

# SERMON

## STARTERS

Kathleen Peterson  
and Frank Horton

### **March 2, 2003** **Transfiguration Sunday**

2 Kings 2:1-12; Ps. 50:1-6;  
2 Cor. 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

#### **To See Thee More Clearly**

It is so clarifying that Mark has set the Transfiguration scene at the center of his Gospel in a section that begins and ends with stories of the blind receiving sight (Mark 8:22-10:52). "We would see Jesus," as we say and sing, but this is a lifelong process of glimpses, in which he is revealed to us as we grow in our ability to see who he is and what he means to us.

Like the disciples, we experience this in momentary flashes of understanding, when the veil is lifted. It can take years to integrate these moments of insight into our lives. The law and the prophets, represented here by Moses and Elijah, are engaged by Jesus as he brings them with him into the fullness of the Light, a perfect image for what he actually did and does for us.

In their search to understand what it could mean that they see Jesus in this glistening moment, the three disciples privileged with it are primarily just "terrified," another very true-to-life acknowledgment of how these "shining hours" can be. But Peter, apparently never at a loss for words, even when he doesn't know what to say, manages to come up with a building plan to memorialize the moment. However, this in no way interrupts the revelation.

The guidance given from above is an identifying and full endorsement of Jesus as The Son and a strong directive to "listen to him!"

Like the disciples, we can't stay on the mountain top for long. On the way down and ever afterwards, the hard work of bringing our revelations down to earth and into our everyday, lives is the real challenge we are all called to rise to.

### **March 9, 2003** **1st Sunday in Lent**

Gen 9:8-17; Ps. 25:1-10;  
1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

#### **Free to Plead Guilty**

I know a pastor who told me that whenever he writes a recommendation for someone, he always puts in something negative because that makes it more realistic. "Nobody's perfect," he said. Recently someone in the business world, whose job it is to read recommendations for various positions, told me that most people are so afraid of being sued nowadays that they only write positive or neutral things in recommendations. If she comes across something negative in a "recommendation," she said, their policy is to eliminate that one immediately, on the assumption that this person must be really bad for the writer to include negativity. So the pastor, meaning to give balance and credibility to his references, could really be giving them the kiss of death. It's a harsh world that will not allow for any weaknesses in a market so overflowing with wanna-be's.

Meanwhile, we cannot confuse our sometimes-forced public personas with our true selves. As Carl Sandburg begins one of his poems, "Can we be honest for five minutes, even though this is Chicago?" Indeed we are all deeply flawed in many ways and our only hope is that Jesus is wont to seek out sinners, to dine and to dwell with them. So we are free to be honest with God and with ourselves.

Jesus comes to us on this first Sunday in Lent, fresh from his desert fast, saying first off: "Repent and believe the good news!" Today's good news is that we can admit we have been wrong and it can and will be used for, not against us!

As John the Baptist went about preparing the way for Jesus, the sermon was always the same: "Repent! Repent!" His baptism of repentance and of sins is still what prepares us to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the kingdom. We

need not be afraid to raise our hand because the answer might be wrong. Our teacher is the one who knows all our confusions and only wants to give us the freedom to let them go, so the way can be re-opened to "get it right."

### **March 16, 2003** **2nd Sunday in Lent**

Gen. 17: 1-7, 15-16; Ps. 22: 23-31;  
Rom. 4:13-25; Mk. 8:31-38

#### **Recovering from the Abyss**

All the Psalms of Lamentation end in praise! I will never forget when I first realized this many years ago. It is one of those shining moments that stands guard over your sanity like a sentinel. Yes, Jesus loves me. But the psalmist didn't know that. Or did he? The Word was with God from the beginning. So why wouldn't they have felt its presence even before it was made flesh? Felt the comfort of Jesus' help in the midst of feeling forsaken, when there was groaning and crying in such pain there could be no sleep.

We see Jesus so aptly described in the midst of this Psalm (v. 6-8). Such profound torture was not new in A.D. time. Such anguish has been part of it all from the beginning.

These are days when we have watched the lines of flowers winding with their bearers down the long ramps to mark a spot called Ground Zero and we have wept with them there, wherever we were. The hardest thing is bringing life back from the depths again. That's why we feel most vulnerable when we see the courage and grace of those resolved to do it. It breaks our hearts open, like the psalmist's, as he resolves to remember the goodness and power of the Lord of Life.

We could dwell in the richness of the Psalms much more. Except for a few, they are rarely sermon catchers. But this one most especially commends itself to us during Lent. It calls up all the elements of the

passion we experienced on 9/11 and all the remedies for that tragedy's pain.

The average person falls asleep in 7 minutes unless he or she is in physical or mental torment, which afflicts huge numbers of people today. For many in our pews, that is one of the few places they can fall asleep. Psalm 22 gives them the whole gamut of emotions to take to heart, to bed, and to their unborn descendents, providing deep consolation, awe and joy. Just read it like you believe it, and it will speak for itself.

## **March 23, 2003 3d Sunday in Lent**

EX. 20:1-17; Ps. 19; I Cor. 1:18-25;  
John 2:13-22

### **Setting the Stage by Turning the Tables**

All three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) put the temple cleansing scene at the end, during the last week before Jesus' death. In John we find it already in the second chapter! Most people have never even noticed; some think it was a careless scribe's misplacement. This would be a pretty big and odd error though.

John's spiritual interpretation and treatment of everything could be involved here. But how so?

When Jesus entered into his public ministry, it seems that he took it on full time, leaving his carpenter's responsibilities behind him. Relieved of these, being the good Jew that he was, he would have faithfully made the annual trip to Jerusalem for Passover, not just once, but 3 times, during each of those 3 years.

John's account of it here doesn't sound like the last of those three. John says that "in the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves and the money changers seated at their tables." (John 2:13) This sounds like a first-time discovery experience. Jesus' startled, violent reaction to the shocking sight of such corruption is just that then. It's not the response to years of harassment and abuse from the temple personnel that finally erupts just before his death. There's nothing personal about this spontaneous outburst against such desecration of the holy place by using it as a "fleecing" market-place.

But this early show of his anger toward the enterprise that was making them so wealthy could explain why the religious establishment was hot on Jesus' trail from so early on.

John's rendition of Jesus' temple tantrum is one of fury at first sight, which rings truer than a repugnance growing gradually over 3 years. John's account is also the most violent and clearly unpremeditated. Only John mentions the "whip," which Jesus ingeniously makes out of cords he found there, to drive out the sheep and cattle. Then in John, Jesus doesn't just throw over the tables. First he pours out the money changers' coins. It would have all hit the floor with the tables anyway. But no, Jesus has to rub their noses in it first. Then he starts yelling at them! You won't see Jesus angrier than this anywhere; in fact, nowhere near this angry anywhere else.

How appropriate that we have all 10 commandments here in the Exodus passage. People were always trying to get Jesus upset about adultery, stealing, etc., etc. but to no avail. He doesn't revoke or ignore these. But it is secularization and commercialization of worship that he rages against and condemns so vehemently—what everyone else took as a matter of course.

But the most violent upheaval happened afterward when they asked him for a sign of how in the world he presumed to get away with behavior like that. His mystical answer both obliquely suggests he does not expect to get away with it and transforms stone into a living temple that will die and be resurrected. Much later John understood it even better as he wrote: "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." (Rev. 21:22) John's Gospel sets the stage perfectly for this later revelation.

## **March 30, 2003 4th Sunday in Lent**

Num. 21:4-9; Ps. 107:1-3, 17-22;  
Eph. 2:1-10; Jn. 3:14-21

### **There's Always Something**

Rosanna Rosanna Danna was right, of course. There is always something to put a fly in the ointment or a desert in the way. "Why do we have to go through this?" we ask, with the Israelites. We get

led out of bondage into a desert?

Today's passage from Numbers is commonly called a "murmuring story," one of the many in which the people grumble about the itinerary and lack of amenities on their road to freedom. The murmuring actually began before they even got out of Egypt, when they didn't think they were going to make it out, as they faced the sea and soldiers before their miraculous rescue. But no sooner are they safe on the other side and they're grumbling again.

This goes on like a formula Soap Opera: they murmur about their latest complaint, God miraculously solves the problem, they raise another complaint. The old adage about a service, once rendered, quickly diminishing in value, certainly is true of their view towards God's goodness to them along the way. Also true for them is Mark Twain's perspective on the past, in which he observed, the older he got, the better he could remember things that had never happened. The mirage of "good old days" in Egypt grew more and more vivid to them.

Finally all their endless murmurings came to a head in this outrageously incongruent whine: ". . . there is no food and no water and we detest this miserable food." (Num. 21:5) That's even worse than Woody Allen: "The food's awful and the portions are so small."

Their poisonous thoughts call out poisonous snakes that bite and kill them. They were not, in fact, dying of hunger. But now they are dying. Now they finally have a real problem, caused only by their insistence that they had a problem when they didn't. They repent of their obsessive focus on poisonous negativity. Moses prays for them and the Lord gives the antidote: a bronze poisonous snake set on a pole. Anyone bitten, who looks at it will be healed and live. It worked.

Do you remember seeing the symbol of the medical profession for healing, perhaps in a doctor's office or on a medical certificate? It's a snake, wrapped around a pole. The snake, whose own venom can heal its deadly bite, becomes the symbol of life rescued from death. The Israelite in peril must look up at it to be saved. In looking up they are reminded both of their own sin and of God's grace. The murmurings finally stop all altogether here.

This now little-known story is the one Jesus calls to mind as he speaks of himself being lifted up on a cross, ". . . just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilder-

ness.” (John 3:14) Joan of Arc requested that a cross be held up for her at eye level as she was burned at the stake, and the great old hymn asks the same: “Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes . . .” (UMH 700, v. 5). So we too can look up to the cross as something there to remind us of our sin and its remedy. The blood of Jesus is the ultimate antidote for sin and death, thanks be to God.

## **April 6, 2003 5th Sunday in Lent**

Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 51:1-12;  
Heb. 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

### **On Being Connected**

There were these two shipwreck survivors who made it to a remote island. One of them was frantic. He ran about shouting for help and moaning to his fellow castaway that their chances of ever being rescued from there were slim to none. Then in his panic and despair he would start screaming again for help.

“That’s useless way out here in the middle of nowhere,” the other man told him. “Just settle down and relax. We don’t have to worry. I make \$300,000 a year.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” his island companion replied. “That’s not going to do a thing for us here. You can’t eat or sleep in that here.”

“We’re fine, don’t worry,” the calm one insisted again. “Listen, I make \$300,000 a year and I tithe. My pastor will find me.”

Every United Methodist pastor has feelings about connectionalism that only other United Methodist pastors can understand. The mysterious author of Hebrews wants to tell us that our connection with Christ gives us ultimate and complete salvation. Christ is seen here as a “high priest”, whose job is to be an intermediary between God and human beings, “forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Heb. 5:5-6)

You remember Melchizedek. He was the one who blessed Abraham (and Levi yet unborn) “returning from defeating the kings.” (Heb. 7:1) And Abraham gave him one-tenth of all the spoils. Unlike the levitical priests, Melchizedek was appointed directly by God and since his parents birth and death are unrecorded, he is here considered not to be mortal. Thus the similarity between him and Jesus, both called directly by God and forever (viz. Ps.

110:4, also high on Jesus’ debate-rebuttal reference material list).

In what may be a very early, still-fluid account of the Passion, v. 7 gives us intimate clarity that the highest high priest can still suffer intensely. In fact, this is a large part of what perfected him in that role and makes him so suited to be our compassionate connector to God. Jesus’ supplications were heard because of his obedience to the Father. How this relates to our island man’s confidence in his rescue, is a question with some significance in the United Methodist system.

The final word on connectionalism here is like the one in the parable where the vineyard owner pays the last workers the same as the first. It’s not what you do, how, when, where or for how long. It’s who you do it for. There best not be any confusion about this.

## **April 13, 2003 Palm Sunday**

Mark 11:1-11; Ps. 118:1-2, 19-29;  
Is. 50:4-9a; Ps. 31:9;-16; Phil. 2:5-11;  
Mk. 14:1-15:47 or Mk. 15:1-39, (40-47)

### **Everything in Moderation?**

Benjamin Franklin, who went from penniless to rich enough to retire at 42, had 13 guiding principles. One of those was: “Moderation. Avoid extremes.” Our dishwasher repairman this week told me the same thing. “Moderation is the key,” he mused as he worked. “Even perfectly good food can kill you if you eat too much of the wrong kind.”

“Moderation.” The philosophical principle that guided classical Greek culture, (arguably the highest civilization ever yet), was *sōphrosenē*—moderation.

But the ancient Hebrews were an extravagant, passionate people. The Palm Sunday “parade” is anything but moderate. Matthew tells us “the whole city was stirred up.” (Mt. 21:10) To get those palm branches they waved, they had to go a long distance outside the city. And to strip trees of their branches in that arid land was an extreme act. That’s why they did it. The exuberant emotions they wanted to show were very strong! They spread their precious garments on the way, to be trampled. Nothing was done in moderation that day.

Perhaps the most immoderate act of

this passionate sequence took place in the house of Simon, a leper, where Jesus was breaking bread and staying. Mark does not even comment on how shocking this is. Probably by now he’s beyond being amazed. In just the few days since the big Palm Sunday bash, Jesus has offended almost everyone with his teachings. So our hero does not dine in the palace tonight.

But a woman comes to honor him above worldly kings, with her stunning extravagance and the statement its outpouring makes. The very costly perfume in her jar is one of the main accoutrements of her illicit occupation. As she breaks the jar to anoint Jesus with all of it (worth enough to help many of “the poor”), the act itself says volumes. It says her involvement in that old life is over forever. She will never need that jar again and as she smashed it, everyone there knew exactly what that meant. It was at once a witness to Jesus’ love, which “breaks the power of cancelled sin” and the boundless love this Love inspires.

Even as Jesus predicted, we remember her compelling presence and that moment when it exploded into the spotlight of history, to shine on down the ages for anything but its moderation.

This “Passion Sunday” is well-named. It reminds us that Love’s excesses have their place. After all, the ultimate brokenness and extravagant outpouring of Love on the cross saved our lives.



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**April 20, 2003**

## **Easter Day**

Acts 10:34-43; Ps. 118:1-2, 14-24;  
1 Cor. 15:1-11; John 20:1-18  
or Mark 16:1-8

### **He Is Risen**

Today is Easter. Today we celebrate with millions of Christians around the world the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This lesson in Acts 10:34-43 is a very appropriate one for us to read and study on this resurrection day. It is a message about the real task we have before us. It indicates what today is all about. It is about the real reason for the season. Today is about the preaching of the good news of what happened on this day over 2,000 years ago.

In this lesson, Peter is found preaching to Cornelius, the Roman centurion. Peter states that it is his understanding that God is no respecter of persons. He further states that in every nation those that fear him and work for righteousness are accepted by him. This includes people of all races, colors, and creeds.

My wife and I spent many years in Liberia and always looked forward to Easter Sunday morning. The night before, we would have an all night "tarry" at the church. We would sing and pray almost to daybreak. After this we would then light candles and walk through the streets looking for Jesus. After daybreak, we would re-gather in the church for testimonies and closing prayers. Then we would all leave the church going in various directions shouting, "He is risen, he is risen, he is risen indeed!"

Today we join Peter in his call for us to "preach unto the people and testify that it is he who was ordained of God to be the judge of the quick and the dead." (Acts 10:42) As we go forward today we can go forth singing, "Christ the Lord is risen today. Hallelujah."

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**April 27, 2003**

## **2nd Sunday after Easter**

Acts 4:32-35; Ps. 133;  
1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

### **Peace Be With You**

Every day newspapers, magazines, radios, and televisions are flooded with information on war. Any day it could break out somewhere. There is a Nigerian musician who sings that "there is war in the East, there is war in the West, there is war up North, and there is war down South." Then he cries out several times, "War, war, war!"

Frederick Douglas, a black abolitionist, once indicated that just as the United States had a Department of War, it should have a Department of Peace. If we spent as much on making peace as we do on making war, we could have more success in our making of peace.

Peace is something that will not just happen by itself. We must be intentional about peace. We must be advocates for peace. Jesus has challenged us by saying that "as the father has sent me so send I you."

**May 4, 2003**

## **3rd Sunday of Easter**

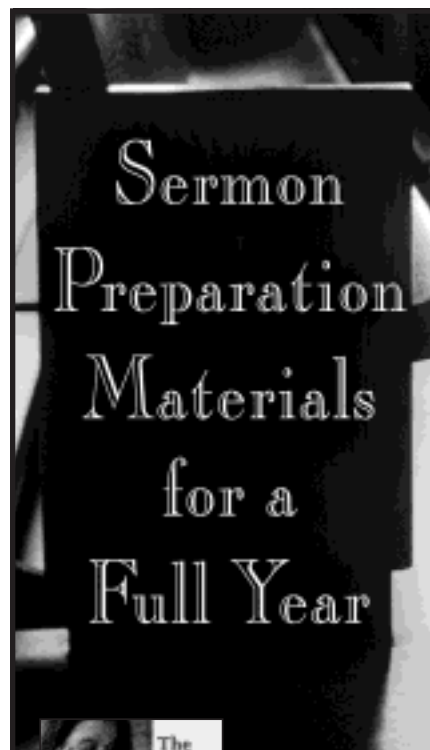
Acts 3:12-19; Ps 4  
1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

### **Listen to the Lord**

In 1990 shortly after the signing of a cease-fire between the warring parties in Liberia, I left Freetown, Sierra Leone, to go to Monrovia to check on the condition of the churches. When I crossed over the border into Liberia, I was arrested by the rebels and held for two months.

During this time I had no contact with the General Board of Global Ministries or my family. I was being charged with being a spy. Every day I was taken to the headquarters of the rebel forces for interrogation. They kept asking me why I was there. I kept telling them I was going to visit members of the church.

A number of times while being questioned, I had fear for my life. For two months I had had no contact with the Liberian church leaders, or my family. I began to say to myself, "What have I gotten into?" Fear was a real part of my daily thoughts.



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This message from Psalm 4 gave me a sense of assurance that there is safety in the Lord. The writer states: "Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness; Thou has enlarged me when I was in distress; Have mercy upon me and hear my prayer."

Every day I listened to the Lord for direction and safety. I began to have visits from members of the churches who heard that I was being held. They brought food and offered their prayers. It was through listening, waiting on God's time, that I was released and later freed to return to Sierra Leone. God's time is the best time. Listen to him.

## **May 11, 2003** **4th Sunday of Easter**

Acts 4:5-12; Ps. 23;  
1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

### **The Shepherd Cares**

The job of a shepherd is one of caring. The shepherd is responsible for looking out for the welfare of the sheep. The shepherd spends a great deal of his time in lonely places. The shepherd does not stay in the same place for long periods of time. He keeps on the move in search for greener pastures so that his sheep will be able to find adequate nourishment.

While the shepherd is in the process of moving his sheep from place to place, some of them can become separated from the rest by getting lost, falling into a ditch, or getting caught in the bushes. At night when the shepherd makes his sheep ready for sleep, he counts them to see if they are all present. When the count is concluded and the sheepfold is closed for the night, the shepherd's task is not over. The shepherd must now leave the sheep and go looking for the missing ones. The shepherd is not satisfied when any of his sheep are missing. The shepherd goes back to those places he has been in search of the lost ones. He searches and searches until all the missing ones are accounted for. If one is injured, he places it on his shoulders and carries it home. The fold is not complete unless they are all there.

Psalm 23 assures us that God cares and looks out for us in a similar fashion. He cares for us and seeks to meet all of our needs as the shepherd does.

## **May 18, 2003** **5th Sunday of Easter**

Acts 8:26-40; Ps. 22:25-31;  
1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

### **Love One Another**

In today's Epistle lesson, we are being challenged to love one another. You might ask the question, "How can this be done in a day when hate and mistrust are being demonstrated in so many different ways?" Children are being kidnapped, bombings are taking place in the streets, and many families have not gotten over the tragic events of September the 11th of 2001.

Are we capable of loving one another? The answer is no and yes. It is no if we are trying to love someone in our own strength. We are not able to love the unlovable and the unpardonable by ourselves. Our own self-centeredness keeps us from being able to open up ourselves to the point that we can experience our higher selves.

On the other hand, we can experience the love of others with the help of Christ. The Epistle lesson calls for us "to love one another for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." Because of God's love for us we are called to love one another. This is not an easy task but it can be done.

Think of someone in your life that you have negative feelings about. Now begin to think about how you might let the love that Christ is calling you to demonstrate permeate your life.

Secondly, begin to pray on a regular basis for this person and ask God to open up your spirit and make you more receptive toward the person.

Finally, look for this person so that you can begin to feel a new receptivity toward the person in ways you have not before. When you take these three steps, give God praise.

## **May 25, 2003** **6th Sunday of Easter**

Acts 10:44-48; Ps 98;  
1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

### **Chosen by God**

In life we have to frequently make choices. The profession that we will practice, the person we will marry, the school

we will attend, and the type of automobile we will drive are choices that we all have to make. Some of our decisions turn out to be good ones, and some do not bring the results we had hoped for. We "win some and we lose some." Life is filled with difficult choices that we must continue to make throughout our lives.

The lesson today is about a choice being made;—a choice being made by Jesus. He is the one who is taking the initiative. He indicates in John 15:16 that we have not chosen him but he has chosen us. There is no greater honor than to be chosen by God. To be selected and ordained by him to be his messenger, what an honor!

The message that we carry is not of *our* choice but of *his* choice. His message is one of love and friendship. We have been chosen to carry this love and friendship everywhere we go. This love and friendship transcends all barriers. This love and friendship tears down all walls that divide us. The ground at Calvary is level. There are no distinctions there. How wonderful and great it is to be chosen by God!

## **June 1, 2003** **7th Sunday of Easter**

Acts 1:15-17, 21-16; Ps. 1;  
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

### **God Blesses the Godly**

There is a song we use to sing in the local church when I small. I don't hear it very often in today's church. The song went something like this: "Count your blessings and name them one by one, count your many blessings and see what God has done."

I challenge you to sit down today and take out a sheet of paper. Draw a line down the middle and on one side of the line write blessings, and on the other side write non-blessings. Then think about your life as you live it from day to day. Every time you think of a blessing in your life put a check under blessings. Every time you think about a non-blessing in your life put a check on the other side. When you have exhausted your list, count the marks under each category.

I want to assure you that when you total up the results you will find that the blessing outnumber the non-blessings. The songwriter knew what he was talking

about when he wrote, "count your blessings and name them one by one, count your many blessings and see what God has done." If you count fairly, the pluses will always out number the minuses.

Psalm 1 assures us that when we live a life of righteousness, God is with us and will stand by us in every way.



**Frank Horton is a retired member of the Kentucky Conference and was formerly a missionary to Liberia for 27 years.**

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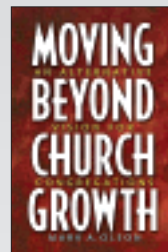
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