



Texts in Context

The Church in Mission: Gospel Texts for the Sundays of Easter (Series C)*

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THE SIX LECTIONARY GOSPEL TEXTS DESIGNATED FOR PREACHING FROM THE Second through the Seventh Sundays of Easter (series C) are all from the Gospel according to St. John.

All of the texts underscore the central place of Jesus in the ongoing life and calling of the Christian community and all are marked by a consistent theology of the cross. There is throughout a continuing explication of and emphasis upon the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of that community. Trinitarian language is deeply embedded in all of the texts, and all convey a profound missional note.

Additionally, there are a number of basic, ongoing themes in John's Gospel which appear in these texts. They are critically important for understanding the message in each instance and will be dealt with as they surface in the texts themselves.

Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

It may be helpful to divide the text into two parts: the gathering of the disciples on the "first day of the week" (vv. 19-23) and the arrival of Thomas (vv. 24-31).

1. *The gathering of the disciples (vv. 19-23)*. This section should be read with an eye to what Jesus says in the farewell discourses in chapters thirteen through seventeen.

*This article was written after an extended discussion of the texts with Professors Craig Koester and Paul Martinson, Luther Seminary, and Pastor Tom Zarth, Oak Grove Lutheran Church, Richfield, Minnesota.

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Animosity toward Jesus is an ongoing theme in John, and that fact lies behind the disciples' "fear of the Jews." Jesus' appearance makes it clear that his presence stands over against the hostility of the world; with him present the disciples have nothing to fear.

The fidelity of Christ to his word is another ongoing theme in John that surfaces here. Before his death Jesus had promised to give the disciples peace (John 14:27), joy (John 16:22), and the Holy Spirit (chapters 14, 15, and 16). After his resurrection, he gives them all three just as he had promised. The cumulative effect is to make clear to them that Jesus has not abandoned them, that he has not left them "orphans" (John. 14:18).

There is a qualitative distinction between the peace that the world offers and that which Jesus gives (14:27). Christian discipleship does not take place in a neutral environment. The peace that Christ gives comes with knowing him (16:33). It is a peace that comes to them in the midst of conflict and threat rather than as the absence of such.

Literally translated, Jesus breathed "in" them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is an echo of the original creative act in Gen 2:7.

There is a persistent missional note in John's gospel (v. 31). Here that note is brought to its final form in his sending of the disciples (v. 21). It is a cruciform sending (cf. vs. 20) and it will prove to be a cruciform going for them as well.

Jesus does not proclaim the forgiveness of sin during his public ministry in John, rather his response to the need to deal with human sin is concentrated in his taking it upon himself on the cross. Here Jesus speaks in terms of the disciples forgiving or retaining sin. In John, to retain sin is to hold people to account for their sin (cf. 8:24; 9:41; etc.). It is a word of stark warning that is given for the sake of the word of promise: "You will die in your sins – unless...!" In other words: retaining is not done as an end in itself. It is a word of "law" designed to lead to the gospel.

The trinitarian language is profound here. It is profoundly concrete rather than abstract, however. The Trinity appears here as the lived-out life of God for us in the world. It is carried in the concreteness of "sending" and includes our own being sent by Jesus to participate in God's mission in the power and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It is under the direct and continuing authority of Jesus (Matt 28:18-20) that Jesus' disciple community (the church) participates in God's mission (cf. v. 23; but only *God* can forgive sins!). So it is that in the church's mission the world is directly confronted by Jesus, the Son of God (Acts 5:29), and thus by God.

2. *The arrival of Thomas (vv. 24-31)*. Thomas appears here for the third time in John. His earlier appearances are a preparation for this occasion. His first appearance is at the raising of Lazarus, which is a dress rehearsal for the resurrection and is the last of the "signs" Jesus performs. Jesus promises *life* in that sign, but Thomas, completely misunderstanding, assumes it means *death* (John. 11:16). Obviously, for Thomas, seeing (Lazarus being raised) was not believing.

Thomas' second appearance in John is at the last supper. Jesus speaks of going to the Father's house, preparing a place for them, and returning to take them to be

with him. Then he says to them: "You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas replies: "Lord, we do *not* know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus replies: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also" (John 14:4-7). In other words, when you really know who I am you will see and know God.

Then in John 20 it all comes together for Thomas. The appearance of Jesus does not in itself evoke faith. There is a context of proclamation which creates the ground out of which faith arises. The earlier proclamation prepared Thomas for faith, but faith doesn't come until later for him. The experience took on meaning for Thomas because of the testimony and witness that had gone before. The preaching of the word had established a context within which the encounter now results in faith. So Thomas confesses: "My Lord (in response to the disciples' testimony) and my God (in response to Jesus' word of promise)!" (v. 28).

So the text speaks about how people come to faith; that they do so is a driving concern for John (v. 31), even as it is for Jesus. Accordingly, Jesus comes back for Thomas—he goes out of his way for this one person—and deals with him where he is, that he may come to believe and that through believing he may have life (v. 31).

Third Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-14

The key word here appears both at the beginning and the end of the passage: "Jesus *showed himself* again to the disciples" (v. 1), and "This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples" (v. 14). The text has to do with Jesus' self-disclosure.

The first section of this passage (vv. 1-8) is a fishing story. To go fishing was Peter's idea, but given Peter's initiative alone, nothing comes of it.

There are only two sea stories in John, this one and the one in chapter six. In John 6:44 Jesus makes the claim that "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me." The means through which God draws people to Jesus is the lifting up of Jesus in his crucifixion (12:32). God does this drawing, both consequently and subsequently, through the hearing of the "word of the cross." No one has said this any more clearly than did Luther in his explanation of the third article of the creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel."

So now in this passage, the word that Jesus speaks (v. 6) emboldens the disciples to do what does not seem to make sense; the result is a net filled with big fish—one hundred fifty three of them! What had been fruitless has become bountiful. The divine "drawing" is to be found behind the scenes both in 21:6 and in 21:11.

It is undoubtedly the case that Peter and the others had found the events of the past few days unreal, bewildering, and fearsome: Jesus' arrest, trial, conviction, crucifixion, death, and burial—then his appearances to them and his disappearances again. What were they to make of all of this?

Finally Peter says: "I am going fishing!" And they go with him. They go back to what they know to be real. They go down to that lake and boat, those oars, ropes, nets, and those fish—the things that are the very most real for them—in order to

get their feet back down on the ground again, to establish some kind of moorings for themselves, to do something useful.

Then they discover to their chagrin that they have no final control even over what is most real for them, for “that night they caught nothing” (v. 3). Then Jesus comes into the picture (vv. 4-6) and demonstrates convincingly that he does have control over what they do not. Among the things that are the most real for them, but over which they have no real control, Jesus comes and makes himself known. In Jesus’ self-disclosure they come to know what is truly real. Their life and calling begin to make sense. The incident has a missional theme.

The second incident in the text is the feeding (vv. 9-14). The bread and the fish, as in the feeding of the five thousand, are ready. Jesus is the active agent in God’s mission.

Both the Johannine themes of the nurturing of the disciple community (vv. 9-14) and its missionary calling (vv. 1-8) are found in this passage. God is the subject of both themes. God is the actor. The final message of both themes is much the same as Abraham discovered it to be, namely, that “the Lord will provide” (Gen 22:14) – and that is the very essence of faith.

Fourth Sunday of Easter: John 10:22-30

Two issues are front and center in this passage: (1) the identity of Jesus, and (2) the mystery of faith.

1. *The Identity of Jesus.* Jesus is pressed hard to reveal his own identity at the feast of Tabernacles in chapters 7-8; the pressure continues in chapters 9-10. Hence the context is very conflictive.

The sharpness of the question makes response difficult. Tell us plainly, who are you? Are you the Messiah? Why not just say Yes or No?

John tells us that it was the time of the festival of the Dedication (v. 22). It was the winter festival, the last festival of the year, the feast of Hanukkah. The Maccabees had introduced it to commemorate the rededication of the temple in 164 B.C. after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. The festival had an inescapably nationalistic quality about it. It was a time of heroes.

The great villain in the memory of the questioners was the Syrian leader Antiochus who had tried to play God, capturing the temple and turning it into a pagan shrine. The great hero in their memory was the Jewish military leader Judah Maccabee who drove the Syrians out of Israel and purified the temple. So it was that Jesus could not say either yes or no to their questions without being seriously misunderstood. He would have had to respond with a yes and a no: Yes, he is the Messiah; but, no, he is not a Judah Maccabee. Yes, he is God; but, no, he is not like the blasphemer Antiochus Epiphanes.

Jesus goes a third way. He redefines the role of the messiah, speaking of himself as the shepherd of his people, reaching back into Isa 40:11, Jer 23:1-6, and Ezek 34:11 and 23, where the shepherd is both God and messiah. At the end (v. 30) he does tell them plainly who he is by identifying himself with God, and that does not go so well. They associate him with the blasphemer Antiochus and seek to stone him.

2. *The mystery of faith* (vv. 25-30). Faith is not self-generated. It comes only with hearing the Master's voice.

Why don't people believe (v. 26)? The text doesn't have an answer for that question. The missionary response is to keep on proclaiming Jesus as the Christ; it is to keep on telling the story, pointing to Christ, to keep on offering without ceasing.

To believe in Jesus is to believe in God; to belong to Jesus is to belong to God. Our security is found not in what we have or who we are but in *whose* we are. It is located in the faithfulness of the shepherd. Our certainty is not in our hands; it comes from the One who holds us in his hand (cf. Ps 4:8 and 23:1-4). The church's only security is in being chosen and sent; the church comes to know this in listening to Christ's voice and following him in trust and obedience.

Fifth Sunday of Easter: John 13:31-35

This text follows the foot washing and the identification of the betrayer (vv. 21-30). The word immediately preceding this pericope says: "And it was night" (v. 30). This is the culmination of the light and darkness theme in John. The betrayal (v. 30) has set the final act in motion. Now that betrayal is underway and night has fallen, Jesus says: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified" (v. 31). His glorification is the revelation of God's power and presence in the context of the forces that are against him.

John's Gospel regularly moves from christology to discipleship, wherein Jesus makes clear what it means to be a disciple (e.g., John 6:35; 8:12). That happens here, too: Jesus talks about himself, and then goes on to talk about discipleship in terms of the new commandment. The emphasis here is a little different than in the other Gospels. There the standard assumed is self-love, that we should love others as we love ourselves. Here, however, Jesus identifies his own self-giving love as the standard for his followers.

When Jesus talks about being glorified he is talking about being crucified. The cross is the sign of his glorification. (cf. 12:20-36) The glory of God's love for the world is to be seen in the cross (3:16). One is led to ask here: Who suffers more? The Father who gives or the Son who dies? Divine vulnerability is an inescapable part of this whole event. It reaches very deeply into who God is.

The death of Jesus becomes the standard for Christians. The cross is the transforming revelation, the saving action of God's love. Jesus translates this into discipleship: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (v. 34). You cannot come with me now, so you must love one another, care for one another, as I love and care for you. This gives a reciprocal character to Christian love that shows up in community.

We need to read verses 34 and 35 together. The love that exists in the Christian community is an integral part of that community's witness, and these two elements are always in tension with one another. We cannot go out and love the world without the support of a community wherein we are loved as Christ loves us. We need that community in order to survive as Christians. It is crucial for

us to know that someone out there loves us. On the other hand, the community does not exist in and for itself alone. The church is the community where the love of God takes shape for the sake of the world, for the sake of that wider community of which the Christian community is a part. Thus the church becomes the saving reach of God's love into the world.

Sixth Sunday of Easter: John 14:23-29

There is an interesting movement throughout John 14. Jesus keeps coming and going. At the outset Jesus announces he is going somewhere to make a place for us and then he is going to come back and take us to be with him there.

The movement shifts as the chapter progresses so the disciples are not left with the idea that Jesus is abandoning them. In verse 18 he says: "I will not leave you orphaned." The future hope is brought into the present. There is also a home which Jesus has in the present and that is *in the believer* (v. 20). It is through the agency of the Spirit that Christians have the assurance that God is with them.

The other function of the Holy Spirit is to teach and remind (v. 26). Throughout John's Gospel the disciples never seem to get what Jesus tells them – or shows them – the first time round. It is the Holy Spirit's function to teach and remind the believers of Jesus' original revelation and saving action, drawing out its significance for them in an ever deepening and strengthening way. We see an example of this in 2:22 and again at the very end of Jesus' ministry in 12:16. Very often understanding comes with retrospection. At a new time and in a new place we often see something more of, or see more deeply into, or are more fully grasped by the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection for us and for the world around us. That is an expression of the Spirit's work in us with its gift of peace (wholeness) and the sense that all is right (v. 27).

This is a heavily trinitarian passage. Jesus' reference to going to the Father and his expectation that his disciples would rejoice in his going is a sign of the love that characterizes the relationship between Jesus and the Father (v. 28). All this comes within the context of our hope and anticipation that we also will participate – will dwell – in that divine community of love, which is to say, in God. We are made to participate in the divine life by the One who has given us peace, has sent the Spirit, the counselor, and who will bring us into that dwelling.

Seventh Sunday of Easter: John 17:20-26

Given the widespread recent interpretation of this passage, it is necessary to state at the outset that the unity of which Jesus speaks here is not organizational unity. The text refers to something far more profound. Organizational unity may be only about centralized power, and that is not what the gospel is about. It is about diversity and richness, community and fellowship, mutual love and support, a common Lord and a common calling.

What is clear at the outset of this passage is that unity within the Christian church is for the purpose of witnessing to others. In one sense it can be said that John is speaking of a theocentric, congregational approach to Christian mission. The

passage speaks of community for the sake of witness. The community is the place in which the love of Christ is expressed, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end.

Jesus says, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 22). The glory that God gave to Jesus came to its fullest expression in the cross. Now Jesus gives that same glory, that is, the cross, to his followers. The cross is given to them "that they may be one, as we are one." The oneness of God is demonstrated and lived out in the cross. In that light, to fight among ourselves as the followers of Jesus is to deny the cross. To take control is yet another way to deny it.

The glory spoken of by John is inseparable from the crucifixion, but we see another dimension of that glory in John 1. Though cruciform, glory refers also to God's eschatological presence and power. It includes, therefore, the characterization of Christ's pre-existence, or his heavenly existence, as well (cf. 17:24). The concept of glory in John is anchored in the cross, but extends beyond it.

Whether we speak of the glory of God in Christ in terms of our Lord's pre-existence or in terms of the cross, however, God's glory remains the same. It is glimpsed in the mutual giving and receiving of the Father and the Son (17:4-5). Under the conditions of human sin, such glory finds expression in suffering and the cross.

In this text the great gifts of the glory and the oneness of the Triune God are given to the church. The glory that God has given to Christ, God also gives to the church; it comes to expression in and through the church's participation by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as the church follows him in the obedience of faith out into the world to the end "that the world may believe...(and) know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vv. 21-23).

Just as the glory of God is given to the church so also is the oneness or unity of the Triune God given to the church, and it is given in the same way. The unity of the church universal is a gift and is thus something of an end in itself, yet it is at the same time a means to an end and a by-product of that end, which is to say that it is given to the church in the process and as a result of its participating in Christ's suffering and its witness to the world.

As a sort of footnote to these reflections it should be noted that, historically speaking, the so-called ecumenical movement was a result of the modern missionary movement, not the other way around. The churches decided to work together for the sake of mission (cf. the Edinburgh Conference of 1910) and in doing so discovered something of the oneness they already had in Christ.

Jesus makes God's love known to his disciples. So it is the love of God that we experience when we experience love within the disciple community. It is through that community in turn, in and through its reaching out to embrace others, proclaiming him to them, that Jesus continues to make God's love known to the world (John 3:16).

These six texts from John, selected for the Easter season, were chosen to prepare us for Pentecost Sunday, the giving of the Holy Spirit and the living out of our missionary calling. Preaching them should do just that.