

## Lent II Year A 2026

We are now in the second Sunday of Lent... which means we are well into year A of the lectionary cycle... We began in Advent, then Christmas, then the season of Epiphany... now we are in the so-called penitential season of Lent... and just as soon as we have acclimated to our readings from Matthew's Gospel... the lectionary gurus switch us over to the Gospel of John, from which we'll be reading throughout Lent and Easter mostly... and then we'll return to Matthew after Pentecost for the remainder of the church year, with only a couple of exceptions. So a little biblical review here.

Matthew is concerned, as we have seen, with the practice of Jesus, and thus with the practice of the church... practice engenders belief. Matthew's theology is practice. It matters deeply to Matthew that Jesus is connected to the lineage of the patriarchs and prophets of the tradition... Matthew wants a clear connecting line drawn between Jesus and the orthodox tradition.... For Matthew Jesus is the new articulation of an ancient faith... that his life and ministry is the renewed manifestation of living out the Torah, the laws of God, that will keep the people of Israel in a right relationship with God and each other.... For Matthew Jesus is the personification of an obedient people, contrasted with the disobedient Israelites in the Sinai desert, and the succession of disobedient kings throughout Israel's history.... Jesus is the archetype of a People whose practice of the faith fulfills the promise of salvation for a world wracked by evil, oppression and violence... "I will bless you, and you will be a blessing." That's the heart of the Covenant between God and God's people. The practice of the faith is the means of God's love in the world up and

against an unjust social, economic and political system. Matthew in short is pitching the Jesus movement as a renaissance of Judaism and its vital witness to the love of God in history.

John's Gospel, on the other hand, is anything but orthodox Judaism (that is why John's Gospel barely made it past the scrutiny of the early church fathers as to whether it would be included into the canon of scripture) John's Gospel owes its theology, unlike the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, whose theological ethos relies on the categories of Judaism and Semitic religious practice.... John's Gospel owes its theology to Platonic thought, a decidedly cosmopolitan interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus, very much connected to main stream philosophy.... John's Gospel depends on the Greek idea that all things in earth are forms of, reflections of, the ideal forms of heaven; the forms of earth symbols of the forms of heaven... Plato's republic is a prime example.... The Polis, the Greek city-state with its grand and gracious and egalitarian order, with its reliance on justice and equality, with its beautiful architecture, and urban symmetry.... The city-state for Plato was a reflection of the heavenly city.... As God's gracious order exists in heaven, then it is reflected by the enlightened human imagination and ingenuity on earth... That's Platonic thought in a nutshell...

So in speaking of the person of Jesus, the writer of John's Gospel is making the audacious claim that as God in heaven is love, love that gives itself away in imaginative possibility... then Jesus is the reflection of that love on earth, and not just a reflection only,

but one and the same... Jesus is the flesh and blood manifestation of God among us.... He declares Jesus the light of God in the world, and that that light is the light of the human community.... Jesus, then, is the archetype of the human community.... So the church, the community of believers, for John, becomes the flesh-and-blood manifestation of God's love in the world, not just similar to the figure of Jesus, but in fact, one and the same... And you are familiar with the passages in John in which Jesus describes his body and blood as nurture for the world's hunger.... Which means that those who follow Jesus are also nurture, that the faithful are no less body and blood for the world.

So between Matthew and John we have two very different perspectives on the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew never speaks of Jesus as divine... and for that matter, neither do Luke and Mark... and now we know in biblical scholarship that there were many other gospels read among the early Christians speculating out of their shared experiences who this Jesus is, and what he means for the world. John calls the followers of Jesus, the baptized, he calls them the children of light.... Light bearers to a world riddled by the dark. For John, the people of God are a colony of angels, as it were, of divine substance, destined to bear God's light to the world. And though John's Gospel became the central theological touchstone for the church when it became the religion of empire, the church has refused to believe the central premise; it has never owned the proclamation and vision that we are sons and daughters of God. Instead, the church has wallowed for centuries in the toxic doctrines of Original Sin and substitutionary atonement.

Our reading today is a teaching on Baptism from the perspective of this unorthodox, lyrical, and enigmatic writer.... John depicts baptism as a second life.... A new birth in the middle of life... a birth of water and Spirit... he calls it “being born from above.” Our first life, our physical birth, is about growth and maturity and self-sufficiency.... Learning how to survive, in short, necessary in the process of maturity... but then, John says we must be born again.... We must enter our second life, a life of love and sacrifice... a life lived for the good of the whole.... A life lived for the other... a life inspired by the Spirit of God.... It is an acclamation that we must come of age. Nicodemus in our story is a model of self-sufficiency... he is part of the elite, of noble lineage, privileged, and a person of faith... but Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night in the dark, in secret. He wants to possess the knowledge of salvation. He wants his belief in Jesus affirmed... that he’s got it right... the way he’s always gotten it right.... And he probably doesn’t want to be known as one who hangs out with a radical revolutionary. But Jesus reminds him, admonishes him that faith is not a secret, private matter; it is not a mere token of our self-sufficiency... but that our second life, the life of the Spirit, demands that we bear our faith into the light of day.... That faith is public.... That to be born from above is to practice one’s faith in earth, as witnesses to the truth... in full view. It is the Spirit that calls us into a radical public life. Our faith is political... at its heart. In other words, our faith, and the practice of it, bears on the means by which we live our common life.

One of the staunch criticisms of John’s Gospel in the early councils of the Church was that this Gospel was highly dualistic. John speaks of the children of light as opposed to the

children of darkness. The early church fathers saw the Jesus movement as a universal, all-inclusive articulation of a common faith... that would in fact ultimately save the world... that's quintessential Judaism... that God chose Israel, a people, to be a light to the world. But John recognizes that all will not own this noble birth from above; that there are those who reject the divine legacy, their very birthright; that in fact, those who receive the Spirit are few.

That is the quandary in which we find our world today. Pundits call it "deep division." Some say this is something new, but I suspect this intractable dualism has always bedeviled the human community. And let's be clear, this division is not a mere matter of opinion; it's not about being Republican or Democrat; liberal or conservative. This division is between those who choose to follow the truth, and those who choose to follow a lie. And such, I'm afraid is the way of the world.

Never in our history as a nation has this reality been more obvious. Our government, and in particular, the executive branch, is committing atrocity after atrocity. They break the law literally every day. They lie; they cheat. The principals of this administration, including the president, are using their power to enrich their own pocketbooks... billion-dollar pocketbooks. Civil rights are being compromised daily. The sanctity of our Constitution is being violated as a matter of practice. The atrocities are too many to name, but now, we are seeing this administration becoming more and more violent. It has murdered fishermen in the Caribbean, calling them drug runners. It has attacked, while unprovoked, the

sovereign country of Venezuela, and abducted their president... remember? And now we have attacked Iran, for some reason unknown to us (first it was to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities... but we did that six months ago. Then the idea of regime-change surfaced; but that red herring has been around for decades). This brazen attack in the middle of Saturday night has the potential to start a much wider and dangerous war in the Middle East... all to divert attention from the felonious escapades of the president of the United States and his cabal... and all of this comes with loss of innocent lives.... The sad and disturbing reality is that some thirty percent of our population in this country supports the criminal enterprise that is our government. The problem is not only empire, but it is also the complicity of those who either support it, or remain silent.

Good people, we don't have the dubious luxury of complicity or silence. We are, as John puts it, friends of God. We are the ones who claim the birthright of being born from above. That is not arrogance, but profound humility. We are the ones to stand against evil in our world. We are witnesses to the truth. We now know that there are many who will not sign on to such a calling. So it falls to us... and what a daunting privilege. Our very bodies are required of us. Pay attention to the events in Minneapolis. The people, in a stunning display of collaboration, went to the streets... demonstrated their solidarity to non-violence and the truth... and they literally stood the government down. The president's para-military withdrew with not so much as a whimper.... Presence. I believe our presence is healing. I believe our acting for the good is a witness to creative possibility, and, most importantly, that love will not die. Regimes and empires die, but not love. Stand in the

streets, good people; speak out; show up... and pray. Pray that what we believe; what we have given our lives to is true. Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.