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11.29.14 Homily

First Sunday of Advent

Isa 63:16-17; 64:1-8; Ps 80:2-3,15-16,18-19; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Billy Graham has composed a prayer that appears to have been specially written for us, here, in this week of crisis. While we may take exception to pieces of it, his points for the most part ring true, and his prayer sounds very much like Isaiah's.

O Holy One, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know your Word says, 'Woe to those who call evil good,' but that is exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self esteem. We have abused power and called it politics. We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forebears and called it enlightenment. Search us, O God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from sin and set us free. Amen!

Advent is about people, families, whose lives have been put to the test by an event which is out of their control and who before their eyes, see their world come to a standstill and die around them. No one can really prepare for it. It kind of creeps up on us, and then suddenly we look out and see devastation and death all around us. This is war. It is riots. It is fire and floods and pestilence and drought. This year, in this place, it is code-named "Ferguson."

And so we begin again. With graphic reminders of how far we have to go. Who could have imagined that we would be moving into our seventh communal Advent while feeling within ourselves ugly emotions of fear and outrage and even hopelessness. In this week of Advent Hope.

Makes sense that our ritual beginning starts with waiting for newness. For newness of life within our ruts *and* our upheavals. For that elusive unity of persons that can only happen **if we make it happen**—through throwing out every "separate-but-equal" law. Because immigrants are ALL of us, and we are ALL poor in some sense, and ALL entitled in the very same ways, and ALL connected to the very same African earth and the very same eternal God.

Every birth is filled with newness, with wonder and awe, and certainly with hope. Hope for the life that is just beginning, and hope for all of life to be better just by virtue of this new life in our midst. What better way to turn the night into day, as the December equinox begins the lengthening of our dark days of winter and

reminds us that what seems to be dead still lives beneath the cold blankets of snow, being nourished in the womb of the earth just as the baby to be born is being nourished in the womb of his mother. I'm sure Michael Brown's mother had that kind of hope before his birthing into this world. Did she still have hope for him, hope in him, before his death? Hard to know. Does she have hope today? From all appearances, not at all. So how will her Advent play out?

Perhaps *our* Advent Hope is precisely that we *can* be freed from sin and set free. This Season of Waiting is filled with pregnant expectations for a light at the end of the tunnel. The whole world groans in trying to give birth to goodness, to kindness, to respect, to integrity, to unity. And try as we may, it seems to be a lost cause...over and over and over again. Will we get it right this year? Will we get it right...ever?

Every year, we are ALL urged to be alert, to be aware, to be respectful of the earth on which we dwell and the absolute sanctity of all of life—the absolute sanctity of all human lives included. It is incumbent upon us to provide equal rights and equal rites to all our sisters and brothers—of all races and nations, all religions and philosophies, all genders and lifestyles—all across the known earth to which we are connected.

Let us pray with the psalmist: O Holy One, be our strength as we break down walls that separate and divide. Let not fear pluck away the gifts we would share. O Holy One, restore us! Let your face shine upon us! Amen.

12.20.14 Homily

Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Sam 7:1-5,8-11,16; Ps 89:2-5,27,29; Rom 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Finally, five short days before the anticipated birth of Jesus, we hear the magical story of Mary's impregnation. In the eyes of a child it happens this way for everybody. An angel gives Mommy a baby in her belly, she goes to the hospital, she comes home with the baby in her arms. And life is *never* the same! Thank God for Christmas and Santa Claus and *me* in the center of the universe again!

Not too far-fetched. I'd guess lots of kids kinda picture God like Santa Claus. Santa-God is everywhere, sees everything, knows everything, and is *very* generous. As long as I am good, Santa-God will give me anything I want. As long as I never notice all the injustice around me, and don't hurt the new baby, Santa-God can persist in my mind clear through adulthood. I can be Peter Pan forever.

Or David, who becomes Santa-God's favored son through war and bloodshed and inherits a promise of immortality – from following sheep to leading a nation that he will find under his Christmas tree. So on this very day, in Israel, war and bloodshed continues with claims that Santa-God did indeed give this land to David's nation in perpetuity and nobody else is welcome.

War and bloodshed are the hallmarks of the human race since its inception, of course. Or at least since its expulsion from that mythical garden where Santa-God benevolently beamed upon all good little boys and girls as they enjoyed an endless stream of gifts. Too bad they couldn't keep the rules, and made Santa-God angry, and got sent into all the corners of the world for time-outs that have never ceased.

And we're still in trouble. But we've failed to stay in our own corners. We seem to believe we have been given license to take any and all corners away from their current occupants if we are bigger and stronger and meaner than they are. Then their corner becomes our corner and they are no longer welcome there. Because we are still so childish as to believe that there *are* other people in this world who are *not* like us. Like David's nation, all the nations we have managed to establish are thought to be predestined by a Santa-God who validates our right to kill and maim and build walls against anybody who is not like us.

So as we swiftly move toward that magical day of Christmas, it behooves us to spend a moment with Paul's very short homily of the day. Because Paul does not promise us anything that smacks of materialism or favoritism. In this brief ending of his letter to the Romans, Paul merely reminds those people he has yet to meet that God is indeed with them; that they are equally loved and have equal access to all that is known of God, and to all that was taught by Jesus. That there are *no*

separations, there is *no* secret knowledge, and *no* one has a corner into which all are not welcome.

So the magical story of the Incarnation is the never-ending story of new life – the birth of a baby so wonderful that we can't *imagine* he is fully human. Like ... who has ever gazed into the eyes of a new baby and imagined he or she was fully human? New life *is* a miracle, regardless of *how* it comes about. Maybe the most important thing about the Christmas story is *not* that Jesus is born into a dysfunctional family, but that Jesus *is* born into a nomadic family. On the road. Living in foreign lands from little on up. Even claiming later in life to have no place to lay his head...no designated corner, no permanent home. And certainly...never...any alienation from foreigners or others who are not of the established orders, or colors, or genders, or lifestyles.

So tonight's O Antiphon is today's scripture lesson. *O Key of David, open heaven's gate unlock, unblock a captive church too long enthralled by hate. Save us, O God, from ourselves. Save us from the inhumane coveting of corners that keeps us at war with one another. Because in our gratitude to you, Beloved, the Most High, the very Breath of our lives, we are – magically, miraculously – born anew.*

Amen. May it be so. Shalom.

12.24.14 Homily

Christmas

Isa 9:2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Christmas. Beauty ever ancient, ever new. My friend Seamus wrote a new poetic reflection this year on Dec 8, Mary's feast day. He calls it Advent ~

ADVENT

We're waiting for the birth of Jesus, Jesus the King of the Jews.
Mary his mother was waiting and she didn't know it was news.
Pregnant, expecting, hoping and homeless she travelled by donkey
To be with her lover, betrothed, to register at the behest of a king.

Waiting, expecting, and hoping for a live birth she rested her head
on a pillow of straw covered, perhaps, by cloth and warmed in
the heat of a room next to the animal shelter beside where she lay
on a bed of straw not knowing she was to be in biblical books.

She prayed to Abba, her father, and cursed the pains that shot
through her
as the child turned in her womb preparing and waiting for the time to
be born, to become, to be out in the Abba-filled air and be nourished
by Mary, his mother, a young girl, unwed, and scared of the future.

Visitors came from the hillside to say they were sent by a stranger to
See a new baby born and to find him in bands of cloth in a manger.
She pointed with joy to her sleeping child and accepted their lamb,
Bloodied and ready for roasting, the first of gifts to come from a
stranger.

© Seamus P. Doyle.
Dec 8 2014

Never before had I thought about the shepherds bringing any gifts, but isn't it what we do ... get a gift – and only then go to visit the new parents and ohh and ahh over the new baby? Why wouldn't the shepherds have brought what they had to this special child announced by angels? What could be more symbolic than a still warm bloody sacrifice ... a gift the baby could not partake of but could only become?

Anyone who has spent any time around me has heard of the most important thing I ever learned in life: that love is a decision. In the manner of unthinking that continues to accompany my life, the obvious never made itself known to me until I read it today from Jim Wallis: that hope is *also* a decision. Well, duh! Took that

the step further it led to, and found that yes, those two middle hallmarks of Advent—peace and joy—are also decisions. Which isn't to say, obviously, that I can decide to bring peace on earth and, viola, it's here. But I *can* decide to be a person of peace ... and of joy and love and hope. So today I focus is hope. Because Christmas is here, and all around us is upheaval, and it could seem like celebrating Christmas in the face of our deliberate and ongoing chaos is pie-in-the-sky stupidity ... like life itself is hopeless. And isn't it the truth? Sometimes we have to decide to hope ... because without hope life is useless, worthless, and absolutely terminal. But when we decide to hope, life can be like Christmas every day!

To quote Richard Rohr: *The eternal Christ Mystery began with the Big Bang where God decided to materialize as the universe. Henceforth the material and the spiritual have always co-existed. God took on all human nature and said "yes!" to it forever. In varying degrees and with infinite qualities, God took on everything physical, material, and natural as God's own Self. That is the full meaning of the Incarnation. And that is the whole point. We are simultaneously children of heaven and children of earth, divine and human, co-existing in a well-hidden disguise. We are a living paradox, just as Jesus was. Everything is sacrament!*

So Mary surrendered all, in faith, to a fearful unknown fate, accepted an illicit pregnancy, and birthed into new life an incarnation of God. Mary left the safety and warmth of her home to accompany her beloved Joseph all the way to Bethlehem. Mary welcomed strangers, and accepted that first Christmas gift of a sacrificial lamb, following the pain and suffering of labor and giving birth, and she was filled with joy.

And so when we surrender all into the unknown hands of an invisible God, we birth *new* incarnations of God. When we follow a new way, uncharted and absolutely unfamiliar, we welcome strangers who are other incarnations of God. When we accept what comes, even sacrifices that themselves take on new life, we are filled with joy. Within ourselves. Within our souls, where God lives.

Sisters and Brothers, Merry Christmas!

12.27.14 Homily

Holy Family

Sir 3:2-6,12-14; Ps 105; Col 3:12-17; Luke 2:22-40

Elsie Hainz McGrath

We have been carefully taught what a “holy family” is – father, mother, offspring – and carefully taught that all families that aren’t “holy” are, obviously, “unholy.” Fortunately, younger generations are not universally buying into that lie. Unfortunately, too many of our younger generations still are. This despite the fact that census data tells us the “model” of holy family was not a majority in this country as far back as 1970. In 2014, that model fits fewer than 20 percent of US households. Sixty percent of us either live alone or with just one other person. Over four million children live with one biological parent and one nurturing parent to whom they are not related. Nearly three million households are grandparents raising grandchildren. Two million children live in an adoptive family. More married couples now live without children than with children. Might do all of us well to carefully listen to today’s readings for a better insight into holy families.

Sirach’s is a sermon on being good to your parents, not because they deserve it but just because they are your parents. *That is reason enough.* Their love for one another brought you into the world, or at least into the family unit. And it shines through you.

The anonymous letter to the Colossians is poetry for all people – holy, chosen and beloved not because we deserve it but just because we are God’s. *That is reason enough.* God’s love for us brought us into being, as children of our natural and/or adoptive parents. And it shines through us.

The Lukan presentation story is instruction for all families. Know your roots and follow your rites, not because you’ll be punished if you don’t but because you’ll be blessed if you do. *That is reason enough.* Bringing your love for one another and your love for your children into the larger family of a spiritual community with like-minded rituals and creed gives you common ground, mutual support and larger love. And it shines through you.

Our psalm song says, *God set the stars to give light to the world [and] the star of [our] life is Jesus.* When we fall in love the star of our life is our beloved. Once the star of our life was our parents; and once the star of our children’s life was us. We – each of us and all of us – are those stars God set. We are Jesus. We give light to the world – one holy family at a time.

1.3.15 Homily

Epiphany

Isa 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-2,7-8,10-1; Eph 3:2-6; Matt 2:1-12

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. Lift up your eyes round about, and see! They all gather together, they come to you; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, and shall proclaim the praise of God. This is your Epiphany, your sparkling birthing from the stars of the skies into the fertile earth here below. And it is glorious.

I imagine that all births are like this glorious story that Matthew has penned for us. And like that glorious story from Christmas night that Luke had penned—same insight, different audience. Coming to earth we are shooting stars, and those who are awake, those who are aware, are over-awed with our arrival among them.

I imagine that all rebirths are similar, just taking a reverse orbit—from earth's fertile dust upwards to collide again with the stardust that claims us as its own. If we have sat with one we call "dying," we have almost seen it—through the light in that person's eyes just before the ascent. To return to that omega point from which we originated must indeed be glorious.

Even the nonsensical and heartbreaking deaths that happen far too often in utero are blessed epiphanies on orbiting paths upwards into the heavens from which they came. This I imagine of my great-granddaughter, lost to us in August; and of my great-grandson, lost to us in October. When stars fizzle out before they have the opportunity to shine epiphany-bright in earth-birth, we are so focused on our broken hearts that we fail to see the light reversing, returning upwards without having ever fully bonded with its earthly counterpart. But I imagine that the celebration of all those stars that never fully shone here on the earth is blessedly glorious.

So when I hear about the slaughter of the Holy Innocents during the search for the baby Jesus, I imagine so much Light in the night skies that it must have been as daylight. And the slaughters that are going on today, especially of infants and children, are causing enough friction to possibly bring a conflagration of Light onto the earth—an Epiphany unlike any since those days of our gospel stories. For the scriptures tell us that whenever Earth was at its darkest, God shone in our darkness. I imagine that these days are some of our darkest, with so many baby stars being snuffed out intentionally, violently, immorally and amorally and indiscriminately.

In 1806 a seemingly trite little nursery rhyme was penned by a woman named Jane Taylor. In 1838 the poem was set to music. I learned it at an early age, and often hear it playing in my head without my mind being engaged. But when I heard it as I was preparing for today, my mind finally got in on the action, and I realized that Jane Taylor was on to something in 1806 that continues to speak to us from the days of our childhood. So I went to Wikipedia, and discovered that there is more than the one verse we all know.

These are Jane's words:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high, Like a diamond in the sky. When the blazing sun is gone, When he nothing shines upon,

Then you show your little light, Twinkle, twinkle, all the night. Then the traveller in the dark, Thanks you for your tiny spark, He could not see which way to go, If you did not twinkle so. In the dark blue sky you keep, And often through my curtains peep, For you never shut your eye, 'Till the sun is in the sky. As your bright and tiny spark, Lights the traveller in the dark. Though I know not what you are, Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

I have to believe, hearing this, that Jane Taylor was writing of the Epiphany star guiding the Magi—and ultimately, by extension, guiding us. I have to believe, hearing that persistent little sing-song verse in my head all these years, that *my* star has been inviting me to see further into the mystery of life and death and new life. I have to believe that my stardust has been hitched to the star of the Epiphany of God-among-us from all eternity. And so I had to rewrite the words:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder who you are.
Up above our world so high, will you come down from the sky?
Will you light the sun at dawn? With new birth, will you be gone?
Dark the sky without your Light. Do not hide yourself from sight,
for your fire-power is the spark that guides us on despite our dark.
And when from here it's time to go, we need a hitch to your Light's glow.*

Which is why the Epiphany myth is so important. Because the Light that sparked the Big Bang continues to spark all of life, and once in a while we are so full of grace that we see its radiance and recognize its Light for what it is...our very own DNA, bursting into life over a feeding trough in Bethlehem.

1.10.15 Homily

Baptism of Jesus

Isa 42:1-7; Ps 29:1-4,9-1; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

Elsie Hainz McGrath

So last week we were still celebrating the baby and this week we celebrate his baptism – which makes sense as Catholics who rush their infants over to the baptismal font before Mom is even able to leave the house yet – *except* of course that Jesus and his mom *weren't Catholic*, and Jesus actually did this completely *on his own*, as an adult, and really more *like a Baptist* – which is one thing the Baptists seem to have gotten right – that this *is* an adult decision and that it actually does involve going *under* the water as a *significant* symbolic sign of dying and rising and all that stuff, I mean.

But, more to the point, we have swiftly moved from the myth of a miraculous birth up to the time of a person's conscious choice to live life differently because it is *here*, at the baptism, that any *real* knowledge of who Jesus was begins. Which is not to say, of course, that John actually predicted the coming of Jesus, or that Jesus was assaulted by a pigeon when he came up for air, or that the skies split and the voice of God came down upon the waters. But Jesus possibly did go to John for baptism, it possibly did mark his initiation into a life of public ministry, and the stories from this point forward are based in fact on the life of the man called Jesus.

And so we are told that Jesus was a follower of John, a strange man who lived as a desert hermit until he apparently heard a call from God that he needed to go out onto the highways and byways and call the Jewish people to repentance through a baptismal ritual that was radically different from the one they were used to. John's was a once-and-for-always baptism that demanded lifelong conversion on the part of the baptized, he was the baptizer, and the people were led down into the living waters of the Jordan River – that, as opposed to the people *choosing* to repent and then symbolically *washing themselves* in the ritual pool *as often* as they wished to, or needed to – which sounds kind of like that ritual dipping of fingers into a holy water font and barely wetting our foreheads on the way in and out of our “typical” Catholic churches.

And so it is time for us to put away the trappings of Christmas and get about the business of living as Jesus would in today's world. Because once we have made that quantum leap into faithful and responsible adulthood, we are all – symbolically speaking – on a journey to Jerusalem.

Like Isaiah, persistent in presenting a vision of hope for all the people despite being a prophetic voice only to the exiled Jews, we must put aside old grudges and all misplaced feelings of entitlement and realize that God truly desires justice for *all* people on this Earth, that the only law *is* Love, that we are charged with God's own grandeur, like billions of beams of light in the darkness of death's despair.

Like Peter, initially convinced that the lessons of Jesus were meant only for the Jewish nation, who was confronted with an entire household of non-Jews when he was called to the Cornelius homestead, we must put aside old teachings and prejudices and recognize that God truly shows *no* partiality, that all people and all nations are *equally* worthy and equally acceptable, that all of life comes *from* and returns *to* that one and only Fiery Source of life-giving water.

So does the baptism of Jesus welcome us into our “ordinary time” of life, without presents and festivities and make-believe Santa Clauses. It is time to step up and step out, to see and to be seen, to hear and to make our voices heard. It is time to leave the familiar safety of Nazareth, get in over our heads, and learn to walk on water.

God, you have moved upon the waters, you have sung in the rush of wind and flame; and in your love you have called us sons and daughters. Make us people of the water and your name.

1.17.15 Homily
Second Sunday

1 Sam 3:3-10,17; Ps 40:2,4,7-10; 1 Cor 6:13-15,17-20; John 1:35-42
Elsie Hainz McGrath

On this Martin Luther King weekend, we begin our ordinary time of living as disciples of the Jesus Way. So we are quickly reminded of the price that faithful discipleship sometimes exacts, and even of the seeming irrelevance of such faithfulness as we look around us. Riots rule the world, from Ferguson to Paris, and from Jerusalem to Mecca. What are we going to take from all this as we live our call this year?

No better place to start than with that beautiful, familiar, never-gets-old story of the call of Samuel! Who among us cannot relate to being called, over and over and over again? Or to not “getting” the call, over and over and over again? And then, miracle of miracles, we’ve been sleep-deprived enough to let it seep in. And aren’t our dreams amazing from that point on? Don’t we recall with clarity our past experiences of call? Then *we*, like Samuel (or Martin Luther King), grow, *knowing* God is with us, *hearing* with new ears, and casting doubt and fear aside.

Last week, recall, Jesus went to John for a baptism of conversion, dying to the life that had been and rising into new life... new vision... new purpose. This week, as John and two of his disciples are standing on the street corner, Jesus walks by... and John immediately recognizes the new life that is radiating outwards. “Look!” he instinctively shouts, “the lamb of God!” And the two are pulled, as if by a magnetic force. They follow Jesus. One of them even runs to grab his brother, “Come, see this kingly presence who walks among us,” and then there are three. Three disciples, calling Jesus forward as their guru... their rabbi... their teacher. And a new movement is born. It is time to look honestly at the oppressiveness of the old, name it for what it is, and model renewed life... renewed vision... renewed purpose.

And Paul humanizes it all. His is *not* a restrictive theology of the body, such as magisterial groups have been trying to make it out as for 2,000 years, but a transcendent one. Our bodies are not *just* containers for the eternal divine. We are the sum of *all* our parts ~ body, soul, spirit... dust of earth intermingled with dust of stars, and all alive in and with the waters of life. We shine as brightly on the outside as we do on the inside. Like Jesus did on the mountain of transfiguration. Like Martin Luther King did on the mountain of his dreaming.

So the question is posed, this year as it is every year. This is the time for our *real* New Year’s resolutions. What are you... what are you... what am I... what are we going to take from all this as we live our call this year?

1.24.15 Homily

Third Sunday

Jon 3:1-5,10; Ps 25:4-9; 1 Cor 7:29-32; Mark 1:14-20

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The author of Jonah shows the influence of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah by an opposition to sectarian exclusivity. Ninevah was the capital of the Assyrian nation. Jonah is a bigoted prophet whose “word” causes wholesale conversion, not only of the city of Ninevah, but also of the boatload of sailors who had unknowingly carried him away from the destination God had appointed him to. So with clever literary finesse, this little book calls Israel to repentance and reminds the people of their mission to preach to *all* nations the wideness of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Our theme of call continues. We have an abbreviated story of the call of Jonah, which could throw us off, but when we fill in the missing pieces, we get perhaps the greatest story ever written on God’s persistence! This is *Jaws* with real teeth! Those *absolutely worthless* Ninevites! How *dare* God insist that he go preaching conversion to them! And employ *very devious means* to *make sure* he comply! And *then ... really* turn their hearts so that they *really won’t* get their comeuppance! *Where’s* the justice?

Point: Justice is not the same thing as equal opportunity. Justice is *man’s* invention; equal opportunity is God’s grace.

Paul’s advice to the Corinthians smacks *not only* of injustice but of absolute hypocrisy! Because *he* thinks the Second Coming is on the horizon, everybody should *stop* living the way they live and *start* living like somebody they aren’t? Sure, we have the age-old commentaries to “explain away” what this passage says, but I’d rather believe that this passage *doesn’t really say what it has been interpreted to say* because Paul was *not* a hypocrite! And he *did* say, often and in various ways, that *we are all called to live fully the lives we are called to live*. (That’s putting it in what has come to be called “Paul speak”!)

And where’s the *justice* in today’s *gospel* story of call? James and John *literally*—so the story goes—leave their father to cope with the family business that he has probably nurtured all these long years expressly so that he could pass it on to his sons and be taken care of in his old age. *Who is taking care of him* with the boys off and gallivanting around with some itinerant preacher?

Except, of course, that Jesus probably didn’t call *anybody* to be his disciple. Or that those who chose to follow him were probably, for the most part, not fishermen. He wasn’t actively organizing an *institution*, and likely didn’t even have in mind that he would be initiating a *movement* of reform within Judaism. He was just speaking his piece, little by little, as he was given to speak it. Like Jonah, he had to be taught before he could teach—perhaps especially that part about the wideness of God’s mercy and forgiveness. He did not initially know that he—or his followers—were to preach to *all nations*, as on a par with... equals... God-graced with equal opportunity to live their lives to the full regardless of nation, race, gender, lifestyle, or formal education.

So what we have to grapple with, here and now, is not whether to go to Ninevah ...or whether to walk out on someone who depends on us ...and it is certainly not whether to pretend to be other than who we are and *feel* other than how we *feel*. What we have to

grapple with is not *even* whether our life or anybody else's is *just*. What we have to grapple with is simply if we are being *all that we can be* according to the circumstances in which we find ourselves... if we are being true to who we are... if we are *becoming who we were born to become*.

Because that *is* our call. And we all have an *equal opportunity* to live our call, *whether or not* it seems altogether *just* to us or to those around us. Which is why, in our heart of hearts, we instinctively know that the most pressing call in the lives of all men and women and children is witnessing to and encouraging the equality of persons.

Today we are reminded of that by two significant deaths: Ernie Banks, who died yesterday at 83; and Marcus Borg, who died on Wednesday at 72. Banks was an extraordinarily talented baseball player who was the first man of color on their team, never played for anyone else, and was the epitome of the *best* of Chicago *and* Cubs for the rest of his exemplary life. Borg was an Oxford educated theologian who was a preeminent Jesus scholar, a founding father of the Jesus Seminar, and was the epitome of good *and* unbiased modern historical Christology for the rest of his exemplary life. We are grateful to them and their ongoing example for us of fullness of life. + *Shabbat Shalom*, gentlemen. May you rest in peace.

2.7.15 Homily

Fifth Sunday

Job 7:1-4,6-7; Ps 95:1-2,6-9; 1 Cor 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Poor Job is a character that I can suppose lots of people identify with closely. No matter what they do, how hard they try, how sincere their efforts, everything comes to naught. They fall upon—or are born into—hard times ... and they never escape what seems to many to be their destiny. Right here in this city and its surrounding areas are daily reminders of how many people live such pitiful lives. Right here in this community and in many communities within our area are members who work hard to help people find hope, healing, a sense of person and responsible living. We suffer with *their* failures, sometimes as if they were *our own* failures.

But we know that, in the end, even the most expert assistance can only do so much. Peter's mother-in-law is a case in point. She was ill, in bed with a fever. And in walks Peter with a strange man. Picture it. I have been ill and in bed for the last three days, and the last thing in the world I wanted was to see *anybody*, *least* of all a strange man!

Our story is pathetically terse: Jesus is introduced to “mom”; Jesus heals “mom”; “mom” fixes dinner and puts clean sheets on the spare bed. We have to fill in the pieces for ourselves—which a *brilliant* story-telling ploy on the part of Mark because **it allows us so much freedom to imagine what we need to imagine** in order for the story to come alive in our hearts! And *I imagine* that “mom” found hope with her healing ... a sense of her person and responsibility in the healing hands and eyes and words of Jesus.

And here's the point ... I think. According to Mark, this woman's healing is the second miracle of Jesus' public ministry. The first happened last week, in the synagogue, when he exorcised a demon from a young man. He is obviously a sensation in town, so all those who are down and out find their way to the home of Peter and Andrew. Jesus could have spent his entire ministry there, a miracle-worker with free room and board. **But that wasn't his call.** He wasn't called to work miracles, but to teach others how to live freely and peaceably as the sisters and brothers that they all were. And the more time he spent in prayer, the more he knew he had to leave the comfort of the arrangement and get back to the business of *spreading* the **good news** God had given him.

So, according to *my* imagination, Jesus makes his announcement to the family, complete with invitation to follow *of course*, and they all pack up their knapsacks and hit the road. This is the first gathering of disciples: the *entire* household of Peter and Andrew, as well as James and John who, we were told, had *left* their father's household in order to follow Jesus.

I imagine that was a *small* household, the men being fishermen in a poor fishing village. The house was Peter's and Andrew's, so their father was probably deceased. Perhaps their mother was as well, but maybe not. We know Peter had a wife and a mother-in-law, so probably no father-in-law either. But maybe children. And maybe Andrew was married as well. And maybe assorted aunts and uncles and cousins lived within the family complex. Apparently no slaves, since “mom” was doing the serving. Maybe a milk cow, but no significant livestock since they lived off the sea. *Undoubtedly* a ragtag group of itinerants!

And here's another piece of interesting information, which we usually dismiss out of hand, that Paul makes clear for us today. People *paid their way* as they traveled. People invited them in and *fed* them. Perhaps the synagogues passed collection baskets after Jesus preached and turned a percentage of their *take* over to him. We are told throughout scripture that many women who

traveled with them *supported* them financially. (A piece of information that is blithely ignored for the most part.) And it makes sense because, *duh*, *nobody* can live on nothing!

So Paul's gospel—and this is my *favorite* good news of Paul, and *has been* since I “discovered” it 30 years ago—states clearly that he does *whatever* he has to do in order to “win over” a few (to help initiate conversions, in other words) ... and he does it **for free**, which is *not* the way others do it, *not* the way scripture demands it, *not* the way Jesus himself did it! But it is what *Paul* is called to do. He supports himself by other means. To do otherwise would be distasteful, dishonest ... un-Christian.

Paul defies many of Jesus' ways of ministry. He takes care of himself; he travels alone; he doesn't do miracles of healing. But he effects miracles of conversion among peoples of many diverse religious persuasions and draws them into the mystery of **our cosmic unity**. *His* was the theology that *built* the church called “Christian.” If we all followed *his* good news, *none* of us would know a Job who could not be helped. There would be no ISIS, no Ferguson, no golden cathedrals.

That is *my* hope. It brings me healing ... *my* sense of person and *my* responsibility.

2.18.15 Homily

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18; Ps 51:3-6b,12-14,17; 2 Cor 5:20—6:2; Matt 6:1-18

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Pascal Kearney, a priest of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, says Lent is *“that forty-day period when Christians are encouraged to fast and pray and do penance in preparation for Easter. It is commonly perceived as a time for ‘giving up’ what we normally enjoy eating, drinking, inhaling, and with a worthy charitable cause benefiting from the abstinence, that aids reflection on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The emphasis seems to be on individual redemption rather than on social reformation. That being the case, I think Lent might be a good time to give up religion.”*

I would change his last word to “religiosity.” And look at Jesus’ *“hidden”* God. This Ash Wednesday gospel begs to be explored and expanded upon in order to reflect the reason for Jesus’ strange words.

Despite his exceptional relationship with God, there were many times of darkness in his life—times when he was searching for answers and God was seemingly not listening. Were those the times when *he* prayed for what *he* wanted... for what *he* thought was best... instead of simply *being* with the God he called Abba? Are those the times *we* think God has left *us*? That is when it is absolutely essential that we retreat into our heart-room—go into our wilderness, our hunger, our need; *then* we will *also* be enabled to make the trek up to the mountaintop and experience our transfiguration.

Good Jew that he was, Jesus recognized the futility—even the downright *hypocrisy*—in public displays of piety that were designed for show and held no substance. He came to recognize how blessed were the little ones who did not flaunt their religious customs like trophies, maybe at least *partially* due to those healings that came at his own hands. The blessings that *changed people’s lives* were peace and joy and daily sustenance, *not* prestige and power and earthly riches.

So I agree with Father Pascal that our task during Lent is not to hide ourselves away from the affairs of the world and give them over to God in pious resignation. Nor is it our duty to fast from the food and the fun of life as if this will somehow feed the hungry and bring peace to the troubled. And it surely was not Jesus’ intention that we quietly stuff the poor boxes in our rich churches without any investment in where the money goes or any fleshly contact with poor and suffering people.

Recall, as January turned into February, the passing of many pillars of our life and the suggestion that we might pray with some of their wisdom as we approached this new Lent. Let’s take another look at the words a couple of those friends have left with us.

Mario Cuomo said, *“Every time I’ve done something that doesn’t feel right it ended up not being right.”* The prophet Joel told us that ages ago. *“Return to the God who made you,”* said Joel. If we know in our bones that things are not right between us—and we *do* know it in our bones, don’t we?—then make it right. Not for *God’s* sake—though it surely must make God feel good when we do that—but for *our own* sake. Because our willful separation from God will absolutely

be our undoing. Because if that all-important relationship is not right, how can we expect any relationship in our life to be right?

Marcus Borg said, *“Christianity’s goal is not to escape from this world. It loves this world, and seeks to change it for the better.”* Paul said it differently: *“We are ambassadors for Christ.”* As ambassadors for Christ, we are all about changing the world for the better. Because that was what Christ was about—healing, forgiving, feeding, loving those in this world. Because *“now is the acceptable time.”* Not tomorrow or next week or when we have more time. Because *“now is the day of salvation.”* Not the day we were baptized or the day we will die or the day the cosmos returns to chaos.

Donald Ashmall, who still lives within our midst, says today that *“there is a recurring and enduring proclamation that pervades all the Bible’s history, poetry and prophecy: every human creature is of dust and of star-dust; of mud and of miracle; of early endings and of eternal beginnings. Life is fleeting and comes too soon to an end; and the end is not the end in the glory of resurrection.”*

So let us be *humbly but worthily* marked by ashes *because of* who we are and whose we are. And let us remember that in the end all will be well. If all isn’t well, it isn’t the end yet. Happy Lent.

2.21.15 Homily

First Sunday of Lent

Gen 9:8-15; Ps 25:4-9; 1 Pet 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

Elsie Hainz McGrath

I love the story of Noah... the couples, the rainbow, the covenant, the continuity. I love the way we keep all these things relevant all these centuries later. Only... how many covenants have there *been* between us and God? How many covenants have *we* broken in *our* lives that didn't even involve God, so to speak? How many times can we break a covenant and expect to be given a new one to buy into? How far does 7 times 7... or 70 times 7... or however many 7s any given translation gives us... go? Are we banking on 7 being a perfect number that *cannot* be broken down into imperfection by willful disregard of call?

Or are we still holding to the notion that we are saved by baptism? The waters of baptism, according to the author of today's second reading, have superseded the waters of the great flood. Baptismal waters have taken the place of God's rainbow as the sign of our covenant. Baptismal waters prove that we can go under and rise back up—not drowned but given new life. Powerful imagery. But I don't believe those who are *not* baptized are doomed. Do you? And I don't believe that everyone who has *been* baptized has been *saved*. Do you? In fact, I don't know what "being saved" means. I think it is supposed to mean saved from hellfire and damnation, but I don't believe in hell either. Do you? I believe we *are* eternal... baptized or not, faithful to our covenants or not... all of us. Which begs the question of reward and recompense big time. I think there's something to be said for the idea of reincarnation, the idea of attaining Nirvana, *all* ideas that have been put forward about life after death throughout human history. At least all *except* that *awful* one about a vengeful God who *abuses* disobedient children with floods and fires and even eternal damnation.

Mark's telling of the wilderness experience of Jesus helps, at least, to make more clear the elusive nature of call. This is a short story, missing many of the elements of the Matthew and Luke versions. Jesus was baptized, driven into the desert, and tested. No time for warm fuzzies and family celebrations of the blessed baptismal event. Think you're *saved* now? Ha! Try *these* problems on for size!

Interesting piece of information in such a short story is the wild animals. What's the point here? Apparently Jesus is protected from T-Rex and those slithery serpents... those Satans... who offer life-altering temptations to greatness. Saved by angels. Because he was *baptized*?

And then we're told that Jesus leaves the desert after John is locked up... proclaiming the same message that John had left the desert proclaiming. How does Jesus know that John had been imprisoned? Mark doesn't tell us. But it surely *does* seem to be the motivating factor for moving on. The time for contemplation, meditation, prayer and fasting and covenant-making, is over. The time for action is *now*. The torch has been passed. Put on the mantle of your guru. Go back into the highways and bi-ways, the cities and villages, the homes and the synagogues. Proclaim the good news. God is here. Repent. Change your lives. Believe.

So Jesus carried on from where John left off and, as all of us do when we assume the mantle of the ones who came before us, he made modifications and adaptations of the ministry. He lived among the people, leaving the wild animals of the wilderness behind. He feasted with all who

invited him, leaving the desert fasting behind. He taught with stories, not threats; and won conversions with healing touch, not baptism. He walked along the seashore, but didn't demand... or even invite... baptism. He traveled by boat from one shore to another, and was even known to invite friends to walk on water with him. And when he felt the need for some quiet time with his Abba, he went *up* into the hill country, not *out* into the desert.

As we make our way through another Lent, recall Ash Wednesday's admonitions against pious shows of religiosity. Our task is not to hide ourselves away from the affairs of the world and pray the world *might* change. Our duty is not to glumly fast from the food and the fun of life as if this will *somehow* feed the hungry and bring peace to the troubled. Our obligation is not to throw money at every cause that comes our way and brag on how we are *buying* change... or *worse*, buying our way out of purgatory. Our covenant with our God is nothing more... or less... than Jesus' own covenant. We carry on—from where those who came before us left off—making those modifications and adaptations that make it *our* ministry.

We keep our covenant because we are God's. And we remember that ***every human creature is of dust and of star-dust; of mud and of miracle; of early endings and of eternal beginnings.***
[Donald Ashmall]

Happy Lent!

3.14.15 Homily

Fourth Sunday of Lent

2 Chr 36:11-23; Ps 137:1-6; Eph 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

Elsie Hainz McGrath

As I have shared here before, it was Psalm 137 that cracked me open and brought me to my knees when my heart heard its plaintive cry. *This* was what was wrong, what made me feel sad and mad and alienated and confused all at the same time for seemingly no reason. I was privileged—white, American, educated, self-supporting, respected. I wasn't *entitled* to have such feelings. I had buried them as deeply as I could because I *knew* I had a good life. But there, all of a sudden, they all welled up and overflowed and I had to admit—that I recognized myself as an exile in a foreign land. I was a woman in a man's church, a woman in a man's world... and a *foreigner* in a nation made up of a *gaggle* of foreigners who *despise* foreigners. I was completely *astonished* to **realize and verbalize**—for the very first time in my life—that I identified with those who hung up their harps in the trees of Babylon because they could not sing their songs. I identify with *all* people, but *particularly* women who are outsiders... who suffer exile and abuse—and all women who try mightily to pretend that it doesn't matter, or who play into the desires of men in order to trick themselves into believing it doesn't matter.

It matters. It has *always* mattered. All of the "isms" of this world, including Catholicism, are bits and pieces of the haughty prejudices of the human race—and **sexism** is the *one* that is present in *all* the others. From the time of the story of creation, it is the woman who is lesser, weaker, dumber... the helpmate or the whore... *never* the equal of her male counterpart.

We are all in exile from our roots and far-removed from remembering the spark that was us as we hurled from the skies and mated with the dust of this earth. But there are other exiles that we can and do remember. We remember where we came from... all the good features of where we once were, even if we never physically lived there. We regret not being there, and not having appreciated it more for what it was or what it is. We regret the things we should have done, or could have done differently.

The people in Babylon remembered. They wept. They remembered all the good things that now were lost to them. They put aside their music and mourned what they had lost. And then they remembered even more. They remembered how they had not been who they could have been... should have been. They remembered all their failings... their individual failings, their corporate failings, their pettiness and jealousy and ruthless disregard for one another. And their willful sins against the covenant that God had made with them.

And when they began to work things out for themselves... to take their harps back up and try to make the best of the situation, bonding with their captors and finding joy in their sorrows, a road to home opened up. Many of them took it—going back to where

they had come from, but with a different outlook on life and death and the place of God in the world. Many of them chose to *not* take it—remaining in what had become their *new* home and helping to make the changes that were needed *there* in order to bring about a piece of God’s realm in Babylon. And many of them, whether staying put or going back, quickly reverted to how they once had been—forgetting everything they had learned in their lonely exiles, *including* their covenant with the God who had loved them into being.

In order to hold on to their power and authority over us, the hierarchy of our churches and synagogues and mosques have consistently, throughout human history, willfully chosen to disregard the covenant of God. We have been indoctrinated into the deep-seated belief that we *cannot* measure up. In the Christian churches it goes like this: *Jesus* is God, and *we* are “only” human. Jesus was “like us,” but “perfect”—so, *really*, not at all “like us.” The gospel of John tells us that Jesus was the Light of the world. In our exile, let us remember that Jesus told us **we** are the light of the world.

The story of our ancestors in Babylon is the story of us, here, in these “United” States of catastrophic divisions and escalating “isms.” Where will our recovered memories take us? Will we cling to our covenant—the one that we hear iterated today in the letter to the Ephesians? The gift of God’s grace has saved us in Christ Jesus. We are God’s own work, and meant to do God’s own work in *this* place... or *any* place where we *find* ourselves... both literally and figuratively.

And so here we are—already—to Rose Sunday. Rejoice! Today’s readings do bring a spark into the penitential darkness of despair and death, restoring our hope for the New Light that will dawn on Easter. Our exile *is* coming to an end, we *are* rebuilding our church, our faith *will* save us. Thanks be to God!

3.21.15 Homily

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Jer 31:31-34; Ps 51:3-4,12-15; Heb 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

Elsie Hainz McGrath

On this Fifth Sabbath of Lent, as is becoming a Therese tradition, we will celebrate together a Rite of General Absolution following the homily. So I emphasize for you a few paraphrased words from the readings we have just heard proclaimed. Close your eyes and breathe them into you.

[From the Psalm, our prayer] *Create in us clean hearts, O Gracious One. Enfold us in your arms of Love.*

[From Jeremiah, God's prophecy] *This is the covenant I make with my people. I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. They will all know me.*

[From Hebrews, the early community's teaching] *Becoming perfect, Jesus was a source of eternal salvation for those who followed his way.*

[From John, a Jesus homily] *Unless a grain of wheat dies and falls to the ground, it remains alone. If it dies, it produces a great harvest. Those who cling to their petty empires and inflate their egos will die to real life, but those who die to self and embrace the intimacy of God's creation will never die.*

And I share with you another reading, excerpted from a homily by Hubert von Hoof, a layman in Australia.

It seems that, in creating what exists and remaining present to it, God gave of self, becoming separated from—but still present to—the creation. The aim of a life that is lived in creation is to become unified once again with God. Perhaps God is incomplete until we are ALL reunified and ONE.

I hear God saying this: I gave Jesus as I give all my children. He had no awareness of being anything else but human, in my image. He was born as free and naturally as anyone else I ever created. I whispered no more in his ear than I do in yours. I favored him no more than I favor you. I risked everything I ever created on him, just as I do on you. Everything he ever became, he chose, because he was free, exactly like you. He was born naked and died naked; his life was open and intimate through his own choosing. I did not create you so that you can bury yourself. I created you to find me, as Jesus did.

Jesus fell in love with me, and knew instinctively that I was God and that he came from me. You know instinctively that you come from me. I desire you to choose me, but I will not bind you. I give you no rules, except to love one another as I have loved you. I have no choice but to love you. I am captivated by you, imprisoned in the love I have for you. I

created you in freedom, and only your freedom to come to me can release me. My arms are open and I want you in them as you are—but through your choice. No matter the day or the hour, these arms are open and waiting for your embrace. You can choose to close me out, but you cannot close my arms unless you are in them. My wholeness depends on you.

I love you!

3.28.15 Homily

Passion (Palm) Sunday

Mark 11:1-10; Isa 50:4-7; Ps 22:8-9,17-20,23-24; Phil 2:5-11; Mark 14:1—15:47

Elsie Hainz McGrath

For me, the biggest *unasked* question has always been, “What was the ‘reason’ that was conjured up for Jesus’ arrest?” All accounts stress that the authorities needed a charge to arrest him with. What *charge* would come out of a story of a woman with an alabaster jar? But *that* was when Judas decided to turn him in? *That* was when Judas went to the authorities with his offer of betrayal?

They had already determined they would *not* arrest him during the Passover festivities. And Judas simply identifying him was not a reason for arresting him. He was no stranger to them! What *really* changed their minds? Surely not his coming into town on a lowly colt with a ragtag bunch of groupies calling him a king, like a staged street farce! Which is what it sounds like it was, *if* it even happened, since at the other end of town Pontius Pilate would have been entering on a royal steed with an armed military escort. As the Roman governor, he did not *live* in Jerusalem, but he came to town for the Jewish festivals in order to prevent trouble.

So perhaps that *is* the whole convoluted reason. If people were calling Jesus “king,” that was subversive. If Rome could get Jesus to confirm that he was claiming kingship, they “had” him! So the arrest was “on suspicion” and the conviction was “on admission” – though the *admission* sounds more like grounds for psychiatric examination! Not even *Pilate* bought it! It was the charge that was nailed to the tree with him, but note, the charge is *only* “king of the Jews.” Was that sufficient cause for capital punishment? We are led to believe that Pilate had no choice, short of dealing with a riot. So he made his point that this was, so to speak, an “illegal” crucifixion.

The gift of Mark is his tight writing, which allows us to get through the Passion in record time. And since his is the first gospel written, an even greater gift is the very real possibility that it is closer to historical than are the other three.

We *do* know, of course, that none of the stories are “documented truth.” The only documented truths we have are that *Jesus was indeed crucified* and that *Jesus was indeed not in the grave on Sunday*, the first day of the following week. But let’s just note a few of those things we *think* we know about the events of the last three days of Jesus’ life that *are missing or different* in the Markan text.

First, Judas does *not* leave the building when he realizes that Jesus knows his plans. He stays, and participates in what we have come to call the First Eucharist – where **obviously** *all* are welcome and worthy!

Jesus does *not* vocally condemn Judas when the kiss of betrayal is planted. Nor does Judas remorsefully commit suicide. Jesus does *not* perform any magic acts when the slave's ear is lopped off. And Pilate does *not* wash his hands of the case, or get an urgent message of a bad dream from his wife.

Jesus does *not* stop and talk to the women who line the road to Golgatha. He does *not* ask God to forgive anybody for not knowing what they're doing. There *is* no "good" thief and there are no promises of paradise to his fellow condemned.

When he dies, there are *no* split rocks, *no* opened tombs, *no* raised bodies. Neither are the legs of all the others broken, nor the side of Jesus pierced with a soldier's lance.

And while all these "missing" elements of "the story as we know it" actually appear in *only one* gospel account – meaning they're either *only* in Matthew or *only* in Luke or *only* in John – there is **one vital piece of the story that is only in Mark.**

Who *is* the young man that is shrouded and runs away naked? Perhaps a brilliant literary omen of the empty tomb that is to come.

Imagine *yourself* in the crowd when Jesus is arrested. Imagine *you* are that cheeky young man who bares all as he abandons Jesus. If necessary, imagine he is a she. What are you feeling? What are you doing? What becomes of you as the events of the trial and crucifixion unfold?

I leave you with this meditation for Holy Week:

What are you feeling? What are you doing? What do you become?

4.4.15 Homily -- Vigil of Easter -- Mark 16:1-8

Elsie Hainz McGrath

What a week, whew! Two of our own are not here tonight because of injury and illness: Pat with a broken wrist and Joan with a bronchial infection. We miss their presence, and pray for their quick return to wholeness. During this Holy Week, which began last Sabbath with the *short* version of Jesus' passion and death, we lost two more luminaries of the present-day church: Robert Blair Kaiser and Robert McClory. And still we celebrate. We celebrated our salvation history into the wee hours on Thursday evening, and again in the early hours of this evening. We've made it to another Easter, and the wonderfully *short* version of Jesus' resurrection.

Only Mark tells of the young man *sitting in the tomb* in a white robe. Most translations of Mark use identical language for this robe and the shroud that we heard about the young man wearing last week—the one who ran away when Jesus was arrested. I propose that this is the very same person. He was there at the beginning of Mark's Holy Week account, and at its ending. He is the constant in the telling, the *real* first witness to the resurrection. Not an angel. Not even Mary Magdalene. But just a young man, unnamed, mostly unnoticed. Why did Mark assign this person primacy of place in his narrative?

Perhaps the young man is Mark's reference to himself. Perhaps it's his way of saying that fear can be overcome and redemption can be attained despite our past failures. Or perhaps...perhaps the scared young man is Jesus' alter-ego. Perhaps Jesus is playing through this scenario in his mind. He doesn't want to submit to what he knows is not going to end well for him. He pictures himself running away—from death.

And in the end, he does. And he pictures himself sitting in the tomb looking at the empty space where his dead body had lain. And his white robe is the shroud he dropped when he fled, in terror, from what inevitably came to be.

Perhaps the women fled in fear, not because they encountered a ghost but simply because they saw an empty tomb. Who *could* they tell? If the authorities knew the body had been stolen away, *all* of Jesus' followers may have been crucified!

As you know, this is *absolutely* where the original gospel of Mark ended—with the faithful women running scared and keeping quiet. Sounds a whole lot more believable than those other endings. Right? But if that had *truly* been the end of the story, *we* wouldn't be sitting here tonight.

Sisters and brothers, Happy Easter!

4.18.15 Homily

3rd Sunday of Easter

Acts 3:12-19; Ps 4:2,4,7-9; 1 John 2:1-6; Luke 24:35-48

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Peter appears as a street preacher in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Standing right beside the city gate, he starts his rant, blaming everyone *en masse* for the killing of Jesus. But then he makes a curious turn, because he ends up calling the varmints "friends," excusing their vile acts on the grounds of "ignorance" – and that old standby "fulfillment of the scriptures" of course – and calls them to repentance **with the assurance that Gods forgives.**

When we go to the Cardinal games, there are usually street preachers outside, sometimes with megaphones, always with propaganda literature that they try to foist upon every person who is trying to get to the stadium. Guess it is the same at all sports venues. Anyway, on Opening Day, as we stood in a non-moving line to get through the metal detectors, I spotted a bright red brochure in the street that had been discarded by one of the Cardinal's Nation revelers. It looked interesting: maps, places to eat, Cardinals trivia questions... Brought it home and quizzed my kids from it after the game without ever completely opening the trifold. Till I got to the last trivia question: What do all Cardinal players have in common? Answer (paraphrased): They are all sinners and they are all going to hell!

Yep, the entire centerfold of the trifold was venomous religious propaganda—and of course all of us who were there to cheer on our Redbirds were headed for that ill-reputed place of eternal damnation too! No one is safe... or saved. *Except* the inflammatory preachers. Who *presume* to be imitating Jesus.

I thought about this as I reread the snippet we heard today from 1 John: ***By this may we be sure that we are in Christ, that we walk as he walked.***

Yes, the present-day preachers call us to repentance too. Yes, they say that God forgives. But they make it clear that God's forgiveness *is conditional*. It has to be "earned." God isn't somebody you want to mess with. The dichotomy of "our faith": Jesus died to save us from our sins – *but we're not saved!*

Jesus didn't die to save us, of course, regardless of what the Bible or the street preachers might tell us. Jesus died because of how he lived and where he walked, and Jesus lives because of how he died and where he walks still.

Like with that couple who had fled Jerusalem and were making their way to Emmaus. As they talked, they came to recognize that despite Jesus' crucifixion it seemed like he was indeed still with them. And when they realized he had indeed opened their hearts and their eyes, the trip to Emmaus was trashed and they hurried back to Jerusalem to tell

the others, “*Jesus lives!*” The others were still locked up in fear – too afraid even to venture out into the streets to flee the city! But as the two told their story, Jesus came alive into their midst as well.

Really? Physically? Asking for food? *Or really?* Spiritually? Nourishing their souls through their physical hungers?

Last week, the first week of Easter, I went with my son John and his family for a dinner to celebrate the first anniversary of the death of my daughter-in-law Cheryl. Because my future grandson-in-law works there, we were “treated” to appetizers “on the house.” The appetizers were a plate of hushpuppies and a plate of fried green tomatoes... nothing *anyone* at that table would have even *considered* ordering! But we were not alone there. Cheryl absolutely loved *both* of those dishes, and everybody “got” it immediately. Our hearts were open. Our souls were filled.

Says today’s Jesus to the finally-comprehending eleven in the upper room, “*Everyone will be called upon to undergo a change of heart for the forgiveness of sins, and you are my witnesses.*” It is *our* change of heart that brings us to understanding. To faith. To hope. To life.

It is *our* change of heart that opens us to be *non-judgmental, non-condemnatory, non-elitist*; that brings us to forgiveness—forgiveness of our own sins and the sins of others. *That* is the forgiveness to which we are called by our God, a forgiveness that truly unites us and brings us to everlasting Shalom. Then do we, as the psalmist, “*face our fears with forgiveness and trust in love.*”

Shalom.

4.25.15 Homily

4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:8-12; Ps 118:1,8-9,23,26,28-29; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Jesus is the cornerstone, in other words, the foundation of our faith as followers of the Christ. We are also foundational, for our faith veers away from the faith that was instilled in us as “Christian” in our earlier days. We believe our faith to be much more akin to that of Jesus than is the faith which is proclaimed in today’s mainstream “Christian” churches. And so right here, this tiny community, is a very real cornerstone of the future church. We have been rejected by the builders of that bigger, more powerful institution, that place where salvation is limited by rules and interdicts, and sheep that step out of line are left to fend for themselves, threats and curses echoing in their ears as they go. There is little healing to be had in organized religion.

That is why Jesus walked a new way, taught a new way, became a new foundation. His faith too had veered away from the faith that was instilled in him as a “Jew” in his earlier days. He believed his faith to be much more akin to the source and the summit of life in Abba, the Creator God, than that which was proclaimed in the Temple. Like us, he knew it at an early age (remember the legend of his session with the priests following the Passover of his “coming of age” Bar Mitzvah). Like us, he tried to push it out of his mind, go home, be a good boy, get into the family business. Like us, there came a time when he simply could not do that anymore. He had to be true to himself, to his guru John the Baptist, to the Spirit of God who called him unceasingly.

Thus did he come to see himself as a good shepherd, a leader who knew those that were with him... missed those who got lost and tried to bring them back... lived with integrity and a broken heart... sacrificed for those who stayed the course... and never looked back with regret. And so it is that we too are shepherds for our flocks... of children and grandchildren, elderly parents, sick and hurting neighbors, and yes, even those who assume titles of “Shepherd” while flaunting their power and hurting their sheep. *For see what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God. And so we are.* Just as Jesus, our brother... cornerstone, healer of souls, good shepherd.

5.2.15 Homily

5th Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:26-31; Ps 22:26-28,30-32; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

Elsie Hainz McGrath

In my determination to follow the Jesus Seminar interpretations of the gospels, I found myself severely torn today. Because the story of “the vine and the branches” has always been a personal favorite. Somehow, “trunk and canes” just doesn’t have the same ring! In fact, it doesn’t even have the same meaning in my mind’s eye, even though both can be (and are) interpreted loosely as “tree of life” kinds of symbols. Which is to say, as Christians we are rooted in Christ and continue to generate the life of Christ through our own hearty growth as “chips off the old block.”

So the canes that fall off the trunk, according to today’s rendition of the story, are dead, and they are gathered up and burned. But if they aren’t gathered up and burned, do they not produce new trunks? Little sprigs of baby trees that have to be pulled out by the roots so they won’t take over our pristine gardens? And if they are indeed gathered up and burned, do they not generate heat and light and energy and fertilizer for other new birth? Nutrients for the soil that will nurture and spawn perhaps different kinds of life?

I have a dead twig trunk in my yard right now. Two years ago, this was a beautifully lush red twiggged dogwood, last year it was a scraggly and sickly red twiggged dogwood, this year it needs to be pulled up and burned. Except that city ordinances prohibit burning, so the poor dear thing will have to be deposited into the yard waste dumpster. But from there it will be “chipped” into a mulch pile from which new and different life will someday emerge as well. So, you see, this “connection” thing is so much bigger than a “trunk and canes.” All is one, all is eternal.

And maybe that is part of why I like the vine and the branches. Because vines are unwieldy. Vines are wild, if you will. And their branches are far-reaching. Intrusive. Intertwining. Constantly dropping seeds of new growth. Constantly being pollinated and cross-pollinated. Constantly laden down with rich and inviting fruits. And virtually indestructible! Ever try to dig up, even burn out, *any* kind of vine and completely *succeed* in obliterating it? Impossible!

Paul is a perfect example of that vine imagery, both personally and ministerially. As a well-educated Greek Jew with the given name of Saul, he was initially hugely instrumental in the persecution of the Jesus followers, even reputed to have produced Christianity’s first martyr in the slaying of the deacon, Stephen. But somehow, somewhere, Saul found himself entwined into this strange movement that was spreading like a grape vine gone wild. And he couldn’t escape it, not even through his long self-exile into the desert wilderness of introspective discernment. So he went to Jerusalem and tried to “sign on.” Needless to say, the disciples were not eager to

embrace him, or even to believe him. If it weren't for Barnabas, they may have martyred Paul on the spot, squashed the missionary movement, and obliterated any mention of a Jesus Movement from the world's history.

But I can see why the Jesus Seminar would have Jesus talking of "trunk and canes," if in fact he talked any of this. Because of the tree of life connection that runs through our tradition from its beginnings in that mythical Garden of Eden where that tempting tree of knowledge deprived us of the life we so want to hold on to at any cost. This is why we bury our dead in costly and elaborate boxes that will keep the body from decaying and returning naturally into the dust of the earth from which it is believed to have originated. It is why until very recently the hierarchy forbid Catholic cremation, because how could those bodies, so abused, ever be brought back to earthly life? It was, I'm sure, akin to submitting the dead to the fires of hell. Which, speaking of gruesome, is probably why the hierarchy devised the sinful idea of burning heretics at the stake. Ever about presuming power over other people's life and death, they thought this punishment was effectively depriving these martyrs of eternity.

In our times, of course, we are privy to much more knowledge about the origins of life, and that fiery spark from the dying stars that ignites our very selves. It is just another piece of today's gospel story—the vine and the branches of the universe, so to speak. For just as we are all connected on this Earth, so we are all connected in this universe. The gospel story is the universe story in miniature. Thanks be to God, regardless of our preposterous presumptions of power over the life and death of even that Eternal Life-giving Source, it continues. Virtually indestructible. Like trunks and their canes, or vines and their branches.

ALL... fired in the dust of the Stars, rooted in the dust of the Earth.

5.9.15 Homily

6th Sunday of Easter

Acts 10:25-26,34-48; Ps 98:1-4; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Way back in the time of the psalmist, there were those who knew God did not play favorites. You didn't have to be of the Nation of Israel to be saved, God saved everybody! So how dare any of us, in 2015, insist on a person being of a particular religious bent in order to be saved? Like Christian, or even more limiting, Catholic Christian or fundamentalist Christian?

We could argue with Peter, who according to this Cornelius story has prescriptive definitions for Jesus Followers that continue to bog us down today. Like the necessity for baptism. Even though he sees that his hearers already *have* the Holy Spirit that baptism will purportedly *enable* them to have. Even though, in fact, the Jewish people had, from its roots, believed in the presence of the Holy Spirit among them and within them. But better just to marvel at his turnaround—from ministering only to Jews to ministering to unbelieving Gentiles.

And of course the very late epistle titled 1 John insists that Jesus was sent by God to die for our sins—a very early teaching of the beginning hierarchy of a whole new religion called Christianity that continues to keep us mired in guilt and sin and expiation theology. But it did clearly get that God is Love and we are of God—at least those of us who obey the rules set down by them. Which begs the question nobody asks, and nobody answers: If God is Love, how is it that God is also Judge-Jury-and-Executioner?

And though it is tempting to dismiss these obvious “problems” with the readings, especially in order to laud the poetic beauty of the profound statements of faith that are in them, if we are to be faithful to the spirit of the scriptures—indeed, faithful to God, faithful to ourselves—we must read all scripture with a leery eye and a keen ear. In theological speak, we read with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Instead of starting from the presumption that we are reading straightforward truth, we question the motives and doubt the authenticity of the words. In other words, we give the same credence to the scriptural stories as we do to today's news stories. Because, just as we have learned to mistrust current news sources and their biased reporting, we should have learned to mistrust the ancient ones. God neither wrote nor dictated what we call our sacred books. And no amount of doublespeak will ever convince me that God wrote or dictated any of the other faiths' sacred books either. A God who is Love couldn't push such an agenda of sin and hate and bloody retribution.

To me, these are the take-away verses from our readings, all tied up with a neat bow and presented in-total in the chunk of Jesus' Passover sermon that we hear today.

- *Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*
- *It has been revealed to the nations God's saving power.*
- *Let us love one another for love is of God.*

To whit: *Everybody* has the Holy Spirit, *everybody* has been saved, *everybody* is beloved of God. How could such a simple and straightforward message be so convoluted by so many for so long? Will we ever get it right?

That is our challenge. That is our mission. That is our call. Each of us and all of us, differently but all together, because *we are set free through Love's forgiveness and truth*—free to love with forgiveness and truth.

6.6.15 Homily

Body and Blood

Exod 24:4-8; Ps 116:12-13,15-18; Heb 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16,22-26

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The Body and Blood of Christ. The sacrificial Lamb of God. The scapegoat who is offered up as a holy holocaust to appease and please a bloodthirsty God. Is this what Jesus wants us to associate his community meal of remembrance with? Would he even recognize the ways we have embraced sacrificial theology?

Last week Friday, I and two of my sister priests traveled across Chicago to spend an hour with Alta, first RCWP of color, languishing in a nursing home in the latter stages of ALS, an insidious disease that had stalked her and laid her low in her waning days of earthly life. Less than a year ago, she was with us in our Tennessee retreat haven, diminished but still vibrant and active in her 86th year of life. Last Friday she was radiant with an unearthly glow—still sharing her beautiful smile, her wisdom, her wit, but seemingly from another dimension.

We shared Eucharistic prayers, Barbara helped her to break the bread, and she gave to each of us a piece of the Body of Christ. That Body was represented in the little piece of bread, yes, but it was real—it was encountered—in the wasting-away body of a valiant woman who spent her life in doing for others. This was communion.

On Sunday our bishop, Joan, and her husband John went to visit Alta on their way out of town. They took with them bread that had been consecrated at the ordination on Saturday, the ordination that Alta had so wanted to be a part of. And she was. And they ate the bread together. This was communion.

On Tuesday, the body of Alta gave up. She gasped for air, but could not move a limb. She was admitted into ICU. On Thursday, her eyes glazed over and her speech was stilled. We were all on death watch. This was communion.

Last night, Alta breathed her last. I could almost hear her saying, “It is finished.” Alta, the Body of Christ, viscer-ally, sacrificially, and bloodlessly the real thing. This is communion. Well done, good and faithful servant.

6.13.15 Homily

Eleventh Ordinary

Ezek 17:22-24; Ps 92:23,13-16; 2 Cor 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Today's overall message is very much upbeat. God causes all life, loves all life, and takes care of all life. We have nothing to worry about. Of course, good old Paul takes us to task, through his corrupt-body theology, by reminding us that we are expected to do something to earn God's largesse. We are expected to be faithful, and courageous—and repentant when we aren't faithful or courageous. We are expected, in other words, to walk the walk as we talk the talk – just like our brother Jesus did. But we are not expected to be *needed*.

Whoa... wait... what? Weren't we all conditioned from little on up to be needed? Inexpendable, even? Isn't that our "role"... our purpose in life? Like the old story about the guy who dug in and tended to an overgrown weedy plot until it was transformed into a pristine vision of a corner of Eden. And the new neighborhood assistant priest was out walking (told you it was an *old* story!), stopped when he saw the guy outside pulling up a couple of weeds, and said, "Nice garden you and God have got going here, Mr. Farmer." To which came the reply, "Thanks, padre, but you should have *seen* it when God was doing it all alone!"

As faithful, courageous and repentant children of this planet Earth, we must *own* our solidarity with all of Earth's life. We are *not* only not superior to other *human* lives, we are not superior to the wheat that we harvest or the dog that we domesticate. Why do we tend to a belief in the superiority of humankind that allows *us* the blessing of immortal souls which none of this Earth's other fauna or flora or living waters possess? It doesn't sound to me like *Jesus* discounted the holy life of *wheat*, which he *knew* would be *birthed* with or without the help of the exalted human. Seems to me the *seed* is the *soul* of the wheat. Its body may be corruptible, but it will simply return to the ground from which it came and be rebirthed.

Like that sprig from the cedars of Lebanon. *Whose* is the body of God that pulls the sprig from the top of the tree and brings it down into the ground to replant it? A bird, perhaps? A squirrel? Or maybe a flash of lightning from the canopy of the sky under which the tree stands.

And when the progenitor has birthed a *new* tree into being, *that* one invites *new* fauna to find rest under its lofty branches. And when the tree and its visitors are thirsting for respite from the rigors of this life, they are refreshed and renewed by the living waters in which all the Earth is mothered, from life-giving rains to life-giving streams to life-giving wombs.

Very present to many of us in this assembly today is our sister Alta. From little on up, she was taught by *her* mother to be faithfully and courageously independent. She raised her children in the same way. They would *not* need her. She did not *need* to be needed in order to be validated. She *knew* she was a precious and valued daughter of God just as she was. When ordained, she donned a Roman collar, walked the sidewalks, rode the buses, sat on the benches... and people migrated to her as to a guru who sits atop a mountain dispensing wisdom. Alta knew that we are expected to walk the walk as we talk the talk – just like our brother Jesus did. But we are *not* expected to be *needed*.

Got that, deacons? Not to worry about pulling out the weeds... or even washing the dishes if you don't mind the stench. Got that, priests? Not to worry that if you aren't all things to all people at all times you are a failure in this life. Got that, priestly people? Glory in the ability of others to do for themselves what you think you should be needed for! Be there for them, yes, but teach them to fish... like Jesus did... rather than just throwing a fish their way. And bless them on their way. See in others' growth the Blessed Gardener that today's psalmist sang of.

Just *three* days ago, our sister Alta was buried. This could indicate, according to our trinitarian bent on things, that today she is resurrected. She surely is resurrected in this assembly that has—*three* hours ago—ordained *three* new deacons to follow in her footsteps.

Alta lives. She has returned to that place from which she came—reborn again into the fiery dust of a brightly shining star, perhaps to again fall into the earthy dust of this planet, and sprout, and grow among us. Perhaps we will recognize her in the eyes of the stranger who sits next to us on the Megabus, or in the crescendo movement of the Beethoven symphony that she compared to the call of the Holy Spirit of God. Or in the breaking of the bread.

On Monday, *three* days after her death, I felt to the tips of my toes that *Alta* had communicated with *me*, sending this poem into my inbox:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?

I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?

God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly here,

And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree, but who can tell us how?

The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do

To you and me, so take the lively air,

And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.

What falls away is always. And is near.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke

The seed is the word of God. Christ is the sower. And Life—ALL Life—is eternal.

6.20.15 Homily

Twelfth Ordinary

Job 38:1,8-11; Ps 107:23-26,29-31; 2 Cor 5:14-17; Mark 4:35-41

Elsie Hainz McGrath

You know, I have finally put my finger on why I have a problem with Job. ...I mean a problem beyond the one that has God wagering with Satan and abusing someone in order to win a bet. ...And a problem beyond the one that has the abused being rewarded by the abuser for “taking one for the team,” so to speak, with a *better* wife and *better* kids and *better* stuff than he had before sucking it up for an obviously-perverse God. The problem I zoned in on today is the absolute icy haughtiness of a God who can’t even be bothered with answering Job’s questions, but can only respond with a sarcastic, “You talkin’ to *me*? You talkin’ to *me*? How *dare* you question my motives, ‘cause you can’t *ever* measure up to *me*. *I am great*. ...And *you... ain’t!*”

Yep, with all its promotion as a perfect parable of man’s faithfulness and God’s providence, this story is largely responsible for skewing the theologies of Judaism and Christianity since the time of its invention.

I mean, despite the fact that I love this reading from Paul, I have to own that he was convinced Jesus died not because of how he lived but because God willed it. It’s that same all-powerful God that played around with Job’s well-being for the sport of it. God demands something from us that we are—for the most part—never going to live up to. So comes along a living saint—Jesus—and God scapegoats him in order to satisfy a macho blood-thirst.

Digesting that piece of the piece of the letter that we heard from Paul today only becomes easier because of the brilliance that surrounds it—but the shame of it is that most people are unable or unwilling to internalize the good parts, even while they cling to the tired old expiation theology that keeps them beating their breasts and proclaiming themselves unworthy to be a new creation.

It is lived experience speaks to us of the truth of Paul’s words about being new: *We once knew Christ from a human point of view. We no longer know him that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away.*

Paul, in fact, *never* knew Christ from a human point of view. Neither have we. But we *know* him, as did Paul. Jesus taught us that life is not ended, it is simply changed. But who can really believe that unless they experience its truth for themselves? So we *re-member* him, not from our personal contact with the living Jesus but from our *spiritual* contact with the living God, the living Earth, the living Cosmos; from our spiritual contact with the living dead in our own lives—like Rodger in this community, Alta in the Great Waters community, parents and spouses and children and best friends in our personal communities, and yes, even beloved pets and beloved trees and beloved homes. As last week’s gospel acclamation said: *The seed is the word of God; Christ is the sower; life is eternal.*

So what does all of this have to do with today’s gospel?

The theme of life is never without water. We claim our DNA is dust—star dust and earth dust—but the majority of our *bodily* being is *of course* water. The majority of our planet Earth’s being is of course water. The dust of our co-dependent lives cannot survive without the water that holds us together and allows us to be molded into the shapes that differentiate us, one being and one species and one life-form from another. Water is the basis of all bodily life on Earth. We probe the heavens, looking for other planets that hold water because we are convinced that without water there is no extra-terrestrial life. So we presume to be the favored planet, like we presume to be the favored life-form on the planet. Maybe what Jesus is telling us in this water story, is to wake up to the reality that ours is not the only life in this vast and mysterious Universe.

The others in the boat were afraid of drowning. Jesus wasn't. When he invited Peter to walk on the water with him, all was fine—until Peter looked down and panicked and started to drown. Maybe Jesus was telling us that the waters that sustain our bodies are not necessary for sustaining our lives. Maybe Jesus was telling us that we really are *not* our bodies. In fact, our bodies *have* to die in order to attain new life. Even his did.

Maybe Jesus was just telling us, once again and in yet another way, that death is not something to fear. That God visits us regularly, and is not out to get us. That raging waters and wild winds are as much a part of life as are placid waters and gentle breezes. And that life—ALL life—is eternal. ... Shabbat Shalom.

6.27.15 Homily

13th Sunday

Wis 1:13-15; 2:23-24; Ps 30:2,4-6,11-13; 2 Cor 8:7,9,13-15; Mark 5:21-24;35b-43

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The book of Wisdom was probably written very late first century BCE, probably by a Hellenist Jew. This book literally spans the testaments—Old and New—which makes it an invaluable piece of literature for both Jews and Christians. And in today's reading we hear the beginning of this wisdom: *We are made to live forever. All of life is made to live forever. Righteousness is immortal. Only sin can conquer life.*

Certainly Paul knew of the Greek writings. He was himself a Hellenist Jew, and very well educated. His letters carry echoes of Wisdom and other first century writings. And today's snippet is its own gem: A clarion call for that equality which is borne of justice. How more 21st century can he be? And how more damning of all the generations of people who have lived and died on this Earth since those words were written without choosing and embracing the righteousness that leads to life? Because sin surely does bring death upon us: death of spirit and soul—or of mind and heart. Death of hope, of faith, of love. *Sin indeed can conquer life.*

Perhaps Jesus knew of these writings. Perhaps he believed in them as he laid hands on people and brought them to new life. If they would repent of their sins, which was Jesus' first and never-ending lesson in his new life as a street preacher, they were brought to new life in righteousness. Today's little girl of the gospel, he knew, was guileless, sinless. She was not dead, she only slept, but her parents were frantic with worry over her. And that *aside*—that she was 12-years old—like *he himself was* when he tarried too long in the temple and worried his own parents sick over him. It is the time for new life—that age at which Jewish kids are bar-and-bat mitzvah'd and Christian kids are confirmed. Time to put childish ways behind. Time to become responsible and take on the mantle of righteousness, consciously and deliberately.

Time to choose, as Jesus *absolutely* knew from his beloved Torah: Life or death. In this historic week of **widening medical accessibility and civil rights for all families**, we celebrate a righteousness that gives us renewed hope and Pride in this country, which now *willfully* allows so many more people to live in the light—and *literally* choose life. But when our celebration has ended, as we are reminded every week when we conclude our liturgy together, our service begins. How will we choose life this week?

7.11.15 Homily

Fifteenth Sunday

Amos 7:12-15; Ps 85:9-14; Eph 1:3-10; Mark 6:7-13

Elsie Hainz McGrath

In speaking of Wisdom-Sophia, the book of Wisdom tells us: *She is a breath of the power of God. She is a reflection of eternal light. In every generation, she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.*

To thine own self be true, goes the Shakespearian proverb. That is today's lesson, in a nutshell. Trust Truth. Listen to her. Then trust yourself. Speak your truth. Live your truth. *You* are a prophet, and *this* is prophetic obedience.

Much of the apocryphal literature, like that wonderful book of Wisdom, espoused the kind of far-reaching worldview that Paul drew from and that his disciples expanded on in the latter part of the first Christian century. Ephesians echoed much of Colossians, both probably written well after *both* Paul's martyrdom *and* the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Rome ruled the world, without benefit of religion, and all of life was imperiled. Jesus had not reappeared. The Second Coming had not happened in the lifetimes of first-generation Christians. And Rome was no longer on good terms with the Jewish priests and elders. Paul's disciples did not rewrite his teachings, but they expanded upon them. A broader and more unified theology had to be developed in order to keep the persecuted fledgling communities—both Christian *and* Jewish—from dissolving.

All of that is here in today's snippet from the beginning of the letter, which does *not* say it is addressed to *anyone* in Ephesus, but *only* to "faithful saints," in the oldest Greek manuscripts. It begins with an ancient Jewish prayer form—in place of a formal Pauline thanksgiving—which *cosmically* unites the Jewish God with the Christian Christ; and it goes on to unite the Chosen People with the Gentiles **from before the foundation of the earth!** AND included in this Divine Order is the Divine Presence, enlightening *all of us* to the will of God in all wisdom and insight. The Holy Sophia did not *only* live among the people in the beginning. She did not *only* live within the person of one person, Jesus. She was not speaking *only* to selected prophets, like Amos. As the book of Wisdom tells us, ***she IS, and we are ALL friends of God and prophets.***

There is a moment in my life that I remember well. I was exiting the campus ministry office at SLU with Miriam, a colleague, and we were talking. I *don't*—of course!—remember what we were talking *about*. But I do remember that we were at odds about something, and it must have mattered deeply to me because I was determined to have my say. (Not the norm for me in those days.) And she was *listening*. And she suddenly stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk outside of Busch Center and said, "You sound like a prophet." And I heard myself saying, "I *AM* a prophet!" My reactionary response caught both of us by surprise. Miriam said, "Well, *I'm* not." And *then* I said, "We are *ALL* prophets, *whenever we speak our truths.*" And I marveled at what I had just said. The words were not mine, the thoughts were not mine, all of this was new to me—and news to me. But my slow "becoming" took a quantum leap that day. Standing on the sidewalk on N. Grand at Laclede, I experienced a conversion that somewhat channeled Amos' as he was obediently following the flock. He said, "I am no prophet." But he followed the voice that told him to go and prophesy. I said I *am* one, but tended to drag my feet in the following.

*Except... that day I began to recognize that **every time I had listened to my gut** I had decided and acted in an *instinctive* and *courageous* seemingly-out-of-character manner... and **every time it had proven to be a blessedly right decision and graced action**. That day, I began to listen better. I had experienced Truth, *she who is, who passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets*. That day, I began to **trust myself**.*

Jesus, who had been described in the same terms which were used earlier to describe Wisdom-Sophia, passes on to his apostles in today gospel the same lesson he (or she) had passed on to me that day in 1990. Despite their repeated lack of trust, they had continued to follow Jesus, this prophet-par-excellence, so he sought to give them an experience of true conversion: *Go, not alone, but without me. Go, do as I do. Go, preach change of heart to anyone, lay hands on anyone, accept hospitality from anyone. But do not force yourself on those who resist. Move on, be with those who receive you. Trust.*

And they marveled at their experience. They *could* be other Christ's! They *were* other Christ's! But, like all of us, they were only beginning... only *becoming*. It was a conversion experience that none of them would ever forget as they moved ahead on their halting journeys of discipleship. Because the apostles experienced Truth, *she who is, who passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets*. And they began to trust themselves.

So, to thine own self be true. Trust Truth. Listen to her. Then trust yourself. Speak your truth. Live your truth. You are a prophet, and *this* is prophetic obedience.

7.18.15 Homily

Sixteenth Sunday

Jer 23:1-6; Ps 23:1-6; Eph 2:13-19; Mark 6:29-34

Elsie Hainz McGrath

I think today we can take much solace in the fact that our two most prominent so-called shepherds are Pope Francis and President Obama, because it is clear from our scriptures that good shepherds must be compassionate and attentive to the needs of those who are in their charge. The primary role of the **good** shepherd is to gather—not scatter—the flock. The overall concept is one of a people united rather than divided—one church *and* one nation, as per our present examples. In too many cases, this has been translated as uniformity instead of unity, of course, the *ideal* is what we continue to strive for. And the *ideal* is what *good* shepherds continue to inculcate into the flock mentality.

Local scripture guru Roger Karban reminds us today that towards the end of his ministry Jeremiah, the good shepherd, gave up all hope of ever changing the organized religion of his day. But Jeremiah *didn't* give up all hope. His trust was in God, and in the rightness of the ideal, so he held out hope that *someday* it would happen. Reminds me of something Reinhold Niebuhr once said: *"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope."*

In the life and times of Jesus, it seemed that the good shepherd was John the Baptist, the one Jesus himself went to in preparation for the ministry he was to embark on. Today we are introduced into the gospel setting by way of intruding on a story in process that tells us the disciples heard of John's beheading, went and claimed his body, and gave him a proper burial. What an *extraordinary* act of compassion and unity! And *then* they **regrouped** around Jesus. They took a leap of faith and claimed him as their new shepherd. Because, as Niebuhr continued: *"Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history, therefore we must be saved by faith."*

And Jesus recognized that they had extended and expended themselves in the missionary activity that we heard about last week—calling people to repentance, laying on hands—**and** the difficult ministry of anointing and burying the headless body who had been, like Jeremiah, *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness*. So Jesus took on the shepherd's mantle: he led them into green pastures, beside still waters; for rest, renewal, restoration. Only to find, of course, a crowd of people who had hurried on ahead of them. And we hear the familiar words: *"[Jesus] was moved by them because they resembled sheep without a shepherd, and he started to teach them at length."*

Which, I believe, brings up two very important points. The **first** is that he was compassionate toward the people and knew the importance of *leading them to become followers who could also shepherd* because they would learn how from him. As he had already demonstrated by the sending of the disciples into the towns to call for repentance and touch others. Niebuhr said: *"Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."*

The **second** is that we can presume those disciples Jesus led away in order to find rest were not employed into this teaching experience. They were part of the crowd, perhaps reclining at the fringes, nearest the refreshing water, still able to absorb a bit of the healing power of renewal before their next assignment.

By the time the letter to the Ephesians was penned, the prevailing wisdom of the disciples was that Jesus had indeed been *the Best Shepherd*. Jesus had done what seemed to be impossible to do: made us one people, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, citizen and immigrant, male and female.

But he *didn't* do that, of course, during his days of life on this Earth. Truth be told, never and nowhere have we *ever* achieved the unity that we read about in Ephesians. And so the end of Niebuhr's quote: *"No virtuous act*

is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or our foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.” Or, as we say each week, here at Therese, “In forgiving, love is perfect; and in dying, life bestows.”

The ideal is presented to us as a goal to be reached, an end to be accomplished—a *possibility*, if we but keep at it, *maybe*. With hope, and faith. With love, and forgiveness. But not today. Not during our lifetime here on Earth. And that’s okay, *because the alternative*—doing nothing, without hope or faith or love—is **not**. Good shepherds, ourselves included, lead us in paths of goodness—to follow **Love’s** way fearlessly. Because **Love** is with us, and we do not walk alone.

7.25.15 Homily

Seventeenth Sunday

2 Kings 4:42-44; Ps 145:10-11,15-18; Eph 4:1-6; John 6:1-15

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Keep in mind that Mark's is the earliest gospel account we have, and that it was available to the other three evangelists as they compiled their gospel accounts.

During the Year of Matthew, we *hear* his first account of today's feeding story, which closely parallels Mark's. During the Year of Luke, we *hear* his account of the story, which closely follows Mark. This is the Year of Mark, but suddenly today, even though Mark has written **two** accounts of this miraculous feeding, our lectionary gives us the story from John. John's story closely follows Mark's too, but with significant twists. As we know, John's theology is esoteric. Jesus is other-worldly and all-knowing; in a sense, *pretending* to be one of us. Naturally, even though this is the most-told story in all the gospels, and even though we think we know the story backward and forward, John's feeding story reflects that *huge* theological difference. Did you hear it?

The *context* is mightily important, because that in itself tells us a story, and in context, according to Mark, we have a huge liturgy going on here. Mark's account follows on the heels of last week's gospel, which ended mid-story. Recall: *When Jesus came ashore, he saw a huge crowd and was moved by them because they resembled 'sheep without a shepherd', and he began to teach them at length.* The story continues: (Mark 6:35-46) *And when the hour had already grown late, his disciples **would approach him** and say, "This place is desolate, and it's late. Send them away so they can go to the farms and villages around here to buy something to eat."* In other words, Jesus was on a roll with his "at length" teaching and the disciples were hungry! Then we get the feeding story, which ends: *"And right away he made his disciples embark in the boat and go ahead...**while he dispersed the crowd.** And once he got away from them, **he** went off to the mountain to pray."*

Mark's (and Matthew's) second story differs slightly from the more familiar one—but we *never* hear it. *Except here!* In context, according to Mark, it is only a few days later. Jesus and the disciples have been in constant missionary mode, traveling from town to town, teaching, laying on hands, healing... and now feeding—again. Let's listen—and then let's share.

Mark 8:1-10a

Once again, when there was a huge crowd without anything to eat, Jesus called the disciples aside and said to them: "I feel sorry for the crowd because **they have already spent three days with me** and haven't had **anything** to eat. If I send these people home hungry, they will collapse on the road. In fact, some of them have come from quite a distance." And his disciples answered, "How can anyone feed these people **bread** out here in this desolate place?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They replied, "Seven." Then he ordered the crowd to **sit down** on the ground. He took the **seven loaves**, gave thanks, and broke them into pieces, and **started giving them to his disciples to hand out.** They passed them around to the crowd. They also had **a few small fish.** When he had blessed them, Jesus told the disciples to hand those out as well. They had more than enough to eat. Then they picked up **seven baskets of leftover scraps.** There were about four thousand people there. **Then he started sending them away. And he got right into the boat with his disciples and moved on...**

8.1.15 Homily

Eighteenth Sunday

Exod 16:2-4,12-15; Ps 78:3-4,23-25,54; Eph 4:17,20-24; John 6:22-35

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The author of the Gospel of John gives us what is called High Christology. This is the gospel that we hear during the Season of Easter because of its focus on Jesus as God. The readers of John's Gospel are told from the beginning both *who* and *what* Jesus is. His I AM statements were designed by the author to expand on who and what of Jesus by adding identifying phrases—in this case "I AM...the bread of life." On this second of five consecutive Sabbaths during which we will hear the gospel proclaimed from John instead of Mark, the subject is still Jesus as the bread come down from heaven—bread that gives us never-ending life.

In our sharing last week, we looked at Mark's feeding of the 5,000 story instead of the one we heard from John, and at the context in which it was written. The disciples had just returned from a missionary journey that had tragically included them claiming the decapitated body of John the Baptist and giving it a proper burial. They were worn out. But also exuberant because they had, in fact, taught and healed many people on their jaunt. Jesus was taking them to an isolated place so that they could recoup—get a bit of rest and renewal. But they ran into a crowd of people who were waiting on the other shore. So Jesus began teaching the crowd because they needed a shepherd in order to learn that they could do it themselves; and then he had the disciples feed them because *they* had to learn that they could do this too; and then he sent the disciples off alone to still get their R & R. And he went back and dispersed the crowd. This was a very human story of a very human teacher—a shepherd of and for the people of God.

Today's gospel, of course, does not appear in Mark, since John's is the only one that has Jesus declaring himself as the Bread of Life. We will be hearing snippets of this Bread of Life discourse from John's Gospel for the next few weeks—a radical departure from the Markan stories that depict Jesus so tersely and humanly. The reason for this, according to some teachers of liturgy, is exactly *because* Mark is so tightly written—the shortest gospel in our bible. The Markan liturgical year *has to be* supplemented in order to span the whole year, so the reasoning goes. But their rationale leaves us cold because the radical departure from Markan theology muddies the waters of our learning. It brings us to a crossroads and pushes us onto a road that Mark would not have taken.

I AM is an expression that was widely used in the Greco-Roman world. It was an established formula in speech that was attributed to one of the plethora of gods. In Greek, the famous self-revelation of God that we find in Exodus—I AM who I am—would be rendered "I am the one who is" or, as John predicates, "I am what I say I am." So, in this case, "I am the Living God, the bread of life. Feast on me, and never die."

One commentator on today's gospel makes note of the fact that there are many people out there today who have voluntarily removed themselves from institutional Eucharistic communities. They do not feel compelled to receive the bread of the Eucharist; they do not feel deprived for lack of it; and yet they believe in Jesus. There are many more out there, of course, who are arbitrarily deprived of the bread of the Eucharist because they have failed to "live up to" the standards of the so-called shepherds who refuse to feed them. And then there are those who never have identified as Christians and have neither received nor missed this Living Bread.

Everyone in this room believes that none of these souls are lost—or damned—because they are not gathering around a communion table. If we were to believe what the Jesus of John's Gospel is purportedly saying we would have to acknowledge that they are indeed lost and damned. Maybe even that *we* are lost and damned, like the so-called shepherds of the legal institution that is the so-called church says we are. But we hear the Bread of Life discourse with much more knowledge than did the people of John's time, of course. We appreciate the literary genius of the evangelist called John. We appreciate that Jesus, even in John's esoteric gospel, does not withhold that precious bread from anyone.

And we appreciate that Jesus was an extraordinary person of compassion and presence and persuasive ability. We appreciate that the people's sharing of bread and companionship is of the utmost importance for the forming and bonding of communities of disciples—indeed, from the time of the Exodus stories. We appreciate that *our* weekly remembering of Jesus, the Good Shepherd we continue to strive to emulate, renews and refreshes *us* for our ongoing discipleship. We know that Jesus was of God.

And, happily, we know that we *too* are of God. We are blessed to have bread in abundance—and in so many ways other than as *real* bread around a *real* altar. As Moses told the people in their wilderness, *This is the bread that God has given us to eat.*

8.8.15 Homily

Nineteenth Sunday

1 Kgs 19:3b-9a; Ps 34:2-9; Eph 4:30—5:2; John 6:41-51

Elsie Hainz McGrath

We are all familiar with the famous statement from Karl Marx that *religion is the opiate of the people*. This is the fault of and the problem with religion—all religion. It gives us creedal statements and dogmatic rules, and sets itself up as its own God: a “my way or the highway” kind of environment. Example: John’s gospel, which here presents us with this Bread of Life discourse from an embodiment of God himself—and absolutely no mistaking the gender—and consequently leaves **out** all those who do not profess themselves as “Christian.” And from ages past and into the present, lots of people *believe* that! And lots of those who *don’t*, get lost and go hungry.

Yesterday I had a nearly 4-hour discussion with a woman, self-professed atheist from way back, on the idea of a Greater Power that we all experience regardless of how we may or may not identify that Power. Her tendency was to attribute *everything* to coincidence or to the power of the mind, but she eventually came to pinpoint it more precisely as *energy*—and to reluctantly acknowledge that Energy might be uppercased, especially as she was reminded of specific incidences that she described as “freaky” and that she tended to try to put out of her mind... because they defied even the far-reaching definition of coincidence.

I’d like to quote a statement from today’s *Catholica* commentary: *Each of us are links in the **participatory experience** of bringing the reality of the Divine reign **into reality at this very moment in time** as no one else has experienced in the past. It is **a process of evolution** that will continue until the human race either gets it right or destroys itself out of pure ignorance and arrogance.* ...Too bad I didn’t have that quote in front of me when I was having that discussion yesterday, because it pretty much sums up what I was trying to say.

The idea that our mind is the power behind our coincidental experiences is not completely wrong, of course. Our minds *are* powerful. And that *Greater Power* many of us call God really does dwell within us. But she dwells **more deeply within us** than our mind does. Another of recent history’s most important thinkers, Karl Rahner, *felt* that, but he could not get *past* his mind in trying to define it, so he came up with the idea of the Anonymous Christian as a way of allowing that those who were *not* Christian were *not* condemned to everlasting damnation—or at least everlasting nothingness. They *were*, in other convoluted words, *really* Christians; they just didn’t *know* it!

So, as we spend our third Sabbath with Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse as imagined by an anonymous author dubbed John, I have been led to ponder the meaning of “the bread of life” in my own life at this time. Certainly, I do not believe it is the flesh of the man Jesus; or the flesh of the resurrected Christ either. But I do believe it is the Real Presence of the Holy within which we all live and move and have our being. Because in our covenant with the one for whom we call ourselves Christian, **we have made it so**. Because just as the Israelites continue to remember their deliverance from death through the bread of the Exodus, so do we continue to remember our deliverance from death through the bread of the Eucharist. And because it is that important in our faith formation, it remains that important in our ongoing and on-growing life of faith.

Bread isn’t *always* essential for our bodily life, though it was for Elijah today because he was ready to die on the spot until a coincidental angel told him to get up and eat. Bread isn’t *always* essential for our emotional life, though it goes a long way towards melting away those malicious emotions mentioned to the Ephesians today, which coincidentally cause us to be gentler, kinder people. Bread isn’t *even* always essential for our spiritual life, but it seems to bolster both our resolve and our strength when *we believe* we are being asked, from *somewhere* deep within us, to make arduous journeys that we really would rather not make. When bread is deliberately withheld from us, who are *they* to deny it? When it is made available to us, who are *we* to refuse it? And when we consume it, *are not our senses* opened up to new and wondrous insights? *Is not our*

love more freely and perfectly given away? Don't we find ourselves more aware of the Presence of the Holy in which we live and move and have our being?

So yes, the Bread of Life is *but another name* for our God who is Beyond All Names. As was Jesus. As ***all our names*** are *other names* for that Holy Presence within each of us, *whether* we identify as Christian or atheist, or Jew or Muslim, or fill-in-the-blank. Indeed, following the lead of the psalmist, *when we separate ourselves we are empty and hungry; when we open our hearts we are filled to overflowing.*

8.22.15 Homily

21st Sunday

Jos 24:1-2,15-18; Ps 34:2-3,16-21; Eph 5:21,28-33; John 6:60-69

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The overall theme of the day is **choice**. Chose whom we will serve, whom we will break bread with, whom we will be intimate with. Chose who Power of God is for us, in faith. Choose which community models Person of God for us, in hope. Choose what person specially mirrors Passion of God for us, in love. And the secondary theme is **accountability**. Because when we have chosen, we have to live *with* our choices, and live *up to* our choices.

So today we move from Jericho to Ephesus, or from our faith in God's Power to our love of God's Passion. And—*finally*—we move to the end of the Bread of Life discourse. For these past several weeks we have been hearing one long redundant sermon that today concludes with its startling clincher, which presents us with our hope ... our Eucharistic community. But do we not also *have to* choose whether to be people of the Johannine Eucharistic community or people of the Pauline Eucharistic community?

No doubt about it, the gospels give us lessons in the history of the making of the *ism* called *Catholicism*. Our foundational theology comes from Paul, the earliest writer from the Christian era. Paul never knew the man Jesus. His knowledge of Jesus the man came secondhand, from those disciples who *had* known him. *His* personal encounters with Jesus were deeply spiritual ones, of the sort that cause people to radically change their lives and never look back. His written letters came into being a good 20-to-30 years after the crucifixion, and their only reference to the life of Jesus comes as the earliest written text around the Eucharist, which he prefaces by saying that it was handed on to him that Jesus, "on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it saying, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.'"

Thus did Eucharist become, for us, the *new* covenant, the *new* Passover, the *new* way of being the chosen people of God. This was a communal meal, the carrying on of a tradition, a ritual memorial—lest we forget. And it was the formal beginning of a movement whose founder surely would not recognize today's church.

Our synoptic gospels, which presume to tell us first-hand accounts of the life of the man Jesus, treat Eucharist in ways similar to what Paul presented. They were all penned within 10-to-20 years *after* Paul began to circulate his epistles, so chances are that none of those writers knew the man Jesus either. And the last gospel, John's, was written on the cusp of the second Christian century—somewhere between 90-95. Jesus had been dead for over 60 years. Far enough removed so that **the overall theological focus was reconfigured**—from the story of a man who bordered on divine into the story of a god who bordered on human.

Because John had a vision. And the vision was to perpetuate a Jesus movement that had become its own organization, called Christianity, and that had begun to govern itself through a series of administrative positions, but which was struggling to find its dogma. The church couldn't get its firm foothold, what with the demise of all the first generation believers and the absolute absence of the widely-heralded Second Coming. So John's vision was skillfully written down, drawing on both the Judaic and the Christian writings of the times. Jesus the man became Preeminent ... superseding Wisdom Sophia as the Breath and the Word of God ... he who was and is and will be forever, and who was *always* completely aware of what was going to happen next because it was *all* God's will.

Thus the emphasis shifts, from the communal to the personal. And the Eucharist, the "source and summit" of the Christian faith becomes the **Real** Presence, the Bread of Life ... not a ritual commemoration, but literally the *choice* between life and death.

But there is one thing that was not obscured in any way throughout the history of the written Christian scriptures. *All* are welcome. Anyone who does not come to the table *chooses* to not come to the table. Eucharist is not something to gaze on from afar with adoring eyes. And Eucharist is not a reward for making a perfect act of contrition moments before it is served. Eucharist is a sacramental connection with faith and hope and love. It is freely chosen.

Whatever we choose, we are accountable for living up to the demands our choices make on us. Today I have a grim true story for you. It happened to one of our priests, a woman named Alexandra. On Thursday, Alexandra was going to her car after work, at around 5:30, and a man holding a coffee cup approached her. He spoke a few words to her, then threw the contents of the cup into her face. It was some kind of acid. She is in critical condition, with face burned and unable to open her eyes, and under heavy police security at a New York hospital. They do not believe it was a random attack. The perpetrator has not been found, and our members in the Eastern region been unable to get any updates since yesterday.

One of our ongoing demands, as members of a Eucharistic community of hope, is a laying on of hands, prayers and anointing for those who are in need of healing. Within this little group, we continue to pray for Ron & Laura, and today for Joan and for Amy, for Mary's mom, and for all in need of healing. The litany that a member of her region has written for Alexandra is being prayed this weekend in RCWP communities around the world. I ask you to pray it with me now.

[litany for Alexandra]

And in a very special way, we pray today for Pat, who will be undergoing hand surgery on Tuesday. So let us gather around Pat.

[litany for Pat]

And now let us share with one another a holy kiss of shalom.

8.29.15 Homily

22nd Sunday

Deut 4:1-2,6-8; Ps 15; James 1:16-27; Mark 7:1-8,14-23

Elsie Hainz McGrath

The last time we heard from Mark was on July 18. That week, Jesus began teaching the crowds who were so desperate for good news because he sensed they were like lost sheep. Raised to work with his hands in a skilled trade, as a carpenter, he took on the mantle of a despised laborer, a “good shepherd,” for the sake of the many. Now, after six weeks of John’s esoteric preaching, we return to roughly where we left off in Mark’s account of the man Jesus.

Since that time we have been fixated on eating—from the feeding of the 5,000 to the run-on Bread of Life discourse. And so today. But today’s story is one we can better relate to. The disciples are eating, but they have apparently not done their washing ritual prior to digging in and the Pharisees have a problem with such blatant disregard for the purity rules of the day. Picture these rough and tough fishermen, worn out and hungry from the latest long trek, having a picnic, so to speak, as Jesus is again being engaged in conversation with the powers-that-be. Picture yourself when you were a kid—all ready to climb up to the picnic table and hurriedly eat so you can run off and play. And the adults again start talking, ignoring you, so to speak. So you grab the hot dog off the plate with your grimy little hands and start shoveling it into your hungry little mouth. And mom says, “Put that down! Go wash your hands!” But grandma interjects, “It’s okay, let her go. A little dirt is good for her.” (In this case, it appears, we could substitute the Pharisees for mom, and Jesus for grandma. Probably in *many* cases.)

We still have our purity rules, of course. We still *try* to teach our kids to wash their hands before eating. We probably are much *more* fastidious about washing the pots and the dishes before re-using them than they were in Jesus’ day. And we are *way* more food-conscious, though not necessarily when it comes to cloven-footed meat. But what about Jesus’ admonition? *It is what comes out of a person that defiles.* We have become a *world* of defiled persons, evidenced in 24-hour talk radio, completely biased journalism, inane Twitter tweets, and defamation of ALL character. We have debased our definition of “freedom of speech” in order to glorify anarchy and imposed codes of conduct called “political correctness” in order to silence honest freedom of speech.

So in this day’s readings we have a concise bit of history about the rules of earlier times. Moses, passing on those initial Ten Commandments that were presumably the very *first* rules ever written for the living creatures called persons, emphasizes their restrictive nature. *Neither add anything to what I tell you nor ignore any of my words,* said the self-professed messenger from God. (Took us about a fraction of a nano-second to trash *that* one, right? And we’re *still* adding! So, by Jesus’ time, all that “cleanliness is next to godliness” stuff had been added.)

A part of what Jesus is stressing in today’s gospel is that we were not *made* for rules, *rules* were made for *us*. Because we don’t rely on our God-given instincts, like all other living things do. We *bury* those instincts, sometimes so deeply that we never even figure out throughout *all* of our life on earth that we *have* any! We are *forced* to rely on rules. The whole point *is*, of course, as it is throughout Mark’s gospel, that rules are put into place as guidelines. *Not* as imperatives. And that the *only* imperative is love, which is to be the *only* impetus behind *all* rules. Which is *exactly* why it is *imperative* that bad rules be *broken*.

By the time the letter of James was written, when the emerging churches were *just* beginning to become *very* concerned with establishing dogmatic orthodoxy... *rules* for the *good* Christian—this author put together an admirable package of “have tos.” In essence, these *are* those first Ten Commandments. And the “how to” of those injunctions is crystal clear. [quote] *We can know goodness and perfection in our imitation of Jesus.*

The person called James knew we were *already* ignoring that one *before* it was written, of course. That’s *why* he wrote it! That’s why, after the “must’s”—*MUST be slow to anger*, *MUST welcome*—come the “if’s”—*IF we*

do not act, IF we deceive—and then comes the “only’s.” ONLY *when we humbly act with justice, love with kindness, speak for the hopeless...* said so many years earlier, when there was no Jesus and there were no Christians, by the prophet Micah. Because Micah knew, just as did Jesus after him and James after him, that these *are* our God-given instincts. That we were *not* made for rules. That a little dirt *is* good for us.

It is, after all, God’s *good* earth. It is a part of *our* very essence.

9.5.15 Homily

Twenty-Third Sunday

Isa 35:4-7a; Ps 146; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37

Elsie Hainz McGrath

It is indeed providential that our calendar in this coming week holds both Labor Day and 9/11; *and* that our scriptures are all about the absolute necessity for justice, and the absolute prerequisite of hearing & seeing in order to bring it about. We hear about courage in these readings as well, a concept that has been bandied around since the days of Eden and is usually—*still*—associated more with physical bravado than with moral propensities.

No, I do *not* believe these readings have *anything* to do with *physical* limitations.

You know, when babies are born into this world they cannot talk (in ways that we intelligent grown-ups can un-derstand), they cannot see (as we define the seeing world), and they are unafraid. Their first mark of courage is the absolute audacity to leave the friendly confines of the womb. (Or maybe it is to enter into those confines to begin with. But that's a subject for another day.) And perhaps what we call their baby gibberish is more akin to the freedom of the Spirit that is manifested in the gift of speaking in tongues. Which Jesus is apparently doing today, *groaning* as he looks to the heavens.

The more we learn of this world, through the sights and the sounds we are bombarded with, the further removed we become from our roots, our beginnings, our essence. We become dumber, in every sense of the word, and numb-er too. We lose our keen sight of what is true and good, our fine-tuned ability to hear the voice of God within us. Our tongues go silent in cowardice, or worse, in apathy. We need an intervention, a conversion, a healing. We need to be made whole again, unfragmented and unafraid.

So we can truly celebrate our just and equitable ways and means of living on Labor Day. So we can truly remember with gratitude those who have paved the way to worldwide unity and peace on 9/11. So the kingdom which God desires for us will truly be here on this Earth as it is in the heavenly realms from which it—and we — were birthed. ...

9.12.15 Homily

Twenty-Fourth Sunday

Isa 50:4-9a; Ps 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-37

Elsie Hainz McGrath

I continue to be amazed by what is happening around us. And one of the most amazing happenings that I stumbled upon this week was the release of information about *Homo Naledi* (na-LED-ee) – meaning “human **star**.” This archeological find is in South Africa, very near Johannesburg, in a tiny chamber deep within a cave that is called Rising Star. The cave has been a popular spot for several years, which might have something to do with its name, but the human-like fossils that the African continent has yielded over the past century had seemed to run dry for nearly half of it. Until now. The roughly one-yard square chamber that holds these remains has been dubbed the “chamber of stars.” Scientists can’t get a handle on this discovery in terms of age or overall character, seeming to be human – but not fully human. And they can’t get over the fact that there were over 1,500 well-preserved specimens and not a trace of how they got there.

Seems the embers of those so-called “dying” stars from which we are launched onto earth truly never die out. Of course.

As Isaiah knew. Because Isaiah never lost track of who he really was. He knew it was God who taught him; God who gave him the words to speak; God who opened his ears to hear; God who was his strength and his joy and his peace. Isaiah is an example for us, especially in these times of unmitigated injustices.

As he was for Jesus.

We may doubt that Jesus ever had the discussion with his disciples that we heard in our gospel reading today. But it is easy to believe that he might have had some similar discussion with his Abba God. *Dear God, do you hear what people are saying about me? If this keeps up, I am going to be in big trouble. Is this your intent for me? How will I survive this? What good can I do if I become the laughing stock, or worse, the scapegoat for the sins of this world?*

But Jesus, like Isaiah before him, knew it was God who taught him; gave him the words to speak; opened his ears to hear; was his strength and his joy and his peace.

And Jesus prevailed. He refused to give in to the pressure that surrounded him on all sides, even within his own ranks. And he courageously gave voice to his fears, even barring from his sight those who would dissuade him from his mission unless or until they would have a change of heart – Peter today, Judas in days to come.

By the time of the writing of the letter of James, the communities of Christ-followers were being forced to develop some definitions of their faith – a set of dogma – in order to keep their communities from dissolving. And so begins the argument that has continued unto this very day, an argument that is ridiculous by its very nature. We can have works without faith, but seriously, how is it possible to have faith without works? James sums it up perfectly: *show me your faith apart from your actions, and I will show you my faith in the ways I act.* And yet we persist in arguing over this seemingly unnecessary doctrine.

But despite the human propensity for disagreeing, even if only for the sake of disagreeing, we can rejoice in the sheer numbers of people who are diligently and faithfully involved in good works for the betterment of all of life. And in the increasing numbers of people who are finding their voice, courageously speaking out against discriminatory injustices around the world. Sometimes even reaching critical mass, so that their efforts bear fruit for the many instead of only the few. Sometimes in the most unlikely of places, like our US Senate and our Missouri Statehouse.

And sometimes by the most surprising circumstances and in the most unusual of ways, like in an ancient rock chamber deep in the ground within an African cave bearing the providential name of Rising Star.

O God, if we forget you, do not forget us.

In the land of the living, we walk with you all our days.

Praises be to you, for you dwell within the heart of everything.

9.19.15 Homily

Twenty-Fifth Ordinary

Wis 2:12-20; Ps 54; James 3:16—4:3; Mark 9:30-37

Elsie Hainz McGrath

I never can hear this gospel without thinking of Cassius Clay, a beautiful specimen of a man who knew how to get the publicity he sought with such audacious claims as, “I am the greatest!” To many people it seemed he really *was*, at least those for whom being a master boxer is an ideal of greatness. But *then...he wasn't*. Probably for a larger percentage of people than had *ever* thought he *was*. Because he *refused* to fight. He became a source of national shame—the world’s greatest fighter who declared himself a conscientious objector. And a Muslim. And with a different name. No longer “the greatest,” Mohammed Ali was stripped of his title, convicted of draft evasion, and not allowed to fight professionally. He was shunned and shamed for his religious beliefs and politically polarizing objections to this country’s involvement in Vietnam.

WIKI quote:

Ali registered for the draft on his eighteenth birthday and was listed as 1-A in 1962.^[94] In 1964, he was reclassified as 1-Y (fit for service only in times of national emergency) after two mental tests found his IQ was 78^[95] (16th percentile), well below the armed force's 30th-percentile threshold.^[94] (He was quoted as saying, “I said I was the greatest, not the smartest!”)^{[94][95]} By early 1966, the army lowered its standards to permit soldiers above the 15th percentile and Ali was again classified as 1-A.^{[94][95][19]} This classification meant he was now eligible for the draft and induction into the United States Army during a time when the U.S. was involved in the Vietnam War.

Familiar with much of Ali’s story, I was *not* familiar with *that* piece of it. What absolutely appalling information this is. Not only did we draft *children* to go into war and consequently *never have an opportunity to grow normally* into adulthood, we drafted children with *little* mental acumen! But I should have known this, because I remember how my mom and dad would talk about my uncles who had been drafted (into World War II) and how “sinful” that was because, as they put it, “they didn’t have the mentality to do anything else.”

“Unless you become as a little child,” is a Jesus-quote most of us are familiar with. But Jesus didn’t mean IQ-wise; Jesus meant truly wise. Wise to their divinity, to their innocent and loving enthusiasm for everybody and everything, to their absolute dependence and connectedness. Wise, like Brayden is wise, even though we *knowing* adults would say he was only “born yesterday.”

WIKI quote:

During this time of inactivity, as opposition to the Vietnam War began to grow and Ali’s stance gained sympathy, he spoke at colleges across the nation, criticizing the Vietnam War and advocating African American pride and racial justice. Ali’s example inspired countless black Americans and others. The New York Times columnist William Rhoden wrote, “Ali’s actions changed my standard of what constituted an athlete’s greatness. Possessing a killer jump shot or the ability to stop on a dime was no longer enough. What were you doing for the liberation of your people? What were you doing to help your country live up to the covenant of its founding principles?”^[8] Ali inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been reluctant to address the Vietnam War for fear of alienating the Johnson Administration and its support of the civil rights agenda. Now, King began to voice his own opposition to the war for the first time.^[103]

Eventually vindicated by the Supreme Court, Ali was allowed back into the ring and the world of sports. He was again admired as a boxer, but more importantly as an even greater humanitarian. And as the years passed and the physical beatings took their toll on him, Ali became more and more as a little child. And a role model. Wise

to his divinity, to his innocent and loving enthusiasm for everybody and everything, to his absolute dependence and connectedness.

We are born into this world as wise as the serpents in the Garden of Eden, and initiated into our communities through rites of baptism that declare us priests, prophets and servants to and for one another. Today's readings dwell upon that inherent wisdom, seen in the eyes of newborn babes like Brayden and heard in the words of truly wise battle-worn adults like Ali. Church hero **Oscar Romero** summed it up this way many years ago:

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

**It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.**

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

10.3.15 Homily

Twenty-Seventh Ordinary

Gen 2:18-24; Ps 128:1-6; Heb 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-12

Elsie Hainz McGrath

We might know that our church fathers would opt to use *this* creation story in their nod to the marital state. They could have used the *other* one, from chapter one, and we would *not* have heard that woman was created *out of* man, named *by* man, and subjugated *to* man from the beginning of time—as is victoriously noted by the anti-scientific creationists who are *still* being given far too much latitude in which to spout that their prejudicial biases are *rooted in God*.

But let's try to disregard the prejudice and center in on the beauty of the relational sign of God among us—the sacrament of special love that has been typically noted as marriage but is more perfectly defined as deep and abiding friendship. And let's look more closely at the whole theology of sacrament. Bernard Cooke wrote that “sacraments are meant to be a special avenue of insight into the reality of God [and thus] the most basic sacrament of God's saving presence to human life is the sacrament of human love and friendship.”

And Roger Karban reminds us that “biblical morality revolves around relationships.” So when we get to today's gospel, which the church has “defined” as meaning there can be no divorce and remarriage, the *real* meaning of Jesus' purported words becomes clearer. He is not talking about law; he is talking about human relationships—and human relationships are not *weighted* in favor of one gender. The establishment of marriage as a contractual agreement—made between men for the selling of women—was dead wrong. As a man can ditch his wife without repercussions (so to speak), a woman can also ditch her husband—because *she* is every bit as *human* as he is!

That is why the writer of Hebrews dwells on consecration, or, as the psalmist puts it, blessing. *The one who consecrates (or blesses) and all of those who are being consecrated (or blessed) have one origin:* Life in God is our original blessing. The same God who, according to today's creation story, was spread so thin as to be alive within every single living piece of that creation. So do we mirror the presence of God *most* perfectly when we recognize our radical connectedness to *all* of life.

And we attempt to live that connectedness most radically in our most intimate relationships. The most radical of all is mother and child because these truly are bone of bone and flesh of flesh relatedness. Ergo, children are blessings, in and of themselves.

The next most radical relationship, by virtue of its undeniable connectedness, is within the intercourse of two living entities. These entities need *not* be male and female. They need not *even* be human. All of life finds its freedom and its relatedness to divinity in the intermingling of its life-giving serums. We *speak* of sacraments in human terms, but we are well aware of the signs of God outside our human estate. Often, in fact, we are *more* aware of the signs of God outside of our human estate.

Which brings us full circle back to the concept of the innocence of childhood and the closeness to God that such innocence implies. Watching the world through the eyes of a child restores to *us* some of our lost inno-

cence. And recalls to mind Bernard Cooke's claim that friendship *is* the most basic sacrament, because as we watch our children begin to move away from their center in order to connect to the world in which they now find themselves, we are watching relationships unfold. As the mother assumes less importance in the child's life, others assume more. Often the first "best" friend is an inanimate object, like a teddy bear or a blanket; or an inhuman being, as in *real* puppy love. Usually it is *not* a sibling, at least initially, because the sibling is a source of jealousy as the child vies for attention. The attention that is gotten from the puppy dog is more constant and less demanding. A real bond can be forged. A sacrament, sign of the unity of God spread throughout all of this Earth's life.

So it is that we have tried to make of a humanly exclusive male-female marital relationship something that it is not able to be, not *even* if we hold the two as equal in every way. So it is that we have tried to inforce rules into our relationships, which automatically serves to diminish us because rules restrict freedom and love that is not free is not sacramental. Because God's love is completely free, completely unconditional, completely unending, and completely whole. Because God *is* Love. And we are but little snippets of God's completeness. We are God's blessing.

10.17.15 Homily

Twenty-Ninth Ordinary

Isa 53:10-11; Ps 33:4-5,18-22; Heb 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

Elsie Hainz McGrath

May every nation come to live in the love and wisdom of the Spirit of Truth! Those poignant words of the psalmist should be our daily prayer and our daily work, perhaps never quite so blatantly obvious as it is during the “season of presidential debates.”

Jesus is close to winding up his lengthy expository on his coming suffering and death and resurrection in today’s gospel. In Mark, that occupies a full three chapters. Today it is precipitated by James and John wanting the seats of honor in the coming reign that they so miserably misunderstand. And it ends with one of scripture’s most dynamic and ignored sentences: You know how those who supposedly rule over foreigners lord it over them, and how their strong men tyrannize them? It’s not going to be like that with you!

God is concerned about the oppressed children of this world, Isaiah said. God wants justice. Oftentimes, through unspeakable acts, and the humiliation and pain we inflict on others, justice is finally brought to bear. On a national scale, we might think of the people of Germany following the defeat of Nazism; or the people of South Africa following the defeat of Apartheid. On a more personal scale, we can look at what is happening right here right now in Ferguson and other local communities around our nation. God has no hand in our cruelty, but becomes very visible in our suffering because when one suffers all suffer. Which is why, within suffering, we can find our center and focus on the Light that grounds us. That is Isaiah’s message today. It is the psalmist’s message. It is also the message of Hebrews.

And it is primarily in the hands of the powerful—the elected or appointed or otherwise enthroned leaders of nations or churches or businesses or families—to offer mercy or tyranny to the rest of us. Thus does Isaiah give today’s promise of God’s Light and contentment to those who were languishing in Babylon. They had been defeated and most of their war-worthy men killed. The rest—women and children and old men—had been exiled. They were enslaved in a foreign land. The words of the prophet are designed to bolster their resolve, keep hope alive.

Robert Greenleaf, author of a book entitled *Servant Leadership*, says: “Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from the one who is leader first. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant to first make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test of this is to ascertain if those who are served grow as persons. While being served, do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to themselves become servants?”

In today’s example from Mark, it appears that James and John have a ways to go before passing that test! But keep in mind that the gospel was written well after James was in fact martyred, Peter and Paul were martyred, and open warfare was undertaken by Rome against the Jews. It was written *after* Jerusalem fell, the Temple was burned, and the priestly cult of Judaism was snuffed out. It was written in order to establish the essential character of Jesus as a person who has significance beyond history—a servant first, who makes the conscious choice to lead in order to attract others who will observe and learn from his words and deeds; others who will, in turn, become servant-leaders...who will attract others...in perpetuity.

The author called Mark was all about preserving the faith of a people who were every bit of debilitated and exiled as their ancestors had been in Babylon. Mark was all about telling the story of the tragic and unjust death of Jesus in a way that would give him significance beyond what surely had to seem was a hopeless end of a dream. Mark was all about bolstering the resolve of those who had believed in the dream, keeping hope alive.

So what Jesus was purportedly teaching his disciples in today's gospel, Mark was hopeful of teaching *his* disciples in those grim years following 70 CE. It was as if to say: *See, James and John and the others did learn; they did become servant-leaders. They did suffer tragic and unjust deaths as a result, but they have been rewarded just as Jesus promised; just as Jesus was himself rewarded. Remember who you are. Remember whose you are. Remember that your ancestors were aliens in a foreign land too, and God brought them back. You know how those who supposedly rule over foreigners lord it over them, and how their strong men tyrannize them? It's not going to be like that with you! Or, as Francis puts it, a servant-leader carries the smell of sheep.*

May every nation come to live in the love and wisdom of the Spirit of Truth!

IN THE LIGHT OF THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY 2015-16
Thirty- Second Sunday
1 Kgs 17:10-16; Ps 146:7-10; Heb 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44
11/7/15, *Elsie Hainz McGrath*

As you know, Pope Francis has called for an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy for the Church. I suppose it is “extraordinary” because the Church usually celebrates a Jubilee Year every 25 years but we had one a mere 15 years ago. Jubilee Years were celebrated every 50 years in Old Testament times (if indeed they *were* celebrated), with the mandate that all debts be forgiven in that 50th year. All debts included the freeing of all slaves, as well as the forgiving of any loans, and the forgiving of any harm done to others in any way. In our times, the stakes are perhaps even higher (as in, we’re talking about *af erlife* here), but so are the requirements for actually gaining that absolution of debt. (Yep, we’re *earning* our way).

Francis first announced this Jubilee Year in March, saying, **“I have often thought about how the Church might make clear its mission of being a witness to mercy.”** The new liturgical year being the Year of Luke, Francis chose as his scriptural basis Luke 6:36, which he has rendered, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Our Jesus Seminar experts render merciful as “compassionate.” Seems to me that “mercy and compassion,” though somewhat synonymous, are *usually* nuanced differently. But the differences between “earning and forgiving” go beyond nuance.

In September, Francis elaborated on that “requirements” part of the Jubilee—that place of departure from the “forgiving” of all debts to the “earning” of some indulgences (which could perhaps be another word for mercies, though not for compassion—to make my point about nuance). The first requirement is the pilgrimage. If you can’t make it to Rome, you aren’t completely out in the cold; you can make it to your local Cathedral. Or certain shrines. Just so they have a “Holy Door” that you can enter through. And then that you receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And then Eucharist, with a reflection on mercy. And with a profession of faith, and prayers for Francis and for all of Francis’ good intentions that are directed for the good of the Church and the world.

There are special allowances—“outs”—for those unable to make it through a Holy Door because they are infirmed or incarcerated, and a special emphasis for them (as well as those of us who aren’t infirmed or incarcerated) to concentrate our efforts on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy because, as Francis puts it, then we **“shall surely obtain the Jubilee Indulgence” because of our “commitment to live by mercy so as to obtain the grace of complete and exhaustive forgiveness by the power of the love of the Father who excludes no one.”**

So, if I understand this correctly, we do not act with mercy because we are *really* merciful; we act with mercy because it gets us extra brownie points. And we have to do that, especially if we continue to *only* walk through this “unholy” door, because otherwise how will we “get ours”? Because our all-holy God, who within these documents goes solely by the name of “Father,” is apparently only a forgiving God if we follow all the formulas that Jesus never gave us.

But to stress how magnanimous this Father's forgiveness is, Francis makes special mention of those sinners who have already died. Yep, we can pray them out of their purgatory. And those sinners who have had abortions can actually go to Confession to a plain old priest and get forgiven instead of having to wait in line to confess to a bishop. And those ignorant people who worship with the priests of the Fraternity of Pius X (who are not in real good standing with Rome) well, they can even be forgiven by *them* because, says Francis, **"this Jubilee Year of Mercy excludes no one."**

Well, I think it does indeed exclude *us*. And I am dismayed to find that the indulgences most thinking Catholics have not believed in for the past 50 years are still front and center in these papal documents from Francis. I had hoped, if he were going to declare a Jubilee Year of Mercy, he would have used the opportunity to *mercifully* educate those who are still so fearful of an all-loving God that they are fervent about trying to "buy their way into heaven," as it were, instead of simply being fervent about loving one another and finding their heaven right here, outside the holy doors and in the midst of the messes made by fearful people.

Francis has also established that, even though it is the "Father" to whom we have to answer, he is mincing his bets by entrusting the success of this Jubilee Year not unto the Father but unto the Mother—the "Mother of Mercy," that plain old woman, Mary, born without the sin in which we continue to wallow, but that all of us plain old women somehow ought to emulate. **Dare we include the men in this?** And more fully define *how* we should emulate Mary? Dare we say?: **by birthing Christ into our world each and every day, and recognizing that we all are other Christs.**

Today, the widow of Zarepath is the face of God's mercy for the hungry Elijah, and the widow of Jerusalem is the face of God's mercy for the observant Jesus. *Their* corporal works of mercy served to bring both women blessings that they neither expected nor sought, simply because **we reap what we sow**. When we sow intolerance and divisiveness, we will reap hatred and violence. But when we sow acceptance and forgiveness, *then* we will reap mercy and love.

And I have to say I am always hopeful in a Jubilee Year. Especially in a Jubilee Year that is called by a pope of the people. It is so exciting and refreshing to watch Francis "work a room," and to believe that he is truly another Christ—more akin to the Mother of Mercy than he is to the Father who demands expiation. So, **as a community which was left out**, I believe we should grab onto these all-important words from Francis. We should take them to heart. **"This Jubilee Year of Mercy excludes no one."**

11.14.15 Homily

Thirty-Third Sunday

Dan 12:1-3; Ps 16:5,8-11; Heb 10:11-18; Mark 13:24-32

Elsie Hainz McGrath

As we move into the final weeks of this liturgical year, and then into the first weeks of the *new* liturgical year, we hear *much* of the literary genre called apocalyptic. Within the 200-year span before the beginning of the Common Era, this was a popular mode of writing that the people understood. For us, it remains a largely misunderstood genre.

Apocalypse comes from times of communal upheaval and trial. These stories are not actual history, but are interpretations of current events using a historical background, and then predictions of a future that will be triumphant and peaceful. Daniel's is the first biblical book of apocalyptic. Daniel is a pen name, adopted from the real Daniel who is mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel and also in some Canaanite texts that have been found in archeological digs. The author was a Jew living under the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes, circa 165 BCE. He wrote in Aramaic, telling stories from the times of the Babylonian exile in order to illustrate that faithful Jews were always able to triumph over their enemies through God's intervention. The secret message, which can be disseminated because it does *not* talk about the cruelty of the current regime, is to covertly say, *ergo, these troubles will also end.*

Today's short excerpt begins Daniel's literary interpretation of the final judgment. It is a subject that is picked up by Jesus—according to Mark—as he predicts a similarly imminent end of the world scenario. With a similar bit of *good* news for those who do not lose faith in the face of such absolute terror. The sky is falling, *but* a worthy remnant will survive.

Has the apocalypse that occurred in France yesterday inspired any of the people of France with such faith? Will there arise in their midst a prophet who will encourage them by perhaps referring back to similar scenes of death and destruction from their last encounter with such evil?—their World War II days and nights of darkness.

Perhaps Rene Girard will get a hearing, though his words are as difficult to understand as apocalyptic for the common citizen. Like Jesus, who had already died when the events he is presumably describing today were taking place, Rene has died. And while what we are witnessing are violent signs of never-ending death and destruction, the larger meaning of such disaster, to quote Rene, is that “the apocalypse does not announce the end of the world; it creates hope.”

Rene Girard was born on Christmas Day in 1923, in Avignon, France. He died last week, on Nov 4. He was a heady and prolific anthropologic philosopher whose primary gifts to the world are his theory of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry; that scapegoating is the origin of sacrifice and our human culture; that religion is necessary in order to control violence. Add to that his extensive presentation on how Jesus changed the course of human behavior by *not* taking on the sins of the world—being our scapegoat, in other words—but by pure martyrdom. Simply put, Girard's position goes: *With Jesus simply 'doing his Father's will', i.e., doing what is right and true, he inevitably arrived at the point when he either backed down and withdrew from his mission, or took a stand and suffered the consequences. This is not the behaviour of a scapegoat but of a martyr, a witness to the truth.*

I think that is what Jesus is trying to tell us today—or Mark is trying to tell us—because in the society of Jesus' times scapegoating was widely practiced among the many Canaanite religions. It is the whole idea of sacrifice in general—the offerings on the altars of the world that used to be (and in some places still are) human. When the God of the Israelites stayed the hand of Abraham from “sacrificing” his son, our ancestors in the faith

replaced human sacrifice with roasted animals. According to our *own* Christian dogma, that *same* God reverted back to the human sacrifice of a son by scapegoating Jesus. And we still are instructed to keep that bloody sacrificial piece of theology in our Eucharistic rituals.

Rene Girard said that as the scapegoating process is exposed as a fraud, we all become less innocent. We know we lie to ourselves. We know our politicians lie to us when they tell us war is necessary, or some refugees must be locked up in concentration camps as an example to the rest, or some people cannot come into our countries because they are "illegal." We know our bishops lie to us when they say some are not worthy to marry, or to be ordained, or even to come to the holy altar in a holy remembrance of a holy human who was martyred for a truth that we *still* do not believe in.

Sad. The author of the letter to the Hebrews, after assuring us that Jesus *was* our scapegoat, does also tell us that we *are* a forgiven people who have no need for a sin offering. Our bishops insist on the first part of today's reading, but discount the second part. That is *at least partly* why we still have need of martyrs, partly why the truth *continues* to elude us. It is why we need to *all* come to the table, remember Jesus, worship in rituals that open our eyes and our ears to Truth and that embolden us to go forth in the Spirit of love and forgiveness that can *truly* change the world. Because, despite the concerted efforts of our ignorant selfishness to destroy this planet, the end is *not* imminent.

We pray for strength and perseverance until the day of our rebirth.

11.21.15 Homily

Christ the Servant King

Dan 7:13-14; Ps 93; Rev 1:4-8; John 18:33-38a

Elsie Hainz McGrath

“This is why I came into the world: to bear witness to the truth.”

“What is the truth?”

This question is not posed in the Synoptic accounts. As we know from Holy Week, Pilate asks the question and then turns away. He is perhaps dejected because he doesn't know the truth, but he's not waiting around for an answer. People with power too often make decisions without listening. They don't engage in dialogue; they interrogate. Truth is often inconvenient and unsettling. And not *our* truth!

Merriam-Webster, interestingly enough, says the “archaic” meaning of truth is “fidelity, or constancy,” while the modern meaning is “the state of being the case, or fact; or being in accord with fact or reality.” My very agnostic son Mike, with whom I was talking this morning, defined it perhaps as Pilate would. He said, “There is no truth; there is only individual perception.” Pilate's perception is that Jesus is a threat to his power.

The truth is what all societies revolve around... church societies, state societies, family societies... and Mike is correct; it is a perception. But ideally it is a perception that elicits the apparently-*archaic* stances of fidelity and constancy. And it is also why you, and you, and me, and every person born upon this Earth, comes into the world. We are ALL called to bear witness to the truth. The truth IS our call, and only when we live by it... and when necessary die by it... are we living *up to* the fullness of our humanity. It was Jesus' perception of truth, coupled with his constancy, which got him executed by the state in cahoots with the church. As we said here a couple of weeks ago: a perfect definition of martyrdom.

And *that* is why we celebrate Christ the King at the end of every liturgical year. Not because he took on the sin of the world, triumphed over evil, and sits at the right hand of some elusive and demanding father-figure who apparently resembles a many-handed puppeteer; but because he bore witness to the truth in absolute fidelity and with steadfast constancy.

And the truth he bore witness to was *his* perception of truth.

We church people call the truth another name for God. When we hear this familiar exchange between Jesus and Pilate, we tend to reinterpret the words as given. We hear Jesus say he came into the world to bear witness to God. And Pilate asks what is God? And so we make truth into a proper noun, just another name for the One who is Beyond All Names... the One who is so Other as to be Unknowable, but yet we spend myriads of years and verbiage and rules and rewards and punishments on *somebody's* exact definition. And also why, depending upon *which* somebody we resonate with, we continue to have holocausts and insurrections and terrorism and isolationism. All in the name of “truth” or whatever other name is conjured up for an unnamable God.

Richard Rohr, who spends a lot of time deconstructing addictions and addictive behaviors, says that spiritual traditions at their higher levels find the primary addiction for all humans is addiction *to our own way of thinking*. We are possessed, as it were, by the littleness of our minds and the external garbage they have internalized throughout our lives. *These* are our perceptions of the truth. And the only way to rise above such addictive responses is to allow ourselves the *freedom* of dispossession. That is undoubtedly why aging tends to make us wiser, because we are forced into giving up much of who or what we *had* thought we were in our prime of physicality. We live and learn.

Jesus *learned* as he lived. He *learned* that he had to die to self in order to become who he was called to be. He had to die to the cultural values of his times in order to embrace his “enemies”: the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman with the sick daughter, *all* of the hands-off lepers of his society.

The importance of that for today’s liturgical feast is that Jesus was not claiming *any* kind of kingship. That was *never* his perception. That was *never* his truth. That will *never* be a means to peace and justice and everlasting life.

Imagine all the people living for today... living life in peace... sharing all the world... and the world would live as one. Imagine if that was everybody’s truth. Shalom.