



Texts in Context

Easter to Trinity with the Gospel of John: Bearing Witness to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

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THE USE OF READINGS FROM THE GOSPEL OF JOHN THROUGHOUT THE COMING Easter season and on Pentecost and Trinity Sunday provides an opportunity for the preacher and the congregation to be drawn into the uniqueness of this gospel Sunday after Sunday, something not possible during any other time in Year C.

Recalling the context for these texts within the gospel allows us to see each text in its uniqueness and also in its relationship with the other texts in this series. The gospel itself is carefully patterned and structured around a closing verse in the farewell words of Jesus, which, in its own way, identifies the divisions of the gospel:

John 16:28

- A I came from the **Father**
- B and I have come into the **world**
- B¹ again I am leaving the **world**
- A¹ and going to the **Father**

Structure of the Gospel of John

- A John 1:1-18
- B John 1:19-12:50
- B¹ John 13:1-17:26
- A¹ John 18:1-21:25

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The Gospel of John, particularly in these rich texts for the period from Easter to Holy Trinity, bear unique witness to the promises, the work, and the relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The preacher using these texts will not have to wait for Trinity Sunday to proclaim the triune God.

In the form of a chiasm or concentric pattern (A, B, B¹, A¹), the prologue of the gospel of John (A John 1:1-18) identifies Jesus' coming from the **Father**, and the passion and resurrection narratives (A¹ John 18:1-21:25) identify Jesus' return to the **Father** through his death and resurrection. The central sections of the gospel, the words and signs or works of Jesus (B John 1:19-12:50), and the farewell meal and words of Jesus (B¹ John 13:1-17:26), identify Jesus' revelation of the Father's presence in the **world** and love of the Father for the **world** in the Son.

Second Sunday of Easter (April 19, 1998): John 20:19-31 — "My Lord and My God"

This text occurs in each of the three years as the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter—the octave of Easter. This is the Gospel of John's "Pentecost" text as Jesus comes among his disciples on the eve of resurrection, bestowing the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' identity and presence with the frightened disciples brings peace: "Peace is with you." Jesus is the embodiment of God's peace now made visible in the nail-torn hands and the lanced side. In these signs Jesus sends his followers into the world in the same way the Father has sent the Son into the world. As the disciples are commissioned, so are we, in the empowering presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus literally "breathes into" (ἐμφυσάω) his followers the Holy Spirit (πνεῦμα, spirit, wind, or breath). The evangelist uses the same verb and tense used in the Genesis account of creation as God "breathed into" Adam the breath of life (ἐνεφύσησεν Gen 2:7 (LXX); 20:22). The words that accompany the gift of God's Spirit are words of life, forgiving one another as we have been forgiven. When sins are forgiven, they stand forgiven; when sins are retained, they are retained (20:23).

The absence of Thomas from the group on the eve of resurrection occasions Jesus' appearance to the disciples eight days later. Thomas' response to the disciples' witness, "We have seen the Lord," is his request to see Jesus' visible wounds. When Jesus comes among them, the words of peace are spoken once again, together with Jesus' offer that Thomas touch and see. Jesus' words, "Do not remain unbelieving but believing" (ἄπιστος ἀλλά πιστός, 20:27), express the promise of Jesus' presence. (The contrast is not between doubting and believing.) Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God," brings us back to the beginning of the gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). Jesus is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the fulfillment of God's incarnate word.

Jesus' response to Thomas does not use scolding words as a question might imply, but a statement of reality: "Because you have seen me, you have believed." These words stand in parallel with the second half of the verse as words of benediction to all who have not had the experience of Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (20:29). Through the signs or works and words of the gospel and the experience of the disciples and followers of Jesus throughout the gospel, we too have seen and heard the living witness of the word become flesh.

The concluding words of chapter 20 express the purpose of the gospel and

the evangelist's selection of signs and words that are necessary for us to see and hear. There is much more not written in this gospel, but what the evangelist has included fulfills the gospel's intention in a twofold way: (1) "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and (2) "that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). The heart of the gospel is in the centrality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, God's only Son. In his Son, God has chosen to redeem our lives from sin and death that we may have life, even life eternal as God's children in the name above every name, Jesus Christ. This is the message of Easter; this is the incarnate word made present in our world; this is the crucified and risen one who leads us in our daily walk of discipleship.

Third Sunday of Easter (April 26, 1998): John 21:1-19 — The Call to Discipleship

It appears that at least seven of the disciples have gone back to "business as usual" — fishing. On this particular evening their efforts have yielded nothing. The disclosing question comes from one on the shore whom they as yet do not recognize: "Children, you haven't caught any fish have you?" This is not the question they wanted to hear, and they answer, "No" (21:5). At the suggestion of the one on the shore, whom they still do not recognize, they cast their net on the right side of the boat. The response appears to be immediate and the yield is such that they are unable "to haul or draw" (ἐλκύω, the same verb used in 6:44 and 12:32 to describe the work of the Father and the Son in drawing all people to themselves) the catch into the boat. At this point the speaker is identified to Peter by the disciple loved by Jesus, "It is the Lord!" (21:7). Peter, stripped for work, clothes himself, jumps into the water and goes ashore.

When Peter is joined by the other disciples, they gather around a "charcoal fire" (ἀνθρακία, in the New Testament only in John 21:9 and 18:18). The word brings to remembrance Peter warming himself around a charcoal fire in the court of the High Priest, where he denied his Lord three times (18:17-18, 25-27). Over this fire Jesus has already prepared a breakfast of fish, and, together with bread, feeds his disciples. Early Christian art frequently presents scenes of Jesus serving bread and fish to his followers. This scene on the shore of Tiberias also brings to remembrance the feeding of the 5000 in all four gospels and the feeding of the 4000 in Matthew and Mark.

Following breakfast, Jesus questions Simon Peter three times concerning his love for him. The threefold questions remind us of Peter's threefold denial. Three times Peter affirms his love of Jesus, and three times Jesus "commissions" Peter: "Feed my lambs," "shepherd my sheep," "feed my sheep" (21:15-17). In this commissioning to care and provide for Jesus' own, Peter himself will become the girded one and, like his master, will be carried by others to where he does not wish to go. The evangelist notes for us that it will be in this way, by crucifixion, that Peter will glorify God, that is, make God's presence known.

We are the richer for this epilogue chapter in the Gospel of John, reminding us of God's inviting Son who provides for our needs and whose forgiving love continues to call and commission us to follow and care for God's own. This is a call

to a discipleship that is grace filled and costly on God's part. In God's gracious love we are invited and empowered as Peter and the disciple loved by Jesus to follow—"Follow me" (21:19).

Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 3, 1998): John 10:22-30—The True Light of the World

The story of Jesus in the Gospel of John unfolds around significant festival events in Jewish life. This is the only gospel in which three separate times of passover are noted (first, 2:13, 23; second, 6:4; third, 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28), and the only gospel that mentions the festivals of booths (7:2) and lights (10:22). This latter festival serves as the context for our text. Note that the identification of the festival of lights follows the chapter in which Jesus heals a man born blind (9:1-41) and is identified as "the light of the world" (9:5; see also 8:12).

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the three-year lectionary draws from chapter 10 each year (Year A, 10:1-11; Year B, 10:11-18; Year C, 10:22-30). As one quickly notes, 10:19-21 is omitted from the readings. Why?

Jesus' identity as "the door of the sheep" (10:7, 9) and "the good shepherd" (10:11, 14), prior to our text, is expressed with four "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι) statements. As the door of the sheep, Jesus is the one who protects the sheep from harm in the sheepfold and also leads the sheep from the safety and security of the sheepfold into the danger of the field where the sheep must graze to maintain life. In the countryside are the predators for which the shepherd must watch. As the good shepherd, Jesus not only protects his own but also knows each sheep by name. He is the one who will "lay down" (τίθημι, 10:11, 15, 17-18; 15:13; used of Jesus' burial in 19:41, 42) his life for the sheep.

The response to these words of promise is the section omitted in all the readings. It records the hostility engendered among Jesus' hearers; Jesus is not only charged with being possessed by a demon but is charged with being a demon (10:19-21). In the Old Testament, God is identified as the good shepherd (Isa 40:11; Jer 31:10; Ezek 34:11-16), and thus Jesus' self-identity with God is considered blasphemous by his hearers.

Our text is set within this context of Jesus' identity and the negative response of his hearers. The festival of lights (10:22), known today as Hanukkah, celebrates the restoration of the temple in 164 B.C. after its desecration under Antiochus Epiphanes. The festival takes place in winter, and Jesus is in the porch of Solomon's temple. Here Jesus is "encircled" (κυκλώω) with hostile intent. A conditional (but true) sentence expresses the request of those offended by his words of identity: "If you are the Christ [which, of course, Jesus is], tell us openly/plainly/boldly/publicly (παρρησία)" (10:24). Those who request this of Jesus are setting a trap. His response heightens their offense as Jesus identifies that what he has done is the work of the Father. Since his inquirers are not of the Father's fold, they neither hear the Father's voice spoken by the Son nor see the Father's work done by the Son. Those who are of the Father's fold know Jesus' voice, follow him, and receive eternal life. In this relationship no one is able to snatch Jesus' followers from his hand for they have been given to him by the Father. Because they are of

the Father, likewise no one is able to snatch them from the Father's hand. To heighten his identity with the Father, Jesus concludes with words that are truly open/plain/bold/public: "I and the Father are one" (10:30). The response is immediate as Jesus' words are heard to be blasphemous and his hearers take up stones to stone him as a blasphemer against God (10:31).

The verses that immediately surround our text (10:19-21 and 31) express the offensiveness of Jesus' identity with the Father and his commission from the Father. Jesus is the door of the sheep and the good shepherd; Jesus is the way of the sheep into the presence of the Father. Jesus' identity and words appear so pastoral and serene that they continue to create a response of opposition. It is around the offensiveness of these words that Jesus' life will be laid down in death, but he is also the one who will be raised by the Father. This is the truth of Jesus' oneness with the Father. In this setting of the festival of lights, Jesus is the true light of the world; in this festival of the temple, Jesus is the true temple in whom the presence of the Father dwells. Into the light of this revelation, Jesus calls us into the Father's fold.

Fifth Sunday of Easter (May 10, 1998): John 13:31-35—The Revelation of God's Glory

Jesus' final meal with his disciples and the washing of their feet (13:1-20) establishes a "pattern" (ὑποδείγμα 13:15) for his followers. Jesus has created an identity for the community that will be lived out in the world: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives the one (the Father) who sent me" (13:20). Jesus has announced at the meal that one who has eaten bread with him will lift his heel against him (13:18, from Ps 41:3): "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me" (13:21).

In the material surrounding our text, two persons are identified who will later play central roles in the passion narrative (see 18:1-19:42). Judas, the one who will betray Jesus, is identified in 13:21-30, and Peter, the one who will deny Jesus, is identified in 13:36-38. In the midst of the identity of these two figures and the events they inaugurate, Jesus begins his final words with his disciples in what has become known as "the farewell discourse" (13:31-16:33); this is followed by Jesus' prayer for the community (17:1-26).

Our text begins by noting the connection to Judas's departure from the farewell meal: "And it was night. When he [Judas] had gone out..." (13:30-31). Judas sets in motion the glorification of the Son of Man, Jesus, the one whose own glory makes known the presence of God's glory: "If God is glorified in him [as God is], God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once" (13:32). The conditional (but true) sentence indicates what truly takes place. God is glorified in the Son, God also glorifies the Son in himself, and there is in this an immediacy (εὐθως), a oneness. In the theology of the Gospel of John, God's glory, made known in Jesus' words and signs throughout the first twelve chapters, will now be manifested in the most inhuman way imaginable, death by crucifixion. Is this truly where God's glory or presence is most clearly revealed?

In the cross event, Jesus will return in glory to the Father's presence: "Where

I am going you are not able to come" (13:33b). Jesus' identification of the community as "little children" (τεκνία) could also be rendered "dear children," for the sense is that of an endearing relationship. This is found only here in the Gospel of John, but it occurs seven times as an identification of the community in 1 John (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). Jesus' words to his followers indicate that on our own we are not able to follow. Further on, in his farewell words, Jesus expresses that he will send the Paraclete (παράκλητος, 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) who will guide, instruct, and lead the community into the presence or glory of the Father and the Son.

In the midst of his betrayal by Judas and denial by Peter, Jesus calls the community to live in love with one another, a pattern expressed in his own life and death: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (13:34). Living in the pattern of Christ's love bears witness in the world to the community's identity with its Lord. The mark of discipleship in the world is expressed in "love for one another" (13:35). This is the mark of the cross and the identity of Jesus' followers, the ones baptized into his death and resurrection. In the words of 1 John, "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Sixth Sunday of Easter (May 17, 1998): John 14:23-29—The Presence of the Paraclete

Jesus' promise that his followers will not be left as orphans in the world (14:18) is dependent upon the presence of the Paraclete and the coming of Jesus. Living in Jesus' commandments incorporates the community into a threefold identity: (1) loving Jesus, (2) being loved by the Father, and (3) Jesus' loving and manifesting himself to his followers (14:20-21). In response to Jesus' words of promise, Judas (not Iscariot) continues the questions and requests we have noted previously from Peter (13:36), Thomas (14:5), and Philip (14:8): "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us and not to the world?" (14:22).

As our text begins, Jesus' response to Judas reiterates what has been said previously concerning the Father's presence with his followers, a community centered in the reality of love. In response to loving Jesus and keeping his word, the Father and the Son both love and establish a "dwelling place" (μονή, 14:2, 23) within the community.

The presence of the Father and the Son will continue to be made known in the sending of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, by the Father in Jesus' name. Through the Paraclete Jesus' teachings will be brought to remembrance in the community. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word of God is made known in our world, a word incarnate in Jesus Christ and in his teachings concerning the Father's presence in the world and love for the world. In this promise the community has been assured of the peace of God, a peace not of the world's origin, but a peace that is present in the one who is the incarnation of God's peace. In this peace Jesus assures us that our hearts will not be troubled.

In Jesus' return to the Father, he goes with the promise that he will come again. Within the reality of the pain of separation from his followers comes the joy that Jesus has completed the course set before him by the Father. In his relationship

with the Father, Jesus expresses that “the Father is greater than I” (14:28). Jesus’ words appear to contradict the identity we heard earlier, “I and the Father are one” (10:30). The Gospel of John places such identities side by side, expressing the awesome reality both of God’s divine and human presence in the word incarnate.

Jesus’ closing words remind his followers that he has spoken what has been necessary for them to hear and know. In going to the Father in death, Jesus has rendered powerless “the ruler of the world” (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κοσμοῦ, 14:30; 12:31; 16:11). Jesus’ death, resurrection, and return to the Father has vanquished all the powers and rulers of this age and world. Jesus’ obedient love has carried out the will of the Father in our world. Sin, death, and the ruler of this world are all overcome. In this sense we are called to follow Jesus to the cross, grave, and resurrection morning. As the chapter concludes, “Rise, let us go on our way” (14:31). We go in the peace of the empowering word of the Son as he goes to the Father, and we go in the empowering work of the Paraclete, the one who is called to walk beside us.

Seventh Sunday of Easter (May 24, 1998): John 17:20-26—God’s Empowering Mission in the World

On the Seventh Sunday of Easter a portion of Jesus’ prayer from John 17 is identified as the Gospel text: Year A, 17:1-11; Year B, 17:11-19; Year C, 17:20-26. The prayer is a unity—and must be understood as such—from the opening words, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (17:1), to the closing words, “I made known your name to them, and I will make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:26).

The heart of the prayer draws upon three prepositions which identify the life and pattern of the community in the world: “in” (ἐν, 17:11-13); “from” (ἐκ, 17:14-16); “into” (εἰς, 17:17-19). In 17:11-13 the community is identified as living “in the world,” but in a very specific way, “in your [the Father’s] name.” In 17:14-16 the community’s origin is “not from the world,” as Jesus’ origin is “not from the world,” and in this identity they are kept “from the evil one.” In 17:17-19 we hear that just as Jesus has been sent “into the world” by the Father, so Jesus sends his followers “into the world.” Around this threefold identity, Jesus’ followers are empowered to be the community of witness in the world.

Jesus’ petition in 17:20 is not only for those in the present community but also for those who will come to faith through their witness. Jesus’ prayer is that his followers and those to whom they witness may be one—in the same unity as that of the Father and the Son—with the purpose “that the world may believe that you sent me” (17:21). In this God-given unity is the presence of God’s glory, a unity of God that expresses the perfect unity of the Father and the Son, “that the world may know that you sent me” (17:23). In the particularity and perfection of God’s sending of the Son is a living witness in the world to the universality of God’s saving purpose for all people.

The fulfillment of God’s saving purpose for all is brought to completion in the glory of the relationship between the Father and the Son, a relationship of unity and love established before the pillars or foundations of the world were set in place

(17:24). Because the world does not come to this saving knowledge on its own, God has sent the Son to make the Father's love and presence known. In his closing words, Jesus acknowledges his accomplishment: God's name is made known and will be made known. Toward this purpose, Jesus' prayer makes known the love of the Father for the Son that this love may live in the lives of the believers just as Jesus lives in them (17:26).

Jesus' prayer continues its work in our world, calling and inviting all into the presence of God. It is a prayer of eschatological fulfillment that the God who brought all creation into being will bring all things to consummation: "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (17:3).

Day of Pentecost (May 31, 1998): John 14:8-17 [25-27]—The Promise/Works of the Paraclete

Prior to our text, Peter and Thomas have addressed questions to Jesus, questions that reflect the concern of the disciples and the community—then and now. Peter's question, "Lord, where are you going?" (13:36), responds to Jesus' words, "Where I am going you are not able to come" (13:33). Thomas's question, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how are we able to know the way?" (14:5), responds to Jesus' words that he is going to prepare a "dwelling place" (μονή, 14:2, 23), and that he will come again and "take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (14:3).

Our text begins with Philip's request, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (14:8). Jesus' response to Philip reflects the truth of the gospel: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me? The one who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (14:9). Jesus' ministry in words and signs or works throughout the Gospel of John has borne witness to the truth of the Father's presence: "The **words** that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his **works**" (14:10).

The remarkable promise of the gospel comes in Jesus' words that those who believe in him continue to carry out the work of the Father in even "greater works" (14:12). In returning to the Father, Jesus promises that "whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it" (14:13-14). Jesus' remarkable promise is the empowering word of Pentecost.

The one through whom Jesus' promise of the Father's presence is made known is the Paraclete. The word Paraclete (παράκλητος, 14:16, 26, 15:26; 16:7) translates literally as "one who is called to the side." (Various translations render the word as advocate, comforter, counselor, helper.) Jesus promises that his followers will not be left as "orphans" (ὀρφανούς in 14:18) in the world. In Jesus' return to the Father, Jesus' prayer is that God will give the community "another Paraclete." If another Paraclete is to come, then Jesus must be understood to be the "first Paraclete." The way in which we know the one who is to come is through the one whom we have come to know, Jesus Christ; in him we have come to know the Father's presence and love. Living in Jesus' commandment of love (14:15, see also

13:34-35) we come to know the one who is called to walk beside us, the one who is “the Spirit of truth” (14:17). The manifestation of God’s presence in the community is through the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, who dwells within the community of faith. The world does not receive this presence, because it neither sees God nor knows God.

Our Pentecost/Paraclete text was inaugurated by Philip’s request, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (14:8). Jesus’ words promise that God’s living presence in this world remains as always. To fulfill its call to manifest God’s presence of love and forgiveness in the world, the community of Jesus’ followers will need to claim the promise of his words and to live in the reality of God’s gift of love. This is the work of the Spirit of truth in the community; this is the companionship of the Paraclete (one called to the side); this is the gift of Pentecost.

The Holy Trinity (June 7, 1998): John 16:12-15—The Announcing Word of the Paraclete

The threefold work of the Paraclete precedes our text for Holy Trinity Sunday: he will convict or convince the world concerning (1) sin(fulness), (2) righteousness, and (3) judgment (16:8). Sin(fulness) in the Gospel of John is centered in unbelief. The presence of righteousness is made known in Jesus’ death on the cross and vindicated in his resurrection and return to the Father. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, “the ruler of the world” (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κοσμοῦ, 16:11; 12:31; 14:30) is the one who is sentenced, judged, and rendered powerless over God’s children. The threefold work of the Paraclete is the foundation for Jesus’ continuing words in our text. Jesus recognizes that there are many things left to be spoken, but that not all can be spoken for his followers are unable to bear them now (16:12). Because of this, the ongoing work of the Spirit of truth will continue Jesus’ revelatory word and work of the Father.

There are nine future tense verbs in 16:13-15, which define the revealing and continuing work of the Spirit of truth. Our translation of these verses will identify this emphasis: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he *will* guide you into all the truth; for he *will* not speak on his own authority, but whatever he *will* hear he *will* speak, and he *will* announce to you the things that are to come” (16:13). Five future verbs in this sentence identify the inclusive work of the Spirit of truth. Like Jesus, the Spirit is also dependent on the authority of the Father and will continue to guide the community in that which will be heard, spoken, and announced in the community.

“He *will* glorify me, for he *will* receive/take what is mine, and he *will* announce it to you” (16:14). The work of the Spirit of truth glorifies or makes present Jesus, for Jesus is the one who has glorified or made present the love of the Father in the world. In receiving what is of Jesus, the announcing work of the Spirit of truth continues to make God’s presence known.

“All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he receives what is mine, and he *will* announce it to you” (16:15). This is the third time in these three verses that we have heard the verb “to announce” (ἀναγγέλλω) in the future tense. Luther

spoke of the church as the mouth- or ear-house of God. In this way he identified the work of the Spirit in the proclamation of the word of God, a word of law and gospel through which the Spirit of truth works judgment and faith in our lives through the announcing word of God.

On this Holy Trinity Sunday we are called to announce the living word of God through which the Holy Spirit works God's mighty work of faith in our lives, calling us to repentance and calling us into the living community of those who in faith proclaim God's Son as Lord and Savior. This is the proper work of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The Gospel of John concludes in 21:20-25 with the witness of the disciple loved by Jesus. In these words we hear a witness that remains true to the end of time: "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things" (21:24a). As these gospel texts for Year C have unfolded in our reading and hearing, we join with the witness of this faithful disciple and community, affirming the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the words of the gospel—"and we know that his witness is true" (21:24b). ⊕