



by Mandy Sloan Flemming

August 23

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11; 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Each of the texts for this week encourages us to wonder: Where does God dwell, and where do we abide? Our family of four recently moved, and we packed up all that we owned and shifted our belongings from one house to another, barely a mile away. Four years of living, loving, eating, growing and nurturing were boxed up and unpacked. We did our best to counsel our boys, ages 2 and 4, on the shift we were making. We took time to bless our old home and personalize our new one. They brought their most prized possessions with them out of the old house to ensure that those were the first things in the new house.

Even though it's been a full month since the move, they still regard our "old" home as their real home. They find ways to attach and cling to the objects that are most familiar and remind them of the time they spent there. Their understanding of home is not the place where their stuff is, but the place where their memories abide. In time, this new home will become home to them. But, in this transitional time, we do our best to love those memories and recall them with fondness as we appreciate this glorious new space.

Throughout history, we have struggled and wrestled to understand God's presence and where that presence resides. In the past, lavish temples were built where God could be worshiped. And, in a gracious act of accommodation, God moved from rejecting David's request to build a temple to visiting Solomon and the elders

upon its completion. The Psalmist writes about the loveliness of the Lord's dwelling place, and directs praise to the courts of God. Paul writes about how we are to abide in the whole armor of God.

But it is Jesus who speaks most directly to where our dwelling must be. In our perpetual need to find a concrete place to go to worship God, God has found a way to come directly to us. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," Jesus tells those while teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. For it is in Christ that we find our dwelling place, and it is in Christ that we find our true home, because it is in Christ that God is revealed as a loving, generous, forgiving God.

So, where then does God dwell? The wise Solomon asks, "Will God indeed dwell upon the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" This wise man knows that God's presence cannot be contained. But, Christ comes to say, "Abide in me, and I in them." For, though it is true that God's presence cannot be contained, God has still chosen tangible, real ways to be present to us: in bread and wine, in flesh and blood, in life and death, and life beyond death, God is with us.

August 30

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9 or Psalm 72; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The nature of the human heart is at the center of our texts today. The lectionary draws

from the rarely-used Song of Solomon to describe the longing for one's beloved. James borrows this language to address the recipient. The Psalm speaks of a heart overflowing. But Mark's gospel sends us in a seemingly different direction, honing in on the rituals of washing and the consequences of focusing on what comes from within. How does this one text make any sense when paired with such lovely, lofty, even erotically-minded passages?

The connection I find is through relationships. Each of these passages begins with the most base of human connection: touch, sensuality, cleanliness. When my husband and I were married, seven years ago this week, the minister preached on this passage from the Song of Solomon: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come." This text points to the recreation of relationship and the possibility of new life that is promised in such a love.

This love, which is as strong as death, (Song of Solomon 8:6) cannot come simply from the pounding heart of a new passion. Such a love must resonate from the affirmation that one is beloved. As Jesus tries to teach his disciples, our best comprehension of God's grace and mercy cannot come by "teaching human precepts as doctrines," but must come from God, who loves as we are called to love, who forgives as we are called to forgive.

The sensuality in the Song of Solomon is unapologetic, the longing is satisfied. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. But, strangely, this text never unites the bride and bridegroom. Their words are spoken across the mountains and vineyards. So, if this passage is to be viewed as a metaphor for God's inbreaking reign, then we are to understand that it is not complete, and our longing continues. If God is unchanging, then what we long for most must be already present. What is incomplete is not God, but our awareness of God's abiding presence.

As we clunk around and do our best to discover the best ways to experience this holy pres-

ence, Jesus reminds us that our ways will only cloud the path. The ritual of handwashing stops being meaningful when it becomes an avenue for pride. Prayer ceases to be heard when it becomes a vehicle for avarice. As James writes, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27).

So, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." Let us keep ourselves unstained by the world as we watch and wait for the unfolding of the Kingdom of God, which is here, now, and yet to come.

September 6

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125
or Psalm 124; James 2:1-10 (11-13) 14-17;
Mark 7:24-37

Clearly, the modern church is not the first to struggle with the question of economic disparity in our community. In today's texts, we get a glimpse of what it is we are to do so as to be bringers of righteousness and mercy to all in need. Proverbs levels the plain by noting: "The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all." James pointedly asks, "Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith? ... But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you?" And Mark brings us the story of the Syrophenician woman whose daughter is possessed.

She boldly approaches Jesus, who is seeking refuge in the region of Tyre, and bows at his feet to ask for her daughter's healing. Jesus' response is stunning: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This distaste is uncharacteristic of Jesus in these circumstances. It is normally reserved for biting retorts to Pharisees or thick-headed disciples. For Jesus to respond to a bold request for healing in such a pointed way

shows us an aspect of this Incarnate God that doesn't sit well. Is this not the one who says, "Let the children come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven?" Is this not the one who heals the hemorrhaging woman simply because she touched the hem of his garment? Is this the man who healed the blind and the lame? Why, then, does this woman's request evoke such a reaction?

The response of the Syrophenician woman is even more remarkable. It was as if she had read the passage in Proverbs before coming to Jesus: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She reminds him: "the rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2). This is not a theory of trickle-down economics; she does not point out to him that those with the least eventually get the run over of those who have the most. Rather, she argues plainly that God's provision is for all.

James writes, "Mercy triumphs over judgment... So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead." If God's provision is for all, then we are to offer ourselves as agents of that provision. Consider that a foreigner was able to speak convincingly to Jesus that mercy will triumph over judgment (and she was right). Our petitions have power. Our faith has power, and we are able to do abundantly more than we could ask or imagine.

September 13

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19;
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. Jesus knew that the tongues of his disciples, followers, and observers flapped endlessly in speculation about his nature and being. We are a chatty bunch, we humans. And, since the dawn of time, our tongues have created both blessings and curses in our mouths. It is joked, here in the South, that you can say just about anything you want about a person, as long as you conclude your statement with a blessing: "Franny is looking

so old these days! Her hair is getting so gray, and her belly is getting so round, bless her heart..." James is right when he says, "The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits."

There is undoubtedly an occasion in your congregation when the tongues of the scoffers and fools will cause conflict. These passages point to both the need for correction and the means by which to do so. How do we, in love, call these tongues to be silenced? And how do we use our words for the proclamation of God's goodness, rather than judgment?

Our faith has power, and we are able to do abundantly more than we could ask or imagine.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We are called to deny ourselves—not that we may lack in joy or pleasure—but that we may set aside foolish teachings and untamed thoughts. Psychologist Karen Horney wrote about the notion of the "Tyranny of the Should." She observed in her clients that their greatest disappointments came from their belief of what they should be: parents, healers, successful in business, great teachers. In focusing on the "should," the inner voices that spoke insufficiencies to the point of torment, her clients were trapped in a devastating cycle of impossibility. Who they were was never enough. When Jesus says, "deny yourself," he speaks to the understanding that these "shoulds" may never become reality. In fact, when we deny ourselves, we are denying our very being as we know it, so that we may die to Christ and be raised to new life.

Though we can never tame the tongue, we can deny ourselves the words of scoffing and foolishness, cursing and complacency. We can take up our crosses, bind to them our "shoulds,"

and follow the one who will cause us to shout:
“The heavens are telling the glory of God!”

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

September 20

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

If one is concerned with the ideal of a Christian family, one needs to look no further than the lectionary texts for today. The gospel passage from Mark describes the nature of welcome and hospitality as one welcomes a child. James speaks to the character of Wisdom. Psalm 1 demonstrates the character of a happy man. And, finally, Proverbs offers a (hopefully) thorough picture of a capable wife, who is a knitter of wool, a seamstress of fine linen, a seeker of food, a purchaser of property, a gardener, an athlete, a businesswoman, an insomniac, a generous, fearless, hearty, dignified, wise, kind, busy, maternal, and, of course, happy woman. And, if she lived today, I'm sure she'd be an active blogger, as well.

This Proverb, which is commonly unearthed to speak of women on Mother's Day or at the time of her death, stands as one of the most empowering views of women in the canon. Certainly, we have the models of the faithful Sarah, poetic Miriam, fierce Jael and Deborah, the honorable Queen Vashti and brave Esther, the subversive Ruth and the bitter Naomi, and dear Mother Mary and loyal Dorcas. But in this passage from Proverbs, all of the qualities of these women (and more) are encapsulated and glorified. How limiting it is to return to it only at the end of one's life or during a prescribed time of year!

Because this passage comes with such grandiose descriptions of woman and wife, we pastors feel that we must soften it to make more

attainable. But, this inclination to explain away the poetry and power of the Proverb also sucks away its message. If, in the Christian life, we are called to be anything, it is to be more than we believed we could be: more loving, more forgiving, more gracious, more faithful.

Great scholar (and wise woman) Kathleen O'Connor points out that this passage is an acrostic poem. Each line begins with a word ordered from the Hebrew alphabet. It also comes at the end of the book of Proverbs, which has spent a great deal of time speaking of the character of Wisdom. In this passage, the personification of Wisdom is given a life, a family, hobbies, and structure. Wisdom is one of the most highly valued attributes in the canon, and today's text from James reminds us of this, saying, “The Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Ordering the understanding of Wisdom in the character of an industrious woman, wife, and mother presents the opportunity for the hearer to engage with Wisdom in a concrete way. Who among us has not known a woman with at least one of these characteristics? As O'Connor writes, “Because Wisdom has provided for the needs of all, no tragedy can disturb the equanimity of her family.” And, if Wisdom can provide, then imagine what fruits our call to wisdom will yield.

September 27

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive... the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us... But blessed be the name of the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth” (Ps. 124: 2-4, 6).

If you serve any time in ministry, you will cer-

tainly experience a time when the flood waters will become deep and the torrent will threaten to wash over you. However large or small your congregation, when their anger is turned to you, it is overwhelming. The church as an institution is both a powerful structure and a broken ruin. The church is filled with people (including those who lead it) who are strong, yet sinful. Hungry, yet famished. Faithful, yet doubtful.

How, then, are we called to preach?

The lectionary texts today point to the weaknesses of the institution and our ability to comprehend our role in it. When Christ overturned the tables in the temple, he turned social structure on its head: the last become first, the weak become strong, the mighty are brought low. But, this is difficult for even the disciples to comprehend. When John says to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us,” Jesus retorts: “Do not stop him! For no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Whoever is not against us is for us. How does this look in your congregation? What prophetic words need to be spoken to those who are against you, and how can you do it in a way that provides pastoral assurance without limiting truth? If we knew the answers to this, the church would be a very different place. But, James says, “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? ... The prayer of faith will save the sick. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” Those who are against us are suffering and wandering. So, let us pray.

Let us cry out prayers of petition, forgiveness, mercy, and praise. For, when the waters get deep and cover our necks, our mouths are still free to pray without ceasing. In seeking forgiveness and demonstrating it to others, we will find a way to live in truth. Pray for your congregants. If any among them wander, bring them back in love,

turning the other cheek and spilling out grace in full. And, as we see in the story of Esther, the day of sorrow will be turned into gladness, and we can return to “sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.”

 October 4

Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26 or Psalm 25;
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Today, as we prepare to come to the table with all of our Sisters and Brothers in Christ around the world for World Communion Sunday, the texts boldly name some of the most difficult themes in our Scripture: the suffering of Job, the vindication of the faithful servant, the nature of the Incarnation and Christ’s power over death, and, finally, what Jesus says about divorce. Even with the question of theodicy (that is, the defense of an all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful God despite the presence of evil and suffering in the world), it is the last of these topics that is the most difficult for us to present in the pulpit. Who among us wants to preach that those who have divorced their spouses and re-married have committed adultery? This is thorny ground, and I imagine most of us would yield our prophetic role to the pastoral on this issue.

How are we to take these tricky texts and use them to prepare our congregations to come to the table and feast with God’s people on earth and all the company of heaven? Our liturgy for Communion says precious little about our integrity, but these text offerings say an awful lot. Job is blameless and upright, and God defends him, saying, “He persists in his integrity, though you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” The Psalmist practically begs for the same test, so that he may be vindicated, redeemed, and found a recipient of God’s grace. Paul wrestles in Hebrews with how we are to understand our relationship with God, since God has made “human beings for a little while lower than the angels.” If

this is the case, then we should all be blameless and upright, fearing God and blessing God's name.

But the Gospel text reminds us that we are neither blameless nor upright. We are foolish and impulsive, making promises that we do not keep and longing for what is not ours. We surrender our integrity when we are tested, and we lose faith in one another and God. We yell, and cry: "What have I ever done to deserve this??" And the silence from the cosmos echoes louder than any words.

So, how are we able to invite people to this table, knowing that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?

We are able because our integrity is found, not in our own ability, but in God's promise to be faithful. God continues to host this supper, and to invite all who will partake of it, because God has made "the pioneer of our salvation perfect through suffering." We do not suffer apart from God, because, "It is Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, that is no crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9).

And because Christ has tasted death for all, we are invited, in the great congregation to bless the Lord and feast at his heavenly table.



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