires material action here in this world. We often hear, in Sunday school songs, about the "wise man who built his house upon the rock," understanding the rock to be faith in Jesus. Yet we're wise to remember that what Jesus says here is that the "rock," the solid ground, is not only faith or hearing but *acting on his words*. And, he says more specifically in the previous verse, acting to do the will of his Father in heaven.

I wonder if his reference to the will of his Father in heaven points to the character of the ethical acts to which he points us. He contrasts the faithful who do the will of his Father in

heaven not only to those who cry out to him, but also to those who “prophesy,” “cast out demons,” and “do deeds of power” in his name. In other words: what’s important is doing good, not doing acts that are powerful or visible.

Of course, the good that Jesus calls his followers to extends far beyond what we categorize as abolition, and it would be a mistake to simply draw a line between his command here and the abolitionist ethics that (we believe) is a faithful response, which are not what is explicitly taught in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to strenuous individual and communal ethics. It calls us to follow the Law of God in heart and soul. It often feels foreign to our modern sensibilities. At the same time, it calls us to forgiveness and love for enemies, a spirit of non-retribution that brings compassion even to evildoers (5:38–45); it calls us to personal accountability for harm we have done and to seek reconciliation (7:3–5, 5:23–25); it calls us to give up anger (5:22) and judgmentalism (7:1–2). These very personal ethical movements toward accountability, compassion, and non-retribution are part of the interpersonal foundation of restorative and transformative justice, the small ways we act (to paraphrase TJ practitioner Mia Mingus) that prepare us to make bigger systemic changes. The Sermon on the Mount demands, then, that we live out our faith in these small ways. And for us abolitionists, this is perhaps also a reminder to make our liberatory politics personal, to live out the world we wish to see in our interpersonal relationships as well.

The living out of faith in small things, Jesus says, is essential, and sets us on solid ground.

Year B:

Scripture: Mark 2:2–3:6

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

In these two stories, Jesus challenges his contemporary religious leaders about how they apply the commandment to “remember the sabbath and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). It is fundamentally a question about the relationship between God’s justice and God’s mercy. Remembering the sabbath and refraining from work is just, right, and lawful. But Jesus teaches us that when we focus on following rules in the face of human need and suffering, we are no longer in the right. Because mercy takes precedence over rules. Loving your neighbor as yourself is the “second” greatest commandment (see Mark 12:28–34). Jesus says that harvesting grain on the sabbath is permissible if one of God’s beloved children is hungry. Healing a person’s hand is permissible on the sabbath because it ends their suffering and restores their ability to work with dignity.

Likewise, justice and mercy are at the core of the debate about the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. Those who wish to uphold the current systems or reform them slightly are more concerned about justice (narrowly understood). They want people to follow rules and to obey society’s law and order. They want to punish wrongdoers so that they get what they deserve.

But Christian reformists are missing the grace and mercy boat. Even in a “tit for tat” or “eye for an eye” view of justice, lengthy prison sentences are completely disproportionate punishments for most crimes. American prison populations are aging rapidly. In the words of Marta Nelson, the director of sentencing reform

at the Vera Institute of Justice, “It all stems from the longer sentences and the longer length of time that people have had to spend serving sentences in the United States ... People who went in as young people then are now aging. So it’s really a story of how we choose to punish people.”

But more importantly, incarcerated people in the U.S. experience physical and psychological torture through the very fact of their confinement and through the deplorable conditions of our jails, prisons, and detention centers. Many people suffer lifelong mental illness after being released from incarceration. Incarcerated people are a class of God’s beloved children crying out for mercy. They do not deserve to be treated this way. They deserve sabbath rest as much as any other child of God. They deserve relief from the human-made hell we have placed them in. Our desire for justice through punishment is twisted and evil. Mercy must prevail, chains must be broken, and prisoners must be released.

Year C:

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

I have an icon on my wall by Roberto Levins Morales titled “Prison Walls Can’t Stop Love.” In it, a flowering vine grows across a barbed-wire fence and barred window, representing the connection of love at a distance even among those who are

separated and sent far away in incarceration.<sup>27</sup>

I thought of this image reading this perplexing passage from Luke in which Jesus heals at a distance. Distance is all over this passage: physical distance, as when the centurion asks Jesus not to come under his roof. Social distance, between the Gentile centurion and the Jewish Jesus, and between the centurion and the men he commands and enslaves.

That hierarchical distance even seems to be related to what Jesus identifies as faith: the centurion appears to compare the authority he has over the men in his command to the authority that Jesus has to heal his slave with only a word of command, and in response to this Jesus praises his faith and effects the healing.

The emphasis on hierarchy and command sits uncomfortably, no question, with abolitionist convictions. I don't know what to make of this story. But I return to that Prison Walls Can't Stop Love icon, and to the idea that Jesus can heal by command as well as touch. If Jesus' healing can be present even without his physical presence, then no one is beyond his reach. When I think of people incarcerated in the hell of solitary confinement, deprived of human connection, I know that Jesus can still reach and heal them. The liberating word of Jesus, the Word of God, acts at a distance, across every wall and attempt to isolate. We who were once far off are brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13).

The people around the centurion brought his needs before Jesus. We, too, can bring each other's needs as we act in solidarity. We may not have radical systemic change within

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<sup>27</sup> See: <https://www.rlmartstudio.com/product/prison-walls-cant-stop-love/>.

our capacity. We may not be able to bring healing. But as we lift each other up, we do so in trust that Jesus has the authority, and ability, to heal even those who seem far away and separated. Prison walls can't stop the love of God.

## Transfiguration Sunday

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

What the author of Matthew is trying to do in his gospel is actually quite simple. He is interested in establishing Jesus' authority for a largely Jewish audience. This particular section does this by showing how Jesus is the fulfillment of the work of Moses and Elijah: the law and the prophets. Jesus' trip up the mountain with Peter, James, and John mirrors Moses' trip up Mt. Sinai with Israelite leaders. Moses spends 40 days on the mountain shrouded by a cloud that looks like devouring fire. This was the glory of the Lord, and within that cloud God teaches Moses how they are to live together and worship God in covenantal relationship. When Moses returns his face is shining, reflecting the presence of God. Like Moses, Jesus shines on the

mountain-top. Like Moses, a bright, glowing cloud overtakes them. In case readers have gotten the message yet, a voice from the cloud says “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

There is more that readers have gleaned from this text though. Several commentators emphasize the theophany aspect of the transfiguration and suggest that this points to Jesus’ divine status. Multiple commenters in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary focus on Jesus’ divinity and Stanley Hauerwas notes that Moses simply reflects God’s glory after being in the cloud for 40 days, but Jesus’ whole body shines from within. Yet other commenters, like Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation* commentary, argue that this is certainly not an expression of Jesus’ divinity. Hare states that Jesus “is presented not as a non-human, but as a transformed human who will be the pioneer and perfecter of those who will share his heavenly experience.”<sup>28</sup>

These are actually not contradictory ideas. The union of divinity and humanity in Jesus should not distance him from us in any way. It is precisely the union of the divine and human in Christ that assures us that we will experience a similar divinized humanity. When we are divinized in Christ, our humanity isn’t annihilated, instead we become more fully human and more deeply humane. For example, for one of the early Cappadocian fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, our divinization in Christ is how the *Imago Dei* is realized in humanity; what was intended in our creation. This led Gregory to condemn slavery. Any violent division among humans is opposed to the *Imago Dei* that is at

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 1993), 199.

the heart of our collective humanity.<sup>29</sup> Our god-like-ness is reflected in how *humane* we are. It is realized in our ability to love each other well. It is realized in our ability to delight in and advocate for one another's well-being.

Objections to Jesus' divine-human status are often related to how inconceivable this notion is. It is not uncommon in the Bible for people to respond to the divine with fear. The divine is so foreign, powerful, beautiful... so *beyond* us, that it feels threatening. Likewise, we often respond to the foreign *other* in fear. Our fear perverts our expression of divine attributes. We pervert beauty by hoarding it and pervert power by oppressing others. This is not what divine power and beauty are like. Christ touches us and reminds us "do not be afraid." The beauty and power of the divine is *for* us. It is in the divine that we become fully ourselves, in harmonious relation with one another.

While the author of Matthew wasn't commenting on Trinitarian doctrine, Jesus is mediating the divine in a unique way in this text. God is doing something new in Jesus. Jesus doesn't tell us what God said, God tells us to listen to what Jesus says. Jesus doesn't give us the word of God, he *is* the word of God. Yet, Jesus doesn't want his authority established on a beatific vision. Peter, James, and John may be given some private encouragement as they enter into Jesus' last days, but it isn't until he becomes an executed criminal and is raised from the dead that Jesus wants people to hear about this moment of glorification. Ultimately his authority lies in his overcoming of condemnation and punishment, death and hell.

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<sup>29</sup> David Bentley Hart, "The 'Whole Humanity': Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001), 51-69.

The cosmic, beautiful, divine Christ is often contrasted with the earthly suffering Jesus, but in the transfiguration the divine and human are drawn together. The man who glows with a beautiful light and is called the beloved son of God is also the Son of Man who is hung on a cross and whose flesh is eternally scarred. Courts, prisons, and execution chambers are ugly places, but this is where God goes and when God tells us to “listen to him!” God is commanding us to listen to and obey a man who suffered in these ugly places. Though our world hoards beauty and power at the expense of the weak, God’s power is not something to be afraid of, and God’s glory will descend into the ugliest places, to raise people up into their own beauty and power with transfigured scars that speak to their authority. This eschatological vision is both an encouragement for those imprisoned right now and a condemnation of the systems that imprison them today.

## Year B

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

Contributor: Liam Miller

It’s so hard to say goodbye. Elisha is extending this moment like he’s bidding farewell to a loved one. First he agrees to say goodbye at the house, then abandons that rational plan to drive with them to the airport. At the airport drop off looks busy so they park and he decides to at least wait through booking, okay, why not through security... well at this point you’re in the airport so you may as well wait with them at the gate, parting ways only at the final, final, final call for boarding before walking back

through the crowds of happy reunions, ugly crying on your way to pay \$42 for parking.

A more somber analogy that came to mind is the Spike Lee film *25<sup>th</sup> Hour*, which centers on the final day in the life of Monty (Edward Norton) before he goes to jail to serve a seven-year sentence. The difficulty of parting ways, of being disappeared from the lives of friends and loved ones is painfully meditated upon – and even at the end, the possibility of a non-goodbye lies on the table, tantalizing the audience who know (in their own ways small and large) the pain of separation.

There's both beauty and tragedy in the moment of Elijah's departure – the dazzling, holy flame and wondrous chariots are a sight the likes of which we will never see, and yet, the pain of being separated from someone so significant to our lives that the only thing we would want from them in parting is a double sense of their spirit is something we all will or have experienced.

'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So repeats Elisha across this journey – and yet, despite his faithfulness and determination, they are indeed parted. There are some who are taken from our lives – be it by death, imprisonment, or other less categorizable forms of separation. And the pang of that can tear not just our clothes but our hearts in two.

Meditating on the longing and loss of Elisha assists us in approaching what the disciples might have felt during the transfiguration of Jesus.

The scene with Jesus strongly resembles that between Elijah and Elisha (a resemblance made all the more explicit by the presence of Elijah next to Jesus at the moment of his dazzling radiance). The disciples, faithful Jews as they were, would know the Elijah/Elisha story well, and so it is fathomable that in their

minds they think this moment is going to end the same way – Jesus taken up to heaven in holy movement. And so, we can read their offer to build dwellings as their own way of seeking to stay a little longer with the one they love. Let us build dwelling places so that ‘As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, you will not leave us.’

But despite their suggestion, a cloud overshadows and out of that numinous darkness they hear the voice of God. Then, *suddenly*, they look around and no one is with them any more, but only Jesus... I think it is so striking that it is phrased this way. Rather than “when they looked around they saw Jesus, but the others had gone”, Mark leads off with the absence (no one is there) and this allows us to live a moment in this absence before the conciliatory reassurance that Jesus is there. Because in that moment, that pause, the disciples look and see no one with them, and it appears that they were right in their hunch that they, like Elisha, are about to be left alone, torn asunder from their master and friend. In this moment, the voices of prophets past might sting their ears, ‘Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?’

It is a perfectly reasonable thing to believe has happened – Jesus, their friend and master, Jesus a prophet of Israel, lifted from earth to be spared from death – a fate befitting his wonder and might, befitting this man attested by God. And yet, the story does not end that way. “No one was with them any more, but only Jesus”. Jesus is not taken. Jesus remains. Jesus stays. As the Lord lives, and as they live, Jesus will not leave them.

Instead, Jesus sets off again down the mountain, disciples in tow, back to the crowds. Not taken up to heaven, but journeying back down to earth – to its troubles, squabbles, hurting, forsaking, and death.

Now, those who know their gospels you might be thinking that this point, 'isn't this just a prolongment?' Isn't this just like Elijah allowing Elisha to walk a little farther down the road with him before the end? Isn't Jesus still going to ascend to the Father at the end of this story?

I think the key point of emphasis is that the road to the ascension runs through Calvary. The transfiguration event marks the end of the season of Epiphany as we prepare to enter Lent, to enter the 40 days of preparation before the cross of Easter. Jesus is not taken, does not depart, until he has gone all the way through. By that I mean Jesus is not swept out of this mortal realm before tasting the sting of death. Jesus goes all the way with us: swallowed by death, only to defeat it.

In this way, Jesus is Elisha. He is the one who chooses to continue to walk with us always a little further: 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' That is the word of Jesus' promise; that is the power of his death. However far we walk, Jesus walks too until the day we are taken by God. And then, given that Jesus is the beloved Son, the Eternal Word, the Second Person of the Trinity – being taken by God is still no departure from Christ – from God to God we go, from God to God we are not left.

That Jesus does not depart on that mountain but instead descends back into the mess of human life, that he descends to the point of death, even death on a cross, that he descends even unto the pits of hell to release its prisoners, that is our good news and hope that we will not be left however far we descend. People can be disappeared into all kinds of prisons, detention centers, and camps, but not Jesus, not he who remains, he who descends. Jesus, our eternal Elisha, carries with us always a little longer. We do not have to extend the goodbye, clinging to the

hem of his garment to remain in his company. Even in the most desolate and lonely places in our lives and societies, even when we are finally laid to rest, when no one is with us anymore, Jesus remains. As the Lord lives, he will not leave you. Amen.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 9:28-43

Contributor: Chris Hoke

In jails and prisons, there are plenty of Bibles. The fat paperbacks line chapel bookshelves, dozens of translations. New boxes arrive every month. Guys I knew in a super-max facility used stacks of these hefty volumes to lift inside bedsheets when weights were taken away.

The problem with these phonebook-like bricks of recycle paper is that the wild variety of witnesses in our tradition's collected scriptures gets flattened, reduced to: The Holy Bible (Book, from the Latin). For my friends reading and trying to pray in jails and prisons, the most radical and liberating voices in the scriptures can merge into a murkier "The Bible Says" — where often, the interpretation of what "The Bible Says" upholds the carceral, punitive status quo.

This is a bummer, a scriptural boxing and caging—which the gospel story of the Transfiguration brilliantly abolishes.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus' disciples follow him up the mountain where they see his divine glory unleashed, shining through his flesh, his face, his clothes. Then mystical apparitions of scriptural heroes Moses and Elijah show up. The disciples witness the embodiments of The Law and The Prophets talking

with their living lord and rabbi, Jesus.

Peter—so often the mirror of our human impulses—in his thrill offers to build three dwellings, or shelters, *sukkot*, for these three holy teachers. Maybe it was an act of honor, sacred hospitality. Maybe it was to commemorate this epiphany, to contain the mystery, as we do, with altars and memorials. Either way, Peter “Bibles” them: he wants to put a familiar religious structure around these voices.

This is when a larger cloud of the Divine wraps around them all and says to all of them—not just the disciples but to Moses and Elijah as well: “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!”

Here, the voice of God resists our containment, our boxes. The voice of God exalts the person and message of Jesus as the fulfillment of all biblical voices. In this moment of radical re-orientation, both those before Jesus (the Law and the Prophets) and after (the Apostles) are instructed by God to *listen to Jesus*.

No matter what we and our incarcerated friends read in the scriptures, no matter what images of God or human actions may seem to support systems of oppression, none of it can overrule or cancel out—or even be held in debate with—the liberating words and mission of Jesus.

May we all hear God’s loud preference here—and so join Moses, Elijah, Peter, James and John as we all learn let go of what we thought we knew and listen with greatest attention to God’s chosen, liberating, healing, forgiving, Hades-abolishing, execution-undoing embodiment in Christ.

## Ash Wednesday

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:6)*

Our Lenten disciplines are often private and closed off from the world. There's a good reason for that, I suppose. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them," Jesus says, according to Matthew, "for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). The most public we get with our Lenten observance is that someone may notice the ashes on our forehead or that we're abstaining from one food or another according to our tradition or private discipline. Purple

drapery, vestments, and paraments declare that Lent has come in the church; but outside of the sanctuary, the world takes little notice.

Isaiah has some blunt things to say about that kind of spiritual discipline in the passage we often read on Ash Wednesday. “Shout out, do not hold back!” Isaiah says, “Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.” (Isaiah 58:1)

We must name with a loud and clear voice the sins of our institutions. Some examples from the United States (from the Sentencing Project):

- Half of the people in federal prisons are serving time for a drug offense. We’ve decided that we should try to destroy the lives of people over drugs by frequently decimating their chances at future employment, stripping them of their right to vote temporarily or permanently, and subjected them to the violence of the prison system.
- We’ve looked at a system that does unspeakable violence to the incarcerated and great damage to their lives after incarceration and over the past 40 years concluded that we should *increase* incarceration 500%.
- States spend over \$60,900,000,000 on prisons every year. We’ve chosen incarceration as a solution to social problems rather than provision, reconciliation, or restoration. How many people could have been fed, educated, or cared for with that money?

Our past Lenten fasts have not changed these facts or made Christians people who want to change these trends, for the most part. “Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike

with a wicked fist,” Isaiah continues. “Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard from on high” (v. 4). The United States has only become more carceral and retributive over the past several decades. So, in what kind of fast should we engage?

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (v. 6). This Lent, consider making your fast one from injustice. Change the way you spend your money so you aren’t benefiting the private prison complex. Join a prison ministry focused on the liberation of people from incarceration (be careful and discerning here as there are many non-liberationist prison ministries). Work with or buy from businesses that hire formerly incarcerated individuals, or hire them yourself if you’re among the employer class (and pay a living wage, while you’re at it). Write your legislators. Form relationships with those suffering incarceration or post-incarceration, embracing them as members of your community.

A significant thing you could do is make it a discipline to spread the Gospel of abolition in your church, whether you are a minister or a lay person. Use the resources from Christians for the Abolition of Prisons in your Sunday School classes, Bible studies, small groups, or whatever you call your discipleship gatherings at church. The resources page is full of great podcasts, articles, and other materials to make this process easy. If you can’t get a ministry of your church on board, do it in your own prayer life and refuse to be quiet about it to your peers. “Shout out, do not hold back!” as Isaiah says.

Make this Lent one not of private piety, but vocal righteousness. If we do, Isaiah promises great things: “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places,

and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail” (v. 11).

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent for the Western Church and services typically focus on our vulnerability and need for repentance. In this passage Paul entreats the Corinthian church to be reconciled with God in order to become “the righteousness of God.” Paul states that there is “no obstacle” put in their way. Even though they are subject to persecution and ridicule, they remain steadfast, patient, loving, and honest. They seem like they have nothing, but they have everything; they are being punished and subject to sorrow, but they are alive and joyful. On Ash Wednesday this passage raises these questions: How does God make the way for reconciliation? Why does our reconciliation make us “the righteousness of God?” What does it mean to refrain from putting obstacles in the way of reconciliation? And finally, what is so counter-intuitive about what the Christians are steadfastly offering and embodying?

Beginning with the call to repentance on Ash Wednesday as a step towards being reconciled—that is put back into right relationship—we might highlight the way that dehumanizing punishment represented by prison and policing stands in the way of accountability and repentance. When the wages of sin are akin to death, even taking accountability and repenting can not lead to reconciliation. God makes the way for reconciliation by

God's faithfulness to offer grace in order to remove the obstacle of death-dealing punishment. In Romans 3:25, Paul says that it is God's grace that *demonstrates* God's righteousness. When we place our faith in that grace and are willing to honestly face the ways in which we are involved in harm in our communities, then we can begin to embody God's righteousness in the world.

This is only true when it is made real in the world and in our communities, but the work of making it real is an uphill battle. Grace and repentance can be used by those who are strong in a community to revel in the freedom to abuse the weak. We regularly see today how grace and a concern for harsh punishment is invoked for young white male rapists, whereas law and order is invoked for Black women who have defended themselves against abuse. The call to remove the obstacle of incarceration through an emphasis on grace must never be used to remove the need for *real* repentance (turning away from harming behavior) and accountability (seeking to repair the damage done as much as possible). Grace, appropriately applied, makes way for the things necessary for reconciliation. It does not remove the need for honesty, behavioral change, and accountability.

What then is "God's righteousness" and how does it relate to the "ill-repute" that Paul speaks of? God's righteousness is not demonstrated by ignoring our sin, but by a commitment to remain in relationship with us, working for our healing and restoration. In a world where harm is so great, the commitment to remain in relationship on a societal level and work for the healing of both victims and perpetrators of harm (both of which is all of us) seems vulnerable and foolish. We are left open to feeling deep sorrow, to being further harmed or punished, to pouring out our monetary and energetic resources into a

fruitless endeavor. Any individual who is not able to experience healing and restoration remains an indictment against God's faithfulness to reconcile. We must remember then, that even the work of transformative justice, the work of seeking to abolish prisons and build new systems of accountability and reconciliation, is commended *in and of itself* because it builds our capacity to be people who are able to transform harm. This is what Paul means when he says that "they have commended themselves in every way." Though the work seems foolish and leaves them vulnerable to harm, the work at the same time makes them more resilient and able to be a reconciling people.

On Ash Wednesday, we must remember that the call to trust in God's grace and repent of sin is only the beginning of the work. It is a foundation for an entirely different way of achieving justice that stands opposed to any form of justice that relies on punishment and death. If we are to be reconciled with God and become "God's righteousness," then we are also called to do the work that "commends ourselves" in the face of great harm. We must work to abolish punitive systems and put in place systems of accountability that allow us to remain relationally connected.

# 21

## Lent 1

Year A

Scripture: Psalm 32

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

As we enter Lent, Psalm 32 offers a beautiful picture of confession and forgiveness. Besides the classically-theological elements of this psalm, such as its emphasis on God's mercy, the psalm shows us a way into the pathways of accountability as a positive practice that is helpful for building alternatives to carceral ways of thinking, being, and responding to harm.

After the psalmist tells the truth about their sin to God, God responds not only with deliverance (v. 7) but also with instruction and counsel (v. 8). God's response is not to forgive, but to guide the sinner into paths of accountability. Following God's counsel is (theologically) a form of repentance; it is also an empowerment for an accountable way of living in community.

It feels important to always emphasize that accountability is an ongoing practice, and one which is fundamentally about how we live in ways responsible to one another, and to God. Even the more direct work of taking accountability for harm we do is grounded in the ongoing practices of accountability to each other, as Mia Mingus describes. As she poignantly asks, “What if accountability wasn’t scary?”<sup>30</sup>

I think Psalm 32 offers, in theological language, a picture of accountability that isn’t scary. It shows one way of practicing accountability in “joy” and “steadfast love” (v. 10–11).

A further resource for thinking about accountability specifically in response to harm is Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg’s book *On Repentance and Repair* (Beacon Press, 2022), and a commentary *On Repentance and Repair* written by Ruttenberg for Christians studying that book during Lent is a helpful resource.<sup>31</sup> Each of these tools exist to help us conceive of accountability as a liberating, joyful way of moving forward when we have done harm. They let us feel, along with the author of Psalm 32, the joyous, powerful response of God to each of our tiny, halting attempts to turn from harm and make things right.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

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<sup>30</sup> Mia Mingus, “Dreaming Accountability” in *Leaving Evidence* (May 5, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/18rIDOWiOEDTfPlS1ftVp01eJrKvppgK\\_/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/18rIDOWiOEDTfPlS1ftVp01eJrKvppgK_/view)

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Mark gets to the point. We don't have a lot of elaborate stories filled with symbolism. In this text, Jesus is baptized, tempted, and starts to preach. The first sermon he gives: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. The word for repentance here, *metanoia*, is often translated as conversion elsewhere in the gospels.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we must lift up the centrality of repentance to faith. Repentance is an act of faith. Repentance and conversion are centrally about admitting that the path I am on right now is not the right path. I need to change directions.

Who is the audience of Jesus's first sermon? The people of Galilee, in one, but that is not very precise. Mark does give a specific location. Galilee is enormous. It is not a very important place. It was a region with a mix of Jewish and Pagan cultures. It would not seem to be the starting place of the kingdom of heaven on earth, but this is where Jesus begins. The kingdom of heaven is near. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.

We must also read this sermon as speaking to our society today. Society is made up of people and the decisions we make as a people. We need to repent as a society of the kingdom of sin we have built with the carceral state. Like those folks in Galilee, we must admit that the path we are on as a society is leading us to destruction. We need to turn around. We need to repent. As a church, we need to repent of our support of destructive institutions. We must repent of false ideas of justice that negate the humanity of others. It takes faith. As a church, we can show the world what we believe, but we actually have to believe that it is true. We have to believe that the kingdom of heaven is near.

We have to believe that new life is possible.

Year C

Scripture: Romans 10:8-13

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

On this First Sunday in Lent, we are met with an ancient formula found in Romans 10: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.”

Of course, this passage is about the entire promise of the gospel: resurrection, salvation, abundant life in community with God and one another. The promise of Jesus is a metaphysical promise of abundance in the midst of the ambiguities of existence.<sup>32</sup>

But if we consider abolition as a sign of resurrection, then the promise here is meaningful in our work toward building an abolitionist reality. I am particularly struck by the doubled motion of “believe” and “confess” in this formula in Romans. If we *believe* that God raised Jesus from the dead, then we also *confess* that he is Lord. If we believe in the power of God to accomplish resurrection, then we also must confess—in the public sphere as well as in private devotion—Jesus’ victory over

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<sup>32</sup> This is what 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich called the “triumphant union of unambiguous life” — his thought on existentialism has profoundly affected my own thinking, although I cite him here with hesitation because of the allegations of sexual harassment against him which came out after his death.

the powers of sin and death, which include the death-dealing systems of incarceration and punishment. Our belief in Jesus' victory over death may justify us but, according to this passage, it is our confession that saves. Salvation is tied to the articulation of Jesus' lordship, of God's power to redeem and save us from the powers and systems of oppression in our world, so that, as Paul concludes, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And in our current context, abolition is one such concrete articulation of what it means that Jesus is Lord. Abolition declares that Jesus' victory over death is real, that it has concrete consequences for our world today as well as the world to come, and that the nature of Jesus' lordship promises the transformation of our communities and political systems from systems that bring death to those that give life. Abolition gives us a way of describing in practical and material terms one consequence of saying Jesus is Lord, and a way of expressing that fundamental theological reality in terms that make explicit its consequences which challenge us and our presuppositions about how the world works.

## Lent 2

Year A

Scripture: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Contributor: Jay Bergen

How do you feel about the book of Romans? Whether you were raised in dominant American Christianity or just absorbed it through osmosis, it is very hard to open Paul's letter to the church in Rome and not hear it in the voice of modern evangelicalism, contrasting "faith" and "works" and proclaiming a Jesus who "frees us from 'the law.'" The supersessionist replacement theology of Paul the American Christian would be confusing to Paul the 1st-Century Jew, and to his Gentile and Jewish audience.

Thankfully, in recent decades there has been an abundance of scholarship asking, in essence, "What if Paul wasn't a self-hating Jew?" At the risk of summarizing an entire academic

library in a few sentences, this new perspective argues that for Paul, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus acts to welcome Gentiles into God’s family without replacing or reducing the Chosen-ness of the Jewish people. And this happens, crucially, not because of our own “righteousness” in faith (as the NRSV translates this passage), but because of God’s righteous commitment to us. Our faith doesn’t “save” us Gentiles, God’s love has already redeemed us. God leaves no one behind.

We can continue to debate this, but for me this reading helps us see and understand Paul the incarcerated organizer. Here, God does not ordain punishment—human or divine—for our unbelief or our bad works. If all people are now inheritors of God’s Chosen-ness, we all “inherit the world” through the righteousness of God’s belief in us. Whether or not we keep the faith or behave well, God has faith in us. God is rooting for all of us, collectively as a species. As Jewish poet Aurora Levins Morales writes,

*This time we’re tied at the ankles.*

*We cannot cross until we carry each other,  
all of us refugees, all of us prophets.*

*No more taking turns on history’s wheel,  
trying to collect old debts no-one can pay.*

*The sea will not open that way.*

*This time that country*

*is what we promise each other,  
our rage pressed cheek to cheek*

*until tears flood the space between,*

*until there are no enemies left,*

*because this time no one will be left to drown  
and all of us must be chosen.*

*This time it's all of us or none.*<sup>33</sup>

Year B

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

When Jesus shares with his disciples that the Messiah will suffer in solidarity with the guilty and the criminalized, Peter finds it unimaginable. How often do we find the concept of abolition unimaginable? How often do we find ourselves unable to imagine that real, material liberation and abolition in concrete terms, not just spiritual ones, might be God's plan? When we doubt the possibility of abolition or find ourselves unable to see outside the carceral structures we've constructed, are we "setting our minds not on divine things but human things?"

The answers to these questions are not obvious — this is an application of a specific text about Jesus' life to our current situation, which requires us to wrestle with the text and its applicability. But abolition forces us to consider such unsettling questions and new interpretations of familiar biblical texts. (That is, after all, the point of this series!) Abolition forces us to ask whether the human responses we have to violence and harm are really consistent with God's desire for justice among us. Abolition is the work of unsettling our assumptions.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore often says that "abolition requires that we change only one thing, which is everything." There is

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<sup>33</sup> Aurora Levins Morales, "Red Sea," <http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com/red-sea.html>

nothing in our society which isn't open to questioning—to unsettling—in light of abolitionist convictions. Every part of our lives, from economic and political systems to interpersonal relationships, requires analysis and critique and *repentance* in order for us to build a world without prisons.

Such a radical re-visioning of how we live our lives is frightening. It may require that we give up every cherished understanding we've held in the past. Abolition *changes* us. But this text from Mark also provides us with a promise about such change. Jesus says: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” If we try to hold on to the structures and values that have brought us to the deadly status quo of mass incarceration, we will give up the possibility of new life and new ways of being offered by abolition. But if we are willing to question everything—if we are willing to give up old unjust security out of secure faith in the new work of abolition God is bringing about—then, perhaps we will discover in the liberation of all the new and abundant life promised by Jesus.

Following Jesus requires only that we offer up everything. Abolition requires only that we change everything. Freedom is on the other side.

## Year C

Scripture: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

One of the great challenges of the church in the modern world, and the church in the United States in particular, is the question of citizenship: where does our citizenship lie? Is it in the place where we were born? Is it in the place we reside? Is it in the place marked on any documents we may or may not have?

Paul was a citizen of Rome. He knew the privileges that that citizenship offered to him. In Philippians 3, though, he offers a radical critique of worldly views of citizenship. With powerful language he describes a group of people who are enemies of the cross. Their end is in destruction. Their god is in their belly. They're never satisfied. They're never content. They're constantly desiring more and more.

In contrast, Paul proclaims that our citizenship is in heaven. This echoes the words of Jesus in the gospels where he says, 'give to Caesar, what is Caesar and give to God what is God's.' It echoes the lines from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21, NRSV).

This citizenship question matters tremendously when we think about society in general and the kind of society Christians should strive for, because if Paul is right, if we are first citizens of heaven and we should first imitate the saints, then we need to strive for a world whose god is not in the belly. A world of radical transformation, where prison abolition is not seen simply as another political plank but as the bellowing call of our Lord and

master Jesus Christ to love our neighbors.

It is an act of faith to claim our citizenship in heaven. It is faith like in the words of Hebrews, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1). The point of abolition is not found just in its practical effects, even though there are strong arguments to be made there, and there are many secular arguments for abolition that are powerful and valid, but the impetus of the church rests on this claim is that the people in this world around us are our brothers and sisters, wherever they are from, whatever they have done. They are worthy of respect, dignity, opportunity, and transformation.

So may we be imitators of Christ, imitators of love, for the transformation of this world, so that this world can be a little more like the true place where our citizenship resides.

## Lent 3

Year A

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Christians have spilled untold gallons of ink on the concepts of justification and reconciliation in Romans and elsewhere in the New Testament, but rarely do they consider the implications of God's mechanisms of justice for their own "justice systems." You could go to any number of theologians for the former, so let's focus on the latter. In the United States, our "justice system" has its basis in retributive justice, the kind where punishment is the response to wrongdoing. That is not the pattern described in the New Testament.

Instead of exacting punishment to get justice, which our current "justice system" attempts to do, God's mechanism for justice in the New Testament is justification followed by

reconciliation. The goal is not simply to punish anyone, but to reconcile enemies. The whole point of justification and reconciliation is the elimination of enmity for the sake of our collective salvation and liberation.

How does that compare to our “justice system?” Our system doesn’t eliminate enmity; rather, it exacerbates it:

- The removal of someone from society via incarceration as a punishment results in disruption to family and community systems, many of which may have depended on the incarcerated individual.
- The individual incarcerated suffers from increased economic instability, inequality, and distress, particularly in regard to legal discrimination toward the incarcerated in housing and employment.
- Whether it is between incarcerated people or between staff and those incarcerated, prisons are sites of further brutalization and violence—they do not stop violence. No one is reconciled, just punished and victimized.

Consider, too, that “levels of imprisonment increased fivefold since 1973, crime rates have not dropped proportionately during this period.”<sup>34</sup> The massive prison industrial complex we’ve built has not achieved significant crime reduction or gains in public safety. Our system simply reproduces violence and increases enmity between persons. If the goal of God’s justice is to eliminate enmity and provide reconciliation, as Paul suggests

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<sup>34</sup> Todd Clear, “Backfire: When Incarceration Increases Crime,” <https://cites.eerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=0e94fa134b8c7c2cc5143dce503e0bc71f66cf2>.

in Romans 5, why do Christians so readily concede to a “justice system” that does the opposite?

When preaching about these theological concepts, keep in mind their implications for social organization. While Paul is not laying out a model for civil society explicitly, you can't believe one thing when it comes to your own reconciliation to God and something completely different and disconnected for our reconciliation to each other.

## Year B

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

As we continue our time in Lent, with many of us marking a year in isolation due to the pandemic, our attention turns to the ten commandments in Exodus 20. While it's easy to skip past the second verse of this section, the commandments must all be read in the light of this declaration.

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

This setting, the God who brings people out of slavery, is the setting for what follows. These are not random and arbitrary rules, nor are they codes that provide a personal path to individual righteousness. These are commandments for those who follow the God that brings people out of the house of slavery. (And what else can prisons be described as except a house of slavery?)

Growing up, I was taught that the commandments could be bifurcated into two categories: relationship with God; and

relationships with others. As I got older, and was taught better, I came to see that these are false bifurcations, and that relationship with God flows into relationship with others flows into relationship with God and on and on. Jesus expresses this when he tells the crowd that “what you do for the least of these, you do for me.”

As abolitionists, we look at these commandments, all commandments, through the lens of the God who liberates. Standing on the shoulders of James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, and many others who have formed liberation theology, we insist that the good news of the Gospel is the liberation of the oppressed, and how we treat others is how we treat God, who places Godself with the oppressed.

“God is taking sides with those who are voiceless and weak, and he is empowering them to know that they were not made for slavery, not made for exploitation, but was made for freedom, just like everybody else in the world,” James Cone said in an NPR interview describing Black Liberation Theology.<sup>35</sup>

When we read the ten commandments, keep first the idea that these are commandments from God, *the liberator*.

## Year C

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-9

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<sup>35</sup> Fresh Air Interview on NPR, “Black Liberation Theology, in its Founder’s Words” (March 31, 2008).

Contributor: Grace Kozak

In her work as an abolitionist, Mariame Kaba reiterates again and again that we must continually push against our own instincts for punishment that are formed in a society where punishing those who have done wrong is normal and expected. When I first heard this idea, I had begun to be receptive to the need to end prison and policing, but had not realized the depth to which punishment had taken root in my own life and interpersonal relationships. As a partner and parent, I began to see the ways in which I was taught punishment in my own family system as a child, and how it was being manifested in the ways I worked through conflict between myself and my husband and daughter, primarily through being unforgiving and disconnected.

When I read this Isaiah passage for this week's lectionary, I was immediately drawn to verses 7-9. These verses focus on a God who will abundantly pardon because God's ways are not our ways. I did a little research into these verses and found that they echo a conversation in Ezekiel 18 when God's saving actions toward the wicked were judged by the house of Israel to be unfair in verse 29. The story in this passage and Isaiah demonstrate twice over the ways in which God's graciousness and will for the salvation of all can trip up "good people" who see graciousness toward the "bad" as reflective of an unfair God who must not value their own "goodness."

God's ways are not our ways. When we thirst for punishment of those who do wrong toward us or the people we love, we are being formed by our environment that says that the way we deal with being wronged is by exercising power over those who have wronged us to cause them harm. As we consider the ways

in which we work to dismantle carceral systems in society and in our personal lives, may we do so with an eye toward God's ways, where all things and people can be saved and abundantly pardoned.

# 24

## Lent 4

Year A

Scripture: Ephesians 5:8-14

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

A key part of the abolition movement is educating ourselves and others about the great injustices of the US criminal-legal system. There would be no need to abolish systems that work for everyone or that serve all of society well. That's why we must "expose" the "unfruitful works of darkness" in the criminal-legal system (Ephesians 5:11, NRSV).

The pervasive cultural narrative is that police, courts, and prisons are simply aimed at achieving "law and order." In this narrative, police successfully investigate every significant crime, arrest the right person every time, and convict them swiftly — typically before the end of a 60-minute TV episode. The convicted criminal then receives the "just" punishment of

incarceration to “pay their debt to society.”

The problem with this narrative is that *it isn't true*. The reality is far messier (at its best) and far more sinister (at its worst). Even the individuals in these systems who bring the best of intentions fail to get it right because the sinful systems are stacked against the accused. The truth is that, according to FBI data, police only make arrests on a fraction of all reported crimes, and less than half of reported violent crimes.<sup>36</sup> Police and courts are demonstrably biased against Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people and against poor people. Convictions are sometimes rushed through using sloppy evidence and insufficient defense. And prisoners themselves experience horrible conditions in most carceral facilities, including economic exploitation, malnutrition, abuse from guards and other prisoners, torture such as solitary confinement, and even the death penalty. Ephesians tells us that “the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true,” and very little about the criminal-legal system fits that description (5:9).

Instead, the evils of the criminal-legal system are white-washed with propaganda from the media, politicians of all stripes, and even religious leaders. But our calling is not to remain in the darkness; it is to step into the light of Christ, the light of the Holy Spirit. Again Ephesians says, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, expose them” (5:11). As Christian abolitionists, it is our responsibility to expose what is evil in our midst. It's our responsibility to share the stories of people who have been chewed up and spit out by prisons, police, and courts. It's our responsibility to commit ourselves to

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<sup>36</sup> FBI's 2019 Crime Data: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/clearances>

“speaking the truth in love,” when it comes to abolishing these unjust systems (Ephesians 4:15).

## Year B

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Our past does not define our future. As Paul says in one of the readings for this Sunday: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). But as a church and as individual Christians, we must grapple with how far we think grace goes.

Is grace just a Sunday morning thing? Is grace just a ‘people who look like me’ thing? Is grace just for people who don’t do really terrible things? I mean, Jesus eats with sinners, but he doesn’t eat with “rapists or child molesters,” right? We may think that grace has to stop somewhere. The limits we put on grace are the exact same limits we put on God. If we think grace must stop somewhere, we must imagine the stoppage of God’s love. It is easier to see the work of grace in individual cases than in a system. As the saying goes that was attributed to Stalin, “one death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic.” The carceral state has turned us all Stalinists of sorts. Churches can have campaigns for individuals. Can let individuals give testimonies about God’s love and grace. Churches can start half-way houses on small scales and work to helping people “turn their life around.”

If we leave grace to the individual and to the great personal

anecdotes, we point to a deep lack of faith in God's transforming power. Grace is not just offered to the deserving. In fact, were grace only for the deserving, it would not be grace. It would just be works, which is where a lot of Christians end up. Works-righteousness really is the backbone of the Prison Industrial Complex. "People need to work. People need punishment. Society needs restitution." As Paul would say: *by no means*. Let us live into God's grace and be unafraid to work towards systems that acknowledge the possibility of transformation and that grace and mercy is not offered to a few but to *all*.

## Year C

Scripture: Joshua 5:9-12

Contributor: Jay Bergen

All of the passages for this Sunday speak of how God is made known in and through abundance, in the bounty of God's creation and the wideness of God's mercy. So what is this text doing here?

Joshua is a complicated book, with a complicated history. My ancestors, like many other European settlers on Turtle Island, placed themselves in the unfolding of the story of Joshua, as Israelites entering Canaan. This whole book could be considered is a "text of terror" for indigenous peoples around the world.

But the communities who wrote and compiled this book had at best an ambivalent relationship with these stories. Remember, it is only after Constantine that anyone who calls this a sacred text gains actual imperial power. For centuries these stories were passed down by people who knew colonization from the

underside. And so, while they may have longed for a God who could act with power, destroying their enemies and giving them total control of the land, they narrated a sacred history that subtly critiqued colonization and imperial power.

Here, at Gilgal, the people of Israel sit down to eat the produce of the land. And at that very moment, God's abundance leaves them. No longer will they eat manna. No longer will they trust in God to provide for their every need. No doubt, like my ancestors disembarking from the boat to start a new life, they were grateful to be able to provide for themselves. But the writers of Joshua warn us: You can trust in God's abundance, or you can trust the works of your own hand, but do not confuse the two.

We often talk about abolition as an act of creation. We plant a new world in the shell of the old. But even more fundamentally, abolition requires us to tend to the practices of healing and transformative justice already alive. It begins not from deficit or scarcity, but from a lens of abundance.

My comrades Dawud Lee and Nyako Pippen, who are both currently serving Death By Incarceration sentences in Pennsylvania, write that incarcerated people have always practiced transformative justice. Even in the belly of the beast, where scarcity is not a mindset but a daily reality, "there are some folks inside of these cages that understand the kind of love and patience that is required to help others make the transformation from living a life of perpetual pain and violence to living a life of healing and accountability."<sup>37</sup>

What could be more abolitionist than practicing love and patience from inside prison walls? What could be more abolitionist

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<sup>37</sup> Can be accessed at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240520095906/https://lifelines-project.org/2021/09/14/weology/>

than trusting in divine abundance and tending to God's creation?  
Let us abolish settler-colonialism and the carceral system, as  
we grow the transformative justice spirit.

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## Lent 5

Year A

Scripture: John 11:1-45

Contributor: Jed Tate

Just imagine. Imagine that new creation, that resurrection is actually possible. Imagine, even, that not only is resurrection possible, but God has already begun bringing about the restoration of the world, all of creation, and our invitation is to participate in this *Missio Dei*.

Of course, this renewal can be hard to picture when we're surrounded by systems of death and imprisonment. Perhaps as abolitionists, you and members of your faith community have been struggling against the ongoing expansion of policing and incarceration, and there are times when you feel discouraged. Oppressive forces have a way of making themselves seem inevitable; meanwhile, the damage they inflict causes so much

pain and harm in our communities. We lament the death that surrounds us, as we should, and yet we do not grieve alone.

When Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha dies, his sisters and his community mourn the loss of someone they loved so dearly. When Jesus and his disciples eventually join them, Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21, NRSV). She is hurt, and understandably so; when we suffer the grief of death, we want to cry out to God, “where were you?” And yet Jesus has drawn near. He loved Lazarus and his sisters (v. 5), and he mourned with Mary and Martha, weeping over the death of his friend and their brother (vv.33-35). We are reminded that God is with us in our despair, and grieves alongside us. But despair is not the final word, and neither is death.

Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life” (v. 25). Resurrection is present now in Jesus. Restoration and renewal are here now. New creation is beginning now. Jesus calls out to Lazarus to come out from the tomb, and the man who was dead and still bears the cloth strips of one who was buried now walks. Jesus says, “Unbind him, and let him go” (v. 44). This is his word for us too. Our calling is the same: to work alongside Jesus as he unbinds the bound.

We are right to mourn the death that surrounds us, and to lament the injustice caused by systems of incarceration. God mourns with us. However, we continue to hope because God promises resurrection – this is the good news that the preacher must proclaim. And we are empowered to participate in God’s work of renewing the world. We continue to do the work, alongside Jesus, of unbinding the bound. This is our invitation, our calling.

In his book, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James Cone quotes

these lyrics from a Black Spiritual<sup>1</sup>:

*Children, we shall be free  
When the Lord shall appear.  
Give ease to the sick, give sight to the blind,  
Enable the cripple to walk;  
He'll raise the dead from under the earth,  
And give them permission to talk.*

Just imagine.

Year B

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah promises a "new covenant," one "not like the covenant with our ancestors, which they broke."

The promise of the new covenant to Jeremiah is of a closer relationship than God has ever had before with God's people. It is also, explicitly, the promise of a covenant different than the Deuteronomic one. Why the difference?

Reading this through the lens of accountability over punishment suggests an interpretation of the difference: a renewed understanding of the covenant in terms of restoration and accountability instead of punishment.

The Deuteronomic history in the Bible (Deuteronomy, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings) shows the cycle of covenant-breaking, punishment, and return. This cycle points to the complexity

of accountability: the dialectic of punishment and return is an attempt, perhaps, to convey the difficulties of building spaces for accountability; the pain of taking accountability, even in a non-punitive context; the fundamental *disruption* of power relations that comes with holding space for accountability. In the Deuteronomic history, bad kings are overthrown — and that’s good! But at the same time, the Deuteronomic portrayal of God shows us a God who still relies on retribution, even if that punishment is aimed toward restoration. I am not saying we should entertain the anti-Jewish claim that “the Old Testament God is retributive and the New Testament God is not” or anything like that. Indeed, we must reject such claims! Rather the Deuteronomic portrayal of justice is an *approximation* of God’s justice, an approximation of the hard but life-giving and restorative work of accountability, and the (still Old Testament!) promise to Jeremiah is part of refining that approximation toward a better understanding.

Perhaps this refinement is one way in which the new covenant promised to Jeremiah is different. In the new covenant, God tells Jeremiah, “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest”; “I will forgive their iniquity”; “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The image here is of a new way of practicing accountability to the covenant.

No longer will punishment be part of an attempt to approximate accountability, God tells us. Instead, we can imagine accountability free of punishment. No longer will exclusion be an attempt to approximate justice: instead, God’s commitment to us and our commitment to one another in community will be the basis of accountability work because “we shall all know God.” The promise that God’s law shall be written on our hearts is an

image of the kind of personal transformation that is ultimately the goal of accountability work: to become the kind of person who won't do the same harm again. This sort of accountability work is close to the Jewish concept of teshuvah, as Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg explains.<sup>38</sup>

What do we learn if we interpret the new covenant as a new way of imagining accountability and justice — not as a rejection of what came before, but as a realistic assessment of the ways in which it approximated justice, and a corrective to bring us closer and closer to a non-punitive understanding of accountability? How might we live out that accountability, and be partakers of the new covenant, today?

## Year C

Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Every year, the state and local governments in the United States pour more and more money into a criminal justice system that is fundamentally broken. Despite the fact that police fail to resolve the vast majority of significant crimes and that prisons fail miserably at preventing crime, the bipartisan American political establishment is unwaveringly committed to throwing more and more money at these failed institutions. The budget plan that President Joe Biden released this week goes out of its way to emphasize that it *funds* the police with “\$1.97

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<sup>38</sup> See Kerri Miller and Kelly Gordon, “Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg on real repentance” in *MPR News* (June 4, 2019).

billion in discretionary funding to support state and local law enforcement.”<sup>39</sup>

“Budgets are statements of values,” President Biden rightly said and the values his budget espouses represent the American commitment to violence. The American imagination is obsessed with violence as the solution to the economic scarcity induced by capitalism, the criminality created by our legal codes, and the estrangement we feel from one another nurtured by decades of harmful systems and policies. The American consciousness accepts largely without public critique the idea that doing violence to each other will somehow stop violence in our midst, even though this idea has been roundly criticized for millenia.

Isaiah’s imagination is different. In the passage from Isaiah this week, the prophet depicts God as one who “makes a way” (v. 16) in the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of a churning sea. God neutralizes the weapons of war and instruments of violence — “they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (v. 17). This God declares: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (vv. 18-19).

Invoking the Exodus, Isaiah provokes us to imagine a new thing, to forget the way we’ve always done things. Yet the American response to its social ills is not to embrace whatever new thing God may want to do among us. The American response is to hold on to the former things and the things of old as if they are the only thing standing between us and death.

The criminal justice system in the United States all too often

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<sup>39</sup> See “FACT SHEET: President Biden’s Budget Invests in Reducing Gun Crime to Make Our Communities Safer” from WH.gov (March 28, 2022).

does not stand between us and death. It is itself an instrument of death. Consider the ludicrous example of Arslan Guney, a 71-year-old man who faces the prospect of a felony for drawing with a sharpie on a gym floor in Colorado. Far from making rivers in the desert, our criminal justice system could send this man to prison creating death where there was life. Consider the role of prisons during the pandemic. Public health experts warned that our prison system would become an “epidemic engine,” destroying the lives of prisoners and people outside their walls. Instead of pursuing decarceration, pandemic relief money often went to funding bloated police departments and investment in even more prisons.<sup>40</sup> American jails hold over 450,000 people not because they have even been convicted by the criminal justice system but because they cannot pay bail or they are being held preventatively without a trial, a system ripe for abuse. Untried incarcerated people experience damage to their families, careers, and communities as the system brings about even more death in our midst.

What does Isaiah propose as the solution, then? Immediately before the lectionary passage, God commits to “break down all the bars” (v 14) in Babylon, a reference to the systems of incarceration and slavery in the ancient empire. It turns out God is quite the abolitionist! God promises to turn the tables on those dedicated to the Jewish people’s imprisonment and bondage. But according to Isaiah, while God promises all of these things, God’s people do not call for God to live up to those promises. In the United States, Christians do the same. We worship a God who in the first sermon of Jesus proclaims (again, in the voice of

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<sup>40</sup> Eric Reinhart, “How Joe Biden Launched a New Prison Boom” in *Slate* (January 25, 2022).

Isaiah!) a commitment to setting prisoners free, but so many of us do not pray for that God to come. Instead, we fund police and prisons with our prayers and tax dollars, convinced that \$1.97 billion dollars in the hands of inherently violent institutions will keep us safe.

Every year, we make the same mistake, but what if we didn't?

## Palm Sunday

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Numerous scholars have noted that Jesus' procession into Jerusalem is an oppositional one. Pontius Pilate would have entered the city, as well, but elsewhere and with a different sort of fanfare. While Jesus did not enter Jerusalem with warhorses, chariots, and the might of the Roman Empire around him like Pilate, expectations were almost certainly high among those in the crowd. Matthew explicitly connects the procession with the restoration of the Jewish people after a prolonged period of exile, after all.

In the text of Zechariah referenced by Matthew, we see a vision of a world that God is making right. God is toppling the empires of the day (Zech. 9:1-8). God is overturning hoarded wealth (vv.

3-4), arrogant and violent power (vv. 5-7), and the forces of slavery (v. 8). It's hard not to think that Jesus is coming with the immediate power to overturn the social and political order right then and there. Only, that's not exactly what happens is it?

Instead, what we look toward in Holy Week, culminating in Easter, is the inversion of how we expect these powers to work, all bolstered by the defeat of sin and death. In that way, what Jesus accomplishes actually embodies the text from Zechariah quite well. After this litany of nations getting their just deserts, one might expect quite the retributive toll. Only, that's not exactly what happens.

Instead, we hear the promise of a king who is "righteous and victorious," yes, but also "humble and riding on an ass (v. 9, CEB). He cuts off the chariot and the warhorse not just from Judah's enemies, but from Ephraim and Jerusalem. "The bow used in battle will be cut off," Zechariah vows (v. 10, CEB). The cycle of retribution and violence is broken, not continued. This promise is embodied in the defeat of sin and death at the end of this week, as well. The cycle is broken. Violence is not repeated.

The breaking of this cycle of violence and retribution is central to a Christian theology of abolition. Police and especially prisons exist as perpetuators of these cycles of violence and retribution. We will never move beyond the social ills that our criminal justice system claims to address while we continue to perpetuate the violence at the center of crime. You cannot imprison a crime, but you can commit more injustice under the guise of doing so.

This Palm Sunday, let's acknowledge these cycles of harm, violence, and retribution. These are the things Jesus came to break. These are the cycles Zechariah said God wants broken. Let's shatter them that we might live in the world God wants

where the bows and chariots have no use to us.

Year B

Scripture: Mark 14:1-15:47

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

In Mark 15, as Jesus is before Pilate and only moments away from his own crucifixion, there is a moment where Jesus serves again as Christ the liberator. Through his commitment to nonviolence, through his submission to God's will, Jesus frees Barabbas.

This is not the story I was taught to believe. In my upbringing, I was taught that Barabbas was an animal, the personification of all that is bad. I was taught that he was a murderer, likely a rapist, a violent threat to the community.

I was taught about Barabbas the things that are taught to us about all prisoners: they deserve to be cast out, thrown away, and discarded, because they are not worthy of being released into our community.

Along with this, I was taught this story in ways that reinforce anti-Semitism — that the Jewish crowd would have chosen a violent and present danger to the Messiah.

These falsehoods, or at best exaggerations, are not found in scripture. At best, Barabbas was a “notorious prisoner” who had been involved in riots against the Roman government, and probably killed in the process. Despite Pilate's surprise at the crowd's insistence that Jesus Barabbas be freed and Jesus of Nazareth crucified, the text gives us no proof that this was out of concern for their communal safety.

Unsurprisingly, the label of “prisoner” serves to make it

much easier to see these actions as unforgivable and monstrous. Compare how you were taught to feel about Barabbas to how you were taught to feel about Moses killing the Egyptian.

In Jesus we have an example of peace, nonviolent resistance, a following of God's desire (a desire Jesus names as liberating those who are oppressed), which in the process frees a prisoner.

It's actually beautiful, in a way. As you go forward, imagine Barabbas as someone shocked at his chance for freedom not because he is bloodthirsty, but because he misses his family. Imagine him looking at Jesus of Nazareth and wondering why this resistor is not resisting with violence, and perhaps believing that there might be a better way. Imagine Barabbas as a victim of the oppressive government he is under. Extend to Barabbas a mercy that Christ extended. Let him go free, and let go of our compulsion to see the incarcerated as we do.

May we instead see them as Christ, as God in the flesh. May we practice good religion, visiting them and caring for their needs. May we follow Christ into liberation, practicing abolition in our politics and economy.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 22:14-23:56

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

Luke's Passion narrative presents a number of powerful contrasts: Jesus's way of self-giving service as opposed to the self-serving actions of those who hold power, Jesus's way of anti-violence as opposed to the brutality of those who inflict pain, Jesus's way of forgiveness as opposed to condemnation. Judith

Jones explains that, “The whole story emphasizes the dramatic contrast between the kingdom of God and the authorities of this world.”<sup>41</sup> The abolitionist preacher might choose to focus on any one of these themes; however, I think one of the most poignant illustrations of this distinction is depicted in 23:39-43.

Jesus has been condemned by the state to capital punishment, public execution on a cross, and yet even as Jesus suffers the anguish of crucifixion, he offers grace to his neighbor. While leaders and soldiers and even one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus deride and mock him, another criminal proclaims Jesus’s innocence and, seemingly, his lordship. This man confesses and repents, asking Jesus, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus responds to the man alongside whom he hangs on a cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” In this singular exchange, Luke describes repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. The state has inflicted its mockery of justice upon the body of Jesus, and yet Jesus embodies the grace-filled justice of God, which redeems and renews. The horrors of incarceration and execution are on display, and yet so too is the grace of Jesus Christ.

One invitation of Passion Sunday, I believe, is to enter into the pain and darkness of Christ crucified while looking for and holding onto the *and yet*. Powers and principalities imprison, abuse, and execute, *and yet* Jesus teaches us another way, his way of grace. Our “justice” systems condemn and kill people who are often innocent, *and yet* Christ offers restoration and renewal to all who repent. This contrast should challenge those of us who participate in unjust systems while offering hope to

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<sup>41</sup> Judith Jones, “Commentary on Luke 22:14-23:56” in *Working Preacher* (April 14, 2019).

those of us who suffer because of them.

Dominique DuBois Gilliard writes in *Rethinking Incarceration* that “Christianity revolves around Jesus, a falsely convicted criminal who was falsely charged, punitively convicted, mercilessly tortured, and unjustly sentenced to death. Given this, I would think the church would understand the necessity of thinking more restoratively about criminal justice.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Gilliard says the church is called to “pursue a justice system that builds community, affirms human dignity, and seeks God’s shalom.”<sup>43</sup> What are some examples of ways in which our faith communities are living out this calling? Or, how might we begin to imagine new ways our churches could participate in God’s work of renewal and restoration?

This Sunday, as we look to Christ crucified, how might we be transformed by his grace? We stand in the shadow of the cross, and yet we have hope because the cross is not the end of the story. How might we respond?

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<sup>42</sup> Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice that Restores*, 147.

<sup>43</sup> Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice that Restores*, 163.

## Maundy Thursday

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-14

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

Careful readers and students of the four Gospels are aware that there are many discrepancies between their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, both small and great. One of the most significant differences with respect to Holy Week is the timing of Jesus' Last Supper. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Last Supper is a Passover meal (known in later rabbinic writings and modern Judaism as a "seder"). But in John's account, Jesus' final meal with his twelve closest disciples takes place on the night "before the festival of the Passover" (John 13:1). This sets the stage for Jesus' crucifixion to take place the next day at the same time that faithful Jews were slaughtering their Passover lambs. This detail drives home the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death on the cross and connects his crucifixion to the first Passover as recounted in Exodus 12.

God commanded each family (or group of neighboring families) to slaughter an unblemished lamb, paint some of its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their homes, and eat the roasted lamb on the night of Passover. Furthermore, “This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD.” The lamb’s blood was a sign that God protected the faithful from plague, destruction, and the angel of death that would kill all of Egypt’s firstborn children. This final plague became the final straw for the Pharaoh of Egypt, and he finally let Moses and the Israelites go. The Passover sacrifice was the means by which the enslaved Israelites were emancipated.

Likewise, Jesus’ sacrifice has been interpreted throughout Christian history as a means for emancipation from bondage. Most commonly, this liberation is spiritualized, as in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ... But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the fruit you have leads to sanctification, and the end is eternal life” (6:20, 22). But in the Passover story, the Israelites were literal slaves to literal Egyptian taskmasters. God intervened to set them free, violently punishing their oppressors. And Jesus’ ministry gives no indication that his intention is to offer spiritual freedom that is entirely unconnected to the material world. Yes, Christians have suffered righteously and been martyred for their faith, so spiritual liberation does not always mean physical or social safety. But that is not the same as building and maintaining oppressive systems that perpetuate injustice.

The 21st century US prison-industrial complex has direct ties to

19th century US chattel slavery.<sup>44</sup> Incarcerated people are forced to work for little to no pay, whether for corporate profits<sup>45</sup> or public works like fighting the devastating Los Angeles wildfires of early 2025.<sup>46</sup> Legally speaking, incarcerated workers are “slaves” of state or federal governments. They are our siblings in the human family, and they remain in bondage. On a day when the Church celebrates its liberation from the cosmic “powers and principalities” of sin, death, and hell, why do we persist in submitting one another to human powers (Ephesians 6:12)? How might we work together to realize the freedom that we claim we have in Christ? How can we love our incarcerated neighbors? For tonight, Jesus gave us “a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

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<sup>44</sup> See resources like Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010, 2020) and Ava DuVernay’s documentary film *13th* (2016).

<sup>45</sup> Robin McDowell and Margie Mason, “Prisoners in the US are part of the hidden workforce linked to hundreds of popular food brands,” *AP News*, published 29 January 2024, accessed 15 January 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/prison-to-plate-inmate-labor-investigation-c6f0eb4747963283316e494eadf08c4e>.

<sup>46</sup> Jamiles Lartey and Shannon Heffernan, “Incarcerated Firefighters Do Risky, Low-Pay Work. Many Say It’s The Best Job Behind Bars,” *The Marshall Project*, published 11 January 2025, accessed 15 January 2025, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/01/11/los-angeles-palisades-prisoners-firefighters>.

## Good Friday

Scripture: John 18:1-19:42

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

On “Good” Friday, Christians remember the death of Jesus, our Messiah/Christ, King and Savior. Regardless of how you understand the mechanics of salvation, the Crucifixion sits right at the center of the Christian story. Jesus lived among us (Incarnation) *and* died among us (Crucifixion). The Apostle Paul asserts, “God proves [God’s] love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8, NRSVUE).

But the way in which Jesus died was an especially violent, brutal, and torturous method. And in Western Christianity, we so emphasize the Cross, that we sometimes miss the details of how this all came to pass. On Good Friday, church communities that use the RCL hear the entire story from the Gospel of John’s perspective. Through this text, we get a window into the Roman Empire’s criminal-legal system.

The Jerusalem Temple authorities, led by the high priest Caiaphas, arrested Jesus, questioned him, and then brought him before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, requesting that Pilate sentence him to death. Pilate questioned Jesus, but Pilate found “no case against him” (John 18:38). He offered to release Jesus, but the assembled Temple leaders preferred Barabbas. This was Jesus’ trial. He was found guilty by a judge and jury of one (as influenced by the crowd).

Next came Jesus’ sentencing. Pilate ordered that Jesus be flogged (i.e., whipped 39 times), intending to release him afterward (John 19:1-5; cf. Luke 23:15-16). After a group of Roman soldiers flogged Jesus, they mocked him by dressing him up like a king with a purple robe and a crown of thorns, repeatedly beating him (“striking him on the face”, John 19:3) during this detention period. They brought the bruised and bloodied Jesus back out before the Temple leaders, but when Pilate offered to release him, the crowd rejected the offer: “When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’” (John 19:6).

As we think about the connection between this text and the Christian abolition movement, I think it is worth paying special attention to this portion. After the formal flogging, the Roman soldiers (who functioned like police, jailers, and prison guards) abused their position, assaulting and demeaning an already-injured convict from an ethnic and religious minority. Then, because they did not deem this torture to be sufficient, the temple police were among the first to demand that Jesus be crucified! According to John, the police’s lust for blood led to Jesus’ cruel and shameful sentence of crucifixion (over and against other forms of execution).

It’s hard to ignore these details in a country where guards

frequently taunt, assault, and abuse incarcerated and detained people (who are disproportionately BIPOC). It's hard to ignore these details in a country where police frequently brutalize poor communities and communities of color through over-policing and enforcement of biased laws.<sup>47</sup> It's hard to ignore these details in a country where many police officers are affiliated with violent white supremacist groups.<sup>48</sup> It's hard to ignore these details in a country whose prison-industrial complex disproportionately executes poor, BIPOC, and mentally ill convicts.<sup>49</sup> This is why we cry out as Christians for prison and police abolition. We are trying to dismantle the systems our ancestors used to kill our Savior. Christ continues to get beaten, tortured, whipped, and crucified today, and the blood of our siblings cries out from the earth.

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<sup>47</sup> Campaign Zero, *Mapping Police Violence*, accessed 31 October 2024, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>.

<sup>48</sup> Michael German, "White Supremacist Links to Law Enforcement Are an Urgent Concern," Brennan Center for Justice, published 1 September 2020, accessed 31 October 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/white-supremacist-links-law-enforcement-are-urgent-concern>.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, "Race and the Death Penalty," [www.nacdl.org](http://www.nacdl.org), published 7 December 2022, accessed 31 October 2024, <https://www.nacdl.org/Content/Race-and-the-Death-Penalty>.

## Easter Sunday

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’” Matthew 28:5-7, NRSV*

The connection between Easter and abolition of state-sponsored violence is quite clear when you take the story at face value, as the angel describes it in Matthew. Jesus was a victim of both brief incarceration and speedy execution at the hands of the state. And yet, God repudiates that violence and overcomes it in

the resurrection. God did not defeat death for us to keep doling it out through the prison industrial complex and other state-sponsored violence like police forces and executions. God did not defeat death for us to keep killing people.

One of my favorite aspects of Matthew's telling of this event is that Jesus doesn't wait at the tomb for everyone to catch up with what he's doing. He has already gone ahead to Galilee. The disciples must play catch up. The movement of the Spirit is often like that, going ahead of where we are. God goes ahead of both our comfort and our comprehension.

That reality is vital when it comes to the abolitionist imagination. So often the retort to calls to "defund the police" or "abolish prisons" is that it's not practical or even possible. But that's not what imagination is for. That's not where Jesus meets us. Jesus meets us ahead of where we are and beckons us forward. Jesus meets us in the place that we can only barely imagine right now. If we can't even entertain the idea, we will never arrive. So, Jesus calls us to Galilee where death has been defeated, the state has lost its power, and a new world has begun.

This Easter, let's get moving. Let's go meet Jesus. For God did not defeat death for us to tolerate it further. God defeated death that we all might live.

Year B

Scripture: Acts 10:34-43

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Peter's sermon-creed in Acts 10 contains a powerful message of resurrection. What can we gain from this many-faceted text of relevance to abolition? Four things: Peter's sermon promises God's good news about inclusion, resurrection, judgment, and forgiveness.

### **No partiality**

The opening phrase — “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” — is a creedal statement of *radical inclusion*. In the context of Acts, Peter is talking about the inclusion of Gentiles into God's covenant with God's people. But the radical inclusion of God goes further. “God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears God and does right is acceptable to God.” God is not bound, in other words, by our structures of exclusion, prejudice, and criminalization.

We know that the prison-industrial complex is predicated on racism, especially anti-Black and anti-indigenous racism in the United States. We know, as Rev. Dr. Nikia Smith Robert has written<sup>50</sup>, that mass incarceration forms a system of sacrifice that destroys Black and Brown bodies for the sake of upholding social structures that benefit those with power and privilege. We know that one defining reality of the prison is that it excludes — in Mariame Kaba's words, it provides a “Somewhere Else” to put people our society doesn't want to deal with in community and relationship.

For God to show no partiality, then, is a resounding rejec-

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<sup>50</sup> See Nikia Smith Robert, “Penitence, Plantation and the Penitentiary: A Liberation Theology for Lockdown America,” in *The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* (2017), [https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hdsjournal/files/61292\\_graduate\\_journal\\_2017\\_web.pdf](https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hdsjournal/files/61292_graduate_journal_2017_web.pdf)

tion of such practices of exclusion, especially as they work themselves out in racialized ways. The social construction of criminality is a form of exclusion and partiality which God sets God's self against.

***Vindication of the victim***

Next, God promises resurrection: "God raised Jesus on the third day." The promise of resurrection of the dead is not just a promise of life (although it is that). Instead, as Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino and others have written, the resurrection of the dead is the promise of vindication for victims. As Moltmann and Sobrino put it, it is the promise that ultimately "the executioner will not ultimately triumph over the victim." (See Sobrino in the epilogue to *Getting the Poor Down From the Cross: Theology of Liberation*, International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third-World Theologians, 2007.) The resurrection of the dead is the vindication of every person who is oppressed and victimized, and of every one of us insofar as we have suffered harm, injustice, or oppression. It is fundamentally the setting right of oppression, the restorative and transformative justice-making that begins with meeting the needs of those who have been harmed. The promise of resurrection is a promise of vindication, in particular, for all those who have been criminalized, tortured, caged, and murdered by the state — and it is a promise of better forms of justice, of a reality driven by transformation rather than retribution.

***The oppressed becomes the judge***

In fact, Peter promises next that Jesus has been raised "as the one ordained by God to judge the living and the dead." The revolutionary promise here is that judgment does not come from some outside or hierarchical authority, but for Jesus who

was crucified in solidarity with all the criminalized and guilty people of the world. Jesus, executed by the state, a victim of the violence of the Roman predecessor of our prison-industrial complex — this Jesus the oppressed and vindicated one is the judge of all. How is justice transformed when it is developed “from below” by people finding new ways to transform systems of harm through their own communities? As Lee Griffith puts it in *The Fall of the Prison*, how does it affect our understanding of judgment that Jesus the Prisoner (Matthew 25) is now also the judge? The overturning of courtroom roles here provides a new and abolitionist picture of justice and judgment: a vision of justice in which those who have been most harmed by systems of oppression are prioritized going forward, a vision of justice driven by solidarity with those criminalized, incarcerated, and marginalized.

### ***Forgiveness of sins***

Finally, Peter gives the promise of forgiveness: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

My point here is not to suggest any sort of Christian exclusivism, or to insist that forgiveness can come only through belief in Jesus. Instead, it is to emphasize the hope of forgiveness for harm done in the gospel message of Easter. Jesus the Prisoner, raised and vindicated, becomes the judge of all, so that no one is excluded: and the promise of his judgment is that it is merciful, aiming for forgiveness. As we might put it in more explicitly “abolitionist” terms, the promise of the resurrection is that we can find our way to a transformative justice that eschews punishment and instead envisions true non-punitive accountability and restoration where possible.

Inclusion provides a starting point for true transformative

judgment — the kind of judgment that vindicates those who have been harmed, judges from their perspective, and perhaps even brings the hope of real accountability in relationship and restoration and healing where possible. These are the resonances between Peter’s Easter sermon and abolitionist praxis. An abolitionist lens draws these elements out of the text to present the story of Jesus’ resurrection afresh as good news for our struggle against the powers of the prison in this world.

## Year C

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:19-28

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

Much of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians addresses concerns and controversies that were likely brought to Paul in a letter from the Christ-followers in Corinth. Many scholars argue that Paul is addressing ideologically based social hierarchy rooted in Greco-Roman philosophies which divide the Corinthians into “weak” and “strong” classes. Throughout the letter Paul sarcastically admonishes the “strong” and identifies with the “weak,” using and upending the hierarchical logic.<sup>51</sup> The penultimate chapter addresses a concern Paul is bringing to the strong; he has heard that they deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. Here Paul again both appeals to and upends the Greco-Roman philosophies held by the Corinthians in a couple ways

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<sup>51</sup> See Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

that might be interesting to the abolitionist.

First, Paul begins this section with language that admonishes the Corinthian “strong” and endears him to the “weak.” In verse 12 he writes, “So if the message that is preached says that Christ has been raised from the dead, then how can some of you say, ‘There’s no resurrection of the dead?’” (CEB). The term “resurrection of the dead” might be better translated as “raising of the corpses.” This phrase would have offended the sensibilities of the well-educated, philosophically nuanced “strong.” It would have been familiar and more easily accepted by the “weak” who may have sincerely relayed stories about risen corpses and had concerns about suffering bodily in this life and the after-life. According to Martin, philosophies acceptable to the strong might have argued that there is no life after death or that the soul was liberated from the body. Populist beliefs on the other hand, “betrayed a fear of death... a belief that death was somehow unnatural and undesirable.”<sup>52</sup>

Paul begins by unequivocally affirming the concerns of the weak, using imagery (the raising of corpses) that would offend the strong’s sensibilities. Paul affirms the problem of death, which certainly was a more salient concern for lower-class “weak” Corinthians. The well-educated philosophers would have seen this fear of death as a maladjustment. They believed people should accept death as a natural part of life: leading to a release from worldly concerns and an end to suffering. The people who were looked down on in Greco-Roman hierarchy found the persistent specter of death insufferable and not remedied by its completion. Paul sided with these people.

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<sup>52</sup> Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 114.

Abolitionists must do the same, unequivocally affirming the concerns and hopes of those suffering under mass incarceration and the specter of death represented by prison and policing. Later in chapter 15 Paul describes the resurrected body in a way that would be intelligible to the strong, but not before admonishing them and clearly aligning himself with the weak.

The second thing Paul does is articulate a view of salvation that is cosmic and participatory. Salvation from Paul's perspective cannot be understood as individual moral or intellectual achievement. Salvation is accomplished by the destruction of powers and principalities that are governed by sin and death. In his letter to the Romans Paul is clear that while law (ethical and social norms that govern relationships) is not bad in itself, it perpetuates sin when it is enforced by the threat of death.<sup>53</sup> Paul hints at this same idea in 15:46, though it is not as well developed and argued in this earlier letter. Those who were less connected to the ongoing threat of death might be able to function in such a system, but they are left "in sin" just as much as the ones who are, as Daniel Oodshorn puts it, "left for dead."<sup>54</sup> The strong in 1 Corinthians judged the weak's plight as an individual (or social group based) constitutional, moral or intellectual failure rather than an indictment of the whole social and political system, which is governed by death. Paul insists that the whole system needs to be transformed by Christ's death

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<sup>53</sup> See Theodore Jennings, *Outlaw Justice: The Messianic Politics of Paul*, Cultural Memory in the Present, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013) for more about how Paul understands Christ's relationship with the law.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Oudshoorn, *Pauline Eschatology: The Apocalyptic Rupture of Eternal Imperialism*, Paul and the Uprising of the Dead, V. 2, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020) 134.

and resurrection. This removes the threat of death and power of sin, not by affirming or using death, but by overcoming it. This opens the possibility for people to enter into spaces vulnerable to death without either fearing or affirming the violence death represents. Only in this way can we commune with one another in a life giving way: first by communing with Christ (overcoming fear of death in vulnerable solidarity with those who are “left for dead,” yet live) and then by becoming the “Christic body” that extends this communion to others.<sup>55</sup> It is placing faith in and participating in the life of Christ that the whole world is saved.

Likewise, the abolitionist interpreter will note that there is a right and wrong way to talk about overcoming the fear of death. The wrong way, represented by the Corinthian strong, overcomes “fear of death” by some kind of personal intellectual and moral achievement that accepts death (or even lauds it). This can be likened to a particularly insidious form of CBT therapy offered in many prisons and re-entry programs called “Moral Reconciliation Therapy.” MRT insists that the problems leading to incarceration lie solely within the prisoner. The system does not need to change, just the individual’s beliefs. For example they say, “Suffering and unhappiness are to be expected sometimes right? **WRONG.** Unhappiness was and is a part of your life because you choose it,” (caps and bold are theirs).<sup>56</sup> The right way, represented by Paul’s cosmic vision, is to see that there is, altogether, a system perpetuating suffering and unhappiness, our embeddedness in that system,

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<sup>55</sup> See Yung Suk Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor*, Paul in Critical Contexts, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) for more insight into how I’m using the term “christic body.”

<sup>56</sup> Gregory Little and Kenneth Robinson, *How to Escape Your Prison: A Moral Reconciliation Workbook*, Memphis, TN: Eagle Wing Books, 2016), 2.

*and* the possibility of putting our faith in another way that is neither governed by the system's threat of violence nor affirms it. We are liberated from death-dealing systems when we participate in relationships that show us how to communally overcome such systems even while we are still living within them. This is the work of abolition and building new systems of transformative justice. This is also what Jesus' death and resurrection accomplished from Paul's perspective. Christ's resurrection provides the confidence we need to participate in the vulnerable, salvific relationships of the "christic body." This confidence is not in one's own personal salvation, but in the transformation of the entire cosmos, where our loving, life-giving God becomes "all in all."

## Easter 2

Year A

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-9

Contributor: Jay Bergen

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!  
By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a  
living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from  
the dead.” 1 Peter 1:3 (NRSVUE)*

Rarely, if ever, do our dreams really come true. In part, yes. Indirectly, yes. But the long history of radical political imagination is one of freedom dreams deferred, or at least truths told slant. The abolitionists of the 19th century dreamed of a new economic system not based on the exploitation of Black bodies; what rose from the ashes of chattel slavery was sharecropping and apartheid (not to mention the continued expansion of the

US empire). The movement against the Iraq War in 2003 failed to stop that invasion, but it did make the future invasion of Iran politically impossible.

History teaches us that we see only through a glass darkly. The dialectic never resolves as we expect it to. And yet, we are called to dream. God has given us “a new birth into a living hope,” “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” The flame of faith we are called to tend lights our way forward, though the way twists and turns, though the road may be rough and uncertain. The mystic Thomas Merton once prayed by saying, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going..., Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You.”

We do not know what world we leave to our children and grandchildren. We can only move forward in faith, trusting that our dreaming and our acting contains a truth “more precious than gold” which will bring all people one step closer to the Kingdom of God.

Year B

Scripture: John 20:19-31

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Thomas was not with the twelve when Jesus first appeared and he didn't believe them. He wanted to see something more. It is reasonable to want to see something more. Earlier in chapter 20 of John's Gospel, Peter and John go to the empty tomb but

they don't understand it. Thomas is not wrong. People don't just come back from the dead. We do not expect it to happen today nor did they 2000 years ago. Let's say that you read about an old, high school friend who passed away. Let's imagine a pre-COVID world where you were able to attend the funeral and grieve in your own way. And then, two weeks later, you hear that this same friend was out getting a bite to eat. You should be incredulous about this news. It is not expected. The analogy falls apart fairly quickly, but the point is that we should not be shocked by Thomas and by a desire for confirmation about strange and unexpected news. Miracles like this do not normally happen.

In our world today, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of prisons. The vast majority of my congregation and Christians in this country and this world have yet to truly imagine an end to the carceral state. It is the way of the world. Its existence is like the reality that people just don't come back from the dead.

Easter, though, changes our expectations about what is possible. What is impossible for humans is possible for God. If Christ is risen from the grave, the status quo is not our ruler. What has been is not what always will be. A world without prisons can be imagined within the scope of God's promise and God's power. The question for the church today is how far does the good news go? Does go all the way to the structures of society or does it just stop at our comfort level? God is much more concerned with transforming lives than with maintaining the comfortable.

But what can we do in a world of Thomases who have never dreamed of the possibility that setting the captives free means all of them? We should speak like Jesus: directly, purposefully. Jesus doesn't leave Thomas behind but brings him along. In this

season of Easter, the church has chance to claim how much it believes. Abolition is a faith claim. Abolition is a resurrection claim.

## Year C

Scripture: Acts 5:27-32

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Testimony has a central function within the Christian faith. One of the more curious aspects of Christianization in the Late Ancient period was moving from stories of heroes to stories of martyrs. Instead of tales about Theseus or Achilles, stories of Perpetua & Felicitas and others were shared and spread. A martyr is a witness. Someone who testifies about an event. This legal language of witness and testimony was present in the use of martyr in the ancient world as it is today. The book of Acts will show Stephen the Protomartyr and his death in Acts 7, but in Acts 5 we have Peter giving a testimony in front of the Sanhedrin. Peter declares clearly, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

There is a tricky balance to be had between obedience to God and human authority. Many claim to speak for God, even if they say opposite things. Just because someone claims to speak for God, doesn't make what they say true. How we can discern this is found a few verses later in the words of Gamaliel: “Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

Or, in the words of Jesus, a good tree bears good fruit. What is the fruit of the claims people make? We have seen the fruit of the Prison Industrial Complex. We have seen an inability to step down from the carceral state. We have seen families continued to be torn apart and generations ravaged by the ill-effects of this system. Peter stands to speak of Jesus and the power of God. In speaking up, in testifying for prison abolition, we can speak with the full breadth of Scripture as well as the claim of Jesus. A good tree will bear good fruit. Society has let bad trees grow for too long. We need to plant more of the good trees of dignity, reconciliation, and hope.

# 31

## Easter 3

Year A

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:17-23

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

In *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*, Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd claim that one of the problems with US American's conception of justice is that it has become too small. Instead of identifying justice with a divine yet to be fully realized law that we struggle to make real in our world, justice has become equated with the unbiased application of current criminal law. They argue that this is why the eventual obsolescence of prisons went from an almost foregone conclusion (the expected end to the pursuit of justice) in the early 70s, to an almost unthinkable utopic vision.

The lectionary passage today speaks to the need for Christians to believe in a utopian vision, conforming their minds and their

lives in obedience to a law that is beyond the current legal social order. In doing so, they remain sojourners in their land, forced to struggle (and at times suffer) within the tension of a certain, but not yet realized, just and loving community. As they attempt to embody this vision in Christian community, they provide a witness to the world God is working to bring into reality through Christ.

The abolitionist preacher can highlight the theme of obedience to God as our Father to bring this message out of the text. The preacher can also remind hearers of Jesus' command "Don't call anybody on earth your father, because you have one Father, who is heavenly," (Mt 23:9 CEB). In a legal system that was structured around the power of earthly fathers, the command to give obedience to God as our father undermined their obedience to unjust human fathers and the *paterfamilias* system. This is why the author of 1 Peter states that they were liberated from the futile ways inherited from their ancestors (1:18). The Greek term, often translated as "ancestors," is related to the word for father, making the subversion of earthly fathers' authority clear. Likewise, we are not called to obey and maintain our current justice system, but to seek the fullness of divine justice. This divine justice liberates us from bondage to our current (in)justice system.

The author of 1 Peter acknowledges that this is difficult. It puts us in tension with a world that seeks power, stability, and safety through a broken, abusive system. We must tolerate the tension, conflict, and at times suffering that living with integrity and pursuing God's vision for the world can provoke. At the same time, our difference offers a witness to the world. We are called to embrace our otherness, our strangeness and state of exile in this world because our communal witness speaks to the kind of

justice that is possible. When we live in obedience to God's truth and have faith in God's justice our relations with each other will be "marked by genuine affection and deep and earnest love," (1:23). Our churches then, should be communities where God's transformative justice is imagined and worked out.

## Year B

Scripture: Luke 24:36b-48

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

In Luke 24:36b-48 Jesus appears before the apostles, showing off his flesh and bones, his scars, eating and dining — revealing his resurrected humanity to them.

Toward the end of this section Jesus turns to scripture. He instructs them to consider the law, the psalms, the prophets, "all that has been written," about the Messiah. In opening their minds to understand the scripture, the author of Luke highlights that Jesus said to them

"Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day..."

Jesus' suffering is on highlight. The promise of resurrection is before them, but Jesus makes it clear we not forget about the suffering. In the mix of celebrating Easter for a third Sunday, we are mourning the loss of another Black person at the hands of cruel, unnecessary, and evil state violence.

Jesus reminds us that we can hold these realities in tension. This is a reminder that Jesus is in solidarity with the suffering. It's a reminder that state violence will lose, through the power of Christ, without overlooking the suffering of those being op-

pressed. For Christians in the United States, it is a reminder that Christ will prevail over prisons, policing, and the legal system that enables and encourages racist violence and oppression. Christ will prevail. God be with us.

Year C

Scripture: Acts 9:1-20

Contributor: Jay Bergen

If you know me, you know that the Acts of the Apostles is my favorite book in the Bible. I know it has a complicated history, I know that its stories can trouble and disturb us, but what piece of our Scripture is that not true for? I love Acts precisely because it is the story of people stumbling but continuing to move forward, continuing to grow and change by the power of God's spirit. And no story better encapsulates how people change than this famous story of Saul's transformation on the Road to Damascus.

Saul starts this story as a contract bounty hunter, an eager participant in state violence. A few chapters earlier, the story goes out of its way to tell us that he holds the coats for those who lynched Stephen. In the NRSV, Saul is described in this story as "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."

The writer isn't interested in Saul's childhood traumas, how structures of colonialism limit his agency, or anything we might seek out in a story of transformation. He enjoys this work. He volunteers to serve a no-knock warrant in another jurisdiction. Many of us know a cop or a prison CO like this: The one who takes joy in smashing up the encampment, the one quick to

write someone up and throw them in the hole. That person who makes us go, “Maybe some people *are* actually evil?”

But don’t underestimate Jesus. He knocks Paul down and tells him straight: “I’m the one you’re looking for.” And it is in the blinding light of confrontation that Saul begins his transformation.

The struggle for freedom requires conflict (it’s a struggle, after all). I’m a tender-hearted, white middle-class Midwesterner, and I really wish we could all grow and heal without conflict and confrontation. And alas, this story is not the last time Paul will be pushed to grow. The rest of Acts is full of fights, many of them physical. But here, in this dramatic showdown in the street, he begins to change.

The poet Cecilia Llompart writes, “all growth is an argument for more light.” Paul isn’t done growing here, but the fact that he can change is the Spirit’s argument for the disciples of the Lord to not give up on him.

It’s easy to give up on our enemies. But don’t underestimate Jesus. All growth is an argument for more light.

## Easter 4

Year A

Scripture: John 10:1-10, Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

What is the Reign (Kingdom) of God like? When Christ comes again in glory, what do we expect that eschatological future to hold? What do we imagine God's paradise is like, in which Jesus, the Lamb of God, is finally enthroned as eternal Ruler? And, for the purposes of this project, do we imagine that there are police or prisons in God's dominion of heaven?

Jesus points us toward the Rule and Reign of God throughout his earthly ministry, preaching about it not only as a future reality, but a present one (e.g., Mark 1:15; Luke 17:21). This Sunday's scripture passages never use the phrase "kingdom of God" but they each point to that reality in their own way.

In John 10:10, Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and

kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” The second sentence is quite famous, but abundant life is presented as a direct contrast to stealing, killing, and destroying. These are the properties of all the tendrils of the prison-industrial complex. Police and prisons do not fundamentally exist to keep people safe, but to maintain a status quo social order that is unequal in race, socio-economics, gender, sex, and more. The criminal-legal system is designed to steal, kill, and destroy people’s lives toward those ends. Even when the individuals involved wish for better outcomes, the system is rigged. It does not pursue abundant life.

The abundant life that Jesus calls us to is like the world of the early church in Acts 2:42-47. As this community shared in God’s Word and Sacraments, they also shared possessions and goods for the wellbeing of all. They cared for all so that none were in need. Even if Acts’ idyllic depiction was a very short-lived historical reality, the point remains that this is the dream for how Jesus-followers will live. Similarly, Psalm 23 imagines God providing peace and reconciliation with one’s enemies. The godly will share tables and break bread even with those who have trespassed against them. In such a world, there are no prisons because there is no need for prisons.

People may call this an unrealistic dream, but it’s hard to argue that it isn’t God’s dream for the world. And again, it isn’t just God’s dream for a far-off future. The Reign of God is “already, but not yet.” It is both a thing we pray and hope for God to realize when Christ comes to judge the earth *and* a goal for our human communities, as modeled by the church in Acts 2. If we truly believe that God desires abundant life for creation, we must reject all systems that steal, destroy, and kill, including police and prisons.

## Year B

Scripture: 1 John 3:16-24

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage from 1 John—and indeed, the whole letter—offers a wealth of resources for directing our attention to the needs of those who are incarcerated.

The author writes:

*“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”*

As we develop relationships of solidarity with those who are incarcerated or criminalized, we see them as our siblings in the human family: we see our siblings in need. The question posed here in 1 John is posed for us allies on the outside, we who have freedom and “the world’s goods,” in relation to the needs we see of those we know who are incarcerated: How does God’s love abide in us who see our incarcerated siblings in need and yet refuse help?

In the anthology *Thinking Theologically About Mass Incarceration*, Benjamin Hartley, Glen Alton Messer II, and Kirsten Sonkyo Oh write from a Wesleyan perspective about the centrality of prisoner support to Christian life:

*“We believe that the health of the whole Christian community is measured by its love of prisoners; loving the prisoner was and is constitutive of Wesleyan discipleship... Not everyone will be able to focus as much as the Wesley brothers did on prison ministry, but if one is not seeking out ways to love those who are imprisoned — directly or indirectly even in small ways — or is not active in encouraging those who do so, then we must at least ask if we are taking the demands of Christian discipleship seriously.”<sup>57</sup>*

Visiting the prisoner is for *everybody*. As we might phrase it here, the work of abolition—the work of “changing everything,” as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, to allow for a world without prisons—is for *everybody*, and is work that every Christian is called to do. Abolition is “love in truth and action.” There are a variety of ways to get involved! We offer some possibilities for framing your imagination of how to get involved:

- Policy Advocacy: federal/state criminal justice reform, the #DefundThePolice movement, local politics (jails and district attorneys)
- Building Alternatives: restorative justice programs, re-entry support, COSA (Circles of Support and Accountability)
- Accountable Communities: internal accountability processes, inventory of power relations, building pods and relationships

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<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Hartley, Glen Alton Messer II, and Kirsten Sonkyo Oh, in *Thinking Theologically About Mass Incarceration*, edited by Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi J. Budde, and Matthew D. Lundberg (Paulist Press, 2017), 231.

- Meeting Material Needs: housing justice advocacy, health-care for all, mutual aid and outreach
- Theology and Spirituality: chaplaincy and accompaniment, preaching liberation, abolitionist readings of scripture

But *every single Christian* is called to do something to love prisoners. The work of abolition and prisoner support is “love in truth and action.”

The authors continue: “We readily acknowledge that most of us fall short of the mark; it is easy to point out all the ways we are *not* loving prisoners.”<sup>58</sup> Here is where 1 John provides comfort: the author reminds us that when our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. God is already in every prison, in loving solidarity with all who are incarcerated. Whatever work we take on to love prisoners, we are following God who goes before us. In every way we fail, when our hearts condemn us because of the ongoing brutal realities of incarceration and police and state violence in our society, we know that *God is greater than our hearts* and God is going before us. Our love in truth and action is following in the path of God’s love: the loving power of God that will set all the prisoners free.

Year C

Scripture: John 10:22-30

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<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Hartley, Glen Alton Messer II, and Kirsten Sonkyo Oh, in *Thinking Theologically About Mass Incarceration*, edited by Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi J. Budde, and Matthew D. Lundberg (Paulist Press, 2017), 231.

Contributor: Bailey Pickens

When Jesus is confronting crowds, he often has what seems to be a simple, straightforward ask of them: Believe what you see in front of you. Yet this proves to be beyond their ability. They want sometimes words, sometimes miracles on command, but always they want Jesus to be for them what they imagine, respond to them as they expect. They cannot do the most straightforward thing: Look at what is before them and judge accordingly.

Their inability or refusal to simply take him at his deed and word, to recognize a truth that doesn't accord with the world they have grown up in and then continued to build, should be familiar to us. This is a human trait that we, too, display often. We prefer our own ideas about justice and punishment, order and propriety, safety and security, over what is quite evidently true: That prisons do not increase safety or rehabilitate people who have committed crimes, they are not humane “time-outs” until people are ready to reenter society, they do none of the good often assumed about them and much harm. Believing they must be the correct way to respond to harm or disruption, we refuse to see how much is lost and how many hurt—or what else could be, instead of incarceration.

Yet Jesus says that no one can snatch his own from his hand. His sheep are his, given to him not by a society that weighs the worth of human beings as it suits the powerful but by Almighty God, the stamp of whose image is on every person, even those who have been banished from public sight.

What if we took Jesus at his deed and his word? What if we accepted the truth when it comes before us, even if it disrupts our ideas of how a society must be run? What freedom might await us, with our eyes open to God's Anointed and the surpassing

worth of all of his sheep? What might then be possible?

## Easter 5

Year A

Scripture: Acts 7:55-60

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

It is not difficult to see carceral logic at work in the Acts of the Apostles. The frequent response of Roman authorities to the activities of early Christians was prison. Prison existed (as it does today) not just as retribution for alleged criminal activity, but to silence dissent, break up movements, and stifle leadership in marginalized communities. The same logic is at work in Stephen's execution. The response to a potentially dangerous ideology is to destroy the source. In that way carceral logic comes for everyone, not just those we may consider different from us (i.e., criminals, actually guilty or not).

Before any further reflection in that direction, a word about the anti-Semitism present in the Acts of the Apostles is required.

Throughout the Book of Acts, we see references to “the Jews” and their supposed spiritual deficiencies and even their “jealousy” of the Christians. The author is communicating these stories with a strong ideological bias and we need to be aware of it. Luke has a perspective that requires the Christian sect to be religiously triumphant and he wants it to become the main expression of Jewish faith (as does Paul who wrote most of the New Testament books). Over time, that has been used in anti-Semitic ways and has led to violence and persecution of the Jewish people. We need to critique Luke when preaching Acts in this respect, because much of the carceral logic at work Luke lays at the feet of the Jewish community rather than the ones actually practicing, enforcing, and supporting incarceration: the Roman state. Be cautious when critiquing the prisons and practices of incarceration in Acts so not to fall into anti-Semitism by mistake. The Jewish community was not in charge of the violent mechanisms of the state.

Rather, consider directing the question of the persistence of incarceration and retribution at ourselves. Luke says that Stephen’s audience “covered their ears” to avoid hearing the truth of what Stephen had to say. How often do we neglect the cries for justice from prisons? How often is it more convenient for us to ignore stories from death row? How often do we cover our ears to avoid hearing the truth? Abolition of prisons is the inevitable conclusion of our Scriptures, especially in Acts where God is quite literally tearing down prisons. Often, however, it’s easier to cover our ears and ignore it.

Year B

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (John 15:6)*

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. (1 John 4:18)*

The chief objection I hear to abolition is rooted in consequences, particularly fear of imagined consequences. What will happen if we don't have police? What will happen if we don't have prisons? What will happen if we don't put children in cages and incarcerate migrants? The unspoken bit of these questions is an assumption rooted in fear — and frequently bigotry toward people of color. The objector's imagination conjures a lawless world full of unrestrained vagabonds and nerdowells. Punishment is the only barrier between us and this chaotic, dangerous world.

The first letter of John says that such a mindset is rooted in fear rather than love. The author urges us to pursue lives rooted in the abiding love of God. This love is the very essence of God, it is who God is. With love grounding our lives and beings, we ought to love one another. Anything that falls short of that mutual love is not of God and it does not come from God.

The carceral system and the police state of the United States of America, whether applied to citizens or non-citizens, is hardly based in love. If perfect love casts out fear, as the

author suggests, there is no love at all in such a system. It is entirely based on fear and punishment, precisely the sort of thing Scripture warns us against.

We should be far more afraid of the consequences of failing to abide in the love of God than we are afraid of what a police-free and prison-free world looks like. John's Gospel makes that clear enough. Affording to John, Jesus claims that God will remove the branches that do not bear the fruit of the love of God. And branches that do not abide in the love described here and in 1 John, Jesus says "such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." Such divine consequences are a much greater cause of concern than the distorted imaginations that conjure caricatural nightmares of crime and violence as a result of abolition.

If we must talk about the consequences of abolition, however, we should return to 1 John. Here, the author promises that if we love one another that God will live in us and that the love of God will be perfected in us. We should let our imaginations run wild with what *that* could mean. A world where abolition has succeeded is a world where we love one another, and a world where God will live in us. This world is one of abundance and peace, and what could be a better consequence than that?

Indeed, what will happen if we don't have police? What will happen if we don't have prisons?

Year C

Scripture: John 13:31-35

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

There are a thousand permutations of the idea that a society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable, but the biblical variation of this sentiment is in our Gospel lesson for this week. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Although in the middle of John’s Gospel, Jesus was delivering his final teachings to his disciples when he said this, passing along the words necessary for them to continue his work. Jesus sets up the measurement of faithfulness for his followers: love displayed to one another.

Abolitionists in New York have been persistently and consistently pointing out how the state fails this measure, a reality that has been particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>59</sup> Prisons by their very nature propagate and spread infectious diseases, exposing everyone within their walls to the danger of infection. On top of that baseline danger, some prisoners in New York prisons have been denied booster shots for months, they have not been provided proper personal protective equipment (PPE), and testing has been dismally unavailable. Addressing these problems doesn’t even begin to touch on the inadequate levels of essential medical care and services in prisons – a problem that existed long before COVID-19.

Such treatment certainly fails Jesus’ ‘new commandment’ in the Gospel lesson. No love has been shared in this catastrophic situation. Beyond it, however, a system of incarceration like

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<sup>59</sup> An example: the petition for mass clemencies for the immunocompromised and those with chronic health conditions during the worst of the covid-19 pandemic: <https://www.change.org/p/support-the-demands-of-survived-punished-members-inside-ny-state-prisons>

the one in the United States is fundamentally incapable of showing love. When the only way to rectify wrongs is through committing more (and often more egregious!) wrongs, love cannot exist. When so many innocents are victims of this system, which does nothing to restore or promote life but only to destroy it, love cannot exist. How else can a Christian look upon such an institution than say, “This must end.”

I’ve seen criticism leveled at both police and prison abolitionists that they are not taking criminal justice issues seriously enough with demands to defund and abolish these institutions of violence and destruction. While solutions are undoubtedly complicated, when I considered our Gospel lesson for this week, I couldn’t help but think those critics are the ones not taking *Jesus* seriously enough.

## Easter 6

Year A

Scripture: Acts 17:22-31

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

Continuing in Acts this week, we find Paul preaching to the intellectual elite in Athens. The rhetorical strategy in this sermon is worth reflecting on. First, he appeals to a point of connection, noting that they are religious and worship an “unnamed God.” When he describes the unnamed God, he uses philosophy they would recognize and admire, even quoting one of their poets. Basically, Paul is speaking “elitism,” showing them that he is fluent in their epistemological discourses. This is clearly a way to gain credibility with the crowd and secure their attention, but he doesn’t continue pandering to them. He uses his connection and credibility to unsettle their worldview, calling them to repentance in anticipation of the arrival of the

person God has appointed to judge justly... a person their justice system had recently condemned. Finally, he up-ends their expectations by saying that the “proof” of this is God raising this man from the dead.

That last statement would be shocking to them, because resurrection was not something the Greco-Roman educated elites hoped for. It was the hope of the uneducated masses and oppressed Jews, and represented a perspective that the intellectuals would deride as utopian, magical thinking. Resurrection was not an epistemological proof this audience would have recognized. Paul begins by wooing them, but quickly makes it clear that he is more interested in the kind of justice the oppressed hope for than their disembodied philosophies. His imagination is not fettered by their rationalism or pragmatism. His knowledge has been transformed and freed by the vision of a condemned, executed man vindicated and raised by the God who defines all reality and upholds all existence. There is no justice beyond God’s judgment, which is entrusted to a criminal.

Abolitionists need to walk this kind of line as well. Even as we familiarize ourselves with the most current research, we cannot be afraid to look foolish. We must engage the intellectual elites. We must engage the pragmatists and rationalists. Yet we also cannot allow that to keep us from boldly proclaiming the gospel of the resurrection of an executed criminal, a man who will come in power and overturn the state’s version of “justice.” Abolitionists pay attention to the insights that can be gained from science, philosophy, and secular academic institutions, but we first and foremost give attention to the hopes, dreams, and knowledge of the people languishing in prisons and poverty.

## Year B

Scripture: Psalm 98

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

The prophets are often connected with abolition because of the clarity of the words around setting captives free, but the Psalms are also filled with words of abolition because the Psalms are filled with praise of the victory of God.

Ultimately, abolition points to the victory of God. When humans obsess over justifying the status quo criminal justice system, they deny the victory of God. We must mete out justice ourselves because all we have is ourselves.

The Psalms point to a different expectation of reality. “O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.” If God has won the victory, that means that we don’t need to save ourselves. As well, that means that we don’t need to save others. We are not the messiahs. You are not the messiah. The State is not the messiah.

If we sing a new song to the Lord, that means we don’t need to sing the old song before we knew of God’s victory. We don’t need to sing the song of the status quo and taking justice into our own hands. We are in the season of Easter where God’s justice is most clearly seen in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from death and torture. Death has no victory here. Justice is not understood by what we do but by who God is.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord. Can we make a joyful noise while supporting the Prison-Industrial Complex? Can we sing praises to the Lord and ignore those chained up by our society?

Can we hear the hills and the seas sing of God's victory and deny the power of God to transform every heart and mind?

As well, are we ready for God's judgment of the world with righteousness when we accept and ignore such an unrighteous mark on our society? The Psalms speak of justice and righteousness. God's justice is not just found in our hearts but poured out across creation and all human society. God calls us to participate in the world being made new through the righteousness of God. God calls us to make a joyful noise. God calls us to abolition.

## Year C

Scripture: Acts 16:9-15

Contributor: Jay Bergen

This Acts story is confusing! Paul gets a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him. So he and the rest of his team get on a boat and head right on over to a major city in Macedonia. After a few days there (recovering from the trip? Trying to find the man from the vision?), they leave the city and head to the river, where they meet a group of women. And here they meet Lydia, a wealthy textile merchant and head of her household, who invites them to her house and is baptized.

So, to recap: Paul sees a vision of a man, but he finds women. Then, he and his crew are welcomed in by a woman living in the social role of a man (the *pater familias*, head of household). And the story seems to take these gender and power reversals without batting an eye. A few verses later (stay tuned for next week's lectionary!) Paul heals *another* woman, an enslaved woman, and gets incarcerated for it. Maybe the writer is

unconcerned about the man from the initial vision. Maybe Macedonian men are *really* in need of God’s grace, so bad that they don’t even know it and won’t listen to Paul. Maybe the Holy Spirit is telling us that God’s good news for oppressors (men, people who enslave and oppress others) is rooted first in God’s good news for the oppressed.

As Angela Davis said recently,

“I don’t think we would be where we are today—encouraging ever larger numbers of people to think within an abolitionist frame—had not the trans community taught us that it is possible to effectively challenge that which is considered the very foundation of our sense of normalcy. So if it is possible to challenge the gender binary, then we can certainly, effectively, resist prisons, and jails, and police.”<sup>60</sup>

May our vision of God’s good news lead us to trouble the binaries of power and control. May it lead us to listen to how God is speaking to and through the oppressed. And may we recognize how the good news of liberation is good news for all of us.

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<sup>60</sup> “Dr. Angela Davis on the role of the trans and non-binary communities in the fight for feminist abolition she advocates for,” in *libcom.org*, <https://libcom.org/article/dr-angela-davis-role-trans-and-non-binary-communities-fight-feminist-abolition-she>

## Ascension

Scripture: Ephesians 1:15–23

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The readings for the feast of Ascension focus on God’s exalting Christ above “all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (1:21).

Lee Griffith, in *The Fall of the Prison*, associates the resurrection and ascension, which together form God’s exaltation and vindication of Christ, as profound symbols of victory over the power of death.<sup>61</sup> Christ, exalted above every “rule and authority and power and dominion” is the ultimate reality, victorious over what Mariame Kaba calls the “death-making institutions” of prisons and policing.

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<sup>61</sup> Lee Griffith, *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Eerdmans, 1993), 109.

The promise of the ascension is the promise of God's ultimate victory in Christ: the victory in which the church participates already. Liberation is grounded in Christ's victory.

This text from Ephesians promises three consequences of Christ's exaltation for the church: hope, glorious inheritance, and great power. Each of these can offer comfort for the abolitionist struggle:

- The “hope to which we are called” is the hope of restoration and reconciliation, the great guiding principle of the gospel, as well as of eternal life. Christian hope *certainly* transcends any ethical cause including abolition. Yet hope includes relational and ethical components; eternal life is not a vague heavenly state but a real recreation of earth and heaven where all things are restored to God and one another. The hope of reconciliation which drives efforts at non-punitive justice (even when it proves impossible to reach) forces us, as transformative justice practitioners remind us, to see the full humanity of those who have done harm and regard them with compassion. Our work is based in compassion and aimed at hope.
- The “riches of God's glorious inheritance” take form in the spiritual comfort we find from Christ and the Holy Spirit. This holy comfort enlivens our compassion. We believe these riches help us to be able to see the full humanity of those who are criminalized or who have done harm, and to work with compassion for the liberation of all.
- The “greatness of God's power” which overcomes the death-dealing powers of the world. The power of God is the basis of our certainty that abolition will prevail and that we participate in God's coming reign.

The author of Ephesians prays for the church to have “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” (1:17) to see these things “with the eyes of your heart enlightened” (1:18). May we see hope, spiritual riches, and great power in our own struggle for justice with the eyes of our heart’s enlightened. May Christ’s triumph over every power that degrades or kills empower us to our participation in the life-making work of abolition.

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### Easter 7

Year A

Scripture: Acts 1:6-14

Contributor: Jay Bergen

What is the Holy Spirit? It is mysterious, uncontained, uncontrolled. Though Christian orthodoxy declares the Spirit a coequal member of the Trinity, one with God, far less ink (and blood) has been spilled to define and defend the Holy Spirit.

I am struck here by these simple instructions from Jesus: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by God’s own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.”

What is this Holy Spirit we have been given? It gives us power. It travels with us. It wills us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. It draws our eyes from the skies towards the earth.

I take immense comfort in the unknowability and invisibility of the Spirit. So much of our work takes place out of sight. Whether it is organizing in the depths of maximum security prisons, the confidential work of transformative justice that can never come to light, or just the boredom of meetings and Zoom calls and everything else that makes the movement turn. But nevertheless the Spirit is at work. Especially when we cannot see it or feel it.

The “abolition spirit” (borrowing from Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd) is not contained by one faith, in fact it is the remaking of faith traditions in the crucible of struggle. We do not have to look to heaven to find God’s Spirit, we turn our eyes to the earth and to each other. The Holy Spirit of abolition and transformation does not ask for our comprehension, just our acting in power and our witnessing to the truth.

## Year B

Scripture: John 17:6-19

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 offers a repeated prayer for followers living in the world: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”

The challenge for the church is of being a body “in the world but not of it” and in some ways this tension between Christ and culture (to borrow language from H. Richard Niebuhr) is made explicit in the context of abolition.

Abolition and restorative and transformative justice require

us to admit that we are in the world and to look harm squarely in the face (as Mariame Kaba puts it); to be honest about our own capacity for harm and the harm others do. An abolitionist praxis in the church does not allow us to deny, minimize, cover up, hide, or try to avoid recognizing harm when it happens. An abolitionist praxis means that the church should embrace being present in difficult situations of harm and take up the goal of transforming harm.

But abolition also requires the church to insist on a justice that is not the world's justice. To deny the evil bargain that (to use Kaba's language again) replaces "safety"—mutual care for all—with "security"—safety for some at the cost of domination over others.<sup>62</sup> The church, to live into its calling as not of the world, must reject all forms of retribution, exclusion, and disposability, and insist upon real accountability that begins with compassion.

Meditating on Jesus' prayer can help us find support from God in a practice of opposition to structures of oppression and authentic engagement with the world in all its complexity.

## Year C

Scripture: Acts 16:16-34

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

The Spirit's work throughout Acts is easily met with skepticism. Next week we will remember the Spirit bringing 3000 souls into discipleship to Jesus who were "united and shared in everything," (CEB). After over a decade in Catholic Worker

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communities, where I have shared (a portion) of my income and possessions with other members and housing in-secure guests, it is a little ironic that I was surprised by my New Testament prof's comment that most scholars don't think there was ever a community of 3000 who shared all their possessions in the early church. As I noted above, we only ever shared a portion of our possessions. I lived with less than 30 people and there was enough conflict in negotiating our life together that doing this with 3,000 is incredible. That moment of surprise and recognition comes to mind as I read this passage.

Here Paul and Silas end up in prison after exorcising a demon from an enslaved girl. This part makes sense. Paul and Silas were being harassed for *many days* by her following them around and yelling "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Paul's annoyance is a very relatable moment. Can you imagine putting up with that for days? The response from her owners is also believable. The girl was doubly-enslaved, both to a demonic force and the owners who exploited her for wealth. We are also living in a world governed by demonic forces and people who exploit us for wealth. In light of the most recent mass shooting, we might consider our enslavement to gun-idolatry and the manufacturers who lobby against restrictions on gun ownership and manufacturing. The only systemic response our country has seen is the increase of police presence, yet increasing the number of people with guns—whether in the hands of police or civilians—has not born the fruit of peace. This story also presents a good opportunity for the abolitionist preacher to point out how the defense of property and increase of wealth has taken precedence over people's lives in our prison-industrial complex. Furthermore, the accusations in court also feel eerily

contemporary. Nationalism, racism, legalism, and propriety regularly undergird the carceral logic that ruins so many BIPOC and impoverished people's lives. The willingness of the crowd to gang up on them and physically abuse Paul and Silas further recalls the ongoing history of police and white supremacist gang violence against Black bodies. This section is all too real.

So, Paul and Silas being beaten and imprisoned after an understandable (if not well-planned) action taken in psycho-emotional distress speaks realistically to the injustice many incarcerated people, especially Black people, experience in our world today. It's the next part that we can meet with skepticism. Amid Paul and Silas' ongoing faithfulness and hope the Spirit intervenes and an earthquake loosens their chains and opens the prison doors. In distress, the working class—just trying to make a living—jailer is about to kill himself when Paul and Silas charitably alert him to their presence. In gratitude, the jailer seeks his salvation from Paul and Silas. He and his household then enter into solidarity with the former prisoners through baptism and provide for Paul and Silas' basic needs.

This script is fantastical, not only because God initiated a prison-break, but because Paul and Silas—the incarcerated—were the liberators of the jailer. *They* were free and in that position of power they were able to offer salvation to the jailer. What we remember when we read this account in Acts is not just what has already happened in a miraculous moment, but the inception and fullness of our hope. Our hope does not begin with the conversion of jailers, capitalists, or respectable wealthy white people. It begins with people who are willing to speak against the demons that perpetuate ongoing violence and enslavement to Mammon, and with the abolition of prisons and freeing of prisoners, who can then offer everyone liberation

from our demonic, capitalist, prison-industrial complex. May we all believe in this miracle and enter into solidarity with those who will bring us salvation.

## Pentecost

Year A

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Pentecost begins a process of prefiguring, a form of change-making that is often overlooked in the tapestry of organizers and activists in North America today. We can often call to mind the change-making strategies of activism and organizing and many of us work in one or the other. Activism in protests, marches, emails, phone calls, etc. gets us in the streets advocating for a change. Organizing involves building power to make change with policymakers and maintain coalitions. Prefiguring is something different entirely. More or less, it's acting as if the world you want already exists and living accordingly.

Peter's speech and the radical acts of community-building that follow prefigure the kind of world God wants to see, that

God intends for the world. Peter recalls one of the masters of prefiguring, the Hebrew prophets, Joel. Joel and Peter claim that God will pour out the divine spirit on all people, a great equalizing and liberating act, which is what happens not just at Pentecost but throughout the Acts of the Apostles. In the sharing of possessions, the inclusion of new people, and the literal demolishing of prisons, God's reign breaks into the world in the midst of the apostles living as if it was already here.

The same task is before us now. We won't abolish the systems of prison and policing tomorrow, but that doesn't mean we can't start living in the alternatives we imagine today. What can your community do to live in the future God wants to see? How can your community live in a world beyond punishment and retribution? What can you put into place now that shows us the world God wants?

Pentecost began early in the morning, so there's no need to delay.

## Year B

Scripture: Romans 8:22-27

Contributors: Dana Neuhauser and Jonathan Stegall

On a street corner halfway between our homes in south Minneapolis, the final groanings of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 turned the world on its head. The viral video later catalyzed another wave of protests in Minneapolis and across the world. George Floyd's final groans and gasps embodied the bondage to sin, death, and decay in which the whole of creation is held. As Silvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh write in *Romans Disarmed*:

*Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*, “...creation is groaning for the same reason that believers groan: because it is suffering under the exploitative economic practices and violent militarism of Roman imperial rule.”

George Floyd’s groans amplified the groans of all that suffer under the exploitative economic practices and violent militarism created and reinforced by policing and the rest of the prison industrial complex. The toil, suffering, and death perpetuated by policing has been revealed in different ways since George Floyd was killed by the Minneapolis Police Department and this city, and cities everywhere, rose up in the largest protest movement our country has yet seen.

In the wake of property damage during protests, the city of Minneapolis became a showroom of plywood. Windows were boarded up to replace glass that had been broken or to prevent glass from being broken and those stretches of plywood became canvasses for artists across the area. As Toni Cade Bambara said, “[t]he role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible” and the revolutionary shift toward abolition became newly irresistible for many of us. Muralists painted prophetic images of a world without police, introducing many people to the idea of abolition for the first time. The murals told us that we could defund the police, that we could abolish the police, that we could break out of the endless cycles of police violence and cries for reform and blowback and repression and more police violence.

Abolition is both a horizon of the future that we strive toward and a practice of hopeful lament that exists in the tension between what is seen and what is unseen. Keesmat and Walsh write, “Lament is an act of hope. In fact, it is an act of ‘passionate expectation.’” In the streets and parks, in organizing meetings, in political education sessions, in our demands of the

powerful across this land, we lament the violence of the prison industrial complex in all its forms. We lament the ways it fails to offer interruption, healing, restoration, or transformation of interpersonal events and cycles of harm and violence. But as abolitionists, we don't offer these laments without hope, or with an empty hope that these systems can reform themselves, that only the systems we see now are possible. We offer a disciplined, practiced hope that, as Mariame Kaba writes, "there's always a potential for transformation and for change."

George Floyd's groans were those of suffering and death at the hands (or knees) of violent Empire. The groans that we carry forward in organizing, protest, and other abolition work are more akin to the groans of new birth.

The same street corner that bore witness to George Floyd's final groans has become a place in which the community has been birthing new ways of practicing safety, meeting needs, and dealing with harm. Over the past year, George Floyd Square has become a hub for community practice, community mourning, and mutual aid. People bring objects to the community run greenhouse; they bring their kids to the community bookshelf or the clothing closet, they walk the labyrinth marked by flowers and photos or they walk the streets that are closed to cars but filled with the names of people taken from us by policing across this country. Signs of what abolitionists and others seek to reject are everywhere, as are signs of what we believe is possible instead. At least three organizations have been birthed out of this space that didn't exist before: the group that runs the "autonomous zone," the group that caretakes the memorial space, and protest medics who have supported movement across the region. Beyond the confines of George Floyd Square, the caretaking work of memorial and spacemaking has grown to

include a new memorial space where Daunte Wright was killed in nearby Brooklyn Center in April 2021.

George Floyd Square is a lab of sorts, creating and experimenting with what can be, rather than what has been. [This essay was originally written in May 2021.] As Mariame Kaba said in a recent interview, “I don’t know what the end result is going to look like. But it’s part of a long legacy, what we call *la longue durée*.”<sup>63</sup> We don’t always know how to create these things, and many things happen at once rather than the single narrative of progress many people would want to tell, but we learn as we build together.

God’s Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Abolition is one of the ways, one of the most broad and deep reaching ways available in our time, that the Spirit intercedes and helps us in our weakness. Abolition is one of the ways we reach out with hope for something we’ve never seen. It is one of the ways the Spirit is offering us to deal with human weakness and pain, not by continuing to perpetuate harm but by creating conditions where we can live otherwise.

We don’t always know how to articulate what abolition will look like; it is always a horizon that is in front of us even as we create it. We are invited to stay grounded in the groanings and longings and hope that the Spirit gives, through individual spiritual practice, through communal spiritual practice, and through organizing toward a new world.

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<sup>63</sup> “Hope is a Discipline: Mariame Kaba on Dismantling the Carceral State,” in *The Intercept* (March 17, 2021).

## Year C

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

Both Acts 2 and Romans 8 allude to the practice of slavery in the ancient world. A lot of modern translations skirt around this issue by replacing “slaves” with “servants” (see Acts 2:18 NIV, CEB, NABRE, etc.), but that interpretive choice leads readers to miss some of the key biblical and contemporary context. Even though neither text directly calls for the abolition of slavery in the 1st Century, each of them problematize slavery in the Christian’s eyes. Both these passages make clear that the lines between enslaver and enslaved are not drawn by God. They are drawn by people, drawn by our sinful desire to separate, punish, and demonize others. Preachers should consider that incarceration in the USA is little more than a legal form of slavery. The 13th Amendment to the US Constitution makes this explicit by abolishing “slavery [and] involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime.”

With that context in mind, the Apostle Peter and the Prophet Joel remind us that God pours out the Holy Spirit “even upon my slaves, both men and women” (Acts 2:18 NRSV) The status of enslavement does not exclude people from the blessing of God’s presence. It does not erase the Image of God stamped on every human body and soul. If we recognize God’s Image in every human being, enslavement is morally and theologically incoherent (theo-illogical, if you will). There is no basis for one person dominating another if both are made in the Image of God. There is no basis for imprisoning anyone if the Holy Spirit

chooses to fall on the prisoner and the imprisoned alike.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul says that God's Spirit is opposed to any "spirit of slavery," which is driven by "fear" (Rom 8:15). Fear is what leads us to enslave and/or imprison people we believe to be dangerous to society. Fear leads us to establish institutions that isolate, torture, and kill people. The American Prison-Industrial Complex is a demented institution; its fruit is the abuse and dehumanization of the individuals in its grasp. It harms the imprisoned, of course, but it also harms the people who work for prisons as guards, wardens, and the like. Incarceration — in all its forms — spreads a spirit of fear and a spirit of slavery.

But God calls people of faith into "a spirit of adoption" (Rom 8:15). Christ has acted triumphantly in the world by rising from the dead and sending the Holy Spirit to people of all ethnicities, nationalities, races, and classes. Through the Holy Spirit, we are adopted as children of God, siblings with one another. The human family is bound together and interdependent, whether or not we acknowledge it or like it. Passages like these should motivate Christians to work for the liberation of enslaved and imprisoned people. God has already made the incarcerated beloved children; God has already declared them free. It's up to us to make our earthly, human, imperfect societies a bit closer to that heavenly reality.

## Trinity Sunday

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 28:16–20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage, read on Trinity Sunday, Jesus gives his last instructions to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. Three points stand out: his claims for authority to transform the world through discipleship, the shape of that transformation in trinitarian community, and his promise of presence.

Jesus tells the disciples that he holds all authority in heaven and earth, and commands them to go make disciples. We must be cautious in applying this text to abolition. It is true that Jesus' authority over the earth means that we can be bold in insisting that his way of love, reconciliation, liberation, and justice has material consequences. Because Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth, our own striving for justice, in-

cluding abolition, are participation in his authority. At the same time, the way Jesus tells his followers to exercise his authority is through discipleship, not power. He does not inaugurate political transformations. The mission of “making disciples” cannot be simply equated to any political program. Rather, our own efforts for justice arise from our own discipleship and participation in relationship with Jesus and life with God.

Because, indeed, relationship with Jesus is relationship with the entirety of the Godhead and entrance into the fellowship of the trinitarian community. This is why Jesus tells his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the reason this passage is assigned for Trinity Sunday). The way that Jesus holds authority over the earth and heaven, in other words, is characterized by Trinitarian community. (I am struck here by the similarities to Jürgen Moltmann’s musings on how the Trinity, as a community, presents a social model for living in community rather than for authoritarianism, in his book *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. God is not a single authoritarian king, according to Moltmann, but a community.) The trinitarian fellowship reminds us that power is exercised through relationship and love, not through force. Discipleship is into community and into the hard relational work of being in community. Surely this echoes the practical wisdom of abolitionists and transformative and restorative justice practitioners who insist that any radical political change such as abolition must be based on our building things with other people (this is a common refrain of abolitionist Mariame Kaba). Participation in the trinitarian community is *more* than any of our human personal or political relationships, but it is not less. The way of building something new in community is possible because it participates in the trinitarian reality of fellowship.

And, finally, Jesus promises his presence. His presence with us, in our endeavors to seek justice. His promise with those who seem far away, condemned and incarcerated and criminalized and called “depraved.” His presence is with *all of us*, until the end of the age, and all the justice we do in this age we do in our discipleship following him.

He tells the disciples to teach the nations to obey everything he has commanded. In the gospel of Matthew, this is a sequence of admonishments toward neighbor-love and selflessness. Jesus’ ethical teachings go far beyond abolition. But the underlying love of neighbor and care, even to the point of difficulty and pain, for others nudges us always toward greater liberation, greater care, and ultimately toward the sort of love for one another which requires us to reject every effort at exile, disposability, and punishment such as the criminal carceral system provides.

## Year B

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The prophet Isaiah’s dramatic vision of God’s heavenly throne offers lessons to Christian abolitionists about where we look for leadership and whose voices guide the movement.

Abolition is fundamentally a grassroots movement, guided by those who are most affected by the system: incarcerated people organizing for their own liberation, formerly-incarcerated people, people with loved ones who are incarcerated or system-impacted. Allies on the outside dedicate themselves to following the leadership that already exists.

What does this have to do with Isaiah? In Isaiah's vision, he sees the seraphs around the throne of God crying out: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Every place on the earth is full of the glory of God. The glory of God which is the impetus toward justice is *everywhere*—there is nowhere on the earth that is God-forsaken. This means that every prison, every jail, every place where humans try to exclude or banish people is nonetheless a place where God is present and working toward justice. This fact illuminates for us the divine reality behind the practical reality that incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated folks are leading the organizing toward abolition.

Isaiah's vision also speaks to the ability of everyone to participate in God's work for justice, no matter what we may have done in the past. He says: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips"—yet the seraph cleanses him and sends him out for God.

Outside allies sometimes are uncomfortable following the leadership of incarcerated organizers who may have done serious harm. For those people, it is important to recognize that having done violence or harm does not prevent someone from also being a leader for abolition. In terms of Isaiah's vision, Christian allies on the outside can recognize that anyone, no matter what they have done, can participate in the work of justice and thereby answer God's question: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

But "living among a people of unclean lips" is also a description of those on the outside, who live freely in a society that has determined that some people should not have freedom; who participate as citizens in a country that talks about liberty and justice but provides exclusion, control, and punishment. Failure

to take action for justice makes one complicit in the injustice of white supremacy and mass incarceration. Yet, the call to Isaiah is also a call to those who are complicit. God calls us, all “people of unclean lips,” from our complicity. God cleanses us. And God makes us ready for God to send us out, to go for God and do the work of justice and abolition.

We follow the leadership of those most affected and we look for God whose glory is present everywhere, leading the whole earth to renewed justice.

## Year C

Scripture: John 16:12-15

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The reading for Trinity Sunday from the Gospel of John offers my favorite description of the Trinity: “All that the Father has is [the Son’s]...[the Spirit] will take what is [the Son’s] and declare it to you.” The fullness of the Father dwells in the Son and *also* dwells in the Spirit, in the form of revelation or declaration, made visible to us. The Spirit, within the Trinity, shows *us* God as God is also already present in the Son. The Spirit is the fullness of God the Father, fully present in the Son, made visible (“declared”) to us. This is not to lean on a functionalist modalism where the Spirit is only the “revealing mode” of God — but it is to emphasize that when we look to God, we see God-the-Spirit in the revelation and declaration of that which is the Father’s and fully present in the Son. Theologian Sarah Coakley suggests that our trinitarian theology always arises first from our experience of the Spirit: the Spirit is our entry point into the

fullness of the Trinity.<sup>64</sup>

What do these technicalities of the Trinity have to do with abolition? Kathryn Tanner, in her discussion of the sacrament of confirmation, associates “manifestation” with confirmation and the gift of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit manifests to us “all that the Father has [which] is [the Son’s].”<sup>65</sup> The Holy Spirit isn’t identical with this manifestation, but the Spirit’s presence in the Trinity reminds us that the manifestation of God in the world is an essential element of God’s being.

What does the manifestation of God look like? It looks like liberation, reconciliation, and healing: setting the captives free and declaring good news to the poor. Abolition — the work of building healing, loving structures and tearing down powers of death and captivity — is the manifestation of God’s liberating presence. Abolition is a project of the Spirit. John 20:22–23 shows Jesus giving the Spirit to the disciple in order to “forgive and retain” sins: put another way, the Spirit empowers the disciples to engage in the hard work of community accountability. The Spirit “declares” to us all the things that are of God; the Spirit enables us to make the fullness of God’s liberating being present in our material realities. Abolition is the manifestation of God.

But the presence of the Triune God goes deeper. Jesus declares his very presence — the presence of the Son — with those who are hungry, naked, unsheltered, sick, and in prison (Matthew 25:31–45). The Father, fully present in the Son, is fully present

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<sup>64</sup> Kendall Cox, “God, Sexuality and the Self By Sarah Coakley,” in *Syndicate* (November 8, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Towards a New Theology of Confirmation” in *Anglican Theological Review* 88:1.

in those who are oppressed and incarcerated. The Father and Son, fully present in the Spirit, are fully present to us in the manifestation of liberation that is resistance to that which oppresses.

This reality in the world expresses a perspective on the Trinity rooted in the cross-event. Jürgen Moltmann writes of the Trinity arising from the cross-event, in *The Crucified God*: “In the cross, Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender. What proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event of the cross; the death in God also includes them.” The mystery of the Trinity is this: God the Father is fully present in God the Son, yet God the Son is fully present in those who are forsaken, what Ignacio Ellacuría called “the crucified peoples of the world.” The Spirit arises from the Son’s forsakenness — the Son’s solidarity with those who are oppressed, incarcerated, forsaken by societal structures — making God fully present in the resistance found in places under the power of death. The Triune God is present in all the death-dealing systems of incarceration in a manifestation of resistance to them. Abolition makes manifest the Crucified Son in solidarity with those subjected to death-dealing systems and the Spirit of accountability and reconciliation in the real, material resistance to such systems. All that the Father has is in the Son who is one with those who are incarcerated, and the Spirit declares this liberating, life-giving, death-and-punishment-abolishing fullness of the Father to us.

## Proper 1

Year A

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage from Deuteronomy which promises “life and death, blessings and curses” is often a challenging one from a restorative-justice or abolitionist perspective. The stark contrast made here in Deuteronomy and the promise of reward and punishment for human action drive the Deuteronomic History of Israel, the telling of Israel’s history which unfolds over the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings which sees Israel prosper when they are faithful and be punished when they do wrong. Such a simplistic narrative of reward and punishment is at first glance opposed to the more transformative understandings of accountability which derive from transformative justice practices.

I think this is a misunderstanding of the Deuteronomic History, which in fact offers a more nuanced and dialectical attempt to point towards the difficult-to-express reality of accountability without punishment. (I've written more about that, in connection with the prophet Jeremiah, in Lent 5, Year B.)

But I also think there is value in facing the stark choice between life and death in this passage as an existential reality, reading it on its own terms and not just in light of how later authors use it to interpret Israel's history. Because abolition, fundamentally, requires us to make a stark choice between life and death.

Prisons and policing are “death-making institutions,” as Mariame Kaba says.<sup>66</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” in *Golden Gulag*.<sup>67</sup> To uphold these systems is to support death-dealing. In place of them, abolitionists demand solutions aimed at *life*: caregiving, community. As Kaba and Andrea Ritchie put it, abolitionists demand “safety,” which depends on strengthening all the things in communities that can help promote well-being, rather than “security” provided by the exclusion and violence enforced by carceral systems.<sup>68</sup>

The difference between safety and security is perhaps why the solutions abolition provides to violence don't always compute within a carceral framework. Safety requires holistic approaches.

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<sup>66</sup> Mariame Kaba, quoted in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “The Emerging Movement for Police and Prison Abolition” in *The New Yorker* (May 7, 2021).

<sup>67</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>68</sup> Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, “Reclaiming Safety,” *Inquest* (August 30, 2022).

It requires strengthening communities and practicing safety and accountability in small and partial ways, as Mia Mingus suggests, not simply looking for solutions that immediately remove or make invisible harm when crises occur.<sup>69</sup> Supporters of police and prisons sometimes seem to think abolitionist responses are unserious because the response to violence is the ongoing production of care and safety, rather than insisting on violence in return for violence. But this turn to such deep, lasting work that can prevent violence in communities and defend against it is precisely the work of “choosing life,” the work of building beautiful things, which is—as we see in Deuteronomy —*opposed to death-dealing systems, which are idolatry.*

Ultimately, Deuteronomy poses an existential challenge we cannot avoid. To choose safety instead of security, to choose life over death, requires complete and unreserved commitment on our part.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 1:40–45

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This narrative of a healing from Mark echoes the healing of the leprosy of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. On that text, I wrote about Naaman’s resistance to “easy” healing:

*How can it be possible that the “easy” small solutions abolitionists propose—getting to know your neighbors,*

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<sup>69</sup> Mia Mingus, “Dreaming Accountability,” in *Leaving Evidence* (May 5, 2019).

*caring for one another in mutual aid, investing in education and health care—will be sufficient to eventually remove the need for police?*

*I particularly see a reflection of Naaman’s disdain for the “easy” solution Elisha proposes. As his servants say, “if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?” Often, the struggle to imagine abolition is that a future without police or prisons is a radical change yet one that can only be built by tiny everyday steps. It is hard to see, and to convince skeptics of the value of, these small steps toward freedom. When those who are afraid that abolition will bring danger or disorder want to see plans for a dramatic, different way of doing justice before giving up their commitment to the current system, I see the desire for something that feels more complete, more appropriate to the enormity of the problem, more final, just as Naaman wishes a more grandiose response to provide his healing.*

*Yet sometimes the biggest changes can only come from small fidelities to the ways of God. The minor, practical steps that abolitionists can suggest are the seeds of the radically new way of being. We turn to the “easy” ways of God and find healing there.*

In this passage from Mark we see a similar focus on how “easy” the healing is: the man with leprosy asks Jesus, “if you are willing, make me clean,” and Jesus says, “I am willing. Be made clean.”

“I am willing.” What a profound response from God. Jesus wills, Jesus desires, healing and wholeness for all who ask. The passage in Kings focuses on the small, seemingly-too-trivial

steps that we take to bring about a healed world. But the passage in Mark focuses on the simple act of asking and the simple response of Jesus' willingness. I find great comfort in that when faced with the overwhelming suffering caused by the carceral system. Jesus is willing. In every small act of compassion we make, Jesus is willing to help. In every need that is raised, Jesus is willing. This does not mean that the suffering always disappears. But it is a promise that human need and compassion will be met with even more divine compassion. Jesus is willing, and this is a starting place.

## Year C

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, by logical syllogism, to combat the belief that there would be no general resurrection of the dead. For Paul, the resurrection of Christ points to the resurrection of all; to the promise of life beyond death, the vindication of those denied justice in life, and the renewal of the creation.

Of course, Paul's insistence on resurrection here is about victory over death and life beyond our deaths in this world. But—as in Daniel 12:2 and Jürgen Moltmann's interpretation of that passage in *The Crucified God*—resurrection also points to justice and vindication. The resurrection is also the resurrection to judgment: not the criminal legal system of punishment that passes for “justice” in this world, but God's true judgment of accountability. Belief in the resurrection of the dead is hope that

justice can be done — that is one reason why, as Paul writes, if there is not resurrection “we are of all people most to be pitied” (15:19).

Resurrection of the dead is victory for those who have perished (and vindication for those who have perished due to injustice and oppression). Resurrection of the dead is also what frees us from remaining “still in our sins” (15:17). The divine judgment at the resurrection of the dead is linked by faith, in 15:17 to our freedom from our sins, to the transformative possibilities of real accountability and divine compassion.

Lee Griffith, in *The Fall of the Prison*, also reminds us that prisons in the Bible are identified with the powers of death<sup>70</sup>—so resurrection is opposition to the power of the prison, and abolition is an act of resurrection. Resurrection is the freedom of those bound by death and the grave. Resurrection empowers the promise of freedom for those subject to the civil death of incarceration, too.

And this resurrection is not only a promise for the world to come but a *present reality*. As Paul writes in 15:20: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” While the resurrection of all, victory over death, hasn’t come about yet, *it has started*. Paul’s faith in the resurrection of the dead is based on the reality of the vindicated Jesus who lives. And for us, living in the presence of the living risen Christ, in a world where the resurrection of the dead *has already begun*, abolition becomes a sacramental act of making-present the living Jesus. The risen Christ comes close to us in every act of liberation that resists the powers of

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<sup>70</sup> Lee Griffith, *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition* (Eerdmans, 1993), 108.

death and brings forth transformative and creative community and accountability. Abolition flourishes in the already-risen presence of the living Christ and anticipates the promise of the divine judgment of real accountability—for in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

# 40

## Proper 2

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

What this passage offers is a famous introduction to the peaceable way of Jesus and his ethic of non-retaliation.

The injunctions in this passage are controversial. I would not encourage those under abuse or oppression to continue to bear that abuse or oppression, nor would I condemn their desire to resist and seek freedom and flourishing for themselves.

At the same time, I think non-retaliation or non-punitiveness – a commitment to giving up the right to seek retribution for harm – is an essential part of an abolitionist vision of accountability.

Christianity has often abused victims of harm with its insis-

tence on forgiveness. I do not believe forgiveness or reconciliation are always possible or, therefore, required. But I do see a call in Jesus' commands here to a commitment to mercy or non-retribution. Mercy and compassion are a first step in a process of accountability. For example, Communities Against Rape and Abuse, in their guidelines to community accountability processes, list as their first principle "recognizing the humanity of everyone involved."<sup>71</sup>

A compassionate commitment to non-punitiveness informs the start of the process. But forgiveness and reconciliation, if they occur at all, occur only later in the process, when the responsible party has taken steps towards accountability. Perhaps this is a way of maintaining the Christian emphasis on mercy and non-retribution while disavowing the ways forgiveness is too often used to excuse harm or maintain oppression.

The Sermon on the Mount provokes us toward a deeper understanding of what mercy looks like in Christian ethical life.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 2:1-12

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage, Jesus uses a material healing to make a spiritual point. The particular allegorical use of changes to material

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<sup>71</sup> See Alisa Bierria, Onion Carrillo, Eboni Colbert, Xandra Ibarra, Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti, and Shale Maulana, "taking risks: implementing grassroots community accountability strategies" in *The Revolution Starts at Home*, <https://www.transformativejustice.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Taking-Risks.-CARA.pdf>.

conditions here perhaps offers a model for what abolition can offer to the church's proclamation of the Reign of God.

Three key points in this text:

1. A paralyzed man's friends bring him to Jesus.
2. Jesus tells him his sins are forgiven.
3. Faced with incredulity over this audacity, Jesus heals his paralysis in order to show that he has the power to forgive sins and inaugurate a new way of being.

In our modern context, I think the church's work for justice can act as such a material sign of a new reality. Abolition is *not* the coming Reign of God. The eschatological fulfillment of God's design for the world is much bigger and more transcendent than any political reality, even the liberation of captives. But abolition may be parallel to the physical healing Jesus performs as a sign of the new reality that underlies his actions. Abolition makes material changes for the better in ways that are consonant with the coming Reign of God. Abolition can be part of the sign and promise of God's liberation kingdom to come.

Also of interest is the role of the friends in this passage, who bring the man to Jesus for healing. I wonder where we see friends in our context of abolitionist work. What are we and others doing to bring people impacted by the carceral system into places of solidarity, healing, and liberation? How do we locate people within social spaces where the material signs of the Reign of God can be experienced and therefore its new reality can be signaled and understood? We cannot bring people into the kingdom of God—only God can do that—but perhaps we can bring them to the sites of liberation that provide signs of its fulfillment.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 6:27-38

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

I never found it difficult to love my enemies until I had some. I grew up in a cozy suburb with little police presence and not a prison in sight. The most I saw of police was the inexplicably present “School Resource Officer” at my public high school. Raised among evangelicals, I remember being taught that my enemies were people whom I didn’t like or with whom I didn’t get along. The most dramatic enemy was an abstract foe in a culture war. These are not the kind of “enemies,” I think, of which Jesus spoke.

In my first years of ministry under the Trump Administration, I finally made some real enemies. One of our church members was kidnapped by law enforcement while attending what was supposed to be a routine check-in regarding his immigration paperwork. As I waited for him to come out after doing his biometrics, I received a panicked call from him that they’d put him in handcuffs and were taking him away. Then the line cut out.

I made a list of enemies over the next 45 days as we fought a losing battle against his deportation. Kelly. Kunde. Gallagher. Nielsen. Trump. Officials all up and down the authoritarian ladder, from case officers to paper pushers to the ones dictating the policy that got our friend incarcerated and ultimately deported.

The 45 days our church member spent in immigration detention should be enough to convince anyone that abolition is necessary. He was hospitalized several times because of

negligence toward his medical conditions. He spent time in at least three prisons and not a care was given to his struggling body in most of them. For most of his detention, he was isolated in a remote notorious prison designed to alienate immigrants from support in rural Georgia.

But the Scripture passage this week isn't about that. It's about the people who made that world possible and continue to maintain it (because it did not leave office with the first Trump administration). I can't tell you exactly what it means to love those people. I'm still struggling to figure that out myself. But what I can say is that this passage demands we don't wish the same depraved system of incarceration on them, even though they made and maintain it. And if we don't wish prison on the only people who we really might think deserve it, we certainly can't maintain that status quo for people who aren't our enemies and certainly don't.

For all the focus we put in this passage on turning the other cheek, I believe the answer to the vexing questions here may lie elsewhere. In v. 30, Jesus makes a remark that seems out of place when talking about enemies. "Give to everyone who begs of you." The response to a cruel and shattered world is not to wield its own weapons against it and against your enemies. The response is abundance. The response is to make plain God's provision and love to the world.

The project of abolition is not merely the ending of incarceration or the abolition of police. The project of abolition must necessarily involve the creation of a world that obviously has no need for such things, where the existence of these systems would seem absurd to everyone present. We need to recognize and distribute the abundance that God has given us in this world so that everyone has what they need. Then everyone can thrive

and not just attempt to survive.

Even our enemies.

# 41

## Proper 3

Year A:

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1–5

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The abolitionist value in this passage is its radical insistence that judgment belongs to God alone. “It is the Lord who judges me,” Paul proclaims. Paul’s trust in divine justice leads him to think it “a very small thing to be judged by any human court” (4:3). The promise of justice in the age to come renders irrelevant the decisions made by sinful human systems of “criminal justice.”

To give judgment to God is *not* to abdicate our responsibility to work for justice in the world. Instead, it is to proclaim that justice exists, even when human structures fail. Christian work toward abolition is informed by the idea that the church always lives on the edge of the eschaton, at the brink of the coming divine judgment at the end outside of time. The fullness of

justice may not be seen until the Lord “brings to light the things now hidden” and “discloses the purposes of the heart” (4:5). Paul’s text is, undoubtedly, a warning not to pre-judge. Yet perhaps it is also a provocation to us, to ask: where do we see glimpses already of the divine vindication? How is the very rejection of the current system as providing “justice” already a glimpse, in hope and faith, of the true justice found in God? We should not judge one another the way God does, Paul says, as though we are already living at the end of time. Yet we *should* reject systems of condemnation and punishment that arrogate to themselves the power of judgment.

Abolition cannot promise a perfect system to replace the prison-industrial complex. Abolition cannot promise that a world without prisons and police will find a perfect way to bring justice when harm occurs. Perhaps the provisional forms of accountability that we *are* able to build—what transformative justice practitioners Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan call “fumbling towards repair”—is the best we can hope for.<sup>72</sup> We cannot achieve perfect eschatological justice here and now. Instead, as Paul demands, what is required is that we be trustworthy (4:2). In rejecting systems that claim ultimacy for their justice, we can find partial and provisional ways to move forward as trustworthy servants, seeking to build what justice we can now, in light of the perfect justice of God.

## Year B

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<sup>72</sup> Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* (AK Press, 2019).

Scripture: Mark 2:13–22

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus proclaims an entirely new reality breaking into the current one, in this passage. “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak,” he says, “otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. Similarly, no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” The new way of being, he is saying, is entirely different from the old. The reign of God is not something close to the realities of death, violence, and repression that grind us down here, but is something entirely different.

For abolitionists, this eschatological reality of the Reign of God provides, I think, the space of moral imagination that abolition requires. Too often, what we hear in response to pleas for abolition is that it’s not practical, not safe, not reasonable. It’s a lovely idea clearly in line with the gospel, we’re told, and yet the church can’t commit to it. It’s too different. Yet different is what Jesus is promising. And different is not only what he says is coming but what he says is *here now*, in his life, death, and resurrection, in his practices of table fellowship and ethics for this world. As followers of Jesus, we commit now to a way of living that we can barely imagine.

And what does Jesus do to live out this new way of living? In this passage, before declaring the unfathomable *differentness* of the reign of God, he calls a tax collector — those who worked for the Romans — and eats with tax collectors and sinners. Or to put it in provocative terms for abolitionists: he eats with cops as

well as harm-doers. The newness he is declaring isn't only for those who are oppressed, but also for those who have really done harm, interpersonally and/or as part of systems of oppression. And yet the character of his ministry is still something *new*, still a participation in the world to come. He is not only welcoming cops and harm-doers, he is calling them to follow, and forming them in the shape of the new, *different* reality. This newness is the transformation that holds harm without participating in it, that demands accountability based on compassion not punishment. The newness comes into the world and this world, in all its difficulties and evil, is transformed, in ways that seem unimaginable.

We, as Christians, do not live in the realm of the practical or common-sense, but seek the newness, the “unshrunk cloth,” of God’s compassionate reign.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 6:39–49

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage is very similar to the warnings and stories in Matthew 6:21–29, which appears in Proper 4 (Year A) in this lectionary.

There, I wrote:

*Jesus’ words here in the Sermon on the Mount offer a powerful warning to remind us that discipleship requires material action here in this world. We often hear, in Sunday school songs, about the “wise man who built his*

*house upon the rock,” understanding the rock to be faith in Jesus. Yet we’re wise to remember that what Jesus says here is that the “rock,” the solid ground, is not only faith or hearing but acting on his words.*

In the Gospel of Matthew, the emphasis on acting on Jesus’ words is tied to “doing the will of his Father in heaven” as opposed to deeds of power. Here in Luke, the emphasis is instead on bearing fruit in line with the way we claim to live. To put it in the terms often used by abolitionist organizer Kelly Hayes, this is living in line with our own values. Luke’s focus is on personal accountability. Where are we seeing our failures to live up to our own values, the log in our own eye, and addressing those so that our actions come closer to the values we hold? How are we building “good treasure of the heart” that will allow us to live our values in the world.

As transformative justice practitioner Mia Mingus reminds us, we practice accountability in small things. “Accountability is a skill we can build and practice,” she writes.<sup>73</sup> We practice apologizing to one another and caring for one another. As we practice our values, we become better able to engage them in the world. This is the solid rock that makes radically different systems possible.

Abolition is the fruit of trust that God is bringing about a new world. Abolition requires us to dream of possibilities beyond our current social order. If we believe that the reign of God is characterized by freedom and mutual love, then we *act* in ways that bear fruit. The ways we as Christians live and order our social structures in this world are the fruit of our belief and trust

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<sup>73</sup> Mia Mingus, “Dreaming Accountability,” in *Leaving Evidence* (May 5, 2019).

in the loving possibilities of God to come.

Shortly before this in the gospel of Luke, Jesus proclaims that he has come to bring good news to the poor and to set the prisoners free (Luke 4:17–21). Here, he asks: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” The question could be aimed at us, in light of his proclamation of freedom. The conformity between our confession of faith and our actions is the firm foundation on which we stand. Why do we call Jesus Lord and yet not proclaim good news to the poor and freedom to prisoners through the social structures for which we advocate and which we build among ourselves?

Abolition is not the only fruit our lives must bear. Yet abolition arises from the “good treasure of the heart” (6:45), as it is the fruit of love and compassion for all people, including those who have been criminalized or have done harm, and of trust that God is bringing about a reign characterized by life and freedom rather than death and punishment.<sup>74</sup> As we advocate, we practice the impulses of compassion and trust that characterize following Jesus.

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<sup>74</sup> I am indebted here to the thoughts of James McCarty and Johonna McCants-Turner on a panel discussion we presented jointly about abolition as faith, hope, and love to the Canadian Theological Society in May 2022.

## Proper 4

Year A:

Scripture: Matthew 7:21-29

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus' words here in the Sermon on the Mount offer a powerful warning to remind us that discipleship requires material action here in this world. We often hear, in Sunday school songs, about the "wise man who built his house upon the rock," understanding the rock to be faith in Jesus. Yet we're wise to remember that what Jesus says here is that the "rock," the solid ground, is not only faith or hearing but *acting on his words*. And, he says more specifically in the previous verse, acting to do the will of his Father in heaven.

I wonder if his reference to the will of his Father in heaven points to the character of the ethical acts to which he points us. He contrasts the faithful who do the will of his Father in

heaven not only to those who cry out to him, but also to those who “prophesy,” “cast out demons,” and “do deeds of power” in his name. In other words: what’s important is doing good, not doing acts that are powerful or visible.

Of course, the good that Jesus calls his followers to extends far beyond what we categorize as abolition, and it would be a mistake to simply draw a line between his command here and the abolitionist ethics that (we believe) is a faithful response, which are not what is explicitly taught in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to strenuous individual and communal ethics. It calls us to follow the Law of God in heart and soul. It often feels foreign to our modern sensibilities. At the same time, it calls us to forgiveness and love for enemies, a spirit of non-retribution that brings compassion even to evildoers (5:38–45); it calls us to personal accountability for harm we have done and to seek reconciliation (7:3–5, 5:23–25); it calls us to give up anger (5:22) and judgmentalism (7:1–2). These very personal ethical movements toward accountability, compassion, and non-retribution are part of the interpersonal foundation of restorative and transformative justice (TJ), the small ways we act (to paraphrase TJ practitioner Mia Mingus) that prepare us to make bigger systemic changes. The Sermon on the Mount demands, then, that we live out our faith in these small ways. And for us abolitionists, this is perhaps also a reminder to make our liberatory politics personal, to live out the world we wish to see in our interpersonal relationships as well.

The living out of faith in small things, Jesus says, is essential, and sets us on solid ground.

Year B:

Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:12–15

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This text from Deuteronomy places sabbath observance in a liberatory context. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,” God tells Moses, “therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” Sabbath is not only a cessation of work (for yourself and for those who work for you) but the antithesis of captivity. Lee Griffith makes this point, regarding the Sabbath and Jubilee years, in his book *The Fall of the Prison: Sabbath becomes a liturgical remembrance of God’s liberation of God’s people*.

What does this say for us as prison abolitionists? For one thing, movements to end prison slavery (see e.g. <https://www.vera.org/news/its-2024-and-slavery-isnt-over-in-the-u-s>) remind us that conditions of slavery and forced labor persist in the prison system. Recent efforts such as Prop 6 in California in 2024 have failed to end this practice. The ancient context of Deuteronomy is still very relevant to those imprisoned and forced to work in prisons. Slavery is real and the promise of sabbath is much needed.

Furthermore, theologically, sabbath as a reminder of liberation is much more than simply a day off or day without work. Sabbath is a foretaste, a practice within the material world now, of the world to come, of the rest and peace of eternity in God. As such, it shares qualities with efforts for abolition,

which function the same way: these are 1) concrete practices, 2) enacted here and now, 3) which reenact God's liberating action, and 4) make present the promised Reign of God to come. We see this ritually enacted in sabbath keeping. Perhaps we can identify it also in movements, campaigns, and protests aimed at ending prison slavery; in actions of solidarity and accompaniment for incarcerated people; in restorative justice and re-entry programs. These too remind us that "the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."

Year C:

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:20-39

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage, Elijah shows the power of the living God against the idol Baal, whose prophets fail to bring fire upon their offerings.

This story of a miracle points to the capacity of God to bring life-giving power against all odds. Like many ancient scriptural stories, its meaning and relevance go far beyond abolition. Yet perhaps Elijah's prayer can be relevant to the struggle for better and more compassionate justice.

Elijah prays (verse 37): "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." What he receives is a miracle. Yet what he asks for is not just for supernatural action for its own sake. Instead, he prays for God's action for two purposes: 1) to show forth God's power over the false powers opposing

God; 2) to invoke and enact repentance in God's people.

Both of these are relevant to the struggle for abolition. A faith-based movement against prisons and policing recognizes, as Lee Griffith writes in *The Fall of the Prison*, that "the spirit of the prison is the spirit of death" (109). Our social reliance on prisons and punishment is a spiritual power that is death-dealing. These social systems take on a life of their own, separate from what may be the good intentions of the people within them. It is the power of the prison against which we struggle. Elijah's prayer, then, is the prayer we make in the face of any unjust system, including that prison-industrial complex: "answer us, so that this people may know that you are God." God, bring your power to overcome the death-dealing systems we face.

And what is the second part of Elijah's prayer? "Answer me, that they may know that you have turned their hearts back." The prayer here is for repentance and faithfulness on the part of the people of God. The turn to life-giving rather than death-dealing ways. In our context, this repentance looks like the turn to restorative and transformative forms of justice that more closely match the merciful and reparative character of God, repentance away from the racially-unjust systems of control, exclusion, and death that we falsely name as justice. But the repentance Elijah prays for here he presents as already accomplished by God. He is not calling the people to repent but that God will show that God has already turned their hearts back to the ways of God. Perhaps we can pray similarly: recognizing that repentance from the death-dealing system of prisons and punishment requires action of God, not simply human willpower. We pray for God to bring about that change of heart. We pray for us to recognize that repentance where it has already occurred, and to see the acts of solidarity and liberation around us. We pray

that in a renewed social imagination for justice the people will know that God is God and that God has turned their hearts back to God's merciful ways.

## Proper 5

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*“Go and learn what it means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”*

This line jumped out from the Gospel text this week as I read and wouldn't let me go. It's an arresting statement, an axiom of a different kind of world. We live in a world that requires sacrifice at every level of existence. Capitalism requires the sacrifice of our bodies, our labor, and our relationships with one another to continue to function, for example. The Prison Industrial Complex requires us to sacrifice the highest per capita rate of our neighbors in the world in order for it to function and — allegedly — for us to be safe.

This sacrifice reminds me of the classic short science fiction story by Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From

Omelas.” In the disturbing bit of speculative fiction, there’s a town called Omelas that is happy by every metric you could imagine and prosperous, too. But Le Guin reveals that the happiness of Omelas is dependent on the suffering of a child, locked away in the basement of one of the town buildings. Everyone in the town knows it, but only some choose to reject the arrangement and leave. Most are happy to live in prosperity thanks to the brutal treatment of others.

Omelas is based on unjust sacrifice, not mercy. Our society is frequently the same. Popular understandings of safety, security, and even justice depend on the sacrifice of prisoners (guilty or not) and the sacrifice of policed communities (again, guilty or not). Jesus does not condone a world based on such unjust sacrifices and instead, in this passage, prefers the company of those often asked to sacrifice for the greater good. He commends the woman “suffering from hemorrhages” who reaches out to him for healing even though it would have been improper. To keep others ‘safe,’ it would have been better for her to sacrifice community and be isolated. But Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice.

What would a justice system in our society based on mercy, not sacrifice, look like? What could our world be like if our economics were based on mercy, not sacrifice? We need to decide, as Christians, if that’s a world worth fighting for or if Omelas is worth living in as it is. *Instead of leaving the Omelas we live in, how can we stay and build a new world based on mercy? How can we be sources of healing, justice, and mercy in a world that would rather sacrifice untold numbers to the prison industrial complex?*

Abolition is the ultimate answer to these questions, the framework for how we achieve that world. But what steps can

you take now to make that world in your midst?

Year B

Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:4-20; Mark 3:20-25

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

The people call for a king in 1 Samuel. The people call to be ruled. Samuel lets them know what the cost is going to be and yet they still call for a king. They are jealous of the other nations. The king will take but they don't mind. The king will order about but they don't mind. We have a king in this land in the prison industrial complex. We have a king in this punitive idea of justice. We are ruled and the church says 'thank you' to King Justice for the privilege of being ruled. The church has been complicit because it wants to be like other groups. The church has been complicit because we take the status quo more seriously than the words of the prophets. The Bible exists to justify our place in society. When it challenges that position, it is just meddling.

We are a divided society. We have divided ourselves. We have pushed others outside the bounds of society and labeled them and branded them with the finality of permanent records. We have ceased to listen to the God who breaks chains and longed to be respectable to powerful of this world. In Mark, people accuse Jesus of being possessed because he is ministering to folks who have been cast out of society. Instead of questioning their own structures of power, they question Jesus, but he turns it back in their face. Satan does not cast out Satan because a house divided will not stand.

Lincoln uses this language to talk about the United States

before the Civil War. He says, “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.”

Similarly, the church’s complicity with the prison industrial complex will not dissolve it. We will either oppose and destroy that evil, or we will oppose and destroy the Scriptures and the God revealed therein. Will we bind the strongman, the lord of this world, the deceiver who deceives us into thinking justice is only found in the pain of others or retribution? Will we have faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who defeated death on the cross and came to set the captives free?

## Year C

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-24

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage, the prophet Elijah is fed and cared for by a poor mother and widow in Zarephath. This mother offers him hospitality even though she is in dire straits, telling him at first that she is preparing a last meal for herself and her son “that we may eat it and die” (17:12). Because of her hospitality to Elijah, God grants that her food does not fail, and that later, when her son is ill, Elijah is able to save him from death (17:22).

Mothers and their care for their children are a potent resource in abolitionist efforts. Abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson

Gilmore's first book, *Golden Gulag*<sup>75</sup>, narrates the creation and efforts of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC), a grassroots organization that harnessed the power of mothers and loved ones to resist the carceral system. Mothers ROC was a group of family members of incarcerated people, whose efforts toward changing the system began from their desire to help their beloved children separated away and sentenced to life and death behind bars: "to support Black and Latino men who were arrested and incarcerated in Los Angeles on false or exaggerated charges." The love of mothers and other loved ones drives systemic change. We see similar reliance on mothers in organizations like Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration.<sup>76</sup>

What is striking in the story of Elijah and this mother is that the mother is reaching out to him in compassion and care out of a place of desperation. For mothers and others whose loved ones are thrust into the hell of incarceration, compassion, care, and coalition often arise from the desperate need to help their beloveds. Just as the mother who encounters Elijah is, perhaps, first worried about her own son, yet her willingness to risk hospitality for Elijah redounds in care for her own needs, so these organizations which arise from the needs of mothers and loved ones of incarcerated children build coalitions whose work powerfully affects the system as a whole. Parenting that is open to hospitality and care for the broader community

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<sup>75</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> See: [https://transformharm.org/resource\\_author/moms-united-against-violence-and-incarceration/](https://transformharm.org/resource_author/moms-united-against-violence-and-incarceration/)

can be transformative.<sup>77</sup> The love for her son of the mother in Zarephath and her willingness to extend compassion to a stranger, Elijah, provide a foundation for a new way of living based in hospitality and justice. The love of family members of incarcerated people in our day similarly provides a foundation to fight for a freer and more just system.

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<sup>77</sup> C.f., Hannah Bowman, “Parenting is an Act of Faithful Community Building,” in *Sojourners* (March 3, 2023).

## Proper 6

Year A

Scripture: Romans 5:1-8

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

In the Barnard Center's video *The Modern Roots of Transformative Justice*, Shira Hassan talks about the realization that they could build a context for accountability through developing relationships with people who harmed others. She says, "building relationships with people was the most TJ thing we could do."<sup>78</sup> This enabled them to enact strategies, like encouraging drug dealers to distribute narcans, that would reduce harm. She reminds us that, though our impulse is to push people away who are doing things that harm others, finding ways to increase

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<sup>78</sup> Barnard Center for Research on Women, "The Modern Roots of Transformative Justice," <https://youtu.be/ZqMxNiKQLHc?t=224>

relational and communal connections is ultimately the only way to create a context where people are able to take accountability for, repair, and prevent harm.

The first half of Paul's letter to the Romans, which culminates in chapter 5, is best understood through that lens. Paul describes the way death and *wrath*<sup>79</sup> as a response to sin only increases sin in the world. They will never produce justice. Furthermore, he reminds us that no one is simply an offender or a victim, we are all caught up in a system in which sin increases through retributive logic. The only way out of this system is through faith in a life-giving relationship that offers grace. Romans 5:1-8 summarizes Paul's argument in chapters 1-4. He reminds us that this kind of relationship does not offer life without struggle or grace without the building of character. And in chapter 6 he assures us this kind of gracious relation is not an excuse for sin, it is the context for justification. Our suffering can be transformed when it is *toward* and in commitment to take accountability, repair, and prevent harm.

Preachers should be careful to note that we “boast” in suffering not to apologize for remain in harmful, abusive contexts. No. We boast in the struggle, in the midst of great adversity, to communally maintain boundaries that protect ourselves without anathematizing or punishing another person. We boast in the suffering and struggle that comes from confronting the

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<sup>79</sup> Though you will read “God's wrath” or “the wrath of God” in English translations. Paul always just says “wrath” in Romans, excepting Romans 1:18, where NT scholar Douglas Campbell argues that Paul is using speech-in-character. This is a rhetorical technique like satire, and Paul goes on to refute the claims made in that section. I tend to think Paul does not explicitly attribute wrath to God in latter sections because he is criticizing the use of “wrath” as a response to sin.

systems that harm our community. The work isn't easy, but when we put our faith in the power of Christ's TJ, the hard work produces endurance, character, and hope rather than despair.

On the other hand, we also can boast about the suffering that comes from taking accountability for the harm we have done to others. We can boast in the "clean pain" (to use Resmaa Menakem's term) that comes from working to repair harm we've done and prevent ourselves from harming others again. This is also a painful struggle, but it is work we can be proud of.

We do this because God demonstrates to us through Christ that this is the path of salvation: of real, transformative healing and justification. God does this with us through Christ, who embodies God's commitment to remain in loving relationship with God's people and whose own struggle and suffering resulted from opposing systems of death and wrath.

## Year B

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

I grew up in an evangelical environment with a paradigm of punishment that largely matched the world around us. Despite the common refrain of being "in the world, but not of the world," I heard in church environments and 'secular' environments alike that people were in prison because they deserved to be there. Prison was the just reward for committing crimes. When we visited those in prison, we did so to convert them to a more moral way of life—a moral way of life that also happened to be our particular interpretation of Christian faith.

Central to that same faith was the idea that Jesus washed away our sins. Jesus' death on the cross took on the punishment God had in store for sinners. In the grand scheme of the cosmos, we were guilty criminals but Jesus gave us some sort of spiritual 'get out of jail free' card. That logic stopped there, however, and did not extend to material reality. In the culture I grew up in, there wasn't a whole lot of second guessing whether somebody in prison deserved to be there or not, the atonement of Christ notwithstanding. We certainly didn't discuss whether prisons should exist or not!

When I came to this passage in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, this statement about judgment jumped out of the page like it was written in neon lights. "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil." It turns the paradigm of who is guilty and who is liable to judgment on its head. Whereas my context often considers someone who has committed a crime (a definition rife with prejudice enforced by the state) the one guilty or at least liable to judgment, Paul reminds us that we all appear before God accountable for what has been done in our bodies.

When Christians consider that judgment, we should consider prisons. How will we be judged by the record of incarceration in our midst? How will we be judged by the rampant abuse in our carceral systems? How will we be judged for condoning slavery in our prison systems?

Often, we are more afraid of the consequences of doing something about that sin than God's judgment of it. The abolition of prisons often scares people more than the potential judgment of our permissive posture toward them. Yet, Paul has news for us. "We walk by faith, not by sight," and we

cannot fear the possibilities of a prison-free world more than the consequences of continuing a carceral state. Our savior was lynched by just such a system, and Jesus did not die so that our world could remain the same.

“Everything old has passed away,” Paul writes, “Everything has become new!” May that inspire us to see our carceral world as something that needs to die, so a better world can live.

## Year C

Scripture: 1 Kings 21:1-21a

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage offers an image of state miscarriage of justice: when Naboth will not sell his vineyard to King Ahab, Jezebel has him executed on the basis of false evidence, on the basis of the testimony of two “scoundrels” who say “You have cursed God and king.” The prophet Elijah promises disaster upon Ahab because of this evil act.

The violence in this passage is not simply interpersonal violence, but that supported by the power and might of the state. Naboth is not simply murdered by Ahab for the sake of stealing his vineyard: instead, the law is brought against him. Evidence is manufactured of blasphemy. He is not murdered but executed. Before Naboth is killed, he is criminalized.

While in the modern world we do not live in an era of unscrupulous kings, we still live in a system where people are criminalized—made into criminals—for benefit to others. Andrew Krinks writes, in his book *Black Property, White Trespass*, about how patriarchal whiteness relies on criminalization to

make “capitalist and colonial heaven for a few” by creating “carceral hell for many.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, as Nikia Smith Robert has also written, those in power maintain power for themselves by using criminalization to scapegoat and oppress a racialized underclass.

The actions of Ahab and his government then offer a very personal of how the carceral state and what Krinks calls “mass criminalization” function at a broader scale.<sup>81</sup> Naboth stands for those criminalized because their liberation and flourishing are inconvenient to those who would maintain power over them. And the Lord, as he speaks through Elijah, stands against this perversion of justice.

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew Krinks, *Black Property, White Trespass: The Religious Function of Mass Criminalization* (New York University Press, 2024), 231.

<sup>81</sup> Nikia Smith Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary: A Liberation Theology for Lockdown America,” *The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* 12 (2017): 41–69.

## Proper 7

Year A

Scripture: Genesis 21:8-21

Contributor: Jay Bergen

*“God was with the boy, and he grew up.” Genesis 21:20*

Abraham and Sarah do not look good in this story. This story (and its “Part 1” back in Genesis 16) lay bare the power that this couple has over the people they enslave. Abraham, the father of nations, is willing to discard Hagar once she is no longer useful (and willing to blame Sarah for it). The patriarch of all Peoples of the Book acts no different from any other slaveholder or lord: Benevolent as long as it serves him, cruel and death-dealing when the situation changes.

Hagar’s story has long been a source for Black feminist and womanist theological criticism of white theologies that would

seek redemption in the substitutionary suffering of racialized women, most famously in Dr. Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

For Williams, there is nothing redemptive about unchosen suffering. Jesus does not die as a surrogate for us. Rather, "The cross is a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social relations and arrangements sanctioned by the status quo."

Picking up on these themes, Patrick Reyes writes in his memoir that, "I am not seeking a judge to save us from oppressive rulers. I am not seeking a prophet in the wilderness calling for unflinching faith in the face of adversity. I am not seeking a king to rule a new, more faithful kingdom. I am seeking a Jesus who accompanies me on a journey to survive."

But this is not, really, a story about Abraham (or Sarah). God is with the boy, Ishmael. God is with Hagar. The God of Hagar and Ishmael accompanies them on a journey to survive. God does not ask them to turn their suffering into a learning opportunity for Abraham and Sarah. "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow."

Sometimes liberation and reconciliation do not operate on the same timeline. The Black radical tradition in and beyond the United States teaches all of us that self-determination for the oppressed can be found in the wilderness, away from the centers of power. And in these maroon communities (which might dismissively be called "bubbles"), God and God's people are journeying together towards freedom.

## Year B

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Contributor: Jed Tate

*As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain (2 Corinthians 6:1).*

We are God's co-laborers in the work of reconciliation. Paul is describing his own ministry in 2 Corinthians 6, and yet we have the same calling to work together with God.

In the preceding verses (2 Cor 5:11-21), Paul writes that God has reconciled all people to God's self through Christ. Our relationship with God has been restored, and God is not counting our trespasses against us. This is grace. And, as new creations in Christ, we are able to respond to God's grace with *faith working through love* (Galatians 5:6). We have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), the ministry of restoring our relationships with each other.

If we deny the restoration of relationships, though, we accept God's grace in vain (2 Cor 6:1). When we isolate people in prison, when we put our neighbors in cages, we deny them opportunities for healing and reconciliation. Rather than sharing the grace we have received, we put obstacles—physical boundaries—in their way. But our calling is to reject the practices of punishment, and receive this ministry of reconciliation. Our calling is to work together with God in the healing of relationships.

Our invitation, then, is the same as Paul's invitation to the Corinthians: *to open wide our hearts*. This work of reconciliation isn't easy; we will endure afflictions, hardships, and labors (2

Cor 6:5-10). Opening our hearts to our trespassers isn't easy; we will require patience, kindness, and genuine love (2 Cor 6:6). But we are reminded that we are empowered and enabled by the grace and power of God who listens to us and helps us (2 Cor 6:2).

This week, how is God inviting us to participate, to work alongside God, in this ministry of reconciliation?

## Year C

Scripture: Bailey Pickens

Contributor: Luke 8:26-29

For many years I have been disturbed by the story of the Gerasene demoniac. Certainly it's good that Jesus was able to heal a dangerous man, I thought, but why did he have to send a herd of pigs to destruction? The pigs hadn't done anything, and besides, didn't they represent the livelihood of the owner and the swineherds who watched them? Why was there so much collateral damage?

Not uncommon questions, perhaps, but no less disturbing than the story. Why did I think about the man that way? Why was I not concerned that he had been bound with chains, that he was left to wander among the dead, alone and naked? Why was I not equally concerned that the response of all the villagers to seeing him whole again was fear and the request for Jesus to leave?

It is easier to put away people who are disruptive or frightening for any reason, and it is natural, maybe, to bristle at the wiping out of what seems a normal and necessary part of life. But if

the story is put in its starkest terms, as my wife phrased it, it is about the Son of God destroying economic utility in favor of the restoration of someone that no one else cared about.

The economic argument, that something shouldn't be touched because it provides jobs, is a load-bearing one for many businesses that are obviously destructive to human beings: coal mining, industrial animal farming, garment dye and production, sweatshops, and prisons. It is no accident that these operations run in rural areas, both here and in other countries, where there is more need for work and fewer people with enough money or power to complain. Jobs come with the degradation of the environment and the physical and spiritual health of the workers. It is not good to wield power-over and maintain imprisonment for other human beings, even if it's what gets you a paycheck. And rural prisons keep frightening people far away from population centers—including their families, spouses and parents and siblings and children... that is, anyone who might care about them.

The economic benefit of prisons to rural areas was much-touted; how much they provide in the end is debatable. But Jesus' healing of the demon-possessed man even at the cost of an entire herd of animals says that it doesn't matter. The pigs were being raised to make money. Under ordinary circumstances, they would be sold for slaughter, for the gustatory pleasure of people rich enough to buy the meat and the enrichment of the owner of the herd. They were a piece of the economy. The story teaches that this economic activity, the jobs, the passing of money from hand to hand, is absolutely subordinate to the wellness of one human being, even one who had been removed from his community because of his condition, even one the village was not straightforwardly happy to get back. Economic

benefit does not outweigh human wellness and restoration.  
That's that.

## Proper 8

Year A

Scripture: Genesis 22:1-14

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

From a transformative justice (TJ) perspective this story is particularly challenging. Human sacrifice, whether for cultic purposes or in the name of “justice” is directly opposed to the aims of TJ. The preacher has a decision to make when faced with this story then; they can either preach against the text, ultimately condemning the whole situation or they will have to help their hearers accept that the ethics of human sacrifice is not really what this passage is about. How worthwhile that is will depend on what the preacher pulls out of the text. In any case the horror of God’s command must be addressed.

In the first case, one might present an explanation that lulls the audience into accepting the thinkability of human sacrifice

in the context of this passage, and then draws connections to the way horrors today, in our prison and policing systems, are all-too-thinkable. In a world in which people were confronted with the capriciousness of death and suffering in nature, sacrificial systems became a way to exercise control, work for some kind of safety, and protect as many lives as possible. Human sacrifice was always a last resort, tried in the most dire circumstances, an attempt to stay the devastation. Aren't we all too willing to create systems of violence in the name of safety?

The preacher could go on to point out the way systems of harm and violence begets more harm and violence in this narrative. The preacher could look at Sarah and Abraham's pattern of harm: He pretends Sarah is his sister and allows other men to take her, he has sex with Hagar without her consent and allows Sarah to abuse her, and Sarah pushes out Ishmael and Hagar in fear and jealousy. Is it any wonder that Abraham would be willing to sacrifice his son? And what would this mean for Isaac? Traumatized at a young age, he seems to re-enact many of his father's sins, is eventually betrayed by his wife, and tricked by his youngest son. The solution is not more harm, more violence. We must break the whole cycle.

On the other hand, a more positive reading of the text could acknowledge these problems, but remind the hearers that this is not a story about the ethics of human sacrifice. As all three of the Abrahamic religions have traditionally asserted, this is a story about Abraham's faith and how Abraham became the patriarch of innumerable people of faith.

Retelling Abraham's story through the lens of faith, we find that Abraham's *faithlessness* consistently led to harm and violence. Abraham was clearly willing to pursue the promise God laid before him, leaving his home at God's command, but

as soon as he entered foreign lands his faith wavered, leading to the lies and schemes discussed above. God continually cleans up the messes Abraham's (and Sarah's) *faithlessness* makes, and reassures Abraham that God will give him innumerable progeny, making him the father of a great nation.

Even after Isaac is born, it isn't clear that Abraham has placed his faith in God and God's promise. It's clear that he *desires* God's promise and will do whatever it takes to attain it, but can he act in faith that God will uphold God's covenant with him, even when God asks him to do something that seems to go against that very same promise? Abraham's response to Isaac reveals that he does have this kind of faith, "God will see to it, my son."

There is a sense in which this experience doesn't just reveal Abraham's faith, it helps him become a person of faith, and while the preacher needs to be careful to note that this story doesn't justify violence (it has, in its interpretative history, actually been understood as the *end* of human sacrifice), for a Christian, faith is a meaningful part of transformative justice work.

In pursuit of justice, the reduction of harm, and communal well-being, we will be accused of working *against* justice. The closure of jails and prisons, the defunding of police and the willingness to work with people who have been criminalized for harming others (at times in almost unthinkable ways) will feel risky to many, but God has promised us that prisoners will be set free and lions will lay down with lambs. Do we have faith in God's promises?

The author of Hebrews, in the beginning of his reflection on faithful ancestors, writes that "Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see," (11:1). Just as Abraham's faithful act made him the father of three faiths, this

story suggests that when we *embody* our faith, *we will* be the reality we hope for and the proof of what we don't see.

In this fraught story, there is much to fret over, whichever interpretative direction you choose. Whether you choose to preach against or with the text this story does not reach an easy conclusion. Much like our work in the world, it is a risk to work with a story of potentially (and too often *actually*) great harm. May your words transform the harm in this story into a message of hope and healing.

## Year B

Scripture: Psalm 130

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Psalm 130 offers one of the great Biblical calls for deliverance from God: a promise of God's presence in every place and situation, and of the divine movement always towards liberation and reconciliation.

The psalmist writes: "Out of the depths I cry to you..." The language of "depths" operates at multiple levels. It brings to mind for me the concrete realities of the darkest hallways I have seen inside a jail, the places where human ingenuity and architecture are turned toward torment and inhumanity. Jails and prisons, designed to cage people, are locations where the evil powers of sin and death are made manifest in the very building, yet at the same time, God is always—*always*—present with those who are incarcerated.

The language of depths also draws on the psychological: the depths of our own suffering from harm done to us and of despair

or guilt over the harm we have done. The cry from the depths is a cry for healing. The cry from the depths is also the psalmist's cry for forgiveness, made in the sure and certain knowledge that God does not "mark iniquities" but instead forgives and restores us to health and peace where we have done harm. The justice of God is the justice of ongoing restorative accountability and healing, not punishment and suffering.

Finally, the language of depths raises the specter of the ocean depths, which in the Tanakh often represent the forces of chaos, pagan gods, or danger. The language of "depths" in this way brings to mind Psalm 107, where God calms a storm on the sea to deliver God's people. Psalm 107 is a psalm of liberation as well: in addition to delivering people from the power of the deep, God "breaks bars asunder...shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron" (v. 14-16), explicitly setting free prisoners. God hears the cry of those in prison and those in danger from the depths, and sets them free.

It is true that Psalm 107 also shows the overthrow of the wicked and powerful. God transforms conditions of oppression and harm. But the promise of Psalm 130 is that God is *always on the side of those in the depths*. God is on the side of the incarcerated and imprisoned. God is on the side of those who suffer from harm done to them — including the state violence of incarceration. God is on the side of those who suffer pain and despair as they seek to make amends for harm they have done, and so God offers a way out, through restorative and transformative processes of accountability that provide pathways to healing rather than punishment and imprisonment.

God hears the cry from the depths and God brings liberation and healing. This is the promise of Psalm 130. Abolitionist efforts by allies should always remember to take leadership from

incarcerated and directly impacted individuals; from those who have done harm and from survivors of harm. In that way, allies hear and respond to “the cry from the depths,” and the abolition of policing and prisons becomes a human response, out of the depths and supported by God’s ever-present solidarity.

## Year C

Scripture: Psalm 77

Contributor: Jay Bergen

Psalm 77 traces the spiritual journey from grief to praise, through awe at the power of God’s creation. At the beginning, we wail together, we refuse to be comforted. Unconsoled, we turn to prayer. The NRSV tells us “I commune with my heart in the night” (v. 6). Who has not tossed and turned in the middle of the night, praying (or wrestling, or raging) with just the depths of our own hearts for company? It is often in these dark nights that we kill the God that does not serve us, the God who does not accompany us into freedom.

From this sacred listening, the Psalmist turns us to the long arc of history, tracing God’s faithfulness in accompanying our spiritual ancestors. God’s creation aligns itself with the work of liberation: “The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered... Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (v. 17-20).

The Psalmist’s journey from personal grief to collective liberation reads like a CliffNotes version of Job. Gustavo Gutierrez describes the Book of Job as a “circling movement into deeper

insight” on the presence of God amidst the suffering of the innocent.<sup>82</sup> He traces Job’s journey from private grief to public proclamation, as Job connects his own suffering and grief to that of others who have experienced immense injustice.

Gutierrez closes his book with this encouragement to other religious leaders: “Only if we know how to be silent and involve ourselves in the suffering of the poor will we be able to speak out of their hope.”<sup>83</sup> This journey is a necessary one even if it is not easy. We would all like to grow in wisdom and in freedom without communing with our grief at night. But the Psalmist encourages us: Through this doorway is suffering, yes, but also great joy and liberation.

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<sup>82</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job* (Orbit, 1987), 93.

<sup>83</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job* (Orbit, 1987), 102.

## Proper 9

Year A

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-12

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*“As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.”*  
*Zechariah 9:11*

In the latter portion of Zechariah, most likely a later addition written under the threat or rule of the Greeks, we see a clear portrait of the “demilitarized dominion” of God (David L. Petersen’s words from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*). Presented is a common image in prophetic literature of God destroying the weapons of war used to govern the present age and pronounce God’s rule in the age to come. Matthew later connects this specific passage to the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, linking

this newly disarmed world to the purposes of his ministry.

Zechariah rejects a few critical things in this passage: weapons of war (chariots, war horses, battle bows) and incarceration. The specific form of incarceration referenced here is likely related to military prisoners given the references to war. Freedom for these captives of opposing nations from imperial powers represents liberation for the whole of Zechariah's people. At the same time, the prisoners could refer to exiles as deportation was a repeated trauma of the Jewish people at the hands of larger Ancient Near Eastern empires.

For our purposes, we need not see Zechariah's promise of an end to incarceration so narrowly. The prison industrial complex of the United States specifically is a mechanism of these same dominating powers that plagued Zechariah's time. Our systems of incarceration wield deportation as a weapon just as ancient empires did. The internal policing of Americans often looks like militarized occupation, especially in times of protest and resistance to police brutality. Prisons are very much the "waterless pit" (v. 11, NRSV) of the country, resulting in intense pain and future marginalization in our social structures.

God promises freedom from these powers and we ought to declare that freedom from our pulpits. We must declare God's intentions for these institutions to pass away and be replaced by the kingdom of peace promised in Zechariah.

Year B

Scripture: Mark 6:1-13

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

What do you take when you go on a trip? It is an odd time for such a question, but pre-COVID, most of us have moved or traveled or visited relatives at some point. What did you take? What was important? What was for comfort? What did you have just because?

When Jesus sends out the disciples, he prepares them for what is going to be required of them. They don't need to bring food or extra clothes or really much of anything at all. Jesus, in fact, orders them to carry nothing except a staff. They don't know how long they are going to be God. They don't know how they are going to eat or drink.

This asceticism is shocking today. Nothing? Really?

But they lack of luggage is not the shocking thing but what they do, and Mark lists it clearly in verse 12: So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent, or convert. *Metanoia*. The disciples don't need anything save the word of God that goes with them.

The church today, in most places, has grown complacent. We pay more in HVAC bills than support for our neighbors in need. As well, the church needs to repent for the way we have become complicit in the prison-industrial complex. We need to repent in the way we have sold out the Good News of Jesus. We have focused more on respectability and responsibility than the possibility that God may be making something new right here and now. We don't need to wait around until people are ready. Like Jesus send the disciples, we don't need anything other than the word of God to change the world. Prisons are not more powerful than God's love. Respectability is not more powerful than God's love. The status quo of injustice will not

last forever. May we dust our feet off at its door.

Year C

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this passage from 2 Kings, we see Naaman, an Aramean, come to the prophet Elisha seeking healing for leprosy. When Elisha tells him to wash in the Jordan River and be healed, he is angry, saying: “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!”

How often, I wonder, is our advocacy for abolition in Christian contexts slowed by wanting to see the distinctive work of liberation of God in a way that is comfortable to us, rather than by following the lead of those already doing the work?

One of the key principles of abolitionist advocacy is to engage in solidarity, not allyship, following the lead of most-affected people.<sup>84</sup> Abolitionist work is led by Black people and incarcerated people engaged in the struggle for their own liberation. Churches and faith communities come into the movement most effectively by joining existing coalitions and supporting the demands already being made.

Often, I think, our desire in the mainline church is for something “different” in our advocacy — we admit the problems with police violence but do not want to follow the lead of activists

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<sup>84</sup> Nick French, “Solidarity Should Be the Basis of White Anti-Racism, Not ‘Allyship,’” in *Jacobin* (July 8, 2020).

calling to defund the police. We disengage from protestors if we think their tactics are too harsh, yet, as I recently wrote, our response to disruptive protest should be to listen to the prophetic voices.<sup>85</sup>

The “hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed” means that prophetic voices come from those most affected by current systems of oppression, and any analysis of how to act should start by listening to those most affected. What Naaman learns in this text is to listen to the prophetic voices even if they do not say what he wants, expects, or is comfortable with.

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<sup>85</sup> Hannah Bowman, “Protesting in Front of a Judge’s House is an Act of Nonviolence,” in *Sojourners* (May 26, 2022).

## Proper 10

Year A

Scripture: Psalm 119:105-112

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

The effects of the law in this section of Psalm 119 are intriguing (or at least should be!) to a society that claims to be governed by the “rule of law.” The Psalmist holds on to the law as a source of life and sustenance. They bring joy and serve as the inheritance that the Psalmist passes on. The role of Torah is complex in both Jewish and Christian circles, but the picture the Psalmist presents is clear: law should bring life for the psalmist and their community.

The “rule of law” does not frequently serve this purpose in our system of retributive justice. Following the law does not intrinsically bring you life and quite often it is used to bring about death, both for offenders and for those who exist at

its whims. In the United States, from the beginning law was constructed to accrue advantage for some people at the expense of others—most obviously in the enshrinement of slavery. The legacy of such origins endures to this day, bringing life rather than bringing death.

For some, the first step toward PIC abolition is looking at the effects the law has now. When you live comfortably and, for the most part, don't interact with the legal system, you don't see these effects. But once you see them, you can't unsee them. The laws we have make it expensive to be poor,<sup>86</sup> keep people yolked to their incarceration long after release,<sup>87</sup> and shield law enforcement from the laws they are supposed to enforce.<sup>88</sup> Where Torah is meant to bring life to its followers, our laws so often do the opposite.

Abolition has an expressive goal that is quite clear and singular in our case, but it is connected to so much else that doesn't work in our world. When preaching about the life that comes from the imperatives of our Scriptures, pastors should point out the ways in which the laws of the state that we actually follow fall short of God's will for us. It's those laws that create the systems we want to abolish and for some, the journey to becoming an abolitionist starts there.

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<sup>86</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, "It's Expensive to Be Poor," in *The Atlantic* (January 13, 2014).

<sup>87</sup> Reuben Jonathan Miller, "How Thousands of American Laws Keep People 'Imprisoned' Long After They're Released," in *Politico* (December 30, 2020).

<sup>88</sup> "Qualified Immunity" at EJI.org, <https://eji.org/issues/qualified-immunity>.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 6:14-29

Contributor: Erin Jean Warde

This week's gospel from Mark, a flashback to the murder of John the Baptist, provides a complex picture of pain wrapped up in death at the hands of political power. The story of the murder of John the Baptist sets John against kings and those that influence kings, and in equal measure, people willing to use manipulation to commit grievous acts. The ultimate killer of John the Baptist is tangled up in layers upon layers of relationship, muddying the water of guilt so much so that guilt touches everyone involved. Years later, as evidenced by the flashback, John the Baptist's death haunts Herod so much so that the stories of Jesus shame him with the decision he made to kill a prophet.

Ironically, the person in prison—John—is not the person in the story committing murder, an important feature of the story that can call us to remember the “crimes” of those imprisoned versus the criminal actions of those who, on the “outside,” determine their fate. While King Herod fears John, he fears John because John spoke the truth to him. Again, it is John—the imprisoned—who names that King Herod's actions are not lawful, a voice of truth coming from behind the proverbial bars to incriminate power. The fate of John—death at the hands of a King who pleases the people inside his ear—is not unlike the fate of imprisoned people who, even in speaking truth, are only further incriminated and forbidden the freedom offered to the people on the “outside.” The people of power who hold them captive are often able to engage in criminal activity, because it

comes from a place of unjust power that serves to preserve their own freedom.

Aside from the obvious power dynamics at play between King Herod and John, this gospel text also calls to mind the dire decisions that can be made when power concedes to people pleasing and manipulation. King Herod has somewhat of a respect for John, and the gospel notes that he knew “he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.” However, whatever affection he had for John is rendered useless when Herod feels bound to an oath to Herodias, an oath specifically made out of old grudges that, again, are based only in John’s propensity to tell the truth. Even as King Herod is “deeply grieved” he continues with his action of holding to an oath born out of a grudge, rather than care for the life of a one who he believed was a righteous and holy man. In this specific dynamic of the gospel we are shown with startling clarity the cost to human life and dignity that is paid when power pleases the voice of the people, the voice of the masses, with an oath to preserving the grudges of humans over truth professed by prophets. King Herod serves as a reminder of what happens when politics and the highest givers allow their grudges to become death sentences for the very people who, like John, are left to the fate of kings more occupied with their standing in the public square than to their oath to serve anything resembling the justice of God.

Abolition requires the acknowledgment of these dynamics in our world and a resistance to the ways we might feel called to people please. If we live as King Herod, with the voices of grudges in our heads speaking against human dignity, then we have aligned ourselves with injustice and, in time, we will face the same haunting memories of the ways we silenced prophetic

voices in service to our own power.

Year C

Scripture: Amos 7:7-17

Contributor: Mallory Everhart

As sometimes happens in the lectionary, we get a snippet of scripture that misses important context. Prior the start of this passage, God has expressed dissatisfaction with the Israelites and threatened a plague of locusts and an all-consuming fire. Both times, Amos pleaded with God and God backs off. Notably, Amos didn't ask for lenience because the people were good but, instead, because they were "small", citing human finitude as the reason God should relent. The third exchange begins at vs 7, which we pick up in this lectionary passage. Instead of a tool of destruction like locusts or fire, God is holding a tool for measurement. Like a pendulum, a plumbline is a cord with a lead weight on the end and is meant to assess whether a wall has been built straight and sturdy or if it's uneven and prone to self-destruction. In these verses, God is measuring according to the expectations of the covenant and finding the people of Israel lacking.

It's important to know that this isn't a ritual failing—it's a moral one. Back in chapter 5, we learn that all the right festivals and songs are happening but that's only making God angrier. Right ritual isn't matched with right relationship and the poorest, highest risk, and most marginalized are being abused. God has seriously pissed off mama bear energy even to the point of destroying everything that has been built.

What strikes me is the evasion of accountability that happens in vs 10-13. Instead of recognizing how they are harming people, Amaziah and Jeroboam blame Amos and try to send him away, closing their hearts, minds, and land to protect themselves from hearing Amos's message. But God's pronouncement of destruction comes anyway.

As we read in last week's post, it's important to hear the hard truths coming from the most marginalized among us, even when it's hard. In vs 14, we learn that Amos is a shepherd, meaning he's most likely been on the receiving end of government greed and exploitation. Amaziah and Jeroboam are getting called on the carpet and, even though they are the antagonists in this story, I sympathize with them. It takes a lot of spiritual fortitude not to double down when you're being called out and, like Amos notes, sometimes people are small. But if we are going to build the world we dream of where the prison industrial complex is abolished, we need to learn to sit with our discomfort, acknowledge it, and choose to act according to our stated values. Though so much of building an abolitionist world is experimental, an abolitionist ethic provides us a "plumbline" that keeps us building toward this goal in a sustainable, structurally sound way.

A plumbline isn't a tool of destruction. In fact, its only function is literally to aid in the work of construction, meaning it is only to be feared if our pride is protecting what's already been built. Possibility lives beneath that fear if we are courageous enough to search for it. Sometimes, we have to deconstruct so we can rebuild. Activist Mariame Kaba writes "Abolitionism is not a politics mediated by emotional responses...abolition is not about your fucking feelings." She goes on to say "we have to govern the world not based on our personal desires

and our personal feelings. We have to have a politic and set of basic values that we as a society are governed by...sometime our feelings aren't actually aligned with our values." Abolition is our plumbline, the way we measure the alignment of our actions and our ethics. It's the true thing we can come back to. May we have enough humility to be accountable when harm is brought to our attention, the strength to resist the urge to reject accountability, and the courage to build something better.

## Proper 11

Year A

Scripture: Romans 8:12-25

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage from Romans promises the liberation of creation. In the promise that the creation will be set free from “bondage to decay” and will “obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (8:21) we see the abolition of death-dealing systems and powers such as policing and incarceration. Ruth Wilson Gilmore often reminds us that abolition requires “changing everything.” Changing everything is the picture painted in this passage of the creation that is being renewed—although the form of renewal we see right now is that of the struggle for justice we are engaged in, “groaning in labor pains” (8:22). The acts of resistance by which incarcerated and criminalized people stand up for their own dignity, by which allies support them, and

by which we all demand better systems of communal care rather than criminalization and “organized abandonment” (Gilmore’s term) are the labor pains of new creation. The renewal of creation encompasses *more* than prison-industrial complex abolition, but it does not encompass *less*. The abolitionist struggle is a making-real and visible of the labor pains of the new creation.

Renewal is not yet accomplished. Abolition puts us in the business of “hoping for what we do not see” (8:25). But what does it mean to wait for it with patience (8:25)?

Surely it does *not* mean that we cease our striving. Justice delayed is justice denied! Our patience is not a willingness to wait for the world to catch up with the demands of justice. Instead I wonder if patience here goes back to the Latin root of the word, suffering (like the Passion of Jesus). We hope for what we don’t see with the willingness to endure the suffering that is part of the labor pains.

I’ve given birth twice. My experience of the nature of labor pains is that yes, while they cause great pain, they are also *unstoppable*. The process proceeds whether you are ready to endure it or not. As we hope for the world we don’t yet see, I hope our patience takes the form of enduring that unstoppable force. As we participate in the building of a world without police or prisons, we are sharing in the unstoppable labor of God; we are groaning as we suffer under state violence and in solidarity with those targeted by state violence but all our groaning is part of an unstoppable wave of liberation. And our endurance makes us willing to stay in solidarity, to remain committed, to keep demanding a better world of accountability and care rather than becoming resigned to death-dealing systems of control and punishment.

## Year B

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

The second chapter of Ephesians is one of my favorite passages in the New Testament because it provides an alternative framework to how I'd often heard the work of Jesus characterized. The writer takes on a metaphor of citizenship to explain salvation rather than a metaphor of retribution. "Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," they write, "and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). The letter continues, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (v.19). The foundation of God's salvific work is in what we today call might amnesty, the granting of citizenship regardless of status under existing legal frameworks.

While I've found this passage illuminating in work concerning migrants and the immigration system in the United States, it applies equally well to the carceral system in my country. Preaching about our salvation through the lens provided in Ephesians 2 rather than various metaphors that use retribution and punishment as their base can help us provoke our imaginations when it comes to the prison system and conceiving of its abolition.

Often, when Christians speak of the role of Jesus, they do so in terms (consciously or unconsciously) of a punishment avoided. Salvation is not about the construction of a new world and new relationships, but of Jesus absorbing the punishment

we deserved. Penal substitutionary atonement theory certainly has some strong roots in the New Testament (e.g., Romans 3), but it is far from the only biblical metaphor to explain the work of Jesus. Additionally, speaking constantly and exclusively in these terms bolsters our (again, conscious or unconscious) support of systems of incarceration. Penal substitution elevates a retributive theory of justice, which (along with white supremacy) is at the heart of justification for the American penal system. Ephesians elevates a different way of speaking.

The author mixes a few metaphors, one of citizenship and one of architecture. In the first, in salvation, Jesus provides a legal status that was not afforded to us under the existing law. We become citizens not through existing provisions, but by the “amnesty of grace” (a phrase borrowed from theologian Elsa Tamez). If our own salvation depends on rejecting legal frameworks and overturning the existing system, how might imagining the abolition of prisons become more reflexive and natural for us?

The second metaphor is one of architecture. God’s work in Jesus destroys and builds—it destroys the wall that divides citizens and non-citizens and rebuilds a structure that is a “dwelling place for God,” in its place. In the United States, the prison system often strips people of many of their rights as citizens, creating a “dividing wall” between people who have endured the carceral system and those who have not. If our own salvation depended on the destruction of these kinds of walls, again, how might imagining the abolition of prisons become easier for Christians? Further, salvation does not simply destroy (or *abolish*, a term Ephesians even uses in the NRSV) the systems that create “the hostility between us”, salvation requires the building of something new. In

Ephesians' vision of salvation, our relationships are righted and we are "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Many Christians conceive of their salvation individually, but the author of Ephesians resists that impulse. Instead, our salvation results in a righted arrangement of our relationships with one another. The prison industrial complex consistently and persistently disrupts our relationships with one another and actively dehumanizes those within its walls. Such a system is diametrically opposed to Christian salvation as conceived in Ephesians (as opposed to receiving some support through a penal substitution metaphor). How much easier would it be to bring Christians to the gospel of abolition if we actively spoke of salvation, justification, and grace as Ephesians does from our own pulpits?

## Year C

Scripture: Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

The Revised Common Lectionary pairs Amos' vision of a basket of summer fruit (8:1-12, NRSV) with a psalm of equally apocalyptic warning (Psalm 52). Contemporary Americans relegate these sort of warnings to fringe churches, street preachers, and conspiracy theorists at their peril.

God offered a stark warning of what was to come in Amos, which he had to deliver to Israel. "The songs of the temple shall become wailings," God warned. "The dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place" (8:3). Psalm 52 likewise admonished, "God will break you down forever" (v. 5). But why is God

bringing about or at least consenting to these catastrophes?

Both Amos and the psalmist provide answers. Amos, from Judah, warns the Israelites that they have “trample[d] the needy,” brought “to ruin the poor of the land.” They have committed economic injustices by falsifying balances, tricking buyers, and exploiting the poor and needy (8:5-6). The psalmist decries those who “trust in abundant riches” and seek “refuge in wealth,” becoming evildoers who ignore God (52:7). And God promises, “Surely I will never forget any of their deeds” (Amos 8:7).

One of the pillars that props up the prison industrial complex is profit. There has been vast amounts of money to be made in the building and maintenance of prisons. GEO Group and Core Civic, leading builders and operators of private prisons in the United States, made a combined total revenue of almost \$4,000,000,000 in 2021 (that’s \$4 billion, but I believe it’s helpful to write it out). GEO Group and Core Civic aren’t the only companies profiting off private prisons and we can’t limit the financial gains of the prison industrial complex to private prisons. Public prisons and jails enrich vendors and operators, as well.

I once heard on very good authority of a church that received 40% of its budget from one donor every year. This donor made all his money providing uniforms and other sundries to prisons. Our own Christian institutions are propped up by, in many cases, the same money that God condemns in Amos and the psalms. When we talk about the abolition of prisons, we need to understand that means cleaning up our own houses, too, not just the houses of the wealthy and powerful.

When confronted with these realities, the far reaching profits of prisons, the temptation is to throw up our hands and despair

of ever trying to extricate ourselves from it or abolish the system itself. Amos and the psalmist, however, claimed that we ignore their warnings at our peril. How will God see us if we turn our eyes away from the profit we gain from prisons? How will God judge those benefiting off the oppression of God's children? God says, "Surely, I will never forget any of their deeds," so we need to act accordingly.

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## Proper 12

Year A

Scripture: Romans 8:26-39

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

In Romans 8:26-39, Paul continues to encourage his readers to patiently endure the labor pains of liberation that Hannah Bowman reflected on in last week's Abolition Lectionary post. Here Paul encourages them by emphasizing God's providence and foreknowledge. In Romans 8:28 he writes, "We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose." Paul states that God "knows them in advance" (NRSVUE, this is translated as "predestined" in other translations) and has called them according to God's purpose. The passage culminates with Paul's exhortation to trust in God's love for "nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not

angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created,” (Romans 8:38-30).

God’s power and foreknowledge has been appropriated to uphold systems of control when used against the marginalized by the powerful, but the thrust of Paul’s argument in Romans is to criticize systems that rely on rules and punishments as ultimately death-dealing powers opposed to God’s work in Christ. He criticizes gentile Christ-followers who appropriate and misapply Jewish law to malign and marginalize other Christians in their community (see Eisebaum’s *Paul was Not a Christian*). He exhorts believers to uproot Roman class systems that divide Christian communities into the strong and weak (see Mcknight’s *Reading Romans Backwards*). Ultimately Paul is proposing a different understanding of justice that stands with the executed and oppressed in pursuit of liberation for all (see Keesmaat and Walsh’s *Romans Disarmed* as well as Mark Lewis Taylor’s *Executed God*). Consequently it is a misunderstanding of Paul’s argument to conclude that those God “foreknew” and call are working for anything less than “justification and life for all” (lest we forget Romans 5:18).

God’s foreknowledge and power can be understood as a kind of control, but it is better understood as the kind of utopic vision that Mariame Kaba writes about when she states that “every vision is a map,” (*We Do This ‘Till We Free Us*). Likewise, many early Christian theologians interpreted our condition and constructed ethics based on eschatological beliefs about what God is calling us towards. Utopic visions and ethics based on *telos* become oppressive as control-methods, but they are tools of liberation when they inspire us to question the inevitability of the punitive systems we are embedded in and give us the courage

and patience to endure the suffering that comes with demanding change. It is only then that our faith in God's providence can become the basis of our hope in the abolition of prisons and policing and the triumph of a justice system that separates no person from the love of God or neighbor.

## Year B

Scripture: Psalm 14

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

There are atheisms of the mind and atheisms of heart. The psalmist points to atheisms of the heart. "Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good." We see quickly what is implied by an atheism of the heart: doing abominable deeds, going astray. Christians in the United States have focused so much energy on atheism of the mind that we have lost sight of the atheism of the heart. This is especially clear in the relationship between the Church and the Prison Industrial Complex. The Church has been complicit in narratives of "good guys" and "bad guys" that ignore the teachings of Jesus and Scripture around the image of God, reconciliation, conversion, and the possibility of justice and righteousness here and now.

The justice of God is not found in punishment. Jesus never said, "well, he got what was coming to him." And yet the complacency with the reality of sin that is our contemporary system of Justice echoes the words of the Psalmist: "fools say in their heart, 'there is no God.'" This is what we say by ignoring injustice. This is what we say by turning from the sins of which we are complicit.

Psalm 14 does not end with its powerful first words but reminds us that God is not a bystander in the ways we treat others. “You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.” No matter what we say in our hearts, God is the refuge of those who are spurned by society. No matter what we do with our actions, God is the deliverer who will restore true justice. Where do we hope to be? Whose side do we hope to be on?

## Year C

Scripture: Hosea 1:2-10

Contributor: Jay Bergen

I really would have preferred to skip over this reading, to ignore this dangerous metaphor Hosea uses to describe God’s wrath at the Israelite people. This is a story of a man denigrating a woman sex-worker, and then denigrating her children, all as some elaborate form of public theater. Hosea tells us that his actions should teach us about who God is. But part of being a living, breathing tradition means we get to interact with our sacred texts: They push us, we push them.

One faithful abolitionist response to this story could be to say, “No, Hosea, this violence is not the will of God.” We can choose instead the prophetic images of God as a caring mother hen, as the bringer of abundance so great that “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” Saying No to seemingly divinely-ordained systems of violence is a radical act, one that goes back to Hosea’s time. Today we can turn to theologians like postcolonial feminist Musa Dube to embrace this faithful

reading.

Another response could be to listen with care and imagination to the real people impacted by Hosea's elaborate performance here: Gomer, her daughter Lo-ruhamah, and her son Lo-ammi. What if they're not just archetypes? Maybe, God willing, Gomer gave her children other names that spoke to her love and care for them, that reminded them they were more than just props in the twisted drama of their abusive father. Maybe, God willing, she had nothing to do with Hosea except when they had sex and at the naming ceremony after their birth. This tradition of creative and compassionate rereading, too, is ancient, and today we can embrace alongside womanist scholars like Wil Gafney.

A third option as Christian abolitionists is to sit in the uncomfortable familiarity of this story. Certainly, Hosea's framework is common in situations of family violence: When I hurt you, I show you how the universe is ordered. Where, and who, are we in this story? What might we have to learn about ourselves by reading a prophetic text that has shaped how our society thinks about gendered violence and the will of God? Feminist theologians like Julia O'Brien invite us into the holy troubling in this text.

Whatever faithful readings we choose, this is sacred and difficult work. As abolitionist Christians, we must be willing to say "No," to boldly imagine, and to tease out complexity all at the same time. Our freedom depends on it.

# 51

## Proper 13

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

When considering Jesus' feeding miracles, I often think about how his response to people's poverty was sustenance. When Jesus saw that someone lacked, he provided. This response is the character of God in stories throughout Jewish and Christian Scriptures. To confront lack is to respond with plenty.

So much of what undergirds the prison industrial complex in the United States is a completely different response. The reaction our systems have to poverty is often criminalization.

The connection between incarceration and the housing crisis is one example. You can be arrested essentially for being

unhoused.<sup>89</sup> After incarceration, you could find little support and wind up unhoused.<sup>90</sup> You might choose jail to get a roof over your head.<sup>91</sup> In some places, they'll arrest you for helping unhoused people.<sup>92</sup>

The reaction of our justice system is to perpetuate injustice, to meet lack with more lack. It's the opposite of what Jesus does in the feeding miracles. How could our world be different if our legal systems acted like Jesus and met people's lack with plenty? What would your community look like if, instead of passing laws to penalize lack, they passed policies and ordinances that gave people what they need?

Right now, our response not just to crime but to social need is incarceration. Jesus demands something different from us. In Mark and Luke's versions of this story, when Jesus observes the lack and need of the people around him, Jesus turns to the disciples and simply commands them, "You give them something to eat." If we stood next to Jesus as he looked on the prison industrial complex today, what would he say to us?

## Year B

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<sup>89</sup> Open Society Foundations, "Treating Homeless as Criminals Condemns Poor to Streets," (December 16, 2002).

<sup>90</sup> Lucius Couloute, "Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People" in *Prison Policy Initiative* (August 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Wilson Criscione, "Why unhoused people in the US are choosing to go to jail: 'I kept reoffending,'" *The Guardian* (November 2, 2022).

<sup>92</sup> Julianne McShane, "Arizona woman sues city after being arrested for feeding homeless people," *NBC News* (October 27, 2022).

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

Ephesians 4:1-16, a reading from this week's lectionary, is full of abolition-adjacent imagery. Paul calls himself "the prisoner in the Lord," he quotes scriptures declaring "he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." And he alludes to the ascension and descension of Christ.

But it's the imagery of the body, Christ's body, that is perhaps most compelling to me in this moment. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

It is the declaration that Christ is above all, through all, and in all, that ought to compel us as Christians and abolitionists. Where others see outcasts, we are to see Christ, and ourselves. Where others drive to division and dissension, we see that we are connected. And we understand that this connection is not a false harmony built on centrism, but instead a declaration of our mutual benefit when we live together under the Lord.

"In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny," Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said. "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

"Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions," abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore declared.

It is my hope that we will take this lesson and seek to better love and care for those imprisoned, as we are intimately connected and dependent on them, through Christ, and through

our commitments to God.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The opening of this gospel passage shows someone asking Jesus to judge a family dispute over money, to which Jesus responds: “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

This response points to an important lesson for abolitionists: we have the resources to resolve conflicts in our own communities. Jesus, the one who is shown in apocalyptic texts as the judge of the world, refuses to take on the authority of a judge, refusing to take the resolution of conflict away from a community.

Sociologist Nils Christie describes conflict as “property of a community”—by which he means that communities have the right and responsibility to engage in conflict and grow stronger by working productively and constructively through it.<sup>93</sup> As Christie points out, one of the dynamics behind our reliance on police and prisons is a desire to avoid conflict by “outsourcing” it to professionals: rather than engage in the hard work of resolving differences or solving problems together in our community, we call the police. We look for what Mariame Kaba calls “Somewhere Else” to put “bad people” (see Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law, *Prison By Any Other Name*) rather than recognizing that harm occurs within our communities and

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<sup>93</sup> Nils Christie, “Conflicts as Property” in *The British Journal of Criminology* 17, no. 1 (January 1977).

that we can and must address it by transforming conditions in our communities.

(Of course, it is essential to note that this is NEVER to imply that victims of abuse are required to engage in a process with their abuser, which dynamics of abuse would make unsafe. Conflicts are property of a COMMUNITY and the responsibility is on the community to build safe spaces for survivors while providing pathways to accountability for abusers.)

This desire to outsource conflict is why housed people support cities using violence to make unhoused people invisible, so they don't face discomfort.<sup>94</sup> It is why protesters against state violence are called to be "peaceful" (which usually doesn't mean peaceful but non-disruptive) in order not to provoke conflict. It is why churches are often afraid to take controversial stances, such as explicit support of abolition, if it might provoke conflict within a congregation. Reclaiming our right to conflict is essential to building an abolitionist world. Learning to be in conflict *well* is essential to build healthy communities.

The rest of this passage condemns greed and wealth. This should remind us as abolitionists that policing exists for the protection of private property, not for community safety.<sup>95</sup> Part of building our ability to engage in healthy conflict within our communities is questioning our underlying assumptions about property and wealth, and the capitalist structures that immiserate so many people. Turning away from the idolatry of wealth—being willing to risk our own property for the sake of

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<sup>94</sup> Malcolm Harris, "Sweeping Homeless Encampments is Cruel and Unacceptable," *The Nation* (April 14, 2022).

<sup>95</sup> Jack Hurbanis, "History of Policing in America: Starts and Ends with Protecting Private Property," *Lake Effect Spotlight* (June 2, 2020).

the needs of others—and building our communal capacity to handle conflict will help us build an abolitionist world.

## Proper 14

Year A

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Contributor: Jay Bergen

*They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."*  
(Genesis 37:19-20)

But they did not kill Joseph. They did not kill the dreamer. The dream did not die.

The world was not kind to young Joseph, that boy with the rainbow dress, that one with the dreams that defied their lowly position. Being the favorite child of Jacob, who now goes by Israel, doesn't help in the eyes of the brothers. They conspire to

kill Joseph.

There is some act of kindness that changes the story—Reuben “delivered him out of their hands.” But this kindness is thwarted by Judah in his desire to profit off selling his sibling. The story takes another turn towards pain.

The road ahead will be rough. Enslavement, sexual harassment, and incarceration. Reuniting with family in the midst of a famine. The story will end in glory, but we’re a long way from that. And Joseph doesn’t know that. The brothers don’t know that.

The dreamer does not die, and the dream does not die.

This story reminds us that ultimately those who seek to kill freedom dreams will not succeed. Though dreamers may be killed, though they may undergo incredible pain and suffering, the dream of freedom survives. Though dreams may be forced underground, though we may think they are dead, God’s promise to us is that liberation is never dead. The struggle continues. Life continues. Do not give up on the dream of freedom. God hasn’t.

Year B

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The reading appointed for this week from Ephesians offers suggestions for what it looks like to live in a community established by the abolitionist values of mutual aid, accountability, and compassion, as opposed to a community governed by carceral ideals of surveillance and punishment. Looking at these

instructions line by line reflects multiple facts of abolitionist praxis in our communal life:

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.”

Central to an understanding of building what Connie Burk of NW Network calls “accountable communities” is truth-telling and honesty: both with ourselves and with each others.<sup>96</sup> Accountability is a practice of radical honesty with ourselves, including the honest recognition of when we have done harm to others. It also requires vulnerability, as we listen to the truths of others. Building spaces for compassionate, vulnerable listening and exploration of difficult truths with transparency requires that we remember the holiness of our relationships with each other. As we hold space for one another to take accountability and be vulnerable because we have built a foundation of trust, we prove that we are “members of one another.” I have explored the role of honesty/truth-telling and of the concept of the body of Christs in our practice of accountability further, in our Accountability Toolkit.<sup>97</sup>

“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”

What is the difference between being angry and making room for the devil? I wonder if one answer to this difficult question is to interrogate our desire for vengeance and retribution. To be angry at harm is natural, just, and good. But to turn that legitimate anger into structures of punishment and retribution

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<sup>96</sup> See Connie Burk, “Accountable Communities” in *Think. Re-Think.* <https://12network.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/think-re-think-essay.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> On our website: <https://christiansforabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Accountability-Toolkit.pdf>

is, I think, answering harm with further harm. Such structures become the demonic institutions of policing and prisons that we see acting as forces of death in our society. Characteristic of abolitionist community is to be angry, but not turn to retribution. Or, as Mariame Kaba and Rachel Herzing write, provocatively, “Abolitionism is not a politics mediated by emotional responses. Or, as we initially wanted to title this piece, abolition is not about your fucking feelings.”<sup>98</sup>

“Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.”

In the response to thieves, we see the most concrete example in this passage of a restorative-justice response. There is no thought of punishment or incarceration for thieves—instead, the importance is living a new, accountable life in Christ. Repentance means that theft must stop, but there is no response of punishment. Instead, penitent thieves give back to the community, caring for the poor. Such care for the needy from their own labor is not only an actualization of mutual aid in the community, but also a form of reparations for theft.

Particularly given the ways the early church fathers wrote about wealth as theft, this injunction to thieves also reminds us that redistribution of wealth, mutual aid, and concrete care for those in need are an essential part of abolitionist politics.<sup>99</sup> Those who have wealth should turn to labor for the sake of the needy. Instead of shame or punishment, the response to theft

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Claire Schwartz, “The Collective Work of Abolition” *Jewish Currents* (February 25, 2021).

<sup>99</sup> St. John Chrysostom wrote in *On Wealth and Poverty*, “Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth, but theirs.”

is reparations and care for one another so everyone will have enough.

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Compassion is a hallmark of communities of abolition and accountability. The language of “tenderheartedness” or forgiveness here is not, I am convinced, intended to preclude legitimate anger. Nor can forgiveness be commanded of those who are survivors of harm, nor can reconciliation be insisted upon when there hasn’t been accountability for harm done. At the same time, a process of accountability begins with an openness to recognizing the humanity in those who have done harm to us — what Miroslav Volf calls the “will to embrace,” or what we might think of as compassion for the common humanity of all. It is because of this compassion that our demands for accountability and justice must not rely on degradation, retribution, or exclusion for those who have done harm. Perhaps forgiveness — although it cannot be commanded — can find a beginning in this compassion, a baseline desire to seek transformation of harm done rather than retribution for it.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Ultimately, we are reminded, the mutual, everlasting love of the persons of the Trinity is at the basis of our Christian

communities of accountability and abolition. To follow the example of God and to participate in the triune compassionate being of God insists that our way of living—communally, materially, and practically—is characterized by love. To structure our communities by such love means to structure them around honesty and accountability to one another in our relationships, the rejection of retribution, reparations and amends for harm done and mutual aid and care for one another, and compassion for everyone’s inherent humanity.

## Year C

Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Contributor: Mallory Everhart

In my faith context, blood pressures tend to spike when Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned, since the story of these cities has been misconstrued and used as an excuse to violently oppress queer people. We are given clues throughout the Hebrew Bible as to what the sin of Sodom actually was, namely, “refusing to strengthen the hand of the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16). One of the prophets’ rhetorical tools is to compare their contemporary situation to a well-known historical archetype so, here in this pericope, the rulers and people of Judah and Jerusalem become the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah (vs. 10). This comparison is emotionally super-charged and is meant to shock and offend. After all, everyone knows what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. Isaiah’s direct comparison explodes Judah and Jerusalem’s ability to say “we’re not like those guys over there” and really drives the prophet’s critique home.

What follows this incendiary introduction is a long meditation on what happens when a group of people practices right ritual without right relationship. The way things are going, there is at least a pretext of doing the right things. They're burning incense, keeping all the festivals, making all the sacrifices. Even though it looks good and technically crosses all the tees, at its core it's missing the point and, according to Isaiah, God is FED UP. The language used here is pretty evocative – “incense is an abomination to me...your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me” (vs. 13), “even though you pray many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (vs. 15).

This text prompts us to pay attention to what doesn't pass the (incense) sniff test, if you will, or those acts of the state that look good on the surface but break down under scrutiny. Reformist reforms (contrasted with abolitionist reforms) may look great on paper but so often they are a guise to pipe more money into the prison industrial complex. More often than not, the bright, shiny new programs the public was promised never come to fruition and the money gets re-routed to increase the surveillance and oppression of incarcerated people. Abolitionist ideals urge us to follow the money and ask critical questions about whether a reform is moving us closer to or further from liberation.

In its most cynical form, reformist reforms are a pressure release valve which help goodhearted but non-system impacted people feel like they're doing the right thing. Though they seem like reasonable interventions, at best, reformist reforms are rearranging the deck chairs. At worst, they cause further harm. Sounds kind of like a solemn assembly with iniquity, doesn't it? Relationships with people who are incarcerated expose the

empty, ritualized promises for what they are – hollow. They don't get anyone any more free. So, if reformism won't save us, what will?

After the illusion of reform breaks down, we are left with Isaiah's ultimatum: "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed." I love that we are told to "learn" to do good. It's hopeful. As in abolition, there is room to try, fail, grow, and change. This work is a great experiment – or a million of them – and we are learning. The important thing is that we invest in trying, using abolitionism as our guide. My prayer for us as a collective is that we have the courage to cease our empty ritualizing and seek true justice which is liberation and flourishing for all.

## Proper 15

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

For a preacher, the complexity of the epistle to the Romans and the way it has been misinterpreted through an individualistic, spiritual, and anti-Jewish lens makes it difficult to preach a concise and compelling sermon. Furthermore, scholarship on Romans remains vast and diverse and Paul's argumentation is confusing. He employs forms of rhetoric that are less familiar to us today and addresses social, religious, and political problems that are unique to his context. Nonetheless a central point emerges in this passage: God's gifts are irrevocable.

Without getting in the weeds, providing some context is necessary to unpack the force and contemporary application of that claim, and this discussion will largely emerge from

Jewett's *Romans: A Short Commentary*. Paul's purpose in Romans is not purely theological. Looking to the end of Romans will help readers understand his goal. Paul believes he has been called to preach the good news of salvation and unity with Israel through Christ to the Gentiles (see also, Eisenbaum's *Paul Was Not a Christian*) and he wants the support of the Roman churches. Conflict within and between churches stands in the way of that mission. These diverse conflicts are rooted in Imperial honor/shame social structures that lead members in various factions to judge and despise one another. Not only does that hurt the unity of the churches, but it makes them less interested in supporting Paul's mission to Spanish barbarians, a group that the Romans would have little interest in unity with. In response to that bias, Paul, using extreme caricatures at times (like the one who only eats leafy vegetables in 14:2 for example), broadly addresses various forms of class, ethnic, and religious differences that suggest that God's mercy and salvation through Christ is limited in any way. In particular Paul is concerned with social respectability and self-righteousness. An important point to make is that Paul is not concerned with *individual* salvation and belief. He is concerned with the collective superiority or condemnation of social groups, which are reified and heirarchialized under Empire and through the law. In this section though, we find the culmination of Paul's grappling with a concern that is very personal to him as a Jewish Pharisee. Paul is in conflict with his fellow Jews regarding Jesus' status as Messiah, the full inclusion of Gentiles as people of God through Christ, and the coming resurrection. Should Paul thus reject his Jewish kindred or does he continue to affirm God's saving work through them, and God's work *even through this conflict and their differences?*

Paul is adamant about the latter. God's gifts are irrevocable. God does not abandon God's people. When we find ourselves in conflict with one another, we must remember the end of the story: resurrection and grace extended to all in Christ. When we are tempted to feel superior, we are reminded that all are bound up in disobedience, sin, and death. When we are tempted to despise others, we are reminded that God extends mercy, freedom, and justice to all. This faith does not lead Paul to disagree *less* with his Jewish family. It isn't a call to conflict avoidance. It is a call, when faced with social and ideological realities that divide us, to discern when and how we struggle together without dehumanization or condemnation. The community organizing phrase "no permanent friends and no permanent enemies" comes to mind.

For the abolitionist preacher, this is a call to conflict resolution and broad-based community organizing that holds the centrality of grace, the dignity and humanity of everyone involved, and the faith that God can bring about an end that is life-giving to all.

## Year B

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:3-14

Contributor: Mitchell Atencio

It is not in the aesthetic of abolitionists to be complimenting and praising kings and rulers. But here, as we attempt to learn from this week's lectionary, we find ourselves in the position to learn from Solomon in 1 Kings.

God shows up in Solomon's dream, asking what he should give

Israel's new king. Solomon, as the story goes, requests wisdom and is granted it (along with riches and long life, evidently because he passed the ethics test and asked for wisdom *rather* than riches or long life).

Whether we choose to accept this literally or not is somewhat besides the point for the purpose I hope to utilize this story. As I look at this story, I see a specific reason for Solomon's pursuit of wisdom that I had previously overlooked: the people.

The role Solomon embodied as king of Israel was a fundamentally political one. For curse or for pleasure, he held the task and ability to rule the operations of a nation. And Solomon, in the throes of this new task, turned to God for guidance.

"Your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people," Solomon asks God.

Here, we see a wisdom worth replicating. (In other areas of Solomon's story, this is not the case). The wisdom is to seek out God's guidance and discernment as we love and care for our neighbors, a great people — God's people.

As we consider the political power we wield in a democratic republic, or even simply as people with some sense of agency, we must seek out God's wisdom and direction and we must seek it not because we have a necessity to be right or correct, but because we love the people around us.

Loving those around us, believing in their best and believing that they are fundamentally worthy of the best is at the root of the work we do as abolitionists. No one is to be thrown away or dismissed, all are God's people, and we are to love them with our political activity.

## Year C

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:23-29

Contributor: Jay Bergen

For the past month, I have been reading Jeremiah every morning, one chapter at a time. It largely makes for depressing reading, a lone and lonely radical railing against the leaders of a nation overrun by internal division and external invasion. As the structures of Judah's civil society collapse, Jeremiah cries out, "How long?" And as the people despair and turn on each other, he seeks out clarity amidst the chaos: "Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

My social media timeline is full of despair. Many of our movements struggle to maintain hope and a plan that can mobilize the people to action. White Christian nationalism solidifies its wins. Jeremiah might have felt very at home here.

But Jeremiah is not a nihilist, not a cynic who celebrates "being right" as the world burns. Because flickering under the ashes of Jeremiah's grief is a fierce ember of hope. He still believes that it is worthwhile to speak the truth faithfully, damn the consequences. He still believes in the capacity of the people to do right. Jeremiah's hope is not just in dreams of a better world, but in the truth of a word like fire, a word that can warm the spirit of the people.

Faith like this may seem small in the face of all this death and destruction. At the end of the book, Jerusalem is destroyed, the people displaced, and Jeremiah is in exile. What has he accomplished? Jeremiah himself wonders about this, constantly worrying, "Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back?" And

yet his students and his descendants knew there was something here, some mustard seed-size faith that still has the power to break the rocks of oppression into pieces.

## Proper 16

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 51:1-6

Contributor: Jed Tate

These verses in Isaiah can provide solace and encouragement for the abolitionist faith community. Those of us working toward freedom for people who are oppressed and imprisoned may find ourselves weary from the difficult struggles necessary for meaningful change in the world. Perhaps we mourn losses or suffer exhaustion or hear disheartening voices. Yet, the prophet turns our attention to the Lord who promises comfort, justice, and salvation.

“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord.” These words spoke to God’s people who were exiled from their home. Now, their exile was ending, and yet they had lost so much. Surrounded by the wreckage of loss, they must

have wondered how they could ever rebuild and restore.

Here they are reminded though—and so are we—of God’s saving work in history. Where do we find hope in desperate times? We look to the stories of our ancestors, and see how God was blessing and empowering them. “Look to the rock from which you were hewn.” Learn from and find hope in the stories of those who taught you. See the different ways that God was working with and through them to plant gardens in deserts. God liberated before; God will liberate again.

Who might you look to? Whose story can you tell? Are there stories from people in your church (or their ancestors) that might help renew and energize the congregation in their work toward restorative and transformative justice?

We engage with history to learn from history because God moves in history. The goal here, then, is not nostalgia, but education and inspiration. We look back as we step forward, holding onto God’s promises of justice as a light to the people (v. 4) and salvation that will be forever (v. 6). We remember the story thus far to help us find the courage to imagine and write the story to come.

God liberated before; God will liberate again.

Year B

Scripture: John 6:56-69

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

In the sixth chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus covers a lot of challenging topics. That is, topics that have challenged the church over the last 2000 years. What goes on with communion?

What is the bread of life? Who is the church? In response to the words of Jesus, many disciples say “This teaching is difficult. Who can follow this?”

The Greek word translated as difficult is σκληρός, it more often means hard or strong. For instance, in the middle of the parable of the talents, the servant who buries his talent, does so because he knows the master is a hard (σκληρός) man. The problem for the servant is that he doesn’t understand who the master is so he assumes the master is hard.

When we read the words of the prophet Isaiah tell us to break every chain, we today may also think, “This is a difficult teaching.” We may think to ourselves, “This is impractical. Isn’t the status quo good enough?” We may think we understand more than Jesus the bounds of God’s mercy in this world.

The response of Jesus to his disciples is telling. “Does this offend you?” For many Christians today, abolition does offend them. Their worldview has been shamed by a Manichaean expectation of good guys and bad guys and a just society separates the good guys from the bad guys. “Does this offend you?”

Jesus doesn’t soften the teaching on communion. John says that many disciples turn away, but Peter does not. Peter says, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Abolition is a crucible for the modern church as the Eucharistic controversies of the past have been. Does Jesus have the words of eternal life? Is mercy truly offered by God? Should we break the chains?

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."*

When it comes to freedom, we have a lot of excuses. Whenever any proposals for life-saving, life-sustaining, or otherwise substantial change arises in our public discourse we find ourselves drowning in excuses. Climate proposals? Think of the lost jobs! Healthcare reform? It's too expensive! Expansion of the social safety net? We can't incentivize people not to work! The same is undoubtedly true whenever police and prison abolition is brought up. Look no further than the elite-driven public freakout when activists proposed shifting money from inflated police budgets to social services.

Likewise, when Jesus presumes to expand the healing reach of God, his contemporaries were full of excuses. The excuse that receives notice in Luke's Gospel is a protest over timing. It's the sabbath. No work should be done on the sabbath day. The sabbath is a time set aside from the grinding gears of production, the exchange of goods and services, and the machinations of all the things that make up "the economy." The sabbath is a liberating social framework designed to help God's people thrive. But here, it is an excuse.

Our social frameworks aren't often meant for our thriving

(unlike the sabbath) but they are still used as an excuse for change. If you question one aspect of how we live, other aspects (just or not) are used to get in the way. Abolitionists are often told things like: What would happen to all the people currently in our prisons? Where would they go? How would we reduce crime without police? Wouldn't we be unsafe? These objections are often masks for unpleasant realities: To drastically reduce our prison population (around 2 million people)<sup>100</sup>, we would have to do something about our housing shortage (we are around 3.8 million homes short)<sup>101</sup>. To reduce crime, if not through reducing criminalization, we would need to address things like food security (38 million people were food insecure in 2020)<sup>102</sup> and wages (stagnant for decades until very recently).<sup>103</sup> Toppling those dominos seems like an insurmountable challenge, one most people would rather not confront. Freedom, we're told, just creates more problems.

This is part of why Mariame Kaba calls abolition not just a “negative project” but a “vision of a restructured society.”<sup>104</sup> Imagining abolition requires imagining “a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more.” That's the mistake of Jesus' detractors in this story. They miss the point of sabbath, which is itself a vision of a restructured society in which everyone has what they

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<sup>100</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/research/>

<sup>101</sup> Chris Arnold, Robert Benincasa, Jacqueline GaNun, Haidee Chu, “There's a massive housing shortage across the U.S. Here's how bad it is where you live,” *NPR* (July 14, 2022).

<sup>102</sup> <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity>

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.epi.org/publication/swa-wages-2019/>

<sup>104</sup> Mariame Kaba, “So You're Thinking About Becoming an Abolitionist,” *LEVEL* (October 30, 2020).

need. The point of sabbath is our thriving, not our suffering. It is a positive, not so much a negative. Our social structures should be geared toward our collective wellbeing, not the prohibition of this or that activity or punishment as the only recourse for wrongdoing.

Abolition is fundamentally an act of organized imagination of a better world. When considering the Gospel text this week, let it provoke your imagination about what is possible (what Jesus did rarely seemed possible) and communicate a message of possibility to your community. If you only hear excuses in response to the gospel of abolition, take those excuses as an opportunity for imagination. How could *everything* be different?

## Proper 17

Year A

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21

Contributor: Jay Bergen

*“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)*

Let's start with the hard part. The next verse after this one is a troubling one: “Obey all earthly authorities.” And as usual we have been taught to misread this text.

Most early churches grew in the in-between spaces, cities full of war refugees and contested loyalties. Rome had its share of instability, but it also had the center of the imperial metropole and a landscape of local neighborhood governments that operated as a parallel form of collective decision-making.

It is this parallel structure that Paul references in the next

verse. Paul isn't talking about Emperors. Paul's call to harmony and noble action is a call to care for neighbors by building and supporting local leadership and community power.<sup>105</sup>

Most early churches (certainly an anachronistic word) were a blend of Jews and "God-fearing" Gentiles. But the Romans were a predominantly-Gentile church adjusting to a returning marginalized Jewish community in their midst. Prior to Paul's writing, most if not all of the Jewish people had been forcibly removed from Rome and only recently allowed to return.

In the face of this, Paul asks that the church offer hospitality to strangers and the lowly amidst the temples of Roman wealth, to avoid the temptation to allyship with the forces of Empire.

"Bless those who persecute you" is not acquiescence. It is a radical call to have hope in the slow, patient work of building neighborhood power and turning the tide. Even in the belly of the beast, we can act with integrity, trusting that our God is moving within our work to bring vengeance and transformation. Another world is not only possible, "the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor." (Romans 8:22). That is how we overcome evil with good.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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<sup>105</sup> See this interview with scholar Robert Mason: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/law-order-and-romans-13/id1441649707?i=1000544881770>

Contributor: Erin Jean Warde

When the disciples receive judgment for eating without hands thoroughly washed, Jesus transforms the judgment into a reminder that the way we live into tradition is nothing compared to how we tend to our souls. Jesus said, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

In this shift of thought, we are reminded of the ways in which tradition, including our laws, can be used to exact judgment against people around us, even when the inner heart of the accuser — or the systems that bring accusation — are acting outside of the ethical ways to tend to the souls of those around us. If the seat of evil intentions comes from the human heart, then there are not people who are innocent and people who are guilty, judged and held on opposite ends by a system stewarded by people with those same evil intentions. There are only people, each containing the same capacity for goodness and sin. This gospel invites us into understanding the universality of our human hearts, how we are bound to one another by each having that seat of evil intentions inside of ourselves, that possibility that we could go against the laws and traditions that were not created for our flourishing. This is not to bring judgment, like judgments were brought against Jesus and the disciples, but instead to offer *compassion* that is worthy of sin that we all hold in our human hearts.

If we each have a human heart capable of evils, then we

would be wise to look at those in front of us — especially those being judged as guilty alongside Jesus and the disciples — as people just like us, people who have the same capacity for both goodness and sin as we do. If these evils come from within the heart, they are all something we are capable of, and yet the gift of grace is that God can only understand our guilt in relationship to our belovedness, because that is what we receive in salvation. We, then, have the opportunity to share that same grace of God with those around us, choosing to see in those who are judged “guilty” a face of belovedness, knowing that any capacity they have for evil is a capacity we hold in common, and all evil is deemed defeated and resurrected by Jesus Christ.

We are all guilty, we all house that same seat of evil intentions, and yet only some of us — and usually those on the margins — bear the societal pain of systems of punishment. In order for our world to ever feel like the kingdom of God, we will have to offer compassion to the universality of what we are capable of, begin to treat the actions of others in relationship to their belovedness, and entrust it all to the God who defeated and resurrected evil.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 4:1, 7-14

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Who should I invite to my birthday party? This is a serious question for most children. Who is in? Who is out? Who do I want to see? Aging changes the focus for people, but the categorization rarely changes. Who is in my in-group? Who is in my out-group?

The words of Jesus cut right across this tendency. In Luke 14, Jesus begins by tearing apart the desire to be in the seat of honor of ‘important people.’ He then inverts this so that no one is off the hook. Instead of just talking about those moments when you are invited to a meal, Jesus speaks to the host of the meal he is attending and then teaches, by saying how when you are in the position of inviting others “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

For the churches of North America, the in-groups and out-groups are often as static as for individuals. The words of Jesus cut against those static assumptions and blind acceptance of status quo institutions, like jails and prisons. Jesus pushes for a radical dissolution of the in-group and out-group categories people use, and this push goes all the way to the institutional level. When society declares people ‘good’ or ‘bad’, this is contrary to the Good News of Jesus Christ. When churches acquiesce to such categories, we ignore the Good News of Jesus Christ. We lie to ourselves by seeking “important” places in society, and we lie by not inviting those whom Jesus calls us to invite to the table.

May we receive the words of Jesus with clear eyes. May we see how our institutions keep us from living the life God calls us to live. And may we work towards freeing our neighbors from such institutions and offering a true seat at the table.

## Proper 18

Year A

Scripture: Romans 13:8-14

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness,*

*not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Too often we elevate the rule of law above God. In *Break Every Yoke*, Joshua Dubler and Vincent Lloyd argue that during the 1960's there was a shift in mainline, evangelical, and fundamentalist understandings of justice.<sup>106</sup> Instead of identifying justice with a God that judges our societal laws and institutions, Christians of all stripes began to equate justice with the unbiased application of criminal law. Paul's claim that the law is summed up as loving your neighbor and his admonition to own nothing to one another except love, challenges our tendency to do this. Any law that is put in place and applied in a way that doesn't love the people affected by it, is unjust and judged by God. God is love and is the standard all our societal laws and institutions must be held to.

Love demands that we be willing to point out the ways our societal laws and institutions are unloving. If the church has heard the lectionary reading from Ezekiel (Ezekiel 33:7-11) you might make the connection to the prophets' responsibility to name and warn people about injustice. The church is called to walk "as in the day," shedding light on the injustice and drawing us all near to the salvation Christ offers. A salvation that includes the release of prisoners. There is a lot of material for the preacher to draw from that demonstrates the injustice of the prison-industrial complex. Recidivism rates and the increased numbers of prisoners with the building of new jails makes it

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<sup>106</sup> Joshua Dubler and Vincent W. Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke : Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 22-23/293 Epub file.

clear that our current system works towards a prisoner-filled world rather than a world marked by liberation of prisoners. Love judges this system as wicked and the debt of love upon us reminds us that now is the time to imagine and work for a more loving way.

## Year B

Scripture: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-17

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This week's lectionary passages from Proverbs and James focus on God's justice for the poor:

*“Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them” (Proverbs 22:22–23, NRSV).*

*The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2).*

*“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?... You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:1, 8–9).*

These passages condemn partiality against the poor, and reiterate that impartial justice, justice which avoids favoritism toward the rich, must look first to the needs of the poor. The reason

that the church must live out a “preferential option for the poor” (in the terms of the Latin-American liberation theologians), is because the status quo, the system as it currently works, is stacked against the poor. Seeking impartial justice requires recognizing that the current power dynamics of our society will always treat the rich preferentially, and so nothing less than an option for the poor can avoid favoritism and truly treat rich and poor on equal terms.

This favoritism is evident in our criminal legal system. As Bryan Stevenson puts it, “We have a system of justice that treats you better if you’re rich and guilty than if you’re poor and innocent.”<sup>107</sup> Mass incarceration is driven by what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “organized abandonment followed by organized violence”: first, the “organized abandonment” of poor communities, in which the interests of state and capital collude to disinvest in those communities, “robbing the poor because they are poor and despoiling them at the gate.” Then, “organized violence” in the form of policing and prisons, which disproportionately target individuals in poor and marginalized communities, usually along racial lines. (This is what Chris Hayes describes as “a colony in a nation” in his book of the same name.)<sup>108</sup> In other words, the “organized violence” of policing and prisons, targeted against poor communities, is the sort of “favoritism” and “partiality” the author of James condemns.

What these passages remind us is that the prison-industrial complex is not separable from (racial) capitalism — a connection made heartbreakingly clear this week as Hurricane Ida

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<sup>107</sup> “Bryan Stevenson Talks to Oprah About Why We Need to Abolish the Death Penalty,” *EJI* (November 28, 2015).

<sup>108</sup> Chris Hayes, *A Colony in a Nation* (WW Norton, 2018).

took out power in southern Louisiana and city governments and police rushed to prevent “looting,” protecting property, rather than meeting the needs of those affected by the disaster.<sup>109</sup> This is what police are FOR. Abolition requires the questioning and restructuring of the ways our society is built to disenfranchise and disempower the poor.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz insists that the church’s option for the poor must not be described as “preferential” because “a preferential option is an oxymoron, for to prefer is not the same as to opt: the two are mutually exclusive....When the moment of option comes, one opts *for this*, and in doing so one opts *not for that*. The option for the oppressed, as is true of all options, cannot be qualified...To claim to have a preferential option is a way of rejecting the demands of what it really means to opt for the oppressed and the impoverished.”<sup>110</sup>

What does it look like for us as a church to opt for the oppressed and impoverished? What does it look like to resist, fully and wholeheartedly, the organized abandonment and organized violence of policing and prisons? The author of James tells us: anything less than such an unqualified option for the poor is a failure to obey the law to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are complicit in the partiality to the rich which forms the status quo.

## Year C

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<sup>109</sup> Samantha Michaels, “As Hurricane Ida Strands Thousands, the Police Would Rather Focus on ‘Anti-Looting’ Patrols,” *Mother Jones* (August 30, 2021).

<sup>110</sup> (in *Decolonizing Epistemologies*, 57).

Scripture: Luke 14:25-33

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."*

As I read through the Luke's gospel preparing for this lectionary, I was struck by the increasing number of people that flocked to hear and see Jesus. They witnessed his power to heal and willingness to challenge oppressive systems and they wanted in. They heard him preach a gospel that turned the social order upside-down, preaching blessing on those who usually experienced woes and woes for the privileged. When we get to chapter 14, Luke says that many crowds were following Jesus.

For the abolitionist preacher, Jesus' response provides insight into how we respond to increased interest in prison and police abolition. Instead of downplaying the social and material costs of pursuing his gospel, even the physical risks, Jesus admonishes them to face the radicalness of his message head on. This reminds me of Mariame Kaba's response to the increased interest in police abolition after George Floyd's murder: "Yes, We Really Mean Abolish the Police."<sup>111</sup> Kaba's writing on abolition is always nuanced, acknowledging that we are working within a system we seek to abolish, but she is also careful to make sure we hold clearly within our work the need to completely uproot this oppressive system.

What Jesus and Mariame Kaba remind us, is that we cannot allow ourselves to remain attached to prisons or policing or confuse reform with abolition. This might alienate friends or family. It might not make for the best marketing. It certainly threatens economies that rely on the prison-industrial complex and raises fears (well-founded or not) for many people around their physical safety and their ability to keep their personal property secure. While some of these concerns are addressed within abolitionist organizing (not profiting off of prisoners, but certainly valuing people's physical well-being), they are addressed within a framework that wholly disavows punitive and violent methods of addressing harm. In the same way, Jesus is clear that we must completely detach from and disavow the oppressive systems of this world in order to be his disciple. We put our faith in the promise of God's kingdom, even when it seems foolish. We continue to pursue new ways of living in the

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<sup>111</sup> Mariame Kaba, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police," *The New York Times* (June 12, 2020).

world, meeting each other's needs, and dealing with conflict, even when it feels risky. At times it might really be risky and it will demand a lot of our time and resources. If we advocate for transformative justice and are not willing to put in this work, we will certainly fail and look like fools. For this reason, Jesus doesn't encourage the crowds by minimizing these costs. Instead, he admonishes them to "count the cost" and seeks followers that will whole-heartedly put their faith in the gospel he is preaching. When we share the good news of transformative justice may we do likewise.

## Holy Cross

Scripture: John 3:13-17

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

This feast day goes by many names across different traditions of Christianity, but they all commemorate the execution device used to kill Jesus. It's important now, as it is on Good Friday, to remember that we do not exalt the death itself (or the device that dealt it) but the defeat of death that occurred on the cross and in the body of Jesus.

This passage of John's Gospel includes what might as well be the thesis of abolition: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:17, NRSVUE). The aim of God's work in the world is not condemnation and destruction but new life and freedom. God is a Creator God. Our work in the world should reflect these divine intentions.

How does anything about the criminal justice system in the

United States reflect much beyond condemnation? Abolition is about giving birth to a new kind of imagination. What if we were more focused on the divine acts of salvation, creation, and putting things to rights rather than punishing and condemning what has gone wrong? That's not to say that we shouldn't name evil when it's done or call out injustice when it's perpetrated. Too often, though, we stop there. We allow the criminal justice system to do the work of redressing wrongs and it stops at punishment and condemnation. But retribution is not the work of God. Putting things right is.

How can the defeat of condemnation, damnation, and death on the cross reframe how we look at crime and punishment? What if restoration was our guide?

## Proper 19

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This passage from Matthew marks the end of an entire chapter on accountability, restorative justice, and forgiveness (as Ched Myers and Elaine Ends note in their book *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, vol. 1). The parable here provides a stark contrast between a culture of debt-holding and retribution and a culture of forgiveness and restoration.

As Luise Schottroff reminds us in her book on parables,<sup>112</sup> it is important to resist the tendency to read parables like this one and place God in the role of the king, supporting a view of divine retribution — even when, as in this case, the final verse seems

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<sup>112</sup> Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 2005).

to imply it. Surely, in what Schottroff calls an “eschatological” reading of the parable, which is to say reading it from the perspective of a community waiting for divine vindication, the point is not that God will punish you if you are not forgiving enough! Instead, the stark language of the parable is expressing the utter gulf between a community dedicated to restoration and mercy and a community contributed to retribution.

I am always hesitant to insist upon forgiveness as an ethical Christian imperative because of the ways that forgiveness language is weaponized against survivors of harm. But there are a number of actions and ways of being that fall under the term “forgiveness”: reconciliation, or restoration of relationship with someone; forgiveness in your own mind, that is, letting go of your own anger for your own sake regardless of how that affects how you relate to the other party; transactional forgiveness, that is, the willingness to accept restitution made to you without any further desire for relationship; and more. Each of these is different; none are required. But I wonder if underlying all of these is a commitment to what I might call mercy: a commitment to a kind of non-punitiveness or compassion, to what is often referred to in transformative justice/community accountability work as the recognition of the humanity of everyone involved.<sup>113</sup> It’s this way of being that I think this parable is calling the Christian community to — communally.

The point of this parable is that a community structured around non-punitiveness and a community structured around debt payment and retribution are entirely unlike, and God

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<sup>113</sup> E.g., in a toolkit from CARA: <https://solidarity-us.org/files/Implementing%20Grassroots%20Accountability%20Strategies.pdf>

calls Christians to experience and practice a commitment to mercy. The way that works out in any particular situation of harm depends on the harm, the needs of the survivors, and the willingness of those responsible to take accountability and make amends. (For a fantastic and complementary Jewish perspective on this topic, see Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg’s book *On Repentance and Repair*.) A commitment to mercy, though, opens new possibilities for creative and life-giving forms of non-punitive accountability in line with compassion and dignity for all people.<sup>114</sup>

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 8:27-38

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

In this famous passage from Mark’s gospel, Jesus first admits that he is the messiah—and then immediately declares his intention of solidarity with those who are criminalized.

Perhaps we are used to seeing Jesus’ injunction to “take up your cross” in more spiritualized terms, as a call to self-giving love or selflessness. Yet what Jesus is describing is his imminent imprisonment and execution. As Dr. Nikia Smith Robert puts it: “Jesus died a criminalized person—but transcended criminality on the cross.”<sup>115</sup> It is the truth of his criminalization, conviction,

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<sup>114</sup> C.f., Toolkit: Building Space for Non-Punitive Accountability in Christian Communities, <https://christiansforabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Accountability-Toolkit.pdf>

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Reina Sultan, “Say Your Prayers, Conservatives! Prison Abolitionists are Reclaiming Faith,” in *Truthout* (July 26, 2021).

punishment, and death, that causes Peter to rebuke him—solidarity with the incarcerated, perhaps, unpopular then as now.<sup>116</sup> Solidarity is dangerous, and powerful.

What does it open for us in the text to read this familiar line about “taking up the cross” in light of solidarity with incarcerated people? How might it help us resist the ways this notion has been used to promote “redemptive suffering,” especially for marginalized people? What if *solidarity* is the fundamental reality behind the words of Jesus that so many are “ashamed of” (Mark 8:38)?

This is the inversion of the gospel, the inversion of every sort of respectability politics and the insistence on divine solidarity with the criminalized, punished, incarcerated—whether innocent or guilty, likeable or not. Divine solidarity with those who are punished and imprisoned is the basis of Christian support of abolition and the shocking truth about the messiah.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

The parables of Luke 15 are some of the most famous in the Bible. We have the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Each parable shows an inefficient God who doesn't look at the big

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<sup>116</sup> You can read a deep dive on Robert's “liberation theology for lockdown America” in Nikia Smith Robert, “Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary: A Liberation Theology for Lockdown America,” *The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* 12 (2017). [https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hdsjournal/files/61292\\_graduate\\_journal\\_2017\\_web.pdf](https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hdsjournal/files/61292_graduate_journal_2017_web.pdf)

picture. The big picture is that 99 of 100 is a great success rate; nine out of ten is fantastic. Why would the lady spend all that time for one coin?

Earlier this week, my children lost our Apple TV remote in the couch. I spent twenty minutes trying to shake it out or find it some way. No luck. I gave up and moved on with my life. The coin, though, didn't get lost on its own. The lone sheep, in fact, did.

There are a number of questions we could ask about the sheep. What if that lost sheep deserved it? What if they wanted to be lost. What if they were trying to run away? What if they were just a bad sheep and if we kept him in the flock, he would just make other sheep turn bad? If we rescue the sheep, isn't that what economists call moral hazard? Wouldn't the sheep just go out and get lost again in order to get more attention from the shepherd?

The parables are framed around the grumbling of Jesus' opponents as they see sinners come close to Jesus. They make the ever ancient/ever new claim about who deserves the attention of Jesus and who does not. They imply that because Jesus spends time with sinners, he must be a sinner. And yet the parables cut through this wicked logic of separating humanity between the deserving and the undeserving.

This separation of deserving and undeserving is at the heart of the continuance of criminal justice and the prison industrial complex. There are those who deserve to be punished and those who don't. It is a logic completely at odds with the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is a logic at odds with the teaching of Jesus Christ. When churches acquiesce to this cruel logic of separation, we let go of Good News for the sake of expediency and efficiency.

There is another hope found in these parables. The church

that has turned away from the Good News of Jesus to embrace the carceral state is lost and Jesus is coming to bring us home.

## Proper 20

Year A

Scripture: Jonah 3:10–4:11

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Today's Abolition Lectionary points us to the prophet Jonah. This excellent post by Rabbi Dr. Liz Shayne points out the possibilities of reading Jonah as neurodivergent<sup>117</sup>, and in particular how that sheds light on his particularly dogged devotion to justice.

I love the idea of Jonah's anger with God, at the end of the book, being a form of his insistence upon justice. Shayne concludes that God's commitment to justice and God's duty of care for the

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<sup>117</sup> Danya Ruttenberg, "Guest Post: Finding Justice in Jonah," in *Life is a Sacred Text* (September 22, 2023): <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/guest-post-finding-justice-in-jonah?triedRedirect=true>.

citizens of Nineveh are in tension at the end of the text; that God does not bring consequences upon Nineveh (as Jonah, according to Shayne, rightly calls justice) because of God's commitment to care.

I wonder if we can see in that tension God's gently changing Jonah's notion of what justice is, as well. With abolitionist eyes, we can insist on the necessity of disentangling accountability from punishment, and of looking for forms of accountability which begin from a place of care and healing. I might go further than Rabbi Shayne's conclusion to suggest that God is presenting to Jonah a different form of justice to be as fiercely committed to: a justice that relies on "reciprocal care"<sup>118</sup> rather than punishment or consequences; a justice that provokes change in ways that do not necessarily satisfy our punitive impulses. In any case, Jonah's commitment to justice helps reflect God's own such commitment.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Jesus catches his disciples in the middle of an argument. He has just told them what is going to happen. He has just shared about his coming arrest and execution, but also how death will not contain him. They did not understand and began squabbling among themselves about who is the greatest. The

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<sup>118</sup> See Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Haymarket Books, 2023).

disciples missed the point. They were focused on Jesus being a good teacher among other teachers. They wanted to position themselves in the school like kids focused on their class ranking before college. They think they are setting themselves up for important positions in the world when the world is about to be turned upside down and they have already been told this directly.

Jesus says, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all.” In this passage in Mark, Jesus uses the example of a child. A child was deemed unimportant by society. A child was forgotten, ignored until they came of age. Out of sight, out of mind. In our day, those suffering within the prison-industrial complex are out of sight, out of mind.

Since the days of Constantine, Christians have struggled with what to do with criminal justice in light of Jesus Christ. Justinian’s codes brought many systems together. Some rulers have taken Romans 13 to justify anything they want to do. Christians were a major part of the development of the modern prison system, many with the best of intentions. Each trying to show how great they are at reform or justice — or whichever phrase they wish to use. All of it seems a bit like arguing about who is the greatest after Jesus just spoke of resurrection. We miss the fact that the world has been turned upside down and God is calling us to live into a new reality. God is calling us to welcome even a child. God is calling us to welcome even those who are currently in prison. God is calling us to not jockey for position in a self-righteous crusade, but to serve and receive in light of resurrection.

Year C

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

Contributor: Jay Bergen

Ok, let's be honest. This parable is weird. Parables often elude easy interpretation, but this one seems to keep twisting and turning.

First things first: It seems unlikely that Jesus meant for the “master” to stand in for God. Let's take that interpretation off the table.

With that out of the way, what is happening here? While the Roman imperial class system was very different from contemporary capitalism, one possibility is that we could have a parallel here about the choices faced by those in “middle management.” We have a parable about a manager who has to choose whether to put his trust in his boss, or in the people he has been tasked with extracting wealth from. He has to choose who he will serve: God, or money.

Earlier this month, the renowned organizer and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich passed away. Among her many contributions to contemporary liberation movements is her concept of the “professional managerial class” (PMC)—those whose social function is as an intermediary between workers and owners.

While people have endlessly debated the meaning of this term in the forty-five years since she introduced it, Ehrenreich wanted us to understand how people's class aspirations can undermine solidarity. In an interview before her death, she said,

*Sometimes, like in healthcare, it's very hard to get nurses to form alliances with the technicians and even the lower-*

*level nursing staff. And that's because nurses have such a fragile grip on professionalism themselves. They're still not taken seriously by doctors and administrators. I can understand it, but these are the things organizers have to work on step by step.*<sup>119</sup>

Who do we build with—our bosses, or workers? Who do we serve—God, or money? While people in the PMC are rarely given as clear a choice as this parable presents, there are myriad small choices every day. And we must choose who to serve.

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<sup>119</sup> Alex Press, “On the Origins of the Professional Managerial Class: An Interview with Barbara Ehrenreich,” *Dissent Magazine* (October 22, 2019).

## Proper 21

Year A

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Exodus 17:6 (NRSV)*

I have to admit, I’ve always been rather sympathetic to the Israelites in this story. They’ve endured slavery in Egypt, escaped by the skin of their teeth in an effort that required literal miracles, and now they’re in the middle of the desert — not a place well-known for survivability without an abundance of preparation. Moses can be forgiven for his frustration, too, but it’s hard for me to see his rejoinder seriously: “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” (v. 2)

Moses doesn’t seem to be taking the Israelites’ trauma and

their current situation seriously. Water seems a more than reasonable request on their part.

The demands for abolition should be as simple and reasonable as asking for water in the desert. When Black Americans are incarcerated at 5 times the rates of White Americans, it's a reasonable thing to question the legitimacy and existence of the system. When the prison population has increased from 500,000 to 2,200,000 from 1980 to 2015 (far outpacing population growth and crime), it's reasonable to question the system that's locking people up. When we're increasing the spending on prisons and jails at triple the rate as K-12 public education, it's more than reasonable to object.

It's important for pastors to normalize asking these questions of our society and government from the pulpit. Consider this story from the Israelites' perspective this week. Ask questions that seem provocative but are actually just as reasonable as asking for water in the desert. We've become accustomed to the evil all around us, and it sometimes falls to you to ask the questions no one else in your faith community is raising.

Don't be afraid to ask for water.

## Year B

Scripture: James 5:13-20

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

*“Are any among you suffering? They should pray.” James  
5:13*

A consistent theme in this week's lections is trust in God over

and against other sources of security. Psalm 124 extols the saving power of God, claiming that death would have become Israel “if it had not been the LORD who was on our side” (v. 1, 2). One of the Old Testament readings sees the Israelites weeping at the lack of some foods, ignoring the manna right in front of them (Numbers 11:6). In the story from Mark’s Gospel, the disciples’ insecurities lead them to question others doing good deeds in Jesus’ name, instead of trusting in God’s power apart from them. In James, most of all, we have a litany of instances in which we should trust God.

From the first commandment to this passage toward the end of the New Testament, Christian faith always involves trusting God. Carceral systems, however, do precisely the opposite. Particularly in the United States, the carceral system is an intricate and formidable complex of retributive punishment designed to keep us apart from one another. The prison-industrial complex, too, justifies this labyrinthine monstrosity with the claim that it keeps us safe.

We could spend hours dissecting exactly how that claim is a lie. We could consider the destructive effect incarceration has on families and communities, demonstrating that it probably does more harm than good. We could wonder about the studies that show incarceration is associated with an increase in recidivism.<sup>120</sup> We could address the study that found sentencing someone to prison had “no effect on their chances of being convicted of a violent crime within five years of being released from prison.” We could question, too, how much money (tens of thousands of dollars per year) it costs to imprison someone

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<sup>120</sup> Victoria Law, “We Don’t Need Prisons to Make Us Safer,” *Yes! Magazine* (April 19, 2021).

compared to how much other methods of justice-seeking would cost.<sup>121</sup>

We could spend hours dissecting all those things to realize that “prisons make us safer” is a lie, but Christian faith shouldn’t even need to go that far. Any promise that pledges safety and security in exchange for brutalizing other human beings is not a promise of God. Instead, we should trust in God for what we need, not a sprawling profit-seeking industrial complex. Prison is an idol, one in which we cannot afford to place our trust.

James puts forth a brief glimpse of a model of community justice. He proposes that when your sibling wanders from truth, that you bring them back (v. 19). You don’t hide them away in a capitalist’s modern plantation. You don’t inflict suffering on them, supposing that more injustice will right a wrong. No, you bring them back. And bringing them back “will cover a multitude of sins” (v. 20).

Restorative justice and other models of justice-seeking are obviously more complex than two verses in James; however, many of the passages in the lectionary for this week propose an alternative starting point every Christian should consider. Trust in God for safety and justice, not prisons.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

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<sup>121</sup> David J. Harding, “Do Prisons Make Us Safer?” *Scientific American* (June 21, 2019).

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

The name Lazarus is a Greek version of the Hebrew name, Eleazar, which means ‘God will help’. The most famous Lazarus in the Bible is a friend of Jesus in the Gospel of John. He is the brother of Mary and Martha. He becomes ill and dies before Jesus can arrive. Jesus weeps. Jesus grieves. And then Jesus calls him and he lives again.

Another Biblical Lazarus is the subject of this parable of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. In these twelve verses, Jesus covers a lot of ground: poverty, wealth, class, death, eternal life. At the beginning of the parable, the rich man lives richly, and Lazarus, the poor man, is sick and hungry, laying at the gates of the rich man. They both die and there is a great reversal. Lazarus is carried to the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man goes to Hades for torment. And yet both locations (Abraham’s bosom and Hades) are visible to each other and the rich man cries out about his pain, to which Abraham responds.

As I said, Jesus covers a lot in this parable. It is rich with meaning. But what I want to focus on is the last verse and how this call directly connects to abolition. The rich man asks Abraham for permission to go warn his family about the consequences of their actions. Eventually, Abraham says the following: ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’

Because of how our modern world is structured towards the violence of the state and the separation of humanity through jails and prisons, it can feel like we need an extra word from Jesus to convince people of the error of their thoughts. We may think, “if only Jesus could tell the governors and the legislators

and wardens, then they would really know.”

And yet, Moses and the prophets already speaks to abolition. The Gospel of Jesus Christ already speaks to abolition. Someone rising from the dead is not going to add anything to what is already present in the Bible. The word of God for freedom and humanity is already there. Hope is not found in the extra thing but in carrying out faithfully the words God has already put on God’s people to break the chains of this world. We don’t need to wait for a new message to act.

## Proper 22

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 5:1-7

Contributor: Jed Tate

In a field not too far from my home, a grapevine struggles to survive. The field wasn't always just a field; wildflowers and fruit trees grew there not too long ago. At one time, the landowner allowed others to plant vegetable gardens there as well. But eventually he decided he preferred the look of golf courses instead. The gardeners were told to leave. The fruit trees were cut down. The flowers were replaced with grass. That single grape vine still lives at the edge of the property. Occasionally, one of the former gardeners sneaks by to harvest some of the grapes, but the vine isn't as fruitful as it used to be due to neglect. Where there was once abundance, the landowner's abuse has produced barrenness.

In Isaiah's parable, the prophet sings of his beloved who planted a vineyard and did not neglect the vines, but nurtured them with care and provision. Despite the love and nourishment poured into the vineyard, though, something went wrong. The vines produced wild and rotting grapes. Eventually, the one who planted the vines, seeing they were not fruitful, allowed them to go to waste.

If the metaphor is unclear to his readers, Isaiah explains in verse 7 that the vineyard and grape vines represent Israel and the people of Judah, but where the Lord expected justice (*mishpat*) among them, there was bloodshed (*mispakh*), and where God expected righteousness (*tsedaqah*), there was a cry of need (*tse'aqah*). God loved and nurtured God's people and expected fruitfulness from them but found corruption instead. Where God intended abundance, instead there was violence and oppression.

Perhaps we can see examples in our own communities of the ways in which God's abundant provision has been neglected in favor of oppressive violence. Where there could be community centers and community gardens, instead there are prison cells. Funding that could support municipal housing pads police budgets. Resources that could provide for mental health services are redirected to systems of incarceration. Where God desires abundance, we find injustice.

And there, a prophetic word is needed to spark the imaginations of God's people. In barren landscapes, can we envision abundance again? Where we hear desperate cries of need, can we proclaim hope? I have heard that if you spread some seeds in the corner of a grassy field, the birds and wind will spread them even further until that field is covered in wildflowers (although I'll never admit to having done that myself). How might we

spread seeds of hope that invite God's people to imagine and help build a world with fewer prisons and more vineyards?

Year B

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

Contributor: Chris Nafis

Almost everything to do with divorce is messy, which is probably why Jesus' opponents have chosen the topic to test Jesus in this week's gospel lection. Jesus has just returned to Herod's territory, who has already beheaded John the Baptist over a public confrontation about Herod's own divorce and remarriage. His interlocutors may be hoping to catch Jesus up in that controversy by asking whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife.

In Mark's context, it was much too easy for men to abandon their spouses through divorce, leaving them and whatever children they may have in a very vulnerable position. Some rabbis even taught that a poorly cooked meal was sufficient grounds for a man to divorce his wife. At the same time, it was nearly impossible for women to be granted a divorce under any circumstances. The question posed to Jesus doesn't even acknowledge the possibility. This may have been rooted in the assumption that only men could be wronged in marriage. If a married woman had an affair, her husband was the victim. If a married man had an affair, the other woman's husband (if she had one) was the victim. Women were rarely seen as victims in marital misconduct, only potential causes of strife.

Jesus's response to the question, however, rejects that ratio-

nale and highlights the way that marriage irreversibly intertwines at least two lives, including that of the married woman. Where some circles seemed to treat divorce as if a man was discarding an item that had lost its appeal, Jesus tells us that two people have become one flesh. Households have merged, families have mingled, finances have mixed, living space has become shared, children may have been created, emotion has been poured out, and a whole host of other habits, plans, and realities have fallen into place. Separating all of those things is like ripping a body in half. Imagine what it takes just to cut off an arm—sawing through bones, muscles, ligaments, tendons, and blood vessels, and then somehow dealing with all of those hanging bits, no longer connected to anything. Amputation may be possible in dire circumstances, but it is risky and, well, messy.

Jesus calls upon his listeners to recognize what they are doing when breaking up a household. He demands that we recognize the wound we might be creating as we pull two lives apart that have been deeply interconnected with one another. While this should give folks pause as they consider leaving a spouse, too often this passage has been used to frighten people in bad and abusive marriages away from getting help, or to condemn people who are already reeling from the wound of a broken home life.

Instead, maybe this passage should be considered more deeply by those who would break up a household from the outside. Perhaps judges should consider this before sentencing someone to years in prison, tearing a leg off of a household without even bothering to plan how to close the wound. Perhaps police officers should think about Jesus' words, "What God has joined together, let no one separate" before putting someone in handcuffs and dragging them away from everything and everyone they know. Perhaps policymakers should consider the

consequences of legislation that would result in more household carnage, more open wounds, and more traumatized communities. Perhaps mayors should think twice about criminalizing homelessness, ripping off freshly formed scabs from deeply wounded bodies again and again.

There are far too many ways that things like poverty, economic disparity, mass incarceration, and violence tear apart families and other essentially connected community members. Let us continue to work toward keeping bodies and relationships from being torn asunder, toward communal healing from already-broken relationships, and toward meeting Christ and one another in our collective woundedness.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 17:5-10

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus' words on faith teach us an insight essential to abolition: faith is an act of praxis.

Restorative justice is evident in the context of this passage. Rev. James M. Donohue points out that the disciples' request for Jesus to increase their faith comes in response to his teaching on forgiveness: it is because forgiveness, even in the face of sincere repentance, is so difficult!<sup>122</sup>

But I think Jesus' teaching on faith here offers a response to the complaint often posed to abolitionists that abolition seems

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<sup>122</sup> James Donohue, *Redemption and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Restorative Justice* (Liturgical Press, 2017).

like an impractical, utopian dream. Abolition is an act of faith because it is not yet obvious what a world without prisons looks like, it's true. At the same time, Jesus does *not* focus on how we imagine a future we cannot yet see.<sup>123</sup> Instead, he turns faith back to the question of practice: faith is simply acting in accordance with what is right, without knowing how it will work out. Acting in faith, he tells us, is “only doing what we ought to have done.”

I would be remiss not to mention the truly difficult nature of Jesus' words here, given his reference to us as “worthless slaves”—I hesitate to draw on this parable, as I often do when Jesus uses the language of slavery, especially in ways that, inconceivably and immorally, compare God to a slaveholder. At the same time, I find his turn to the idea of faith as following the commandments of God still resonates for me: Faith is not the knowing or the imagining of the future, but simply the *doing*. And the doing is, in fact, doing the work which is opposed to every form of bondage, captivity, and enslavement, not reifying structures of bondage even through their metaphorical application to our relationship to God. The text works against itself here as we recommit ourselves to the work of liberation.

What this means for abolition is that our faith comes not in being able to answer questions about how a world without police and prisons will be possible, but instead recommitting to acting in resistance to police and prisons *simply because that's the right thing to do*. We work for abolition because the inhumanity and barbarity of our carceral state cannot stand. As Micah Herskind summarizes one of Mariame Kaba's points: “You don't need

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<sup>123</sup> Angela Flournoy, “Melina Abdullah is showing L.A. how to be accountable to a future we can't yet see,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 18, 2021).

to have an answer to every question posed to abolitionists—i.e. ‘what about someone who did *fill in the blank*’—to work toward the demolition of the PIC.<sup>124</sup> We create safety in community with each other; we work out answers to these questions in the same way.”

Faith is not even about being able to imagine answers to these questions. Faith is simply about doing the work placed in front of us. Abolition is a moral imperative. We commit ourselves to abolition because it is right and say “we have done only what we ought to have done!”

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<sup>124</sup> Micah Herskind, “Some Lessons from Mariame Kaba’s ‘We Do This ‘Til We Free Us,’” *Medium* (March 1, 2021).

## Proper 23

Year A

Scripture: Isaiah 25:1-9

Contributor: Jay Bergen

As we prepare for worship on Sunday, especially those of us who preach, I know that each one of us is wrestling with what word to offer regarding the war in Palestine.<sup>125</sup> For anyone who speaks of good and evil publicly—and with social media, that is all of us—we can easily become overwhelmed with the anxiety of choosing the right words, anticipating the counter-arguments, and not disappearing into empty discourse.

This week my social media offered me a plethora of positions. First, the ‘stand with Israel’ crowd which itself ranged from ‘Israel has the right to self-defense’ to explicit calls for geno-

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<sup>125</sup> This entry was written near the beginning of the Israeli war on Gaza in 2023.

cide. Second came ‘we grieve the violence on both sides,’ that ahistorical appeal to ‘peace.’ To the left of that are organizations and individuals trying to hold the grief and suffering of Israelis alongside a larger critique of the occupation and apartheid and/or Israel as a settler-colony. And finally, some have called for liberation by any means necessary, considering murdered Israeli civilians unavoidable collateral in the anti-imperial struggle.

How we talk about violence, resistance, colonialism, anti-semitism, anti-Arab racism, genocide, the US war machine, and Christian Zionism matters a great deal, but in times like this our words (and our infographics) feel deeply inadequate for the task of creating justice.

Instead of moral righteousness, mostly I feel grief and complicity. This past Sunday, I told my church that the blessing and burden of pacifism (we’re Mennonites) is that we grieve all violence, and we grieve our own complicity and our failure to prevent death and suffering.

This Isaiah passage is deeply disturbing and timely in its vision: ‘For you have made the city a heap.... you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress.... And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.’ I am wrestling with Isaiah, alternately moved and horrified.

I cannot read these words without picturing Gaza bombed. I cannot read these words without picturing the shroud of fear cast over children in Gaza, or my friends trapped in their homes in Al Khalil, or my Jewish friends grieving relatives in Israel who have been killed. I cannot read these words without wondering where this God of refuge was when early US settlers displaced

and ethnically cleansed the Lenape people on whose land I currently sit. I cannot read these words without feeling the ties of complicity and solidarity that bind my body and heart to the white phosphorus being dropped by the Israeli parents, the grieving parents on both sides, or the Gaza children climbing over the broken prison walls to touch the dirt of a homeland they have only known in stories.

Hope is hard to come by right now. Rather than replacing it with righteousness, I am seeking out a God who will ‘wipe away the tears from all faces’ while still proclaiming the inbreaking end of settler-colonial violence. This God does not keep me passive—as I finish this, I am preparing to head downtown to a Palestine solidarity rally. But hopefully my wrestling with Isaiah and my seeking of God will lead me to humble action on the side of liberation for all people, that larger vision of God swallowing up death forever. May it be so.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

Contributor: Jed Tate

Jesus is approached by a man who kneels before him, and addresses him as “Good Teacher” (v. 17). The man asks Jesus how to “inherit eternal life” (v. 17), and Jesus responds that he must keep the commandments. The man says that he has kept them faithfully since he was a child. Jesus instructs the man lovingly. He must do one more thing: sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come to follow Jesus. The man walks away, saddened because he owned so many

possessions. I imagine Jesus shaking his head and sighing to himself as he turns to the disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (v. 23).

The disciples, surprised and confused, wonder how the wealthy – who have the resources and means to accomplish most things – could have such difficulty entering into the Kingdom of God. If salvation were this difficult for the rich, then what hope do the rest of us have? Jesus explains that while salvation is impossible to achieve by mortals through their own power, “for God all things are possible” (v. 27). God’s saving and liberating grace is for all people. In the Kingdom of God, the poor are liberated from poverty and oppression, while the rich are liberated from their wealth and power. According to Jesus, the first will be last, and the last will be first. This announcement is good news for all, but especially for the poor.

Perhaps some or many of the people in your congregation know what it’s like to experience poverty. People who are poor are frequently punished for the “crime” of lacking wealth and power. Alec Karakatsanis tells the story of a woman who was shackled, taken from her children, and thrown in jail because she couldn’t afford to pay debts the city claimed she owed for old traffic violations. The city had turned her debts over to a for-profit collection agency. She was arrested, imprisoned, and forced into demeaning labor. Her story is, sadly, not uncommon. Karakatsanis notes:

*There are 2.2 million human beings confined in prison and jail cells in the United States tonight. About 500,000 of those people are presumptively innocent people awaiting trial, the vast majority of whom are confined by the government solely because they cannot pay enough*

*money to buy their release... Between eighty and ninety percent of the people charged with crimes are so poor that they cannot afford a lawyer.* <sup>126</sup>

Our systems of separation, imprisonment, and forced labor oppress the poor while enriching companies that profit from their incarceration. But Jesus announces and inaugurates a reorientation of the world in which the poor are liberated, oppressive systems are dismantled, and people are restored into right relationship with God and each other. Depending on your context, your proclamation of this good news may offer a prophetic challenge to the wealthy or a message of hope for the poor. How might God be calling upon your congregation to participate in God's liberative work in your community and the world?

## Year C

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

Jeremiah's prophecies are both disturbing and inspiring. They remind us of how embedded we are to systems of injustice and idolatry, and how difficult it is to untangle and release ourselves from these webs of oppression. Jeremiah preaches through-out the reign of five Judean kings. The first king, Josiah, was a reformer. The Judean people had fallen away

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<sup>126</sup> Alec Karakatsanis, "The Punishment Bureaucracy: How to Think About 'Criminal Justice Reform'" in *The Yale Law Journal* 128 (2019).

from God, adopting the customs and practices of the oppressive Assyrians while under their rule, but King Josiah recognized his people's faithlessness, instituting and promoting reforms outlined in Deuteronomy. Though initially encouraged (see Jer. 11:1-8) Jeremiah viewed these reforms as too superficial, too little and too late. When King Josiah died, Judah fell back into idolatry. Subsequent kings would not work to uproot the oppressive, idolatrous systems in Judah and radically re-orient the Judeans towards a faithful covenantal relationship with God and one another. Jeremiah warned that this would lead to the total destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the rising Babylonian Empire, the death of thousands of people, and the exile of the Judah's political and religious leaders into Babylon. Relatively powerless and poor or rich and powerful, it didn't matter, all suffered—in part—due to the political and religious leaders unwillingness to call their people to repentance and enact systemic change.

And yet, I write “in part,” because Babylon was just as complicit in oppression as the Judeans. Despite Jeremiah's recognition that the overthrow of Jerusalem and exile was a result of Judah's imitation of Assyria, and despite God's providential use of Babylon, no one in this drama is faithful or justified. Jeremiah also preaches God's condemnation against the Babylonians. This prompts Daniel Berrigan in his book *Jeremiah: the World, the Wound of God* to wonder what difference there really was between idolatrous Judah and Babylon, speculating that “perhaps... psychologically, spiritually, a form of exile was underway long before the Babylonians ‘came like a wolf on the fold,’” (Fortress Press: 1999, 107). If Judah was acting like Babylon they may as well be ruled by Babylonians... Which leads us to the verse in our lectionary today, often referred to as

“a disturbing hope,” where the exiled Judeans are encouraged to humbly accept their defeat, their status as exiles, and settle in Babylon for at least a generation, even praying for the well-being of the city of exile. This would not have been a comforting word for political leaders who were actively planning their next revolt.

For the abolitionist preacher this context needs to be supplied to understand how this can preach in our time. While the Judeans are certainly an oppressed people in relation to Babylon, they are a people whose minds have been shaped by Imperial rule. The leaders are scheming with other powerful nations. They might seek reform and speak “peace, peace,” but their words are empty when the people are not committed to repentance and repair. The rule of Babylon is more blatant oppression, but it isn’t altogether different. And yet, in the midst of all of this, the poor suffer under political and military maneuvering. God is ultimately putting an end to this violent farce when he encourages the exiled leaders to accept their fate. God will work to renew and vindicate Jerusalem in a new generation under humbled leadership.

Though it would be a mistake to totally equate King Josiah’s reforms with current reformist policies, Jeremiah reminds us that reforms are not enough if they don’t transform the root of a problem. For abolitionist organizers, this relates to the need to totally reimagine what community care and justice look like. Jeremiah also reminds us that we must be willing to speak truth about political maneuvering that ultimately is using the oppressed for political gain. Consider, for example, leaders who will claim to be concerned about the well-being of prisoners as a pretext for building bigger jails or police reform that simply increases police budgets. Our naysaying to these reforms might,

like Jeremiah's word, feel overly strident and condemnatory, and our predictions of how these reforms will only lead to further violence and systematic oppression might feel as unreasonably dire as Jeremiah's predictions sounded, but may his example embolden us as we preach against the systems of oppression and idolatry we are enmeshed in today.

## Proper 24

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

This Gospel passage tells us that the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to entrap Jesus. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (Matt 22:17, NRSV). With this question, they tried to force Jesus to choose between loyalty to his people and loyalty to his government. Paying taxes meant supporting the oppressive Roman regime, with its military-police who bully and abuse residents; incarcerate, torture and execute dissidents; and wage wars of colonial expansion. That was a betrayal to the colonized people of Judea. Encouraging people not to pay taxes was a surefire way to provoke Roman wrath and be labeled a criminal who deserves to be incarcerated, tortured, and executed — as Jesus would soon experience. (Remember that this text

is set during Jesus' final week, between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his Last Supper, arrest, and crucifixion.) Jesus very deftly skirted the trap by telling his interrogators to show him a denarius coin and asking them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" (Matt 21:20, CEB). They identified Caesar Tiberius' face on the coin. Jesus famously told them, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Matt 22:21, CEB).

The key word that the Common English Bible translation makes plain for us is "image" in verse 20 (Gk. *eikōn*, literally "icon"). The 3rd century north African theologian Tertullian interpreted this to mean that we should give "the image of Caesar, which is on the coin, to Caesar, and the image of God, which is on [humans], to God; so as to render to Caesar indeed money, to God yourself" (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, chp. 15). In other words, we owe God our very lives because we human beings are made in the image of God.

What does this have to do with the abolition of prisons and police? First of all, this question about taxation is very relevant to contemporary conversations about defunding and divesting from prisons, police, and other harmful aspects of the criminal-legal system. As Jesus teaches elsewhere, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21). It is right to question the morality of paying into systems that control, abuse, and destroy lives.

Secondly and relatedly, the way we treat the accused and incarcerated is dehumanizing. It defaces the image of God in each one of its victims. Police and prisons function to strip so-called "criminals" of their God-given dignity and human rights. But Jesus calls us to offer our whole selves, souls, and bodies to God because we belong to God. Belonging to God means that we

do not belong to jailers, wardens, judges, governors, presidents, or Caesars. Even if they take our money, they should not and cannot take the image of God that is fundamental to who we are.

It is easy to use dehumanizing and demonizing language to describe criminals and enemies to justify the evils of police, prisons, and war. Demons and monsters don't need to be treated with mercy or respect, after all; they simply must be destroyed at all costs. Right now, we are hearing about the dehumanization of Palestinians and Israelis alike (depending on your source) in the reports coming from this month's brewing war . We are regularly exposed to the dehumanization of criminals in sensationalist, fear-mongering local news. But even those who commit heinous, dreadful, evil behaviors are not monsters. They are no less our siblings because we were all made in the image of God and God declared all of us "very good" (Genesis 1:27, 31, NRSV). God does not allow us to distance ourselves from other members of the human family. Offering ourselves up to God must lead to a recognition of the divine spark in every other person on earth. It must lead us to more compassionate responses to violence and crime in our neighborhoods and around the globe. It must lead to abolition of the United States' violent, dehumanizing prison and police systems.

Year B

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

It is understandable to want to be on Jesus's good side. James and John had been following Jesus from almost the beginning of his ministry, and they had one small request. As usual, instead of saying yes to them, Jesus confounds both the brothers and the rest of the disciples by saying 'you do not know what you are asking.'

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus often lets these metaphors stay mysterious, but he lays it out for us here. There is no Messianic secret going on. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." The Greek word used is *doulos*. Slave. There is no ambiguity going on. To drink the cup is to be slave to all because that is how Jesus lived and offered himself to us. So to sit at the right hand of Jesus is to be a servant to all.

The church today often lives like James and John. We want to be on the side of Jesus but we don't want to drink the cup that he drinks. We talk about service and mission with our lips but then make a lot of exceptions about what that means. This is directly related to the possibility of abolition. The imagination that allows for the abolition of prison is not held captive by the motivations of this world, and yet the church, so often, cannot see the 'all' that Jesus came to serve as including all. We may have a prison ministry but not a prison ending ministry. That would be meddling, but that is the cup of Jesus. We as individuals, as churches, as Christians, can choose to drink it or not. God will be there with us. We are not alone, but it is not easy, and can't be made with a simple request.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

Jesus gives us a parable of an unjust judge in Luke 18. At first glance, we might think that the judge is going to be torn down by the end of the parable, but Jesus, instead, lifts him up.

It would be convenient, from an abolitionist perspective, to have Jesus directly exhort unjust judges to change their ways. Then, we could map the parable directly on to our legal system and point to how unjust judges need to change their ways today. But something else is going on here.

Jesus does not lift up the unjust judge as an example to which we should aspire. The unjust judge marks a reality to which we must face. Jesus, instead, lifts up the widow who comes back to the judge again and again. She doesn't tear him down or remark about how ill-suited he is for his position. Instead she seeks justice. She asks, again and again, grant me justice.

We don't know how long it took for the unjust judge to respond and finally be sick of her and grant her claim. It was probably a long time, yet she continued.

Jesus lifts up this parable as a call for us to seek justice from the God who is just and good. We are to seek justice continually, not just now and then. We are to seek justice until justice comes.

This parable offers us an example of how to seek justice. To seek it from God first of all. As well, to seek it from structures in this world that lack justice. This parable offers us encouragement to continue even when faced with an unjust judge, and that if our call is first to God, justice will be done.

Let us be encouraged in seeking prison abolition. Our goal is not to find the perfect judge on earth and use them to further our ends. Our goal is to seek justice with the just and the unjust of this world. To seek God's righteousness faithfully and continually and to receive Christ's encouragement in this. God is with us and God will hear us.

## Proper 25

Year A

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

The “Greatest Commandment” that Jesus identifies in Matthew 22 and its parallels originates in the Torah (even the precise combination Jesus makes is found in earlier Jewish sources<sup>127</sup>), and its presence in the reading from Leviticus for this week sits the command to love your neighbor as yourself next to a series of other social-oriented instructions. Here’s a simplified list:

- Do not base your judicial outcomes on defendant’s income (19:15)
- Do not slander each other (v. 16)

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<sup>127</sup> See notes on Matthew 22 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Levine.

- Do not profit based off other's pain (v. 16)
- Do not hate each other (v. 17)
- Do not let injustice slide (v. 17)
- Do not center retribution in your relationships with one another (v. 18)

All of these are surmised in vv. 2 and 18 with general commands: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (NRSV). I've adjusted the wording for the others from direct translation in hopes that we see how obviously our society fails to live up to even the spirit of these commands, particularly in the criminal justice system.

Our judicial outcomes are absolutely driven by defendants' income. Innumerable people take plea deals for crimes they didn't commit because they can't afford a lawyer with enough bandwidth to defend them and they don't want to risk even more punishment and prison time. The public defense system is woefully inadequate (Maine doesn't even have one, other states are governed by state and county funding, which is far from equitable across geographies) and the plea deal is often the least worst way out. At the same time, the rich have no trouble avoiding lawsuits, punishment, and other consequences for regular wrongdoing. When they fail to avoid it, in fact, it makes news.

The accused and convicted (guilty or not) face immense slander, including barriers to employment, the ballot box, and other critical re-entry needs. The American system very much uses them as scapegoats and heap upon them social ills that many conveniently ignore in light of presumed guilt.

In 2017, the Prison Policy Initiative estimated that the cost to state and federal governments (and impacted families!) for our

incarceration system is upwards of \$182 billion.<sup>128</sup> Billions of those dollars go to private prisons, as well. Whatever way you cut it, extraordinary amounts of people are making extraordinary amounts of money off the pain of those who suffer in our prison system (guilty or innocent). This structure certainly falls woefully short of Leviticus 19:16's injunction against "profit by the blood of your neighbor."

The remaining commands are also easily seen as violated. The prison industrial complex only multiplies hate. Our collective (often willful) ignorance of its evil points to our own guilt. The entire system also centers on retribution rather than love for neighbors. Preaching on Leviticus usually isn't popular, but the Torah is radical in its reproach of our society and preachers should feel empowered to use it as a matrix for judgment. No genuine conscience can look at the prison industrial complex, read these words from Leviticus, and walk away comfortable or at ease. Sometimes, that's how we need to leave church on Sunday morning—at a fundamental dis-ease with the world around us.

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus in this story, although at first glance not about criminal justice, offers lessons for transforma-

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<sup>128</sup> Casey Kuhn, "The U.S. spends billions to lock people up, but very little to help them once they're released," *PBS NewsHour* (April 7, 2021).

tive and creative responses to harm.

Bartimaeus calls out for Jesus seeking mercy and liberation — seeking the new and abundant life promised by Jesus. His call to Jesus as the “son of David” is a recognition of Jesus’ messianic status (at a moment when Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem in triumph and resistance against the powers of oppression). Perhaps his call for mercy, in this context, is not only a desire for personal healing but also a prayer for communal liberation.

The promise of transformative justice is that personal healing after harm occurs in the context of communal liberation. The healing of structures — including ableist structures that stigmatize disability — can be as important as physical or psychological healing.

But what strikes me as most essential in this story is Jesus’ response after the disciples bring Bartimaeus to him: “What do you want me to do for you?”

One of the central differences between the responses of the criminal legal system and restorative/transformative responses to harm is that restorative and transformative justice responses are survivor-centered. The key question that an RJ process starts with — what are the needs of the person who was harmed? — reflects Jesus’ question to Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?”

The criminal legal system, by contrast, assumes the answer to every harm is punishment and exclusion. It ignores survivors who do not want harsh punishment, and can treat them with hostility and even retraumatize them. This is one reason, among many, that 70% of survivors of sexual assault choose not to

report it to the police.<sup>129</sup> Retributive state systems cannot meet the needs of those who have been harmed when they do not exist to ask: “What do you want me to do for you?”

“What do you want me to do for you?” What would bring you healing and liberation? What would make you feel that you had received restitution or reparations for the harm done to you? The answer may be different in every situation, which is one reason why there is not one alternative to the prison-industrial complex.<sup>130</sup> Abolition means building on the variety of needs that those who have been harmed (which is all of us!) have, and building a variety of solutions to meet the needs of people by transforming relational and systemic structures.

“What do you want me to do for you?” is an essential question to ask when searching for ways to help those who are poor or unhoused as well — it is the basis of mutual aid.<sup>131</sup> The criminalization of poverty, homelessness, and survival arise from systems that insist on top-down, controlling solutions to social problems; that see those who are in need of care as somehow unable to exercise agency and make their own decisions. When care comes with agency — as it does in this story — it brings not only physical healing, but liberation. Perhaps in the space for Bartimaeus’ agency that Jesus holds, we see foreshadowing of the systemic change to a liberated world

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<sup>129</sup> Mariame Kaba and Eva Nagao, “What About the Rapists?” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee39ec764dbd7179cf1243c/t/6109e65d5a8ce56464ff94eb/1628038750972/WATR+Zine.pdf>

<sup>130</sup> Hannah Bowman, “The ‘Alternative’ to the Prison-Industrial Complex,” *Christians for the Abolition of Prisons*: <https://christiansforabolition.org/2019/10/16/the-alternative-to-the-prison-industrial-complex/>

<sup>131</sup> Gina Ciliberto, “Mutual Aid is Changing the Way We Help Each Other,” *Sojourners* (August 27, 2021).

of mutuality that Bartimaeus imagines when he calls Jesus “son of David.”

Of course, some survivors of harm do desire vengeance. “What do you want me to do for you?” can never be the only question driving our communal responses to harm. Yet what Jesus models here—a true relational listening to someone in need, making the space of healing a space for exercising agency—is an illustration and a goal of where transformative responses to violence, harm, and need can begin.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Whenever Jesus meets or discusses tax collectors, the result is a paradigm of justice that differs profoundly from our own. Tax collectors are imperial collaborators, extortionists, traitors, thieves, and subjects of general derision in first century Palestine, particularly from the point of view of the Jewish people. And yet, tax collectors receive not the swift retribution many thought they deserved, but a far more transformational place in Jesus’ thought, including in this parable.

Take tax collectors in Luke’s Gospel alone. Tax collectors are among the first to seek baptism from John (3:12-13). Levi is a tax collector who leaves his life behind and becomes one of the Twelve (5:27-31). In conflicts with religious leadership, the tax collectors remained faithful to the mission of God (7:24-30) and they come and listen to Jesus’ parables (15:1). And let us not forget Zacchaeus of children’s song fame: the tax collector who

repents so fully that it results in significant reparations to those he has wronged.

Jesus never condemns the tax collectors to retribution but instead invites them to transformation. Jesus (and John the Baptist) are quite clear about the injustice of tax collectors' activities, which is both explicit in John's teaching and implicit in the response tax collectors like Zaccheaus have to Jesus' gospel. This paradigm of transformation and restoration, as opposed to retribution, is fundamental for abolition.

Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie point out in an essay in *Essence* that our justice system is not set up for this kind of transformation. Discussing justice for Breonna Taylor, they write, "we want far more than what the system that killed Breonna Taylor can offer—because the system that killed her is not set up to provide justice for her family and loved ones." While we must seek accountability for police wrongdoing, "arrests and prosecutions ... have proven to be sources of violence not safety. We cannot claim the system must be dismantled because it is a danger to Black lives and at the same time legitimize it by turning to it for justice."<sup>132</sup>

Jesus does not turn to systems of retributive punishment to right the wrongs of the tax collectors, including in this parable. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine speculates that the Pharisee's proclamation is perhaps instrumental in the tax collector's disposition toward God. "We might rather see the Pharisee as helping the tax collector," she writes. "Just as the sin of one person impacts the community ... so the merits of the righteous can benefit the

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<sup>132</sup> From "We Want More Justice for Breonna Taylor than the System that Killed Her Can Deliver" by Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, originally appearing in the July 2020 issue of *Essence* and reprinted in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*.

community. ... Jews who first heard this parable ... may well have understood the Pharisee's merit to have impacted the tax collector. This would be the parable's shock: not only that the agent of Rome is justified but that the Pharisee's own good works helped in that justification."<sup>133</sup> We aren't given the rest of the tax collector's story, but we are witness to his first act of repentance and transformation.

Jesus wants to see a world where people are transformed, not merely punished. Either that, or Jesus wants to see an end to the material circumstances that may have necessitated something we called a crime in the first place. In both cases, the response is not punitive, it's restorative. The witness of the tax collectors demand a social vision beyond punishment, which is core to the abolitionist conviction.

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<sup>133</sup> See her notes in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* on this parable.

## All Saints

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Contributor: Sarah Lynne Gershon

Most preachers will choose the Matthew text this morning, but the Revelation text accompanies it nicely. Revelation offers a vision of the fulfillment of the Matthew text: when all are scrubbed clean of injustice and wickedness, when we are brought into diverse community, when those who are hungry are fed and every tear is wiped from our eyes. In the Matthew text, Jesus calls us to faith in the blessing God offers those who commit their lives to that vision, assuring us that those who are currently harmed by our system will be comforted and those who work against injustice will be vindicated.

It can be difficult to believe this promise of blessing is true and too few of us are reviled or persecuted for the sake of speaking

and working against injustice. As I write this today though, the world seems to be ripe for the work of interrupting our “justice” system, and the increased threat of persecution speaks to the world’s readiness for disruption. Protestors against the genocide in Gaza are being arrested and held without trial, immigrants here on humanitarian parole are being threatened by deportation, and it’s unclear where the criminalization of dissent will end. It is time to make plain the *unsafety* of a system that relies on violence and punishment. This means being willing to make the *unsafety* of our system plain with our own bodies and reputation.

Christians are called to place their hope in the ultimate blessing God promises us as we mourn with those who weep and are humiliated, impoverished, and persecuted in our work for mercy, peace, and righteousness (right-relationship). Matthew (and Revelation) give us a vision of that hope and present the preacher with the opportunity to admonish the congregation to put their lives on the line for this vision of salvation. For All Saints Day, it would be appropriate to include stories of saints who have done this in the past. May we join that great multitude both in our work today and in eternal praise.

Year B

Scripture: John 11:32-44

Contributor: Dana Neuhauser and Jonathan Stegall

New York City's Rikers Island jail complex has been making headlines recently.<sup>134</sup> Inmate deaths; unguarded cell blocks; and detainees being denied food and medicine. Lawmakers who toured the complex described overflowing toilets and floors covered in dead cockroaches, feces, and rotting food. There is a stench, indeed.

The stench of Rikers Island is not just the literal stench of feces, food, and death, but the metaphorical stench of a death-dealing culture that meets violence with violence. The systems of policing and the prison industrial complex are systems of disposal. They remove people from society, whether it's through dramatic actions of police violence or through everyday police activity; whether it's through flashpoint moments like we've seen at Rikers or the everyday removal of incarcerated people from being worthy of care. Even before bodily death, the empire binds and entombs people.

As Barry Friesen and John K. Stoner write in *If Not Empire, What? A Survey of the Bible*, "We all are stricken, as good as dead within a culture that has surrendered to violence and the threat of violence as if they are forces of nature, like gravity or Earth's rotation. The stench surrounds us, but we are disabled by fear."<sup>135</sup> Fear drives liberals and Christians to collude with the empire and its systems of disposal, making the stench feel like a forgone conclusion.

In this passage, Jesus arrives to join the family of Lazarus in mourning after Lazarus has already died. He joins the family

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<sup>134</sup> Written November 2, 2021.

<sup>135</sup> Barry Friesen and John K. Stoner, "If Not Empire, What? A Survey of the Bible" on *Bible and Empire*: <http://liberationtheology.org/library/if-not-empire-what-a-survey-of-the-bible.pdf>

and community in their grief and sorrow, even though he knows that journeying to their town moves him closer to Jerusalem, and to those opposed to his movement. The readers of John's gospel, enduring their own persecution by the empire, would rely on "trusting in the Lord's ability to bring life out of death."

Jesus approaches the cave where Lazarus is buried. According to John Petty, "...caves are places of spiritual mystery and are symbolic of the womb. ... It is also a way of saying that new life can emerge only out of the death of the old."<sup>136</sup> Jesus calls, "Lazarus come out." In calling Lazarus to new life, Jesus invites all of us to emerge from the fearful, stench-filled, death-dealing ways of empire.

Kelly Hayes wrote of the inmates of Rikers Island, "[w]e're allowed to forget about them, because they exist within the realm of our fears. These are people who we are told are being contained for our safety, so most people wind up accepting that containment on the state's terms, without asking too many questions. And so the monster that is the prison-industrial complex becomes more deadly and it grows."<sup>137</sup> Like Martha who warned Jesus of the stench of Lazarus's body, many people balk at the thought of reimagining policing and prisons. The stench is as much a product of our collective fears and the ways those fears collude with the empire's system of violence.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is recorded as a word for those living against the violence of empire. If it is intended to give the original audience confidence in the ability of the Spirit to bring life out of death, what word might it be offering to us

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<sup>136</sup> John Petty, "Lent 5" on *Progressive Involvement* (March 23, 2020).

<sup>137</sup> Kelly Hayes, "Rikers Island and the Shapeshifting Monster of Reform," in *Truthout* (October 21, 2021).

today? May it call us to awaken to the death around us and find ways the Spirit is working to bring forth new life. Let us not turn away from the stench of death and empire's death-dealing ways but join with Jesus and those who are willing to roll the stone away and call forth new life.

Abolition is not an easy road. It is not a road that avoids moving through grief, fear, or oppression. But it is a road that looks for resurrection in the midst of these things. It looks for a new world that can be birthed from the cave of the old.

## Year C

Scripture: Luke 6:20–31

Contributor: Guillermo Arboleda

Whenever I engage in a conversation with someone who is sympathetic but not convinced about the abolition of police and the prison industrial complex, the conversation inevitably turns to an exchange like this: “I’m with you when it comes to reducing prison sentences and populations for ‘nonviolent crimes,’ but what do we do about the people who have committed truly horrible crimes? What about people who cannot or will not be reformed?” I imagine that if you are reading this e-book, you have had similar conversations or thoughts yourself. Some people have behaved so grievously that it’s hard not to write them off as evil and want to take them out with the trash. I think that these are normal, sensible thoughts. I empathize with them.

But God does not call us to normal, sensible lives. God calls

us to holiness, or even sainthood. And in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus presents part of his vision for what it means to live as though we already belong in God's coming Reign. "*But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you*" (Luke 6:27-28, NRSV). And immediately after the lectionary reading ends, Jesus said: "*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ... Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:32, 35-36).

To be a follower of Jesus is to believe in radical mercy, the kind of mercy that is distinctly abnormal and unsensible. Jesus calls us to love our enemies, even when we have been cursed and abused. Jesus calls us to show mercy to others because God shows mercy to us all, even when we are ungrateful. I argue that the impulse to show mercy – to have empathy for people who have harmed others because we know that we also have caused harm – is the key to abolition. Without mercy, abolition simply does not compute. Because punishment is so much more viscerally satisfying. Sitting in the judgment seat and dehumanizing our enemies can feel like justice. I would be lying if I said that I had never experienced *schadenfreude* (rejoicing because of other people's pain, suffering, or humiliation).

But we call for the abolition of the prison-industrial complex because, as Christians, we recognize that no one is beyond God's redemption. We cannot throw people out with the trash because they are created in God's image and likeness and God (Genesis 1:27). We recognize that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), and that means that we cannot point

the finger at others while there are still logs in our own eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). Instead, we must learn to be merciful as God is merciful. We must not succumb people to violent law enforcement, imprisonment, forced labor, torture, and execution. Human beings have never figured out how to give themselves the authority to wield those weapons without dehumanizing, degrading, and abusing the incarcerated as though they are fundamentally our enemies and not fundamentally our siblings.

Therefore, we need to find new ways of pursuing justice in the social order that are not built on the backs of the suffering of others. We need to pursue justice alongside mercy. It won't always feel good. Mercy does not always seem intuitive, normal, or sensible, but it just might be holy.

## Proper 26

Year A

Scripture: Micah 3:5-12

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The prophet Micah explicitly connects the injustice by which the rich and well-connected receive different justice than the poor as infidelity to God in today's reading:

*“Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”*

Micah promises divine judgment against Israel, its destruction allowed by God, because of this inequity: the giving of judgment for a bribe. (As well, of course, as the restriction of religious knowledge to those who can pay!)

We see this inequity in our modern justice system as well. As attorney and activist Bryan Stevenson has famously said, “We have a justice system that treats you better if you are rich and guilty than if you are poor and innocent.”<sup>138</sup> Examples of the inequality in our justice system abound.<sup>139</sup> Money bail is a particularly heinous example of the economic inequity in our system—poor defendants languishing in prison while rich ones do not—and one that is explicitly addressed elsewhere in scripture as an obligation.<sup>140</sup>

Like the rulers of Israel who heard the words of Micah, we cannot claim not to know the inequity of the system. Abolition calls us to seek the end of systems of prisons and policing for many reasons: because of their racist basis and effects; because of the inherent inhumanity of incarceration and the affront to human dignity of punishment, exclusion, control, and state violence; because they are ineffective responses to harm. But we must always remember that inequity toward the poor is also always at the heart of systems of policing and prisons. “Good news for the poor” may be “bad news” for these systems, just like the harsh news proclaimed by Micah.

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<sup>138</sup> “Bryan Stevenson Talks to Oprah About Why We Need to Abolish the Death Penalty,” on *EJI* (November 28, 2015).

<sup>139</sup> “8 Ways America’s Legal System Punishes People Who Are Poor,” on *Equal Justice Under Law*.

<sup>140</sup> C.f. Danya Ruttenberg, “As if spilling blood,” on *Life is a Sacred Text* (June 12, 2023).

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Practically all Christians can recite to you the Greatest Commandment, but often we let it remain an aphorism: “Love God, love others.” Or there’s the insistence on self-care inherent in the second half: “You can’t love others if you don’t love yourself.” Or, perhaps, we focus on the “who is my neighbor question” that plays a role in Luke’s telling of this passage. All of those reflections have truth to them, all tell a part of what the Greatest Commandment demands of us, and all are generally good things to believe and reflect upon. However, when I read Mark’s version of this story this week, I saw what wasn’t there.

The gospels do not assume a fundamental practice of our prison industrial complex: the practice of *un-neighbor*ing. Criminal justice systems in the United States and around the world depend on the process of removing people from their community, dislocating them to a penal context, and making return to their former community as difficult as possible. The system attempts to *un-neighbor* them, to make them no one’s neighbor. The system attempts to destroy familial and communal bonds that maintain the integrity and thriving of our communities by *un-neighbor*ing people the system classified as criminals. That’s what prisons are for.

That could not be further from a Christlike example or the just

society the Scriptures envision. Jesus and his contemporaries knew something about un-neighboring. Ancient empires used deportation as a tactic to break apart conquered communities. The best and brightest were sent to imperial centers not just to benefit the ruling class, but to disintegrate their homelands. We know Romans used prisons, as well, and Jesus begins his ministry in Luke's Gospel by saying it is part of God's mission to free captives from said prisons. And yet, Christians often support this process of un-neighboring, of stripping someone of their community, family, and friends as a form of punishment for what they have done.

Even in a world where the criminal justice system wasn't racist, ableist, and otherwise prejudiced, why would this process of un-neighboring be entertained by Christians in any context? It cuts against the core of Christian teaching that says to love our neighbors as ourselves. The only way to make this kind of system palatable for Christians is to make it so people convicted of crimes aren't their neighbors anymore. Perhaps that's why we have such remote and inaccessible prisons—they want to make sure the incarcerated are no one's neighbor, because otherwise God might call people to care for them.

Many Christians accept this system by default. It's a matter of inheritance. Many fail to question it at all. But if we even aspire to the Greatest Commandment's demands on our lives, the abolition of prisons is an absolute necessity.

Year C

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Contributor: Leeann Culbreath

Jesus is closing in on Jerusalem when he encounters Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, in a tree. Tax collectors were pariahs in Jewish society because they collected tariffs for the Roman Empire, the occupying force. They notoriously overcharged and exploited the poor.

Though he was wealthy, Zacchaeus was outcast, and perhaps that is why no one makes space for him in the crowd so he can see “who Jesus was.” Zacchaeus runs and climbs a tree, which anticipates the cruel cross Jesus would soon encounter. As Jesus passes under the tree, he calls out to Zacchaeus by name, commands him to come down, and “voluntells” him to offer hospitality.

Jesus’ command suggests that this is not a random, curious encounter, or just Jesus’ desperation to find a comfy bed for the night! In this last act public ministry in Luke, Jesus shows the crowd (and us) something about the nature of God and God’s reign—God is the liberator of all creation and is already realizing an inclusive liberatory reign through Jesus.

Jesus could have dismissed Zacchaeus or continued the warnings about wealth that he issued in the previous chapter. Shockingly, though, he reaches out to him to draw him into relationship. This is a beautiful example of “calling in” instead of “calling out”—an important practice in abolition praxis. Jesus calls him in, humanizing him by using his name. This moment of human connection enables Zacchaeus to respond without defensiveness, and then to open up to change. Instead of calling out his sins in public, Jesus honors him and is even willing to share the intimacy of eating at table together.

We who follow Jesus share in God’s inclusive ministry of lib-

eration, seeking freedom for all harmed in systems oppression, which is everyone—the oppressed, oppressors, and those who passively participate in the system. Included in those harmed are non-human creatures, land, and ecosystems. In the famous words of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

Of course, the moment of “calling in” is only a starting point of the truth-telling, accountability, and transformation of relationships that are necessary for restorative justice and liberation. In this passage, we see Zacchaeus begin to move in this direction, acknowledging some wrongdoing and offering reparations. He seems to recognize that the loving, liberated life that Jesus offers is far better than all the riches he could amass. Whether he follows through or not is not the point of the passage, though; the point is that all belong in God’s dream of liberation, and relationships are the pathway into it.

## Proper 27

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The parable of the bridesmaids which we read this week always presents a challenge for me. I'm angry at the wise bridesmaids for refusing to share their oil, even at the risk of everyone running out! Wouldn't it be better to engage in mutual aid and insist that we can only all find safety and salvation together, even if we risk somehow "failing" the expectations of an outside authority figure?

I found help this week in Aaron J. Smith's reframing of the parable.<sup>141</sup> Smith's key conclusion is that the point of the

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<sup>141</sup> Aaron J. Smith, "A Chance for the Kingdom," in *The Book of Common Words* (November 7, 2023).

parable—Jesus’ admonition at the end—is not about the oil at all, but is to stay awake. “Staying awake would have changed the story,” he writes. It’s because all the bridesmaids fall asleep that the crisis with the oil arises at all. Maybe, then, the point of the parable isn’t about how to hoard our own oil to have “enough”—maybe it’s about how we can stay awake to each other in order to find new ways for all to have enough.

I do think the questions raised by this parable about how to have “enough” to carry on are deeply relevant to our work for abolition. A conversation with a friend and fellow organizer this week got me thinking about how so many movement campaigns and organizations seem to be struggling or slowing right now. It feels like reactionary elements are ascendant against the abolition movement. It feels like many of us are in what Carlos Saavedra calls a “winter”<sup>142</sup> season in movement work: a time to regroup and focus on our own values, and a time to “keep our lamps trimmed and burning.”<sup>143</sup>

The question posed by this parable is how we get through seasons of winter, seasons when the end is not in sight and victories are few and far between. Do we see the answer in the oil, and finding ways to reserve sufficient oil for ourselves by stepping back to refocus on what brings us life? Do we see the answer in doubling down on our values, insisting that what the parable provokes is *really* the insistence that the bridesmaids *should* have shared and stayed awake in faith to see what would happen? Do we see the answer, as Smith suggests, in “staying

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<sup>142</sup> Sarah Baum, “Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba on Their New Handbook for Radical Organizing,” in *The Nation* (May 16, 2023).

<sup>143</sup> For a performance of this essential spiritual: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdfkNKqPTV4>

awake,” being present to one another as we make what Andrea Ritchie calls “critical connections” in her new book on abolition and emergent strategy and wait to see where they lead?<sup>144</sup>

What is it, the parable of the bridesmaids asks but (I think) does not answer, that sustains us all as we wait?

## Year B

Scripture: Mark 12:38–44

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

The famous story of the Widow’s Mite—the widow whose tiny gift Jesus names as more valuable than larger gifts from richer people—reminds us to value the contributions of those whose bodies and needs are on the line.

As abolitionist ideas become more mainstream, we see more and more people drawn to the movement who may not be directly affected by carceral systems. This kind of coalition-building is good and effective. Indeed, organizing among Christians who may not have much knowledge of the injustices of the criminal legal system is part of the goal of Christians for Abolition. But it’s important for those who are not directly systems-impacted to be sure to listen to and be led by the voices of those who are.

How are incarcerated people leaders in the movement? How are their needs—including basic survival needs—being met, and where are their gifts being recognized? Incarcerated people care

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<sup>144</sup> Andrea J. Ritchie, *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies* (AK Press, 2023).

for each other and contribute their own activism, as those on the front lines in engagement with the prison-industrial complex. As Jesus says of the poor widow, they, often of necessity, “put in everything they have.” A key tenet of liberation theology is that a source for theology is the lived experience of marginalized people. The story of the Widow’s Mite reminds us of the value of centering and prioritizing the perspectives of those most affected by systems of oppression.

## Year C

Scripture: Job 19:23-27

Contributor: Jay Bergen

As a pastor, I can get lost in the world of words. Preaching, praying, reading, emails, cards... if I’m not careful, my brain can leave the present moment behind and get caught up in trying to find the right thing to write or say. Ironically, the purpose of many of these words is to provide a sense of presence, to remind myself and my community of God’s presence and the power of being in the presence of God’s creation.

But all this pales in comparison to the power and presence that words hold for some of my incarcerated siblings. After all, it was words—the interpretation of laws, sentencing guidelines, etc.—that helped build their cages. It is words—the arguments of lawyers, the recommendations of counselors—that can open those same cages. And while they are caged it is words that so often sustain them: The hand-written cards from friends, the love passed through all-to-brief telephone calls or video visits, the encouragement of fellow incarcerated people, the

worlds opened by the words of poets and philosophers. When Pennsylvania decided that all mail to prisons must be routed to a company in Florida and passed on as black-and-white photocopies, it was little wonder that people were outraged and took to the streets to demand the state stop serving as a go-between for our words to each other.

Job cries out, “O that my words were written down!... O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!” He wants, no, he needs to know that his pleas for justice will be heard beyond the life of his sick and frail body. He knows that our words live lives beyond us, they have a power beyond our own. Some of the most searing and profound reflections on our humanity and on our divinity come from the mouths and the pens of people in Job’s position: The oppressed, the incarcerated, those who live face to face with their mortality. Incarcerated journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal writes that, “On death’s brink, men begin to see things they’ve perhaps never seen before.... Men on Phase II – men whose death warrants have been signed, men with a date to die – live each day with a clarity and a vibrancy they might have lacked in less pressured times.”<sup>145</sup>

We do well to heed the sacred power of words, their power to harm and to heal. And we do well to heed the words of those living in pressured times, our incarcerated siblings and others who light lamps of hope in desolate places and who dare to imagine a world free from punishment and state-sanctioned violence.

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<sup>145</sup> Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms: Reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience* (AK Press, 1997), 101.

## Proper 28

Year A

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Contributor: Hannah Bowman

This famous apocalyptic passage from 1 Thessalonians promises that the day of the Lord will come “like a thief in the night” (v. 2). The passage has often been used to emphasize the unexpectedness of the “end of the world,” even leading to doctrines like the Rapture in some theologies.

But what struck me in reading this passage is what the unwary tell themselves before the day of the Lord — which is, without diminishing its cosmic or apocalyptic power, fundamentally the day of judgment when God will bring justice for all: that the day of the Lord will come when they say “There is peace and security” (v. 3).

From an abolitionist perspective, “security” is a word to

interrogate. Mariame Kaba distinguishes between “safety” — something collectively produced based on care and meeting needs — and “security” imposed by hierarchy, surveillance, and punishment.<sup>146</sup>

Imagining security in this framework opens a new dimension on a familiar text. We can imagine those who say “There is peace and security” as those relying upon systems of domination like prisons to bring security and the appearance of peace. We can ask: what is being hidden by the “peace and security” that appears to be present? Whose safety is being ignored? Who is being harmed in the pursuit of security?

When we ask these questions, then the “sudden destruction” of the day of the Lord perhaps takes form in our imagining as a revelation, rather than a punishment. The day of the Lord is the day when hidden things will be revealed (cf. Luke 8:17). The hidden violence of our punishment and security apparatus, if made known, destroys our illusions of peace.

Perhaps seeing this violence for what it is is part of what it means to “stay awake.” I’m reminded of the etymology of “woke” — “stay woke,” be aware of the structures of oppression. This is not the only meaning of the injunction to “keep awake” in 1 Thessalonians, which no doubt in its context was a warning about the end of the world which was seen then to be imminent. But in our time, where the day of the Lord has not yet come, keeping awake may mean being attentive to the structures that will be overturned in the day of the Lord, as well as expectantly awaiting its arrival. And as we are aware of the violence

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<sup>146</sup> “Towards the horizon of abolition: A conversation with Mariame Kaba,” in *The Next System Project*, <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/towards-horizon-abolition-conversation-mariame-kaba>.

underlying our security, we turn instead to the source of real safety: “encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing” (v. 11).

Year B

Scripture: Mark 13:1-8

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

*An editorial note: Conversations about this passage on Twitter<sup>147</sup> have raised some additional points that I wanted to take into account in our conversation here. First, the antisemitic use of this passage by Christians historically must be recognized. The passage has been used to encourage the destruction of Jewish communities and religious sites. Christians have used it in even unintentionally antisemitic ways.*

*In light of that, I think that while in this post we tried to make it clear that Jesus is not condemning the temple or declaring its destruction to be because it's bad, we should go further to avoid comparison between the temple and bad human institutions. While Jesus' words do present an apocalyptic vision of a future of God beyond everything that is, that newness comes at a cost, and one we as Christians must be especially careful to respect. As I saw someone comment on Twitter, the temple is not our symbol as Christians, and perhaps not ours to appropriate for the sake of comparison.*

*Of particular importance to my thinking in ongoing conversation*

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<sup>147</sup> After billionaire oligarch Elon Musk took over Twitter and renamed it X, there was a mass exodus from the platform and it's difficult to track down all the conversations that were had there.

*about this passage was the emphasis on the destruction of the Temple as religious trauma, and especially a religious trauma for Jews. In this context, the emphasis of the passage seems even further to be on God's fidelity even in the face of the traumatic change that has just occurred. In this context, the coming newness of God is a promise about God's character. As Wilson wrote, "There is injustice and hardship in this world but God is on the side of life." The enduring fidelity and the promise of new life in God is not opposed to the temple but to the empire that destroyed it. Even in the face of trauma, God is on the side of life.*

*This passage is challenging for Christians to approach carefully. But a shared promise of God's fidelity to us and to the cause of justice offers common ground and a basis for abolitionist futures.*  
—Hannah

We often act as if what currently is has always been. We do so especially with buildings and bridges and institutions. "Do you see these great buildings?" Jesus says of the Temple complex, but it can be said of all our human institutions. Look how big it is! Look how much support it has! Look how many people support prison and incarceration! Look how many people assume prisons have always been around!

Not one stone will be left. Not one stone of the Prison Industrial Complex will remain. Even if it seems like that is the way things are, those stones aren't as big as the ones on the Temple Mount! Jesus challenges our assumptions about the world and offers us encouragement about what we should assume and what we should seek to change in this world.

The Temple was the center of faith. The Temple housed the Holy of Holies, which is the location of the presence of God that can only be entered once a year by only one person. Jesus

went to the Temple as a child and told his parents that he had gone to his father's house. Jesus doesn't speak about the stones of the temple in this way because it is bad or a bad institution — it is not! — but because God's future is beyond what we know and what we take for granted. If even those stones of the holy Temple are overturned, what of the institutions who cause injustice in this world? They will *certainly* not last, so we should be encouraged about the new future God promises as we start taking them down brick by brick.

This is challenge enough from this difficult passage, but Jesus is not finished. He is with his disciples and he warns them about folks who will lead them astray. False prophets who claim faith but lead others to destruction. Claiming Jesus does not make something good or just. In fact, many of these false prophets surround us today and claim Jesus in order to continue unjust practices.

The kingdom of heaven is not a continuation of the status quo in perpetuity, but something radically new. There is injustice and hardship in this world but God is on the side of life. May we put our hope not in existing institutions but the Son of God who calls us when we are weary and heavy laden and gives us rest.

## Year C

Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

Sandwiched between All Saints and Reign of Christ, we have one more Sunday of Ordinary Time before Advent. Year C, however, is unwilling to wait for the changing of the calendars

and dives right into some apocalyptic texts that serve us well as abolitionists and those of us who await the outcome of the US elections that occur this time of year.

It's tempting to look to the state for the just world we seek. When reproductive rights, access to the vote, marriage equality, and so much more hinge on the outcome of elections, we are right to be worried. So when we look past the state for our hopes for a world made right, we are not ignoring the stakes in a participatory democracy and we are not embracing some spiritual opiate to divert our attention from what's right in front of our faces. To look beyond the state is to both acknowledge reality and put our faith and trust in God.

Both Isaiah 65 and Luke 21 present apocalyptic visions of a world made right through some kind of dramatic intervention. "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," the Isaiah text begins, marking the creation of a new cosmos (65:17). "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down," Jesus says as he looks upon the Temple in Jerusalem (21:6). Both passages warn of trials that come before, but both also promise good to follow. "They shall not labor in vain," Isaiah promises (65:23). "By your endurance you will gain your souls," Jesus vows (21:19).

Regardless of who wins what seat in the elections in the US this week [2022], things will get worse before they get better for the cause of abolition. Republicans have run a successful closing campaign message on crime, animating racial prejudice and other forces counter to the message of an abolitionist Gospel. It will gain them power. In my home county, a sheriff primarily known for his former advocacy of the notorious 287(g) immigration program will likely return to office after

being ousted some years earlier.<sup>148</sup> It's tempting to despair in moments like this that our work and our hope does not matter.

We must look beyond the machinations of the state because the state will always disappoint us. By necessity, our strategic goals, policy priorities, and campaign objectives will always focus on the state because it is the chief perpetrator of carceral violence. Ultimately, however, our hope and our work must be grounded elsewhere. Mariame Kaba reminds us that our individual efforts "will lessen harm to be sure, but only building power among those most marginalized in society holds the possibility of radical transformation. And that's an endless quest for justice. That's a struggle rather than a goal. Only movements can build power. We need a movement for transformative justice."<sup>149</sup>

Both the Isaiah and Luke texts this week point to transformation, but neither promise that it comes through purely worldly means. Both texts were written in the context of historical cataclysms, but they stubbornly kept to the work and kept their faith. We must trust in the realm God is making in our midst and the world that God will ultimately make. Our work will not be in vain, God will hear our cries, and justice will come even as we endure trials in the meantime.

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<sup>148</sup> It's worth noting that this didn't end up happening. The Republican, Donnie Harrison, who was an anti-immigrant xenophobe lost the election to the Democrat Willie Rowe who earned over 50% of the vote in Wake County, NC.

<sup>149</sup> Mariame Kaba, "Whether Darren Wilson is Indicted or Not, the Entire System is Guilty" in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 56.

## Reign of Christ

Year A

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Contributor: Jed Tate

Reflecting on Matthew 25 during Reign of Christ Sunday gives us the opportunity to envision the kind of kingdom Jesus proclaims for the future while also seeking to understand his calling for us to live out that kingdom now. And as abolitionists we examine this text through the particular lens of ending imprisonment. Therefore, we get to wrestle with the question: what does it mean that Christ the King declares himself Jesus the prisoner?

This passage opens with the proclamation of Christ's coming reign and judgment. He will gather all nations—all of creation—as he sits on his throne of glory. Thomas Stegman notes, “Matthew draws on imagery from Daniel 7:13–14—where the Ancient of Days, enthroned in glory, bestows on ‘one like a

son of man' (RSV) dominion and glory—to set forth the full manifestation of God's reign."<sup>150</sup> Many of us are uncomfortable with this language of dominion and judgment so the preacher may want to take care here. Perhaps it would be helpful to emphasize that the reign of God means the end of the unjust rule of present, oppressive powers. If Christ is king, then oppressors are not. And if Jesus is judge, then our systems of judgment and punishment will be replaced by something else altogether. This new kingdom will be marked instead by compassion and justice.

Care for the "least of these" (v. 40), the people Howard Thurman described as the disinherited, is central to this passage. Compassion for people who are hungry, poor, sick, and incarcerated is so important to Jesus that he says how people have treated them is how they have treated him. When Christ returns and reigns, the question of compassion will be a (the?) primary concern. Our calling, then, as Jesus's followers is to serve people in need with works of mercy, here and now, trusting that God's coming kingdom will bring about complete liberation for the "least of these."

And so, with compassion and care, we visit the prisoner knowing that we are somehow visiting Jesus. This is what it looks like to live into God's kingdom now. But I tend to believe that, in addition to compassion, Jesus is also calling us to the work of justice as well, which includes the abolition of prisons. After all, if the Son of Man, Christ the King who will one day come in glory, has chosen to be enfleshed as the prisoner, then shouldn't we have hope that he will, in time, set the prisoner

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas D. Stegman, "Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 25:31–46," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 333.

free and end incarceration itself? And as his followers, as people living into the reign of Christ right now, don't we have a calling to participate in the building of the prison-less Kingdom? What if we built houses and hospitals and community centers and even churches with the bricks of the prisons we dismantled all because we knew that Jesus was behind those walls?

I think any preacher would do well to highlight themes of compassion in a sermon on Matthew 25; however, I believe there is also a declaration of justice. Jesus is proclaiming the good news of the coming kingdom, and inviting us to participate in its construction through the work of mercy for the oppressed. How might we, as preachers who are abolitionists, inspire wonder and spark imaginations about what it might look like to follow Christ the king who is Jesus the prisoner?

## Year B

Scripture: John 18:33-37

Contributor: Wesley Spears-Newsome

In the Gospel for Reign of Christ, we find Jesus deep in the carceral system of his day. He has been betrayed by one of his own friends who conspired with the police to arrest him. Most of his community, particularly his disciples, abandon him in the face of his incarceration even before his trial. The trial itself is a sham, something Jesus plainly recognizes. Now, the police have dragged him before the imperial authorities for sentencing.

At no point is there any logic to Jesus' incarceration other than imposing the will of the powerful on him. There is no concern for justice (certainly not restorative justice) in this process. There is

no concern for what's best for the community. There isn't even a significant concern for truth (confoundingly, the lectionary omits Pilate's famous quotation from v. 38).

The primary concern in this carceral system appears to be preservation of the powerful hierarchy at work in it. When Jesus testifies for himself earlier in this chapter, the police strike him and demand "Is that how you answer the high priest?" (v.22). The high priest's power is threatened by Jesus and the police respond with violence. Jesus' accusers defer to Pilate's authority when they want to put Jesus to death to preserve their uneasy alliance with the Romans (v. 31). Interrogating Jesus, Pilate famously doesn't seek truth but the best way to preserve imperial power in the face of one accused of claiming kingship.

One of the most important things for Christians to recognize about incarceration, policing, and criminal justice in the United States and around the world is what the primary concerns of these systems are. The default assumption is that they exist to keep us safe, but that often doesn't seem to be the case at all. Private prisons exist to preserve the profits and power of those who own them. Elected law enforcement officials must appear "tough on crime" and follow through with policies to that effect to maintain their power. Whatever the quality of actors within law enforcement and carceral systems, the priority is preservation of those systems' status quo.

Christians, however, are not called to the maintenance of that status quo. Jesus explicitly appeals to a "kingdom ... not from this world" (v. 36). This characterization of the Reign of Christ has frequently been spiritualized, but the whole witness of the New Testament doesn't suggest that. The Reign of Christ has material consequences and should manifest itself in a different order of things, including cared for and freed

prisoners (a consistent theme in both Jewish and Christian Scriptures). Particularly on Reign of Christ Sunday, Christians should question the reign of present principalities and powers. Is their status quo godly and holy or is it the same imperial and carceral system that rejected and executed Jesus?

## Year C

Scripture: Colossians 1:11-20

Contributor: Wilson Pruitt

What are the limits of salvation in Jesus Christ? What are the limits of Christ's power? Paul's letter to the Colossians offers a maximalist perspective on the salvific power of Jesus Christ with beautiful language that is often overly spiritualized. We begin with how Jesus rescues us, redeems us and forgives us. Yet this power is never limited to invisible things.

The status quo loves to overly spiritualize Jesus. If Jesus only saves us in our hearts, Jesus has nothing to say to present structures of power, like the Prison Industrial Complex. Once the power of Jesus becomes material, the shadow of the cross starts to fall on the status quo.

Do Christians want the shadow of the cross to fall on status quo powers and structures of power? The less power Jesus has, the fewer ways that Christ's followers are called to respond to structures of power and oppression in this world. It is easier to live an overly spiritualized life if it means you don't need to take a stand on status quo structures of power.

If Christ's redemption is total and Christ's power is total, then Christ's call on Christians to seek out justice in this world does

not stop at the doors of our homes or the doors of our churches. This means that we should take courage from Christ as we seek the justice of God in this world. Christ's power is not limited by the status quo, so Christians should not blindly accept it. We should strive for the reign of God here and now.

## Afterword

Reading this book in July 2025 was a joy and a comfort. A joy: to see how many colleagues and collaborators, within the Christian tradition, are working together to bring about liberation. It is good to know I am not alone. Many Christians are finding strength from the abolitionist promises of scriptural texts. A comfort: to immerse myself, in the midst of the “changes and chances of this life” (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 133) and the terrifying drip of news stories about mass deportations and rising authoritarianism, in the flow of sacred scripture and the rhythm of the liturgical year.

Reading these essays all at once—after reading them one week at a time over years—also gave me heart as to the centrality of abolition and liberation in the biblical witness. What the contributors to this project have done is looked with eyes aimed at abolition to see the manifold aspects of it visible in the biblical story. What emerges is a narrative of profound comfort: God’s desire that all be free, that all be cared for, that all be restored, that the reign of God in perfect love be made present among us now.

This project makes evident the breadth of abolition: the ways that it touches every aspect of Christian life and calls us to new ways of being, from the most personal parts of our spirituality,

to our life in community, all the way to questions of national and international politics. Abolition isn't just opposition to prisons, but also: accountability to one another in our personal and political lives; care, sufficiency, mutual aid, and support; peace rather than war and its crimes; and ultimately, repentance and reconciliation with God. The close ties between abolition and the entirety of our life together shine through this project's holding-together of scripture, liturgical holidays, politics, theology, and practical spirituality.

Thanks for reading. Blessings from our God who sets the prisoners free.

—Hannah Bowman

