

PREACHING GOD'S TRANSFORMING JUSTICE

A Lectionary Commentary, Year A

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Contents

*Note: Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, are in regular type;
Holy Days for Justice are in boldface.*

Preface	vii
Introduction	ix
First Sunday of Advent: <i>Leonora Tubbs Tisdale</i>	1
World AIDS Day (December 1): <i>Chris Glaser</i>	6
Second Sunday of Advent: <i>Marvin A. McMickle</i>	12
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10): <i>Christine Marie Smith</i>	17
Third Sunday of Advent: <i>Monica A. Coleman</i>	22
Fourth Sunday of Advent: <i>John M. Buchanan</i>	26
Christmas Day : <i>Elizabeth Conde-Frazier</i>	31
First Sunday after Christmas: <i>Ruthanna B. Hooke</i>	36
Holy Name of Jesus: <i>Dianne Bergant, CSA</i>	41
Second Sunday after Christmas: <i>Alyce M. McKenzie</i>	46
Epiphany of Jesus: <i>Terriel R. Byrd</i>	51
First Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of Jesus) [1]: <i>Joseph Evans</i>	56
Second Sunday after the Epiphany [2]: <i>Lincoln E. Galloway</i>	62
Martin Luther King Jr. Day (January 15): <i>Dale P. Andrews</i>	67
Third Sunday after the Epiphany [3]: <i>Melinda A. Quivik</i>	73

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany [4]: <i>Kenyatta R. Gilbert</i>	78
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany [5]: <i>Chandra Taylor Smith</i>	83
Asian American Heritage Day (February 19): <i>Fumitaka Matsuoka</i>	88
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany [6]: <i>Charles L. Campbell</i>	94
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany [7]: <i>Stephen G. Ray Jr.</i>	99
Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany [8]: <i>Jeffery L. Tribble Sr.</i>	104
Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany [9]: <i>Sharon H. Ringe</i>	109
Transfiguration Sunday (Last Sunday after the Epiphany): <i>Ched Myers</i>	114
Ash Wednesday: <i>Peter J. Paris</i>	120
First Sunday in Lent: <i>Nicole L. Johnson</i>	125
Second Sunday in Lent: <i>Alejandro F. Botta</i>	130
International Women's Day (March 8): <i>Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm</i>	136
Third Sunday in Lent: <i>Nyasha Junior</i>	142
Salt March Day: Marching with the Poor (March 12): <i>Rebecca Todd Peters</i>	147
Fourth Sunday in Lent: <i>Randall K. Bush</i>	153
Oscar Romero of the Americas Day (March 24): <i>Ada María Isasi-Díaz</i>	158
Fifth Sunday in Lent: <i>Lee H. Butler Jr.</i>	163
César Chávez Day (March 31): <i>Frederick John Dalton</i>	168
Sixth Sunday in Lent (Liturgy of the Palms): <i>Teresa Lockhart Stricklen</i>	173
(Liturgy of the Passion): <i>Teresa Lockhart Stricklen</i>	178
Maundy Thursday: <i>Bob Hunter</i>	183
Good Friday: <i>Randall C. Bailey</i>	188
Easter Day (Resurrection of Jesus): <i>Rhaskell Hunter</i>	193
Second Sunday of Easter: <i>Olive Elaine Hinnant</i>	198
Third Sunday of Easter: <i>María Teresa Dávila</i>	203
Earth Day (April 22): <i>John Hart</i>	208
Fourth Sunday of Easter: <i>Scott C. Williamson</i>	214
Holocaust Remembrance Day: Yom haShoah (Early April to Early May): <i>Clark M. Williamson</i>	219
Fifth Sunday of Easter: <i>Simone Sunghae Kim</i>	225
Sixth Sunday of Easter: <i>Choi Hee An</i>	230

Peace in the Home: Shalom Bayit (Second Sunday in May):	
<i>Marie M. Fortune</i>	235
Ascension of Jesus: <i>R. Mark Giuliano</i>	241
Seventh Sunday of Easter: <i>Luke A. Powery</i>	246
Day of Pentecost: <i>John S. McClure</i>	251
First Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity Sunday): <i>Kee Boem So</i>	256
Proper 3 [8]: <i>Safiyah Fosua</i>	261
Proper 4 [9]: <i>Diane G. Chen</i>	266
Proper 5 [10]: <i>Song Bok Jon</i>	272
Proper 6 [11]: <i>Carolynne Hitter Brown</i>	279
Juneteenth: Let Freedom Ring (June 19): <i>James Henry Harris</i>	286
Proper 7 [12]: <i>Edward L. Wheeler</i>	292
Gifts of Sexuality and Gender (June 29): <i>Valerie Bridgeman</i>	298
Proper 8 [13]: <i>Pablo A. Jiménez</i>	303
Fourth of July: Seeking Liberty and Justice for All: <i>Ronald J. Allen</i>	309
Proper 9 [14]: <i>Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki</i>	314
Proper 10 [15]: <i>Cláudio Carvalhaes</i>	320
Proper 11 [16]: <i>Joni S. Sancken</i>	326
Proper 12 [17]: <i>Wilma Ann Bailey</i>	333
Proper 13 [18]: <i>Grace Ji-Sun Kim</i>	339
Proper 14 [19]: <i>Arthur Van Seters</i>	345
Sojourner Truth Day (August 18): <i>JoAnne Marie Terrell</i>	351
Proper 15 [20]: <i>Sunggu Yang</i>	358
Proper 16 [21]: <i>Mary Alice Mulligan</i>	364
Proper 17 [22]: <i>David J. Frenchak</i>	371
Proper 18 [23]: <i>Barbara K. Lundblad</i>	377
Simchat Torah: Joy of the Torah (Mid-September to	
Early October): <i>Esther J. Hamori</i>	383
Proper 19 [24]: <i>Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi</i>	388
International Day of Prayer and Witness for Peace	
(September 21): <i>Willard Swartley</i>	395
Proper 20 [25]: <i>Catherine Gunsalus González and Justo L. González</i>	401
Proper 21 [26]: <i>Noelle Damico</i>	407

Peoples Native to the Americas Day (Fourth Friday in September): <i>Martin Brokenleg</i>	413
Proper 22 [27]: <i>Amy E. Steele</i>	418
World Communion Sunday (First Sunday in October): <i>Joseph R. Jeter Jr.</i>	424
Proper 23 [28]: <i>Miguel A. De La Torre</i>	430
Night of Power (27th Night of Ramadan): <i>John Kaltner</i>	436
Proper 24 [29]: <i>Henry H. Mitchell</i>	441
World Food Day (October 16): <i>James L. McDonald</i>	448
Proper 25 [30]: <i>Angela Cowser</i>	453
Children's Sabbaths (Third Weekend in October): <i>Shannon Daley-Harris</i>	460
All Saints' Day: <i>Gennifer Benjamin Brooks</i>	466
Proper 26 [31]: <i>Elizabeth J. A. Siwo-Okundi</i>	471
Proper 27 [32]: <i>Bob Ekblad</i>	477
Proper 28 [33]: <i>L. Susan Bond</i>	483
Proper 29 [34] (Reign of Christ): <i>Jennifer L. Lord</i>	490
Thanksgiving Day: <i>Traci C. West</i>	495
Contributors	501
Scripture Index	505

Juneteenth: Let Freedom Ring (June 19)

James Henry Harris

ISAIAH 61

PSALM 34:11–22

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1–10

MARK 5:1–20

Slavery was abolished in most of the United States at the conclusion of fighting between the Union and Confederate armies in April and May of 1865. However, slavery continued in Texas until June 19, 1865, when a Union army arrived in Galveston and announced freedom for slaves. That date (Juneteenth) celebrates the actual end of slavery and sometimes includes the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation and an abundant outdoor meal. A Juneteenth sermon might reflect critically on the degree to which people of color in the United States are still in need of emancipation from racism and other systems of injustice.

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1865

These texts proclaim the good news of freedom and liberty to those who suffer oppression and unfreedom. My mother used to say that “God don’t like ugly,” and this dislike manifests itself in miraculous deliverance from torment and bondage. Juneteenth celebrates these redemptive acts of God experienced by Blacks as freedom and liberation from American chattel slavery. We can discern from these texts that freedom, salvation, and liberation can be experienced in spite of suffering and evil. God is a righteous deliverer from all forms of bondage, and Blacks can now celebrate their deliverance from the evils of slavery.

Isaiah 61

The language of the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah is descriptive of the prophet's mission and message: to proclaim good news to the poor and oppressed and to proclaim the year of jubilee. In the words of the Negro spiritual, "I got shoes in that kingdom—ain't that good news?"

The realm of God in the Isaiah text and in the spiritual song is a "now" kingdom rather than an eschatological one. The demands of the kingdom are such that a confrontation with the powers about poverty, justice, fairness, and the liberation of the oppressed is an urgent enterprise that calls for a new "nowness," an immediacy that cannot be postponed. The preacher, the servant, and the community of faith are called to the task of bringing about the kingdom of God, now. Social justice as a theory and practice is a holy phenomenon grounded in the word of the Lord and the Spirit's anointing. The language of the prophet in Isaiah 61 is so integral to the nature and will of God that the writer of the Gospel of Luke places these prophetic words on the lips of Jesus as a testimony to his self-understanding.¹ The servant's mission is to announce and effect social justice and transformation in the church and world. This is what it means for the individual and the community to be holy, anointed, and spiritual. The servant of the Lord is called to understand her identity as a preacher and human being to be ineluctably related to the poor and oppressed. This is the antithesis of what we often hear preachers espousing on radio and television today.

This text is about freedom and proclaiming the year of jubilee or release from slavery. That is why this Scripture resonates in the hearts and minds of African Americans. Like the Israelites in Egypt, Africans in North America were slaves for 250 years. After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865, de facto slavery continued in the United States as Jim Crow laws and segregation practices prevailed for another hundred years. Those who have been poor and oppressed, chattel slaves, are now free to rejoice and to "display [God's] glory" (v. 3b). The glory of the Lord has been expressed in Black church life from the brush-harbor days of slavery to present-day storefronts and mega-churches. There is no shortage of glorifying the Lord because our memory is not obviated by suffering but is infused with both suffering and hope because we too are now ministers and "priests of the LORD" (v. 6).

Both like and unlike exilic Israel, African Americans nearly lost everything that created familiarity: their homes, their families, their land, their names,

1. Luke 4:18–19. See also Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1982).

their language, and, to some extent, their memory.² There was a deliberate and systematic attempt to erase from Black consciousness any connection with their African past by separating members of the same tribe and placing slaves from different tribes together to ensure a lack of communication among them. The interstate selling of slaves via the auction block was one of the most cruel and debasing elements in the system of slavocracy.

The words of the prophet Isaiah redirect us to the real reason for our existence: to bring good news, bind up the broken, and proclaim release, jubilee, and comfort (vv. 1–2). These words outline the mission of all God's people—servants, preachers, prophets, of the synagogue, mosque, and church.

Psalm 34:11–22

Psalm 34 moves in a linear progression from perpetual praise to the sage advice and wisdom of the elder: “Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD” (v. 11). It mimics the spirit of Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

There seems to be a growing number of parishioners and students who indeed shun wisdom and instruction. The Sunday schools and Bible academies are sparsely attended, and many seminary students are more interested in obtaining a degree than studying and developing the discipline required to be considered wise. There seems to be no fear of the Lord, thus no vector to direct their knowledge or wisdom. Without this, there is little chance that ministers will be prepared to “do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14). White-collar crime and the vulgar capitalists who oppress the poor; violence; and Black-on-Black crime reflected in the violent lyrics of musical geniuses like Lil' Kim, Lil Wayne, 50 Cent, and the messiah of rap music, Tupac Shakur, have not contributed to peace or positive instruction for the youth of our society.

If we look closely at some of history's greatest villains, we come to the realization that much of their temporary greatness is forgotten and has since been filed away as awful examples. What do we want our greatness to be? We should be building a legacy of depositing positive values in the lives of God's people. As the psalmist writes, “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (vv. 13–14).

2. My reference here is informed by Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), and his dictum “I only have one language and that language is not mine” (p. 1).

In answering to the question, “Why do we do these things?” we must recognize that “God is a God who empathizes and sides with the poor and the oppressed.”³ God rewards all of us for obeying God’s commands and encouraging those who are disheartened and brokenhearted in the midst of tribulation. No one who takes refuge in God will be doomed. As worry, hassle, and danger seem to us unconquerable, God’s mercy and grace are able to conquer all that and more. This is good news indeed. And we are the ones to share it.

Mark 5:1–20

We first encounter the Gerasene demoniac living among tombs, confined to caves outside his hometown, and possessed by evil spirits. His pathos and pain are palpable, indicting the church today whenever it turns away from those who suffer.

The man’s townsfolk had abandoned him, and although no person could hold him down, he chose to remain among the tombs night and day, where “he was always howling and bruising himself with stones” (v. 5). A person whose body is in pain naturally cries out as a response to the pain!⁴ The victim is the demon, the spirit of suffering, and Jesus’ ability to transform this demoniac’s torment into tranquility is a testimony to the nowness of the kingdom. This man’s pain cannot wait to be addressed in the “sweet by-and-by.”

The whole experience of chattel slavery was masterminded by those who Frederick Douglass felt were demon possessed. In his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass describes symptoms of “possession” exhibited by the slave master:

His strange moments excited my curiosity, and compassion. He seldom walked alone without muttering to himself; and he occasionally stormed about, as if defying an army of angry invisible foes. . . . Most of his leisure was spent in walking, cursing and gesticulating like one possessed by a demon. Most evidently, he was a wretched man, at war with his own soul and the world around him.⁵

From slavery to the present, there has been torment and torture of African Americans: beatings, hangings, long prison sentences, violations of human and civil rights, and so on. For some, this torment, pain, anguish, agitation,

3. Cf. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

4. James H. Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), and idem, *Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

5. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, Miller & Mulligan, 1855), available from Project Gutenberg at www.gutenberg.org/files/202/202-h/202-h.htm.

and evil is experienced as a demonic, bruising force, making them cry out for help and healing.

In spite of torment due to systemic evils such as racism and sexism, or personal failures such as drug addiction, or mental or physical illness, there is a ray of hope. Whatever demon causes you to cry out night and day, to bruise yourself, to scream for help, to wander among the tombs, these demons are not all-powerful, and your torment, torture, anguish, and pain are not everlasting. We can move beyond torment to tranquility and, like the man in the text after encountering Jesus, we may be "clothed and in [our] right mind."

Before Jesus steps into the picture to provide this man with hope and healing, his expectations of Jesus are consistent with his expectations of those with whom he had previously dealt. He expected Jesus to harm him in some way, and he begged Jesus not to add to the torment that he had already experienced.

After his encounter with Jesus, the man who had been naked, disoriented, ruffled, and ragged is now the essence of tranquility, the quintessence of control, the paragon of polite society. This man is living testimony to the power of God, embodying a metamorphosis greater than that of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.⁶ This tormented man, who could not sit or keep still because of what postmodern medicine may attribute to attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), multiple personality disorder, or compulsive behavior; this man, who roamed and wandered aimlessly among the dead, is now sitting calmly. No chains. No leg irons. No straps. No fetters. He can move his hands and feet; he can shout without harming himself. He is sitting peacefully, "clothed," dressed up. He has been utterly transformed.

Today, no one comes to places of worship without problems and issues that need to be addressed. Of course, there is tremendous difficulty in "delivering" people from some situations, and we find it easier to push difficult problems and people to the margins by employing a *modus operandi* that says, "Out of sight, out of mind." But banishment does not end pain. Jesus shows us how to step towards those who are suffering and the evil forces overpowering them. By God's power, we may join with him in confronting evil among us.

2 Corinthians 6:1–10

Near the beginning of this passage, Paul quotes Isaiah: "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you" (Isa. 49:8). He goes on to insist, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor. 6:2b).

6. For an excellent definition of transformation, see Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London and New York: Continuum, 1975). See also Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996).

Whether we realize it or not, the world in which we live thrives on dysfunction and disease. What would happen to hospitals and the economy if there were no disease, no HIV/AIDS, no cancer? What would happen if there were no wars to spark national pride and investment in domestic goods? The economic infrastructure would implode.

Paul simply and succinctly states that we—as the body of Christ and God’s people—should fully embrace the fact that we are God’s agents of change. We need to comprehend God’s purpose, see God’s will, and obey the tasks to which we are called. The church has a responsibility to work itself out of the business of placating the poor with a salve rather than providing a real change of conditions. Jesus comes to the side of the oppressed and marginalized. We should do the same. When there are no more oppressed or oppressors, victims or villains, rich or poor, and so on, then the church’s mission will have been completed and restoration and transformation will be made manifest in our world. This is what Paul Tillich may have meant by “the eternal now”⁷ and what Jesus meant in saying to Mary and Martha regarding their brother Lazarus’s death: “I am the resurrection and the life—now.” Resurrection-like freedom and justice is not on the horizon of distant vistas. It is not a proleptic vision to be realized in the eschaton, but it is a present phenomenon. “See, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

7. Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 122–32.