

A RAW, RAGGED OPENNESS:

EMBRACING EXILE IN 2020



WITH THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF DURHAM

A CONGREGATION OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

EMBRACING THIS EXILE

AN INVITATION

In every crisis, doubt or confusion,
take the higher path –
the path of compassion, courage,
understanding and love.¹

If last spring brought an unexpected crisis, a sudden exile from rhythm and routine, this fall is all that and something else. We grieve thousands of deaths, often lonely losses; and we continue to monitor a pandemic that has shaken the spirit and confidence of a nation. While health care professionals have risen to the task, elected officials have stumbled. From coast to coast, divisions run deep and mean, and gun sales are up. Our churches, synagogues and mosques remain closed, at least on the inside. For many of us, school reopens this fall—but cautiously and strangely. And soon, in November, we go to the polls, with racial justice and climate change on our minds, and all kinds of outcomes, even constitutional chaos, possible. Who knows what 2021 will bring?

Of course, we're also discovering hidden wisdom, holy opportunity, in all of this. Some of us are finding renewal and purpose in prayer and meditation. Others are hearing the many voices of creation – spring birds, summer winds, whistling trees – as if for the first time. We're connecting with old friends, tilling new gardens and reading books that matter. And this summer, inspired by activists of color and shaken by violence in our streets, many of us have committed our energies to a national reckoning around racism, oppression and poverty. Wisdom and urgency dance, arm in arm. We want to take the "higher path."



So what does all this mean for the church, for the community that gathers around the grace of God and the teachings of Jesus? What kind of church do we want to be—for the world, for our neighbors, for the broken and beautiful? Where's the path?

¹ Amit Ray, [Nonviolence: The Transforming Power](#).

This much we know: it's going to be different. It has to be. In every generation, the church examines its place, discerns its mission, adjusts its language to speak of hope and love and justice. The gospel is one and the same: the good news of God's liberating intent, the good news of reconciling power, the good news of divine mercy and peace. But in every new season, the church works out its understanding of these things. And we do that in community: together.

I invite you to join me this fall, as we face this moment with faith, courage and resolve. Our Community Church of Durham. Our United Church of Christ. My sense is that God is preparing us, preparing the church, for new opportunities in ministry, for new modes of service, for vulnerability and creativity in speaking words of hope and love and blessing. But we must acknowledge God's initiative. Even now. And we must engage God's partnership. Especially now. And we must lean into this challenge: together.



The path is out there. We make the way by walking.

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

Exile is a potent biblical metaphor – fitting for experiences like ours, for this unnerving season of disruption, uncertainty and pandemic. Historically, it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in the 6th century bce and the forced removal of its leaders to Babylon in the East. Devastated by loss, aching with doubt, God's people question their faith and the meaning of their lives. Babylon makes no sense. And from that strange land, severed from culture and comfort, God's people grieve for all they've lost.

By the waters of Babylon—there we sat down
and wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said:
"Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"²

In exile, God's people are disoriented and anxious. They hang their harps on the willows, unable at first even to sing. They rage against their captors. Those who remain in Jerusalem, conquered and dispirited, are similarly unnerved. In the Book of Lamentations, one of their poets voices his people's sense of confusion and abandonment: "My soul is bereft of peace."³

God has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
God has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation,
and made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago.

God has walled me about so that I cannot escape,
and put heavy chains on me.
Though I call and cry for help,
God shuts out my prayer;
God has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
and made my paths crooked.⁴

In Babylon, God's people question everything. They debate strategies of protest and resistance. They contend with God bitterly, and plead their case relentlessly. But in doing so, they discover new streams of spirit in ancient stories and traditional practices. Grief reveals passion. Cut off from dear Jerusalem, beyond the reach of their temple, they come to worship in new and creative ways; they learn new songs to sing together; and they embrace the Sabbath as a radical alternative to ideologies of consumption, patriarchy and violence.⁵ Not only is God with them, but God is doing something important, something unique, something the world desperately needs. Even in exile, especially in exile, God bestows blessing on God's people. And they come to embrace that blessing. To believe in it.

Throughout scripture, then, exile becomes a metaphor for communities in disarray, for peoples divided and disoriented, for believers struggling to believe in foreign lands.

² Psalm 137:1-7.

³ Lamentations 3:17.

⁴ Lamentations 3:4-9.

⁵ Interesting that some Jews call the Sabbath their "temple in time."

In looking to metaphors like this, we're not trying to pin down our experiences or fix them to particular prophecies. That's not how metaphors work. Metaphors invite expansive creativity and intellectual curiosity. So it is, with our Jewish and Christian ancestors, that we find freedom to make new connections, imagination in our spiritual practice and insight into the passion and purpose of God.⁶



In a sense, exile is about alienation: alienation from one another in divided and suspicious communities; alienation from the earth and her lifegiving energies; alienation from God and God's intentions. As I mentioned above, Israel's exile stimulated curiosity and creativity, and a renewal of religious spirit and practice. Honestly faced, alienation might open our communities – even in 2020 – to new currents of inspiration and refreshment.

What, then, are the dimensions of exile we might be facing in our own moment? How has 2020 revealed and intensified alienation among us? If we're honest and brave, where do we start? I suggest that:

- Religious life is disrupted.
The predictable rhythm of religious life – worship and liturgy – has been disrupted, and we are not practicing our faith together in ways that are familiar and reassuring.⁷

- Social order is threatened.
In the realm of civic and national life, white, male, heteronormative experience is no longer persuasive and the exclusive center of power and governance; and this is unnerving (threatening) for many. In a way, the assault on voting rights is an expression of this crisis, and the existing order's last gasp to stay in power.

- Neighborliness is at risk.
Our sense of shared national goals in crisis has been shattered into divisive ideologies – as we split along the lines of mask-wearing and safe community practices, and as political parties sow seeds of bigotry and xenophobia as a means of keeping power. Without basic neighborliness, democracy itself seems to hang in the balance.

⁶ It's important to note that exile as forced movement or deportation is a very concrete and historical experience for many. We think of the forced relocations of Native Americans on our own continent, the enslavement and removal of Africans in huge numbers. There are so many others. The Dalai Lama, for instance, writes of his own exile and what he's learned in that process.

⁷ To be honest, this was happening well before COVID-19, as patterns of religious affiliation and practice have shifted dramatically. Most folks don't identify with a particular religious community anymore, not in the US anyway; and if Protestantism was once something of a 'national consensus' it's surely not anymore.

□ Our ecological home is on fire.

Our political and economic orthodoxies have divorced us from healthy and meaningful connection to the earth herself; and we are increasingly anxious and even skeptical about the long-term survival of ecosystems on the planet. Already, climate change is wreaking havoc.

It's important to note that each of these "fissures" was already felt among us, already at work in our lives—well before COVID-19 shattered our routines in March of 2020. In ravaging the American landscape and claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, the pandemic has broken our hearts, shattered any complacency and opened our eyes. "Why have you forgotten us completely?" weeps the poet in Lamentations. "Why have you forsaken us these many days?"⁸ Our pain is real.

And here, precisely here, the church is called to prayer and discernment, to service and action. When the keepers of order insist that nothing will ever really change, when the powers bankrolled by Wall Street and Madison Avenue argue that consumerism is the only path to freedom, when the ministers of empire rage against young protestors in our streets, we listen for another Word. We wait for a new direction. We anticipate the fresh winds of Grace. Prepare the way. Open the door. Welcome the promise. "Keep alert," Jesus would say to another people in crisis, "for you do not know when the time will come."⁹ God's people meet the moment with compassion, not callousness, with openness, not orthodoxy.

WHO WE ARE

Writing for preachers, but speaking to the church, Walter Brueggemann looks to the poetry and prophetic spirit of exile. God's people inhabit a world of possibility and grace, a landscape of blessing. But we lean into that world only as we remember, only as we tell the story, only as we remind one another. Who we are. Who we can be.

As the preacher stands up to preach among the exiles, the primal task (given this metaphor) concerns the narration and nurture of a counteridentity, **the enactment of the power of hope in a season of despair**, and the assertion of a deep definitional freedom from the pathologies, coercions, and seductions that govern our society. The preacher is called upon, not to do all the parts of public policy and public morality, but to give **the spine, resolve, courage, energy, and freedom** that belong to a counteridentity.¹⁰

⁸ Lamentations 5:20.

⁹ Mark 13:33.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, in "Preaching to Exiles" (Exilic Preaching), page 25.

While I'm all for preaching, I want to insist that the task belongs not to one of us, but to all of us. Together. As a church, in communion and conversation, in ministry and mission, we are called to "enact" the power of hope in a season of despair, to "assert" a deep and definitional freedom. Even in exile. Especially in exile. We do that through worship (online, if we have to). We do it in bold projects of compassion, resistance and blessing. And we do it conversation, study and prayer. We do it together. Now more than ever, Christian faith suggests a "counteridentity" – "a zone of freedom that the dominant culture cannot erode."

Brueggemann – himself a biblical scholar and UCC minister – goes on to sketch the implications of this same "zone of freedom":

1. That our **sense of loss and sadness** is serious and honorable and that one need not prop up or engage in denial.
2. That our rootedness enables us to belong so that we are not swept away by every wind of doctrine, every market seduction, or every economic coercion, **knowing who we are.**
3. That the **promises of the Creator surge in our life** and in our world so that the manipulatable despair of the hopeless, which turns folk into commodity consumers, is not the live edge of our existence.
4. That **there is a holy, awesome presence** that persists against the emptied profanation of promiscuous economic and lustful sexuality and that true desire is for the presence that overrides all of our trivialized desires, which are now robbed of authority.
5. That the world is not morally coherent, that there is a deep incongruity in which we live, which we need not resolve, explain, nor deny; and that **a raw, ragged openness** is linked to the awesome reality of God's holiness.¹¹
6. That we are always about to be domesticated and that we have these **narrative models of resistance, defiance, and negotiation**, which remind us that there is more to life than conformist obedience or shameful accommodation. We know the names of those who have faced with freedom the trouble that is caused by faith.¹²

I want to suggest that this "zone of freedom" is the church's true home. I think Walter Brueggemann would agree. It's not a strict set of beliefs, nor is it rigid or smug in any way. As summer turns to fall, we lay claim to the "raw, ragged openness" that is

¹¹ Interested in some music? Check out the song "Open" by Bruce Cockburn, on his album [You've Never Seen Everything](#). Faith opens our hearts and futures to "a raw, jagged openness."

¹² Brueggemann is referring both to biblical narratives (Ruth and Naomi, Moses and Miriam, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary and Jesus) and to the stories of other ancestors (John Lewis, for example, the Berrigan brothers, and Dorothy Day).

faith, that is discipleship, that is resistance and defiance and hope. All the while, we bear witness to our considerable grief, aching over lives lost and spirits broken. We open our fragile hearts to the “awesome reality of God’s holiness” – and resist the godly promises of consumerism and organized violence. Embracing our own exile, in 2020, we can be the kind of church our neighbors need, the kind of community that blesses and transforms the brokenness and weariness around us – and inside us.

First, though, we’ll have to remember what we once knew.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Our God is an everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
The Holy One does not faint or grow weary;
God’s understanding is unsearchable.
God gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who look to God shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.¹³

Across the centuries, from exile to occupation, from Cape Town in South Africa to Albany in south Georgia, God’s people meet this God – holy and awesome, loving and just – at the intersection of social movements and spiritual longing. We’re talking about Isaiah’s God, in Babylon, in exile. We’re talking about Mary’s God, in Nazareth, in occupied Palestine. But we’re also talking about Dorothy Day’s God, in New York slums, in the 1930s. And John Lewis’ God, in Alabama, in the 1960s. What’s true in every case, and in every season, is that we meet this God together. In communities of practice. In circles of resistance. In congregations of spirit. At the intersection of social movements and spiritual longing.

Leaning into our grief, keeping watch for spirit and gospel, embracing our exile: this is our challenge and calling this fall. Let the church respond with faith. Let the church move forward with courage. Let our church take the “higher path.”

¹³ Isaiah 40:28-31.

LEANING INTO CHURCH

FALL OPPORTUNITIES AT CCD

So let's embrace the exile. Let's commit to prayer and partnership this fall. My hunch – again – is that God is preparing the church for new modes of ministry in a season of deep sorrow and uncertainty. I believe that God is inviting us to lean into the gospel of love, to open our hearts wide, to serve boldly and bravely. Let's receive this strange season – this fall, this winter – as an opportunity for conversation and communion, for discernment and discovery. Let us weep together and laugh when we can and dream. With “spine, resolve, courage, energy and freedom,” a church like ours can shine with hope, transform lives and build a better world. On the Seacoast and beyond.

So here's the idea:

WORSHIP



I know that our online ‘version’ of church isn't everyone's thing. To be honest, it's not even my thing. *Going to church every Sunday* has shaped my life over many years in many ways. Enacting our commitments – to beauty and music, to grace and peace, to God and one another – we are renewed and empowered. It's always been that way for me: communal, face to face, personal. There's a dynamic in our gathering together – a physicality – that just isn't experienced online.

But, at least for now, it's the Sunday practice available to us; and I think we can use this practice to stimulate curiosity, conversation and a deeper engagement with issues and needs. And that's my commitment to you. This fall, I hope to design Sunday services in ways that plant seeds for further discussion, group conversation and congregational discernment. We'll dig into this notion of exile and explore biblical resources and poetry in the midst of exile. We'll investigate our own cultural moment, and **invite guests into conversation around racial justice and ecological healing and other concerns dear and urgent to many of us.**¹⁴ And all the while, we'll

¹⁴ For example, I'll be talking one Sunday with the **Rev. Mariama White-Hammond**, Pastor at the New Roots African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston. Mariama is a powerful leader regionally, connecting issues of racial

ask: "Who are we now?" "Where is the God of grace and mercy leading us now?"
"What might that higher path look like now?"

In the midst of new dimensions,
in the face of changing ways,
who will lead the pilgrim peoples
wandering in their separate ways?
God of rainbow, fiery pillar,
leading where the eagles soar,
we your people, ours the journey
now and ever, now and ever, now and ever more.

As we stand a world divided
by our own self-seeking schemes,
grant that we, your global village,
might envision wider dreams?
God of rainbow, fiery pillar,
leading where the eagles soar,
we your people, ours the journey
now and ever, now and ever, now and ever more.¹⁵

SMALL GROUPS



I propose that we link these Sunday services with a network of small groups, circles of conversation and discernment. Over the spring and summer, we've taken steps in this direction. And I'd like to do more. In these groups, Sunday's themes ripen among friends, suggest new spiritual practices and reveal opportunities for witness and service. I'll make a special point of developing themes and questions for small groups – content that relates to the flow and rhythm of Sunday's service. If Sunday's service involves a conversation around racism and the church's response, small groups will take up that topic and go deeper together in following days. If our service explores forgiveness and what it looks like in daily life, small groups will join the conversation and speak of mercy and grace.

While I'll take the lead in forming these small groups, I'll eagerly and purposefully look to train and support lay leaders – so that the groups can grow from the center out, and occupy varied time slots throughout the week. I want all who are interested to take part! Watch for more details, and some scheduling possibilities, in our weekly e-news communication.

and gender justice with ecological concerns. Another Sunday, I'll be in conversation with **James McKim**, President of the Manchester Chapter of the NAACP and an Episcopal lay person leading the call for racial justice here in NH.

¹⁵ "In the Midst of New Dimensions," a hymn by the Rev. Julian Rush, 1985.

ONE TO ONE IN CONVERSATION



This summer, many of us have participated in an exciting “one-to-one” campaign, taking time to meet new friends and visit with dear ones. In these conversations, we’ve spoken of faith and passion, hurt and anxiety – the complex stories of our lives in a year no one saw coming. This is a habit, a practice, we want very much to continue – not in the same organized way, but in the fabric of our community life. I hope you’ll freely reach out to church friends – maybe someone you’ve trusted for a long time, maybe someone you met just this summer – and make time for discussion, storytelling and reflection. Not all of us will be able to join a small group – but maybe you can **find a conversational partner, someone to check in with** through the week. Maybe the two of you want to look at a question that arises out of our Sunday service.

My hope is that these three interlocking practices (worship, small group and “one-to-one” discussion) connect us, focus our spirits and cultivate the “raw, ragged openness” the church will need for the many challenges ahead. And I invite you to join me – and many others – as we take up that path together.



SHAKING THE SEASONS

Traditionally, liturgical seasons provide a kind of road map to the mysteries and insights of the Christian tradition. They suggest a kind of practice, one we share in community, one that deepens with time and repetition. There’s something reassuring about the pattern; at the same time, when we’re doing it well, it stimulates creativity and engagement.

Maybe this is a year to wander off the map, to shake up the seasons and acknowledge the extraordinary challenges (and opportunities) ahead of us.¹⁶ Maybe our spiritual juices get stirred in new ways. Maybe our senses are awakened to new insights. Maybe the tradition itself proves expansive, resilient and rich.

O come, O Come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

¹⁶ I’m not talking about moving Christmas, or Easter, or any of the big stuff! I’m talking about shifting some seasons around, working with themes in different ways and varied combinations. Just a little.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Wisdom, from on high
and order all things far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.¹⁷

EARLY ADVENT

We'll begin, in September, with the Season of **Early Advent** – an observation that the church is in an extended season of waiting, or better yet, an extended season of preparation. In our strange exile, we are opening our hearts, our spirits, our families, our relationships to the promise of renewal, to the promise of justice, and (yes) to the promise of holy transformation. Advent's not just a bunch of weeks on the calendar: it's an orientation of our lives, a way of facing crisis and exile.

Sunday, September 6 + Early Advent, Week 1

Texts and Voices: Jeremiah 1:1-10; Isaiah 40:1-11

■ **Word in the World:** Isaiah 40:1-3

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

Sunday, September 13 + Early Advent, Week 2

Texts and Voices: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 8

■ **Word in the World:** Psalm 8

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

¹⁷ "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" from the New Century Hymnal.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Sunday, September 20 + Early Advent, Week 3

Texts and Voices: Luke 1:26-38

Message from the Rev. Gordon Rankin (NH Conference Minister, UCC)

■ **Word in the World: Luke 1:36-37**

The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

Sunday, September 27 + Early Advent, Week 4

Texts and Voices: Luke 1:39-56

■ **Word in the World: Luke 1:45-52**

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.'

INCARNATION

In October, with the Season of ***Incarnation***, we'll see that the church itself is a piece of God's answer to the world's distress. In our commitments to one another, in our covenant to lovingkindness, in our daring discipleship, we become the Body of Christ, the transforming energy of God in the world. In October, we'll receive that promise as we renew our covenant, and make sacred commitments to God's ministry in

Durham and to one another as well. We'll center our conversations around the "three great loves" that make incarnation not just a notion – but something of a lifestyle, a pattern, a defining direction for the church. Love of Neighbor. Love of Children. Love of Creation.

Sunday, October 4 + Incarnation, Week 1

Texts and Voices: Isaiah 61

THREE GREAT LOVES: Love of Children

■ **Word in the World:** Isaiah 61:1-3

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn...*

Sunday, October 11 + Incarnation, Week 2

Texts and Voices: Matthew 22:34-46

THREE GREAT LOVES: Love of Neighbor

■ **Word in the World:** Matthew 22:34-39

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Sunday, October 18 + Incarnation, Week 3

Texts and Voices: Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 18:15-22

THREE GREAT LOVES: Love of Creation

**Dave in Conversation with the Rev. Mariama White-Hammond
(African Methodist Episcopal Pastor in Boston and
Green Justice Organizer with Renew New England)**

■ **Word in the World:** Matthew 14:15-20

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

Sunday, October 25 + Incarnation, Week 4

Texts and Voices: Philippians 2

THREE GREAT LOVES: Love in Action

Message from the Rev. Jason Wells (Executive Director, NH Council of Churches)

■ **Word in the World:** Philippians 2:3-8

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

SHALOM

Embodying God's promise, we receive the breath of Spirit, the fire of renewal, the peace of the Risen Christ. Even in exile, in crisis, God's people resistance vengeance and welcome mercy, leaning into ministries of reconciliation. This Season of Shalom is one of thanksgiving and hope, an awakening in which God's love renews relationships, vision and resolve.¹⁸ For a world on edge, we are a sign of blessing, a people of peace. For a nation in crisis, we are a prophetic voice, a shining light, a beloved community. In November, we explore the practices that breathe life and imagination into this mission.

Sunday, November 1 + Shalom, Week 1

Texts and Voices: Jeremiah 29:7, Psalm 89 (*Olam Chesed Yibaneh*)

Dave in Conversation with James McKim

(President of the Manchester NH Chapter of the NAACP)

■ **Word in the World:** Jeremiah 29:7

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to God on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own.

¹⁸ Scholars note that, in exile, Jewish families were particularly drawn to names using the root SLM (Hebrew for 'shalom'/'peace')—"in light of the desire for peace among those who have enjoyed so little peace." See Daniel Smith-Christopher, The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile, page 37.

Sunday, November 8 + Shalom, Week 2

Texts and Voices: The Book of Ruth

■ **Word in the World:** Ruth 1:16-17

Ruth said [to Naomi],
"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God..."

Sunday, November 15 + Shalom, Week 3

Texts and Voices: Luke 15:11-32

Dave in Conversation with Tarek Abuata
(Palestinian American Activist and Executive Director,
Friends of Sabeel Liberation Collective)

■ **Word in the World:** The Parable of the Prodigal Son

The father said to his servants: "Quickly bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

Sunday, November 22 + Shalom, Week 4

Texts and Voices: John 19:25-30, 20:1-10

■ **Word in the World:** Mary and the Beloved Disciple

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

DEEP ADVENT

The liturgical year turns, and a new year begins, with the Season of **Deep Advent** – a season shaped by the tensions of life in exile. "O come, o come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel / that mourns in lonely exile here / until the Son of God appear." This season – Deep Advent – is a season for mourning, and (at the same time) a season for caroling and hope. It's a season of captivity, and a season of liberating joy. In this strange space, we watch for the birth of human compassion, for the awakening of God's justice among us. And "a raw, ragged openness" points the way!

Sunday, November 29 + Deep Advent, Week 1

Texts and Voices: 1 Samuel 1 - 3

■ **Word in the World:** Hannah's Song (1 Samuel 2:1-5)

*My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by God actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.*

Sunday, December 6 + Deep Advent, Week 2

Texts and Voices: Isaiah 43:1-21

■ **Word in the World:** Isaiah 43:1-15

*When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

Sunday, December 13 + Deep Advent, Week 3

Texts and Voices: Luke 1:39-56

**Dave in Conversation with Victoria Rue
(Priest, Writer, Director of "Maryam")**

■ **Word in the World:** Luke 1:45-52

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

Sunday, December 20 + Deep Advent, Week 4
Texts and Voices: Matthew 1:18-25

■ **Word in the World: Matthew 1**

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Thursday, December 24 + Christmas Eve/The Feast of Christmas

5 pm: Candlelight Procession and Outdoor Prayers



Dave and Kristin are imagining an intergenerational procession, around the neighborhood, with candles lit in testimony to the love that shines, even in the darkness.

We'll conclude in the church parking lot, with a short and simple gathering of Christmas readings and prayers.

We'll do it all with masks on, keeping all the safe-distance practices we know to make a difference!

9 pm: Christmas Eve Celebration

Probably online...but stay tuned!



SISTER MARY

WISDOM 'S FACE

As we open our hearts to the bold witness of 21st century activists, to organizers in the streets and urban prophets, let's also honor the companionship of ancient believers – whose stories still illuminate opportunities and choices. One of these is Sister Mary – Mary of Nazareth – whose “raw, ragged openness” reveals the divine embrace in every life, even as she bears the fullness of human sorrow, the deepest dimensions of exile and incarnation.

A thoroughly Jewish figure, Mary is revered by Christians and uniquely honored among Muslims. In story and practice, Mary reconciles polarities and bridges differences of many kinds. Art historian Judith Dupré puts it this way:

Capable of great suffering, Mary's is a wounded beauty: scarred by life yet beautiful because she allowed that same pain to transform rather than disfigure her soul. In giving birth to God, she let her old self die so that she, and we, could be reborn into eternal life. Although she is usually portrayed as a young woman, Mary's youth is not an indication of her chronological age but a sign of her willingness to do that most difficult thing: to maintain innocence and remain vulnerable in spite of life's most painful demands. In the spiritual imagination, she is ageless. What abides is the fact of her faith and love.¹⁹

I want us to think of Mary as a special companion, a particularly potent teacher on this fall's journey. Throughout our experience, imagine Mary's wisdom, Mary's conviction, Mary's availability. Reflect on the four paintings identified below. Invite her into your heart, your life, your conversations. In so many ways, Mary's presence – in scripture, in art, in imagination – is a sign of what it means to embrace exile, to resist empire and to partner with the holy in crisis. We are not alone.

If Mary is Wisdom's “face,” and I believe she is, hers is not the conventional wisdom of markets and advertisers, kings and armies; and hers is not the disembodied wisdom of reclusive monastics and self-interested evangelists. Mary's is the wisdom of a single mother who believes in the future for her son. Mary's is the wisdom of an old woman who's loved everyone and lost everything – and still cherishes every breath.

¹⁹¹⁹ Judith Dupre, Full of Grace: Encountering Mary in Faith, Art and Life, page 6.

Mary's is the wisdom of an activist, an organizer, a dreamer – able “to maintain innocence and remain vulnerable in spite of life's most painful demands.”



Figure 1: Mary Welcomes the Spirit

THE ANNUNCIATION (Esmond Lyons: <https://progressivechristianityaotearoa.com/the-annunciation-a-modern-mary-esmond-lyons/>) (see it in color!)

My current work is an exploration of the feminine divine. I see the re-emergence of a feminine cosmology occurring globally, but particularly in the West where the pillars of rationalism and patriarchy are collapsing. Beyond the eschatological events currently unfolding, a consciousness is arising informed by the legacy of ancient matriarchies. The women in my paintings are not human personalities. Nor are they archetypes. They are forms drawn from a personal aesthetic, the “corporalization” of an ideal, and a prelude to the imminent re-design of the human species. They are the Everywomen of a future humanity and a mere pendulum swing away.



Figure 2: The Angel Gabriel brings news to Mary: "Be not afraid."

THE ANNUNCIATION (Jen Norton: www.jennortonartstudio.com/annunciation) (see it in color!)

[The] Annunciation's a story that has captured the creative imagination and given hope for centuries. In a violent world, it reveals the power in the feminine quiet. It's a story that challenges who we are and how much we really trust in God. It's a story of a young girl, with young-girl plans, whose life was drastically altered by unexpected Divine Plans. It's a story of God rushing in with all the force of Eternal Spring. Greatly troubling indeed (Luke 2:9).

Yet Mary said Yes to God, and it seems she didn't even have to work through the stages of grief! Maybe because her family got on board. Her parents sent her to a cousin who could comfort and support her (and get her away from village gossip!). Joseph listened to God and moved forward with the marriage. When called upon, he even fled everything he'd worked for and took refugee status. Her people stepped up. They didn't leave her alone. In my humble opinion, that is a vital part of the story. In our politically-divided culture, it is worth remembering that supporting life as a Christian means not only letting it BE, but also not judging or withholding resources for those who face unplanned, life-altering circumstances. When it comes to Life and Love, God is all in. We should be too. We are called to family.

RIVERS OF MERCY

In the biblical story, Mary is radically available to God, in a season of intense conflict and extraordinary suffering. She chooses partnership. She chooses blessing. Like her own ancestors, she chooses to collaborate with a justice-loving, peace-seeking, life-lifting God. "Let it be with me," she says to Gabriel, in Luke, "according to this Word." Instead of sentimentalizing this moment, what if we were to recognize in it Mary's prophetic spirit: her willingness (like the prophets of old) to bear the vision of promise of God in a dangerous and cynical world? In this way, Mary is something like the first New Testament preacher: offering her life as good news for all.

Given Mary's hold on our imaginations, there is startlingly little historical evidence—no eyewitness accounts, letters, histories, birth or death records—about her actual life. From her thirteen appearances in the New Testament, we glean that she was called Maryam, grew up in the hills of Galilee, and married the carpenter Joseph. We are told that she was a virgin yet gave birth to a son who was from God and was God. She was a reflective person, pondering and treasuring in her heart what she learned about her son. She traveled—to the Judean hill country, to Bethlehem, to Egypt, to Jerusalem, to a wedding in Capernaum, to the place called Golgotha, where she watched as her child was scourged, humiliated, and nailed to a cross. In the moment before he died in agony, Christ entrusted his mother to the care of John, the "disciple whom he loved," and he to her.²⁰

As friend and teacher, as midwife to courage and compassion, Mary reveals rivers of mercy, bloodlines of spirit and songs of defiance and hope – in all of us. In many ways, her story is spare and simple. But welcome that story – in prayer, in conversation, in poetry – and you may find your spiritual senses sharpened and your imagination kindled anew. Relationships are revitalized. And church is changed for the good.

In a certain sense, when Mary takes John at the cross, and when John takes Mary, the two of them create the first church. In this openness (raw, ragged) to communion, the two accept responsibility for Jesus' message, mutual care for one another, the gospel project of kindness and inclusion. A new kind of family. Mary's discipleship isn't built around orthodoxy and certainty, but around care, commitment and courage.



²⁰ Ibid.

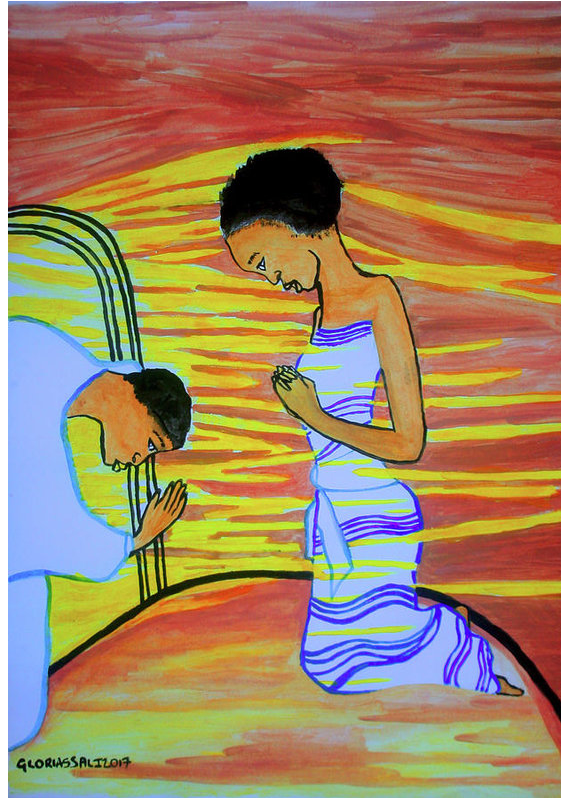


Figure 3: *Mary Welcomes the Spirit*

Mary's wisdom, then, is holy Wisdom. Mary's strength is God's strength. Centering Mary – as I'm suggesting here – means meeting Mary in our own pregnant hearts; it also means meeting Mary in the “wounded beauty” of others:

- ♦ Mary as the generous nurse: ministering to COVID-19 patients whose families can't visit.
- ♦ Mary as George Floyd's mother, or Breonna Taylor's mother, or any other mother in America: grieving her child's death at the hands of the state.
- ♦ Maryam as the Palestinian teenager: standing strong and resisting the occupation of her family's ancestral lands.
- ♦ Mary as the wise church friend: offering to pray for you, for me, in our time of unnerving anxiety and sadness.
- ♦ Maryam as the young activist, devoted to friends and colleagues, crying out for the planet, pushing for a Green New Deal.

Encountering Mary here means engaging her strength, her *hutzpah* and her vulnerability. Mary's spirituality is hardly a quiet pietism, or a private, reserved faith. It is, instead, a dynamic way of life – a commitment to social change and hands-on service; a passion for friendship and community; and a journey into relational power. As we reflect on Mary's life, and its many dimensions, I hope you'll watch for her. As we navigate another season of public health vigilance, another season of political

uncertainty, I hope you'll watch for her. She'll be grieving at times. She'll be marching at times. She'll be bouncing a baby in her lap and singing love songs. She'll be making common cause with sisters, brothers, siblings in the struggle. Keep your eyes open for Wisdom's stirring in the hearts and stories of old friends and new allies. Watch for her.



Figure 4: Mother of God: Mother of the Streets

MOTHER OF THE STREETS (Kelly Latimore: https://kellylatimoreicons.com/gallery/img_5635/)

The homeless are the tip of the iceberg of the injustice and pain in our society. They are the visible "invisibles". The lonely, jobless workers, addicts, battered women and children, veterans, the untreated mentally ill, or people simply too poor to get by. Yet, it is in 'the least of these' that we encounter Jesus.

This icon depicts the Mother of God as the mother of those on the streets. Her garments, as well as her sons, are bright and beautiful showing the hidden worth and dignity of street people, who are living icons of God.

"To turn aside from those on the margins of society, the needy and the powerless, is to turn aside from Jesus. Such people show His face to the world. Such people are also a presence of Church, for where Christ is, there is His Church."

PRAYERS & PRACTICES

Maori Version of Jesus' Prayer

This is a prayer I often use in my morning "Lauds"—a practice of prayer, meditation and intention at the beginning of each day.

Earth-maker, life-giver, pain-bearer,
Source of all that is and all that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God in whom is heaven:
May the hallowing of your name
echo through the universe!

May your heavenly will be done
by all creatures great and small!
And may your commonwealth
of peace and freedom
sustain our hope and come on earth!

With the bread we need this day, feed us.
For the hurt we inflict on one another, forgive us.
By your grace and mercy,
strengthen us through seasons of temptation,
and spare us from trials too great to endure.
Free us from bigotry and evil, for service and truth.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is Love. Amen.

Grace as We Commune at the Table

We haven't celebrated Communion – as a church, anyway – since early March! Maybe you'd like to acknowledge the Presence of Jesus and the Power of God as you "commune" at your own table. Doing so, you bring the affirmations and commitments of our church to your daily routine. Here's a prayer you might use.

(Optional: One of you lifts a piece/loaf of bread,
or some other portion of food, as the first prayer is said.)

1. Holy God, Breath of the Wind:
In the bread and bounty of this table,
we recognize the generous hand of grace,
and the good work of farmers in the soil, harvesters in the fields,
and many others who toil to bring food to our homes.
We praise you for the gifts of earth and sky,
for the food we are blessed to eat together,
and for all neighbors and friends whose work brings us blessing.

(Optional: One of you lifts a glass/cup,
as the second prayer is said.)

2. Open our eyes and hearts to the presence of Christ
in these sweet and sacred moments of communion.
As he loved his own life, so let us cherish ours.
As he delighted in family and friends,
so let us honor our dear ones, near and far.
And as he devoted his energies to mercy, to justice,
so let us commit our church to the Beloved Community,
to the realization of wholeness and wellness for all.

(Optional: You might choose to speak invoke the names
of neighbors and communities for special prayer.)

3. May the Kindness of Jesus, the Wisdom of Mary
and the Power of the Holy Spirit
renew us in this communion meal.
May your love, O God, awaken in our hearts
compassion for the suffering and hope for the future.
Build among us a brave and generous church,

a community of siblings, sisters and brothers,
born anew in gratitude and passionate in the ways of peace.
Amen and amen!

Prayers in the Spirit of Mary (Wisdom of God)

For centuries, Mary has inspired both traditional and non-traditional believers in spiritual life and practice. Here are four prayers you may find meaningful in your own daily and weekly devotion.

DEDICATING THIS DAY

My Queen, My Mother,
today I offer myself entirely to you.
And to show my devotion to you
and to your wisdom,
I offer you this day, my eyes,
my ears, my mouth, my heart,
my whole being without reserve.
Wherefore, Good Mother,
as I am your own, keep me,
and guard me as your child and kin.
Amen.

HOLY WISDOM, MOTHER OF LOVE

(© Diann L. Neu: cofounder, WATER,
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, dneu@hers.com)

Holy Wisdom, Mother of Love beyond our Knowing,
cradle our loved ones in your comforting bosom.
Hold them close in your loving care,
and shelter them securely in stormy weather.
Whisper words of assurance to them
when they are close to stumbling,
and love them tenderly,
forever and always.
Amen.
Blessed Be.
Let It Be So.

PRAYER TO DIVINE WISDOM, SOPHIA-SPIRIT

(© Diann L. Neu: cofounder, WATER,
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, dneu@hers.com)

May Divine Wisdom, Sophia-Spirit,
rise inside me like a rushing wind.
May Divine Wisdom, Sophia-Spirit,
leap within us like a revolutionary fire.
May Divine Wisdom, Sophia-Spirit
flow through the world like a life-giving breath.
Amen.
Blessed Be.
Let It Be So.

TO MARY, UNDOER OF KNOTS

(Said to be a daily prayer of Pope Francis)

Mother of deep, eternal love, I look to you.
Take into your hands the ribbon of my life,
and see the snarl of knots that keeps me bound
to sin, anxiety and despair.
I pray you, Mother of Us All, by your wisdom,
and by the long fingers of love and grace,
undo the knots in my heart and in my life.
Free me to love as Christ loves:
release me from all fear and want.
O Mary, Undoer of Knots, Mother of God:
be my wisdom, be my hope, be my peace.
Amen.



*Pictures from:
The Angel Wings Art Project,
Los Angeles, California 2020*

IN TIMES LIKE THESE

The church was made for times like these – times of disruption and discontent, times of possibility and protest, times of communal creativity and collaborative courage. Our intention, this fall, is to rise to the moment – to discern God’s voice in the urgent pleas of prophets and the shifting winds of social change. We intend to open our hearts, our minds, our community itself, to the pain we encounter, and then to the wonder and beauty everywhere around us, and then to the challenge of ministry and witness. In times like these.

I hope you’ll join us on this journey – a journey unlike any other, into a future we greet with caution, with courage, and with hope. We step out in faith – a circle of friends, a community of compassion, a church of mercy and grace.

Listen. Love. Risk. Imagine.

PASTOR DAVE GRISHAW–JONES

THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF DURHAM

AN OPEN & AFFIRMING CONGREGATION OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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