

Sermon notes and both hymnodic and scripture contexts
For the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2023.

Sermon composition is based on at least two elements scheduled for use on this particular Sunday which recurs only every three years (the famous Yeas A, B, and C.) One of those elements is the three Bible readings scheduled for this particular Sunday, as well as a selection from the psalms and a particular collect or prayer for this Sunday.

Another major component is the hymns. They are as much a preaching/teaching text as the Bible readings. The person preparing the liturgy selects them to augment and reinforce the Bible teaching. The hymns have an extra impact in that they use our singing and listening to absorb that teaching and spirit into our beings, both as individuals and as a congregation. For example, the communion hymn for today which David Carey wrote me that he knows is the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, the words of which begin: “Lord, make us servants of your peace; where there is hate may we sew love.” The melody or tune and words repeat themselves in my mind and spirit as I go about my day.

If all we look for in the hymns is our familiarity with their tune and words but not their meaning and effect in the context of today’s liturgy, then they are more or less comparable to elevator music in their impact in the liturgy where then they do not coordinate with the teaching of the Bible readings and the sermon composed by the liturgist. That is why the liturgist or preacher also chooses the hymns or does so in collaboration with the musician or organist.

How do we find those hymns that work as described above? There have long been efforts to provide selection guides. Even the Hymnal 1940, the predecessor to the Hymnal 1982, had a little selection index in said hymnal. Once the 1982 Hymnal was published in 1984 scholars like Marion Hatchett of the University of the South published a guide to hymns that coordinated with what was then our lectionary or Bible reading schedule. Also, each Year the Living Church Foundation released annually the Episcopal Musicians Handbook. (a useful

handbook but it fails to index two of the hymnal supplements and does not index by function such as ‘entrance hymn or sequence hymn).

And then, when the Revised Common Lectionary was adopted in 2006, 2007 saw Church Publishing(the Episcopal publisher) released a wonderful 3 volume(Years A, B, C) set called Liturgical Music for the Revised Common Lectionary. This last tool is now on the shelf in the Church office. It indexes by function of the hymn and then also by the Bible readings, collect, psalm, and season.

In sum, the part of the preacher’s task is as much as possible to make the whole liturgy, the entire liturgy we use that day, to make the entire liturgy convey the Gospel in one coordinated whole. The preacher writing this likes best to get the task put together early in the week so that the preaching mind can work and the soul absorb the message. I need to do better on the earliness of the schedule. Enough! Grateful for your participation and patience.

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2023.

Scripture/Bible context

Micah 6:1-8;

Psalms 15;

1 Corinthians 1:18-31;

Matthew 5:1-12.

Hymns all but the closing hymn from The Hymnal 1982.

Entrance 569, God the omnipotent! King, who ordainest thunder thy clarion”;

Sequence 441, “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time”;

Offertory 574, “Before thy throne, O God, we kneel; give us a conscience quick to feel”;

Communion 593, “Lord, make us servants of thy peace; where there is hatred let us sow love;”

Closing hymn, 782 in Wonder, Love, and Praise, “Gracious Spirit, give your servants joy to set sin’s captives free”.

Do we ever want to take God to court?

To sue God?

We sang an opening hymn acclaiming in our words God as omnipotent; that is possessing all and limitless power. Able to control all events and happenings.

If that is the case, then why was there a mass shooting in Monterey Park, outside Los Angeles, with senior citizens out to celebrate a New Year in the midst of a difficult life, to enjoy, love and comfort each other. Why were Memphis police officers finding any challenge to their power even by so powerless as person as Tyre Nichols a cause to beat him so much that he died? why did you not intervene O God if you were really omnipotent. We went on in that entrance hymn to call God all merciful. If that is the case, God, why, two weeks ago, did you let our friend's 33 yr old nephew overdose and die! Why is one of our loved one's living with a shortened life expectancy with stomach cancer? Surely the omnipotent God is not so omnipotent as we were taught!

We always doubted and new better! And then we continued in that hymn to describe God as all righteous. Cannot your omnipotence and all righteousness eliminate liars and bribe takers from our Congress, or from the Ukrainian government, or from the posts of warden and head guard at the Special Handling Unit prison outside of Montreal in Louise Penney's A World of Curiosities, her latest novel.

Each of the appeals we made to God in that hymn ended with the plea "give to us peace in our time, o Lord." Now, God, NOW! is when we expect you to make our lives as we think we deserve. Now is when we want life and relationship at St. Luke's Church to meet our standards of rightness. Smooth it all out for us, God, give peace in our time!

The concern that God fulfill and make possible what you and I know is best is evident in the court room trial pictured in the reading from Micah. Micah was one of the eighth century BCE prophets preaching and writing from the context of Assyrian invasion of most of the surrounding lands. Jerusalem still stood as the seat of a remaining kingdom of Judah, but most of the lands to the east were in Assyrian hands now. Micah calls to account the disregard for the poor. Most of his compatriots qualify as poor and struggle to make a living, merely to

survive. Micah knows the desperation of his people in Judah to survive and find God the omnipotent on their side. Micah knows the desperation of the people to find God all merciful and all righteous.

And so Micah writes of a courtroom where the mountains and hills and nature are the witnesses. Maybe the jury. Why are you blaming me, people of Israel. I'm not the one who mined off the mountain tops in Pennsylvania and much of Appalachia for corporate prophet that went to enrich us and our fellow Christians while ruining water supplies and destroying the landscape so it is no longer habitable. Yes, Micah is preaching to the 21st century!

The people of 8th century Judah and Israel asked what they could do to win God's favor. With what shall I come before God. Will you, O God, be pleased with burnt offerings, with calves? With thousands of rams, with ten thousand of rivers of oil? We've given you lots of money and jewels, God. We Episcopalians have built and are building to your honor our St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York, our Washington National Cathedral. Maybe to our honor too? (in fact, I give pittances of money to each as well. I want to interrupt a good thing that happened at St. John the Divine where it became a place where young folks with bleak prospects could learn a life time career of stone masonry, of building a cathedral? Where a formerly more hopeless young person could point out a gargoyle he or she created.

Micah saw a world where such repair of the life of society was not occurring. As mass shootings and individual gun deaths continue in American society is it enough that we've begun a little that we have simply too many guns.

And then to have to face the truth that everything I give was first given me. And so I'm returning to God's human Christian kingdom what I either was gifted thru a stock market the wealth of which comes from the slave owning slave trading past with which I live and must face. The land my ancestors occupied treating the indigenous folk who lived there as almost subhuman?

And do I face the truth that any minor wish for power over another on my part is of the same ilk as exercised by those police officers who beat Tyre Nichols in Memphis? I share that same characteristic and need the blessed spirit and you to educate me about that and lead me too to

healing recovery, truth and justice. We hear Micah remind us that all God requires of us is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Hearing that, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit walking, working, and living in each of us to enter into the world of good works? making reparations where we can do so. Walking humbly with our God means we do not walk with God to assert our personal power in the name of God. That is not to let Go and let God.

(Singing the hymn referred to below may not occur here – we will see)

A wonderful hymn I'm asking you to open in the green Wonder, Love, and Praise hymnal, # 811. This hymn of the Beatitudes we read in our Gospel lesson today sings of us invited on the walk with God. Jesus goes before us and invite us. "Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me." Please, let us find the God-given courage to face ourselves as we are in our daily dealings and even our church dealings. And then taking up the invitation to walk with God . even if we are afraid. We know that Jesus faced fear ahead of us and does so with us. And then we can let ourselves be open to healing, to forgiveness, to forgiving. For what does God require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. And how do we live up to that? I often find myself or my society of which I am part flunking in one of those actions of doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with our God. Facing that failure, in our prayer of confession, we ask God help us to "repent of the evil that enslaves us, of the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf."

And then we sing our prayer for help in our communion hymn, the Prayer of St. Francis. Lord, make us servants of your peace. Where there is hatred let us sow love. " in the last hymn we give thanks for the spirit leading us from being enslaved. "Righteous and forgiving One, so enfold us in your mercy that our wills and your unite; through us may the world behold you, find your love, your truth your light.

A little piece of that love and light went forth from here in those school supplies and back packs, the carry God's love with them.

May we today go forth from here enfolded in figurative backpacks of that love such that we no longer have to justify ourselves. We will find ourselves learning to walk humbly with our God. Thanks be to God.