

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of April 28, 2024

Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** BCP 225

Acts 8:26-40 NRSVue, 2021

This is the story of how Philip brought the Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Jesus. Early Christians doubtless loved to tell and retell this narrative. It shows how a significant foreign personage, who was apparently an inquirer into Judaism, learned about Jesus and was baptized. It also illustrates the way an important passage from the Old Testament, which tells of the Lord's servant who suffered for others, was interpreted as prophecy about Jesus.

- 26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)
- 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship
- 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.
- 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."
- 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"
- 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.
- 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.
- 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."
- 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"
- 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.
- 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"
- [37 The oldest and best manuscripts of Acts omit this verse, which is a Western text reading: "And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he said in reply, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'" Footnote in the New American Bible Revised Edition]
- 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

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39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.
- 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Exploring Acts 8:26-40

Acts. This book is the sequel to the gospel according to Luke. Beginning with Jesus' ascension, Luke tells the story of the beginnings of the church. By no means a comprehensive history, it does however describe the spread of the church from Jerusalem to all of Palestine, and as far as Greece. The episodes he reports show how Christianity arose out of Judaism. He shows us something of the struggles the church underwent in accepting Gentiles as members. The Holy Spirit guides and strengthens the church as it spreads through much of the Roman Empire.

Pastoral Perspective

By Thomas G. Long

The account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is a part of the larger story in Acts of the universal embrace of the gospel. As Acts records it, the church's preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, starting from its Pentecostal epicenter in Jerusalem, is to spread to "all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" ([1:8](#)). The goal of this preaching is to be the instrument of the restoration of all peoples under God's reign ([1:6](#); [3:21](#)). Thus, as the gospel moves into the world, it gathers under the wings of God's mercy more and more of those who have been lost, pushed away, and forgotten. The narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch is the very personal story of the recovery of one of these outcast people.

Perhaps the best access to the pastoral dimensions of this story comes through the three questions that the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip:

1. *"How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?"* (v. 31) As the story opens, the eunuch, who is a relatively important palace official in Ethiopia, is in his chariot, returning from Jerusalem, where he has made a pilgrimage in order to worship. As he travels, he is reading the Scripture. The Bible often tells us about people who are insignificant in the eyes of the world but who are royalty in God's eyes. This story, however, could easily have been precisely the opposite. Here is a man with a royal job in a worldly court, who could have gotten the impression from the Bible that he was unwelcome in God's court. The Septuagint translation of [Deuteronomy 23:1](#) makes it plain that no one who is sexually mutilated "shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD."

But the eunuch is not reading Deuteronomy; he is reading Isaiah, and the prophet gives a more hopeful word. Not only does Isaiah announce that God will "recover the remnant that is left of his people ... from Ethiopia" ([Isa. 11:11](#)); he also promises that "eunuchs who keep my sabbaths" will be welcome in the house of God and will receive "a name better than sons and daughters" ([Isa. 56:4-5](#)).

So which is it? Deuteronomy or Isaiah? In or out? Is he welcome in the household of God, or is he not? If he has only the written words of Scripture, it could be argued either way. How can this man know what is true, how can he understand, unless someone guides him? What he needs is someone who not only knows Scripture, but also knows the God of Scripture. He needs someone to teach him who has felt the embrace of God, who can read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God's Spirit. He needs, as all of us do, a Philip to guide him.

2. *“About whom ... does the prophet say this?”* (v. 34) The eunuch has been reading the passage in Isaiah that describes someone who “like a sheep ... was led to the slaughter” and “in [whose] humiliation justice was denied” ([Isa. 53:7–8](#)). The eunuch asks Philip, “About whom is the prophet speaking, himself or someone else?” At this point in the conversation, the eunuch almost surely means, “Is this only about Isaiah and his situation, or is this passage about me as well? Is this a word from God for someone else, or is this God’s word for me, today?” As a eunuch, he would know full well about “humiliation” and “justice denied,” and he was wondering if God was speaking to him and to his own experience of being an outcast in Israel.

The biblical word is never merely about “back then.” It is always a word to us, to this moment, to these circumstances. “Today,” said Jesus in his hometown synagogue, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” ([Luke 4:21](#)). But when Philip showed the eunuch how this Isaiah passage was “fulfilled in his hearing,” it turned out to be even better news than the Ethiopian could ever have imagined. Not only does God know and understand the eunuch’s experience of being humiliated and ostracized religiously; Jesus himself took on that lowly and outcast state. What Isaiah says, Philip told the eunuch, has to do not only with you, but also with Jesus, who himself was “like a sheep led to the slaughter” and who was himself humiliated and denied justice. But in Jesus, and for all who follow him, this stony road of suffering is transformed into the highway of exaltation. “Out of his anguish he shall see light.... The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous” ([Isa. 53:11](#)). When the eunuch’s story of shame is refracted through the story of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, it becomes a narrative of redemption, restoration, and hope.

3. *“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”* (v. 37) When we think about it, there were actually quite a few things that people could have thrown up as roadblocks to prevent this Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized. He was living in Ethiopia, for one thing, so he was cut off from the land of Israel. He was a eunuch and thus in violation of the purity code. He was a member of the cabinet of the queen of Ethiopia, therefore loyal to the wrong sovereign. He belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job, and possessed the wrong sexuality.

But Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man’s question. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the eunuch. “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the Spirit. “Absolutely nothing.” So the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized right on the spot. Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling, blown down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 22:25-31 NRSVue, 2021

A song of praise to the Lord, who rules over all and cares for the downtrodden.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

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- 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!
- 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.
- 28 For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.
- 29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.
- 30 Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord
- 31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

Exploring Psalm 22:25-31

Psalms is a collection of collections. The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Within the book, there are five "books"; there is a doxology ("Blessed be ... Amen and Amen") at the end of each book.

Theological Perspective

By Michael Lodahl

As the church's journey through Eastertide continues, we find ourselves invited once again to pray with the psalmist—but to do so in a distinctively Christian way. We offer up this psalm in praise to the God of Israel—a simple observation that the church never should forget or take for granted—and yet we do so through Jesus and in Jesus' name. It is as though the living Christ joins us along the way, interpreting to us “the things about himself in all the scriptures” ([Luke 24:27](#)). Thus, as Christian disciples on the road, we offer up Israel's psalms to God in the name of Jesus Christ, and through the prism of his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. While the Gospel writers readily applied the opening portion of [Psalm 22](#) to Jesus' crucifixion—it is the psalm, after all, that begins with the cry of dereliction—this concluding portion of the psalm appropriately bears a distinctively resurrection feel. We encounter here a prominent eschatological theme of the psalmists and prophets of Israel, that one day the Gentiles (or “nations,” “peoples”) would turn in worship and obedience to the God of Abraham and Sarah ([Pss. 47:9; 67:3–5; Zech. 2:11](#)). “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.”

It is a remarkable phenomenon of history that, in fact, virtually countless families from a vast panoply of peoples have turned to the God of Israel. It is also a fact that this turning has occurred primarily through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. All of this becomes even more remarkable if viewed through the perspective provided us by the Gospel of Matthew. In *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, the late Paul van Buren wrote, “The evidence is not vast but it is clear. The extant texts of the Gospels preserve a witness to a Jesus deeply concerned for Israel, the Jewish people, and for them before all others.”[1] Thus we encounter a Jesus who says of himself, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” on that basis initially refusing help to a desperate Gentile woman. The Gospel testimony also describes Jesus as ordering his disciples, as they prepare for their “dry run” in evangelizing, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but

go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” ([Matt. 10:5–6](#)). One likely would not have seen it coming, this coming of the nations to the God of Israel.

It is Jesus’ largely undeterred focus upon Israel’s renewal that sets up the surprise with which Matthew’s Gospel ends. It is in this conclusion that the resurrected Jesus mysteriously meets his frazzled disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee and announces, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” ([Matt. 28:18](#)). It is in the light of Jesus’ announcement of his authority that we should read Psalm 22:28, “For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” Jesus’ commentary on this song of Israel would apparently be something like “Yes, indeed, all authority and dominion belong to God—and God has entrusted it all to me.” This would be an outlandish claim for anyone to make—except, perhaps, for someone who has been raised from death.

Even so, it is a remarkable, likely an incomprehensible claim. All authority in heaven and on earth? All dominion? And if the resurrected Christ has received such power and authority from God, how will he exercise it? He tells us. In view of this divinely entrusted authority, Jesus commands his disciples to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” ([Matt. 28:19](#)), of all the peoples (*ethnē*). Let us appreciate that this is likely a radically different kind of rulership than what the psalmist had in mind when writing that Israel’s God “rules over the nations” (Ps. 22:28).

We confess and believe that the God of Israel is Creator and Lord of all things ([Matt. 11:25](#)). We further confess that, in the utterly mysterious transactions of God’s rich being, the Father has bestowed “all authority in heaven and on earth” on the resurrected Son who was crucified. The specific, and surprising, way in which this Lord exercises rule is not through violence but through teaching, not by threat but by the good news of “the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” ([Matt. 28:19](#)). In this way, whenever God’s dominion spreads among the nations, it spreads noncoercively. Only that kind of dominion really squares with the Isaian servant who “will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory” ([Matt. 12:20](#)).

This is an amazing—some might say underwhelming—kind of power. The resurrected Jesus instructs his disciples to teach the nations “to obey everything that I have commanded you” ([Matt. 28:20](#))—and one cannot overlook the irony that, earlier in this same Gospel, the rationale that Jesus offers for why we should learn from him is that he is “gentle and humble in heart” ([Matt. 11:29](#)). What an incredible revaluation of all values! What a radical reorienting of what we usually mean by power, and of what we often expect of God’s reign!

I am convinced that the church needs to read the Psalms over the shoulder of Jesus, the crucified one. We need consistently to pray the Psalms in the name of, and through the history of, that same Jesus. The gospel of God in Jesus Christ demands such a reading from us in the church, at least partly so that Jesus’ contemporary disciples do not become intoxicated or infatuated with contemporary secular and political conceptions of power that trade on violence, suppression, and fear. The God we proclaim is surely the God of the Psalms, but is even more fundamentally for us one who has sent a message “to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ.” May we who preach the gospel join our voices and our wills accordingly.

1 John 4:7-21 NRSVue, 2021

This reading teaches that God's love is made known to us through Jesus. In response we are to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but to experience God's love and to recognize Jesus as God's Son is to know God. Only by not loving other humans made in God's image would we show that we do not know and love God. When we do love one another, then we live in union with God and fear is driven away.

- 7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
- 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
- 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.
- 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
- 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.
- 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.
- 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.
- 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.
- 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.
- 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.
- 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.
- 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.
- 19 We love because he first loved us.
- 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.
- 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Exploring 1 John 4:7-21

1 John. This epistle was addressed to a general audience, unlike those written by Paul. It shares a style, phrases and expressions with the Gospel according to John, so it is very likely that both were written by the same person. It appears to have been circulated to various churches. The author seeks to combat heresy, specifically that the spirit is entirely good but matter is entirely evil. John tells his readers that morality and ethical behaviour are important for Christians.

Theological Perspective

All things begin in love, flow from love, are perfected through love, and return to love. The centrality of love is a theme that pervades all of 1 John, coming to its highest point of power and simplicity in the little phrase “God is love” ([4:8](#) and [4:16](#)).

With stunning brevity, John tells us what God is and what God is not. John might have said that God is power or order or goodness. In our insecurity and longing for protection, we often yearn for a God who can control nature and prevent sickness or violence, a God who will protect us from all harm. In a world of moral confusion, we wish for a God who lays down the law with complete clarity and holds everyone accountable, catching the cheaters and rewarding the faithful. In our hunger to possess, we might even imagine a God of prosperity, one who promises to make us rich if we obey a few principles.

Whatever may be true about God’s power or moral order or generosity, John avoids all these descriptions in favor of the simple word *agapē* or love. It is not power or law or prosperity, but self-sacrificing love that is the heart of the truth about God. How do we know this? Not by imagining or philosophizing or intuiting, but by looking. God has acted in love, sending Jesus Christ to overcome the destructive and divisive power of sin. God has defined God, and God’s chosen self-definition is love. We do not have to guess what God is like. We simply have to look at what God has done. We cannot see God, John tells us, but we can see what God has done in Jesus Christ.

“We have seen and testify,” John writes, pointing back across intervening decades since the time when Jesus lived and died, invoking a memory still fresh enough in the early community of eyewitnesses to the drama of divine love. John’s point is simple but powerful: we know God is love because we are part of a community that has seen for ourselves that God acts in love. Some in our community stood at the foot of the cross and watched the suffering of outstretched love. Some in our community prepared the body for burial, seeing firsthand the wounds caused by sin met with love. Some in our community doubted, only to have doubts transformed by the presence of a love that cannot die.

“God is love.” More than power or even goodness, God is love—restless, creative, self giving, opening, flowing out into the other, coming back in new wholeness. Love gives birth, John tells us, recalling the text of [John 3](#) and Jesus’ invitation to Nicodemus to be “born anew” or “born from above.” From the rest of Scripture, we know that this new birth comes through faith. Without contradicting this, John tells us that whoever “loves is born of God and knows God” ([v. 7](#)). Believing and loving are the marks of the new creature, the one who is born anew in Christ.

Tucked away in [verse 7](#) is an even more sobering claim. We know God by seeing what God has done, but seeing is not enough. We know God in the fullest and most authentic sense only when the love of God flows through us. God is love; only the one who loves can know this love that is God. Love is not a concept, known abstractly. It is an action, lived concretely. It is not enough to remember Jesus’ self-sacrifice, to think about it, or even to be moved by it. We must live it. To know the God of love is to live the love of God.

God’s love is perfect, while ours is always flawed. Even so, we should not fear or be held back by our inadequacies, John tells us. Act lovingly, even if imperfectly. The love and

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the perfection come from God, whose perfect love casts out fear. We can honestly admit that we are not yet perfect in love, for it is God's love that makes us loving, and it is God's perfection that is making us ever more holy.

The one thing we cannot do is to claim to love God while refusing to love the sister or brother in front of us. Love and hate cannot mix. We tell lies to ourselves when we claim we can love and hate at the same time. Here John points us to the two great parallel commandments: love God and love your neighbor. These two are tied together, John tells us. Not only must we obey them both; it is impossible to obey the first without also obeying the second.

“We love because he first loved us” (v. 19). When God first loves us, we are unlovely and unloving, unworthy to be loved by a holy love. God loves us before we are God's children, and by loving us God makes us worthy of love. The love itself transforms us. Because we are loved by God, we become children of God. The love is first, before any claim on our part that we are worth being loved.

Our love for others should follow the same pattern as God's love for us. Like God, we are to love the one who is unlovely and unresponsive. It is easy for us to love those who love in return. We are commanded to love the one who is unloving, angry, and hurtful. Only then do we see for ourselves what God-as-love is really like. When the love of God flows through us and transforms another life, changing that unloving person into someone who also has been born anew of love, then we know God.

God's love initiates. Love is the overflow of God's delight that issues in creation. Love is the outreach of God's mercy that enters creation as a baby and redeems lost creatures with a cry of agony. Love is the outpouring of the transforming Spirit that permeates all things, quickening them and making them holy. God's love is first and last and utterly constant throughout the long, unmarked middle.

John 15:1-8 NRSVue, 2021

In our gospel reading we hear that Jesus is the true vine to which each branch must be united if it is to bear fruit. The vine and the vineyard were well-known symbols for God's people. A living relationship with Jesus in the following of his teaching is the source of fruitful discipleship. God will cut away the dead branches and prune the healthy ones so that they will bear more abundantly.

- 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.
- 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.
- 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.
- 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.
- 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.
- 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

- 7 If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.
- 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Exploring John 15:1-8

John is the fourth gospel. Its author makes no attempt to give a chronological account of the life of Jesus (which the other gospels do, to a degree), but rather "...these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John includes what he calls signs, stories of miracles, to help in this process.

Pastoral Perspective

by Nancy R. Blakeley

In a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. Understandably, that is where the nutrients are the most concentrated. Thus, the lateral branches are not allowed to ramble all over the arbor. They are pruned and kept short. Jesus drew an apt description of the life of discipleship from this metaphor of nature. Jesus is the true vine, God is the grower, and we are the branches. Through this image, two aspects of God's created world are held together—bearing fruit and being pruned.

Right from the start this passage sounds a word of judgment. Branches that do not bear fruit are removed by the vinegrower. Even harder for us to hear is that the branches that do produce fruit do not escape the knife. They are cut in order to produce even more fruit. How does this process of pruning come into play in our lives of faith?

As beginning gardeners soon learn, certain flowers benefit from being "deadheaded." Pinching the first flowers produced by pansies will result in fuller plants and more blossoms down the road. Yet how hard it is to do just that! Those first flowers are so pretty that one wants to resist the advice to pinch them off. The laws of nature seem to contradict what we desire. Still, there it is. Pruning now results in more beautiful plants later.

Jesus has gathered his disciples around him and seeks to prepare them. He foresees the hardships and death he is about to face. As he meets with his followers one last time, he yearns to console them. He knows the trials they will face in the days ahead. At the same time Jesus invites those disciples to enter into a more profound relationship by urging them to abide in him. Rather than sounding a note of despair, Jesus speaks a word of hope and trust for their souls. Reassurance comes from remaining close to Jesus, weathering whatever storms may come.

Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him, as he abides in them. In his translation *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Eugene H. Peterson uses the words, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." The notion of making a home, of finding the heart's true home in Jesus, brings a settled peace to the turmoil that often characterizes our lives.

When someone is having a difficult time, we casually give the advice to "hang in there." Those are not very helpful words for one who desperately wonders how to do just that. Jesus offers so much more than hanging in there. Yes, hard times will invariably come, but living, abiding, finding our home in Jesus the vine and God the grower sustains us, promoting even greater well-being. Recall the Hebrew notion of shalom, which speaks of wholeness, completeness, and health. Recovering that sense of shalom addresses the deep yearnings

of our lives. Shalom enters into all the cuts and hurts we endure day to day. It even enables us to speak of healing when there is no hope for a cure. Hope for relief from suffering does remain—a hope that God’s miracles of growth bring to fruition.

Bearing fruit when it counts grows from union with Jesus. Finding that home in him and letting his word find a home in us through faithful devotion bring about great joy. As in nature, the pruning and the abiding are held together. When we remain that close to Jesus, we attuned to him and he to us, the remarkable result is that what we want will be what God wants, and it will surely come to pass. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (v. 7). All that is extraneous is carefully and lovingly removed. What remains is centered and focused in God’s word.

As Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples, he invites them to stay close to him by placing their trust in him. He warns them that they cannot go it alone, trusting in their own strength. On their own they would be cut off from their life source. They would bear no fruit. This is a word that followers need to heed today. The temptation to go it on our own is great. We live in a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself. Though a valid goal, self-worth often becomes equated with our own success and what we can produce. It becomes very easy to think that it is all up to us and our own resources as we try to solve problems and meet challenges.

The liturgy on this Sunday could develop such thoughts. The prayer of confession might focus on this human propensity for misplaced trust and ask for forgiveness. For music, a choral piece based on this text, “I Am the Vine” by John Bell and Graham Maule, brings out Jesus’ counsel in one of its verses:

For on your own, what can you dare?
Left to yourself no sap you share:
Branches that serve their own desire
Find themselves broken as fuel for fire.[1]

God as master gardener offers a better plan for our lives. Let us find our home in God’s word and place our trust there. The harvest will be bountiful. As the chorus of the above song reminds us,

I am the Vine and you the branches,
Pruned and prepared for all to see;
Chosen to bear the fruit of heaven
If you remain and trust in me.[2]

We are “chosen to bear the fruit of heaven.” Jesus is the one who has made that possible. Here is real hope for “hanging in there” on the vine of life.

[1] John L. Bell and Graham Maule, © 1989 WGRG, Iona Community, G2 3DH.

[2] Ibid.

Bibliographical and Contributor Information

Unless otherwise noted, the Introductions to the readings come from *Introducing the Lessons of the Church Year, Third Edition* by Frederick Borsch, and George Woodward. (New York; Harrisburg, PA; Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

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[Book Outlines](#) are from [Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary](#) website maintained by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal.

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