

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray the passages below. They alternate the voice of Old Testament Wisdom and the description of Jesus as the Word in the prologue of the fourth gospel (1.1-18).

WISDOM: In the beginning before the earth, I was set up. When God established the heavens, I was there (Proverbs 8.23, 27).

WORD: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

WISDOM: When God marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside God as an artisan. I was God's delight day after day, rejoicing in the world and delighting in humankind (Proverbs 8.29-31).

WORD: All things came into being through him, and without him no one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

What is the story in which we live? What motivates the characters and moves the plot—greed, lust, power? Do the perils for Earth from climate change testify to human self-absorption? Is profit our only moral compass? Is the human story ultimately tragic?

Anyone who answers yes hasn't read the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights or the Earth Charter. Both articulate human dignity and unalienable rights for all. Both call for economies that include people who live in poverty.

Pope Francis insists that we Christians are resurrection people. In our faith new actions and attitudes can arise.

What is the story we personally live? How are we giving and receiving kindness, generosity, and respect? To what values do we give witness day in and day out? How do we pour our love into one another's lives?

Here is a testimony that some people still live Jesus' story. A woman I know recently arrived at our airport and took light rail home. She sat, observing familiar sights, but tired after her flight. A homeless man came walking slowly down the aisle. She remembers smelling him before she saw him.

Homeless people are familiar to her. She heads development for a

nonprofit that provides affordable housing for some 9,000 residents in our area. This day she stays a bystander as the man moves past her and sits down. He is missing a shoe.

While she looks away, another woman sits down beside him. She is wearing scrubs. "I think my shoes will fit you," she says and puts the shoes on his feet.

The man thanks her, but she is in a hurry.

"This is my stop," she says and steps off the train in her stocking feet to her job at the Veterans Administration hospital, a stunning witness.

● Who have you witnessed living Jesus' story?



GOSPEL



John the Baptist introduces Jesus.

NARRATOR: John caught sight of Jesus coming toward him and exclaimed:

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Look there! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! It is he of whom I said: “After me is to come a man who ranks ahead of me, because he was before me.” I confess I did not recognize him, though the very reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.

NARRATOR: John also gave this testimony:

JOHN THE BAPTIST: I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and come to rest on him. But, as I say, I did not recognize him. The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, “When you see the Spirit descend and rest on someone, it is he who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit.” Now I have seen for myself and have testified, “This is God’s chosen one.”

John 1.29-34

● Who has pointed to you as John did to Jesus? Whose story do you have to tell in order to tell your own?

Theology is faith seeking understanding. Christology is faith in Jesus, seeking to understand who he is, and his purposes for us. Christologies grow out of the inexhaustible resources we draw from the Old Testament, the gospels, and our experience.

Sunday’s short gospel describes who Jesus is from three Old Testament starting points—the Passover lamb, God’s chosen servant, and the Word who was with God from the beginning.

First the lamb metaphor. It has deep roots in Jewish life but ambiguous connotations for people today. We no longer make animal offerings to God.

When God sends Moses to set the Hebrews free from slavery in Egypt, the slaves must kill a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts to save their firstborn from the tenth plague, the killing of every first born. This is the plague that convinces Pharaoh to set the Hebrews free.

Attention to details in John’s gospel shows the evangelist compares Jesus specifically to the Passover lamb. In John 19.14, the evangelist carefully notes the time when Pilate hands Jesus over to the crowd who insist he be crucified. It is noon on the day of preparation before the Passover feast, the exact time the priests begin slaughtering the lambs families eat during the Passover meal.

Later, in John 19.32-33, soldiers come to break the

Jesus is lamb, servant, word.

The fourth gospel begins in God time and enters history only in verse six, when “a man named John was sent from God...to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (1.6-7). Jesus has no birth story and no parents at the beginning of this gospel. Instead he has a dedicated public relations man who testifies someone greater is coming.

John the Baptist apparently preaches in such a compelling way that many mistake him for the promised messiah, but he insists he is not. Someone greater is coming who will baptize with the Spirit. Artfully the fourth gospel uses the Baptist to build up anticipation. The Baptist is the point man. Artists often draw him pointing.

The Baptist witnesses that indeed Wisdom, God’s partner in creation, has found a dwelling in



Israel. The Word has taken flesh to reveal God among us. None of the four gospels can tell Jesus’ story without first introducing John the Baptist.

legs of Jesus and the two others crucified with him, so that they will die before Passover begins. The soldiers find Jesus already dead, so they pierce his side to make sure but do not break a bone. This detail suggests Exodus 12.46, which tells those who prepare the Passover lamb not to break any of its bones.

This is not the lamb of sin offerings later in the temple. The Passover lamb symbolizes God's deliverance of an enslaved people.

Israelites ever after eat the Passover lamb to remember how God delivered them. The Passover lamb becomes the food of the free at each Passover meal. Like the blood of the lamb, Jesus' life frees people from slavery and death.

● **How does identifying Jesus with the Passover lamb help you understand who Jesus is?**

Second, the Baptist identifies Jesus as God's chosen one. This title alludes to the prophetic writing of Second Isaiah, who writes four songs describing the exiled people of Israel as God's suffering servant. One of the songs is Sunday's first reading.

Isaiah gives the exiled people heart, insisting their suffering will heal others (Isaiah 53). He comforts the people and preaches that God forgives their faithlessness and disregard for people in poverty. He announces God will lead them home.

Isaiah sees the exiles as servants of God, specially chosen for making God known among their captors. The captives' return from exile leaves a permanent mark in Israel's



history and becomes a frequent reason for praise in the psalms.

● **From whose suffering do you carry lasting wounds and/or lasting hope?**

● **How does identifying Jesus with God's servant people help you understand who he is?**

Third, John's gospel identifies Jesus as the pre-existent Word, "After me," says John the Baptist, "comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." This paradoxical verse echoes the opening verses of the John's gospel, which describe the Word who was with God from the beginning. This image of the Word borrows from the Old Testament description of Wisdom, who is personified as a woman.

The opening prayer in this issue parallels verses from Proverbs 8 that describe Wisdom and verses from John that describe Jesus as Word.

Both Wisdom and Word are with God from the beginning, helping create and order all that is. "Wisdom pervades and penetrates all things, for she is the breath of the power of God ... a spotless mirror of the working of God" (Wisdom 7.24-26).

Awe is the beginning of wisdom in the bible. Wisdom results from our human capacity to discover God's handiwork in creation, its order, its fruitfulness, and beauty. Our minds perceived God's activity, learn and teach about God by interacting with creation and appreciating life.

In the Baptist's testimony, the evangelist John applies the personification of Wisdom to Jesus. Wisdom becomes the Word—"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1.14). In his humanity Jesus reveals God as creation reveals God in its workings.

Like Wisdom, the Word comes from above and was from

the beginning. Like Wisdom, Jesus brings the gifts of creation in abundance among the people—the best wine, living water, and living bread, the signs in John’s gospel.

Twice in Sunday’s short gospel John the Baptist insists that he did not recognize in Jesus the one greater whom he is expecting, not until the Spirit rests upon Jesus. Jesus is the one from above who will baptize with God’s own Spirit. This gospel articulates lavishly who Jesus is by echoing Old Testament images—the Passover lamb, God’s chosen servant, pre-existent Word, and in addition, Spirit-filled leader.

- What insights into who Jesus is does the Wisdom imagery give you?
- What contemporary imagery or philosophy might you draw on to express who Jesus is for us in our time?

FIRST READING

Israel’s suffering has purpose.

Sunday’s first reading comes from the second of the four songs that personify the exiled people of Israel as God’s suffering servant. Some think the prophet Jeremiah inspired this poetry. God called him in the womb to be a prophet; he lived, prophesied, and suffered through the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The servant in Second Isaiah’s poetry can be seen both as an individual like Jeremiah and as a personification of the people of Israel.

Second Isaiah insists the suffering of the exile, whether the suffering of the individual prophet or the suffering of the defeated and exiled people of Israel, will become a revelation of God’s glory. Their God considers them servants, whose survival in suffering will reveal God’s power. God will not only reunite all Israelites but make them a light to the nations. Their restoration will testify to God’s power beyond Israel’s borders.

God will restore Israel.

The Holy One said to me: You are my servant, Israel, through whom I show my glory. The Holy One has spoken, who formed me as God’s servant from the womb, to bring Jacob back to God and gather Israel as God’s own.

I am made glorious in God’s sight; my God is now my strength! It is too little, says God, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel. I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 49:3,5-6

- What has made the suffering that inevitably comes in life purposeful for you?
- What makes survivors?
- What service has your own suffering been to others?

PRAY

Consider how your reflection together has corrected, enlarged, or confirmed your mental image of who Jesus is. Identify a personal challenge you hear in this reflection.

LEADER: Grace and truth come to us through Jesus Christ.

ALL: He comes down from heaven to raise up the afflicted and forgotten.

Take time to ask for your needs.

LEADER: Spirit-filled leader, make us a light to our world.

ALL: Make us active and hearty in your service.

LEADER: Help us live the Spirit you poured out in us at our baptisms.

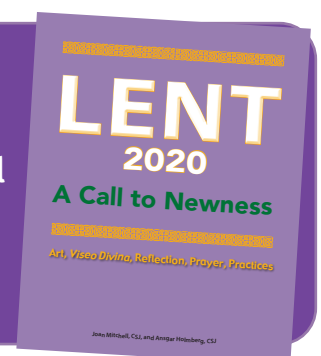
ALL: Make us a light to our world. Amen.



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