

# The Servant



*Stabat frater*

Gordon John Stanley  
admires the vaulting and  
stained glass in the Cathedral  
of Mary our Queen,  
Baltimore MD

#271

*Eastertide 2024*

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### Where there's a will

You can assist and further the ministries of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory by remembering the community in your will. If you choose to do so, the following form of wording is appropriate:

*I hereby give, devise, and bequeath to The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, Inc., a New York State not-for-profit corporation and its successors for ever \$ \_\_\_\_\_ and / or \_\_\_\_\_ percent of my estate to be used in such a manner as determined by its Directors.*

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## *Founder's Forum*

### **Of bunnies and chicks**

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Lent was hardly begun and there were bunnies and chicks in stores and worst of all, on people's lawns. I know, just as Halloween is near, Christmas trees and decorations are on — and on sale. It is bewildering to me on several counts. Most of all, I am confounded as to how much commercial ventures throughout the world have hijacked our holiest observances. When we drive around, the balloons announcing Easter are everywhere, even long before Holy Week — and it's all bunnies and chicks, flowers and floss and Easter eggs.

However, let me share a bit of encouraging news. I suspect many of you may be on Facebook. This past week, the week of Lent IV as I write, there was a photo of a McDonald's that had painted across their front window the Tomb, the stone rolled away and the words "Christ is risen — Alleluia!" Not a bunny or chick in sight! There is hope indeed, but we all must get in the act. Yes, we get into the greeting struggle. "Happy Holiday" can and does cover the days of observance of many religions. But "Happy Easter" is ours — even Christians who are not in the pews on Easter may still have some Easter spirit in their bones. Let us remember that in Scripture there are no mentions of the Easter Bunny and there are no chicks. Easter eggs we can allow; they are the exception because the egg is a symbol of new life!

Christ is Risen — Alleluia should be in our hearts and on our lips. Alleluia, Alleluia!

*RTB*

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## *Here and there with the Brothers*

### **Community Notes**

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*Winter Convocation 2024*



*Brothers and retreat leader at the Daily Office*

The Brotherhood gathered at Saint Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore on January 29-February 2, the third convocation to be held there. Due to COVID-19, Winter Convocation 2021 was a virtual event and Winter Convocation 2022 at Saint Mary's was limited largely to members of Province 3. Annual Convocation last summer was the first major community gathering there.



The Brotherhood's Education Committee, chaired by Director of Education William Henry Benefield (Diocese of West Texas), coordinated the Convocation retreat in the form of presentations on three aspects of our patron Gregory the Great's ministry, "Gregory's Prophetic Imagination and Our Own." Our retreat leader, the Rev Charles Hoffacker (right), presented three talks (photo above), followed by small group sessions focused on study questions reflecting each day's presentation. The three talks were titled:



- ⊕ Saint Gregory as Monastic Benefactor: How, early in his life, Gregory transformed his substantial personal property in Rome and Sicily into monasteries
- ⊕ Saint Gregory the Dialogist: Gregory's authorship of *Dialogues*, which recounts stories of Italian wonder-working saints, most prominently Benedict of Nursia
- ⊕ Saint Gregory the Missionary: Gregory's concern for spreading the Gospel outside the frontiers of the Roman Empire, especially England

As might be imagined, these topics and the questions provided proved to be both fascinating and challenging for each small group as they reflected upon their own ministry experiences and study throughout their individual vocations. We are most grateful to Fr Hoffacker for his skillful leadership of this retreat, and also for having him present among us throughout our convocation.

As always, the daily retreat sessions were set within each day's round of worship, prayer and refreshment in the Daily Office, the Holy Eucharist, and with ample time for conversation and rest. The masses were celebrated by



Tobias Stanislas Haller (Maryland, censing the gifts in the photo above), Richard Edward Helmer (California) and David Benedict Hedges (Arizona, above right), with the assistance of deacons Edward Munro (Maryland) and Gordon John Stanley (Chicago), together with other members of the community serving as acolytes, lectors, Offertory gift-bearers and sacristans headed by Eric Shelley (Southwestern Virginia). Preachers included Tobias Stanislas, Thomas Bushnell (Long Island) and David Benedict. (Texts of the sermons appear later in this issue.) Worship music was organized by Nathanael Deward Rahm (Chicago), our Director of Convocation Liturgy and Music, and Thomas, William Henry, and Nathanael Deward provided accompaniment on the chapel piano.

On the Wednesday of Winter Convocation, Bishop of Maryland Eugene Taylor Sutton (photo, right) visited for Noonday and lunch. The Brotherhood makes a point of inviting the bishop of the diocese in which they are gathered to come and visit during convocations. Former Bishop of Maryland Robert W Ihloff visited during July 2021. Bishop Eugene asked each brother to say a few words about himself and his ministry, and the bishop encouraged the community to persevere, closing with his Episcopal blessing. Bishop Eugene will retire in April, so the Brotherhood is pleased that he took time from his busy schedule to bring his greeting at this time.



Later that afternoon, Edward replaced the Minister General for the Rite of Renewal of Annual Vows for Jason Peter Seta (Pennsylvania) — Edward being the Minister Provincial of Province 3. On Thursday the Minister General convened a Council meeting via Zoom from his home in New Jersey, and it was a joy to have him present virtually if not in the flesh.



On Thursday afternoon, a few of the brothers went on a sightseeing tour to the nearby Cathedral of Mary our Queen (RC, photo at left).

Winter Convocation concluded with a liturgy of Morning Prayer and Holy Communion on Friday morning, February 2nd, the Feast of the Presentation. Every opportunity for our brothers to gather is important to each of us and, while attendance at Winter Convocations is difficult or even impossible for some Gregorian friars, depending on their work schedules, health, and local weather conditions, it is always a time of good cheer and catching-up, regularly punctuated with laughter and even a few tears of remembrance. We give heartfelt thanks for these opportunities throughout the year as they serve as our “times apart,” when we can restore our souls and return home to our many ministries refreshed, reinvigorated and anxious for our next gathering. To God alone the glory!

*Province 1*

In November 2023 Ciarán Anthony DellaFera (Massachusetts) was certified as a WPATH Global Education Institute (GEI) Standard of Care v8 (SOC8) Certified Member and GEI Faculty, and represented his clinic, Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, at the US Professional Association for Transgender Health. In December he was promoted to AVP Clinical Informatics and Director of Transgender Medicine at Greater Lawrence Family Health Center.

In January he presented a two-part miniseries — “Gender and Theology: Understanding Sex, Gender, and Medically Necessary Gender-Affirmation” — at his parish, Epiphany Winchester MA. The presentations were part of the congregation’s adult formation, one-hour classes offered by parishioners highlighting their talents and ministries.

*Province 2*



*Thomas Bushnell preached on Religious Life Sunday at Saint Mary the Virgin NYC. (pc Marie Rosseels)*



*Derek Olsen, friend to a number of our brothers, gave a Lenten talk at Saint Mary the Virgin NYC, and Thomas grabbed this selfie.*

### Province 3



*Jason Peter and Clayton DewAndre, both serving at Saint Luke's Germantown, Philadelphia, took part in this year's Ashes to Go.*

Last year novice Clayton DewAndre Johnson (Pennsylvania) guided planning for his parish, Saint Luke's Germantown PA, hosting a gun buyback event. It was very successful and removed 118 guns and what appeared to be a rocket launcher from the streets of Germantown. This year he will once again chair the committee, and planning is under way.

⌘ Jason Peter Seta (Pennsylvania) is now a postulant for ordination to the priesthood, and begins his MDiv studies at Virginia Theological Seminary this summer. We wish him all the best.

⌘ Tobias Stanislas Haller (Maryland) visited Saint Paul's K Street in Washington DC to give a presentation on icons and icon-writing as a part of that parish's Lenten program. He and James Teets (Maryland) drove down from Baltimore for a quick overnight visit to the beautiful parish for the event, which included the Way of the Cross, Eucharist, and a parish supper, followed by the Lenten

Program. The presentation was well received, and the evening gave James and Tobias Stanislas the opportunity to visit with several friends from other chapters of their history, including the Episcopal Church Center, the Order of Saint John, and the Catholic Fellowship of The Episcopal Church.

⌘ Christopher Robert Werth (Maryland) presented a talk on religious communities on Religious Life Sunday, at Saint Martin in the Fields, Severna Park MD. He is seen at right with the interim rector, the Rev Joshua Rodriguez-Hobbs.



### Province 4



Richard John Lorino (Central Florida) was guest preacher on Religious Life Sunday at Advent Palm City FL. Pictured (*l to r*) are Verger Jim Lammie, Priest-in-Charge the Rev Denise Hudspeth, and Richard John.

⌘ In February he presented a talk via Zoom for the deacon formation program of the Diocese of New York on "The Theology of Pastoral Care and Pastoral Identity."

⌘ Richard John also led a Lenten retreat for parishioners of Saint Augustine of Canterbury Vero Beach FL (gathered at right), on the topic, “Who We Are Is How We Pray,” consisting of a meditation on prayer and a workshop on prayer and personality type.



*Anthony, Emil, Richard John and Brian*

⌘ In early March Richard John attended the 125th anniversary celebration for the Society of the Atonement, in Jupiter FL. A friend from his parish, Anthony Tulumello, is a former SA friar, and the two traveled together. Fr Emil Tomaskovic SA and the present Minister General Fr Brian Terry SA were very welcoming. Fr Emil remembered the Brotherhood well (as the community held its Convocations at their mother house, Graymoor, Garrison NY,

for a number of years until it became necessary to find a site with better access for some of our brothers with mobility concerns) and he shared his warmest regards. Fr Brian, who was in Rome and England for most of the years that BSG met at Graymoor, invited us back, saying that the retreat center has been completely renovated and updated. He recalled the pledge of mutual support the two communities entered into many years ago, and hoped it might one day be “resurrected.”

### *Province 5*

Ronald Augustine Fox (Chicago) reports that his parish (Atonement) made use of Tobias Stanislas’ hymn, “I vow to thee, my Savior” on January 21 — the second annual Religious Life Sunday in the Episcopal Church. Ronald Augustine preached (seen at right) and served as MC, and Joseph Basil Gauss was crucifer. Atonement’s rector Fr Charles Everson recognized both Gregorians and brothers in the Community of the Mother of Jesus at the parish notices, and this was met with sustained applause.



⌘ Francis Jonathan Bullock (Indianapolis) seen at left with CPE Director Rev Becky King, and the Rev Mary Catherine Cole, CPE educator from the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, completed his unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, fulfilling all requirements for the MDiv from Earlham School of Religion, a



Quaker school in Richmond IN. On the Fourth Sunday in Lent he preached at his CPE clinical setting, Trinity Community in Beavercreek OH (see the text of his sermon later in this issue). He will graduate from Earlham in May. Congratulations!

### *Province West*

The Presiding Bishop's Canon for Youth Ministry has selected Angel Gabriel Roque (Rio Grande) to be an adult mentor for the Official Youth Presence at this summer's General Convention in Louisville KY, with voice in the House of Deputies. A fine honor, both for our brother and for our General Convention, and we send our congratulations and prayer support!



⊕ Five of the eight brothers of Province West met at Saint Michael & All Angels Tucson for a spring retreat. The brothers appear above, l to r: Richard Edward Helmer (California), Angel Gabriel, David Benedict Hedges (Arizona, Minister Provincial of Province West and rector of Saint Michael's), William Henry Benefield (West Texas), James Patrick Hall (Colorado), along with vocationers Shawn Anderson (r) and Bonifacio Gútierrez (l). On Friday the gathering enjoyed refreshments and conversation at David Benedict's home before dinner. Saturday was spent in a Quiet Day which included a transferred patronal celebration of the feast of Saint Gregory the Great. The Rev Benjamin Garren, Chaplain of the Episcopal Campus Ministry at the University of Arizona, led the day's program, including reflections on Psalms 44 and 46 based on the work of Charles Spurgeon, the 19th-century English Baptist preacher.

After Evening Prayer the brothers, guests, Fr Garren, and David Benedict's wife Carly enjoyed a hearty dinner together. On Sunday, the brothers attended the Eucharist at Saint Michael's, at which Richard Edward preached (see his sermon later in this issue), and he and William Henry sang with the parish choir. David Benedict served as deacon of the mass. After brunch, the brothers and guests returned to the airport for their flights home, well-refreshed and thankful, of course!

## A Convocation Sermon for Epiphany 4b

### Gods and Monsters

*Even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ.✠*



If you watch trailers for movies, or browse the streaming services — whether you end up actually watching a film or series or not — you know that demons are and long have been a hot property for film- and video-makers. I'm sure you remember *The Exorcist* — with its sequels and prequels and even parodies with spinning heads and split-pea soup. That film was not the first to portray possession by demons and their exorcism — nor was it the last, as the current fare shows. We are served ample portions of demons and exorcism — and split-pea soup. Truly, demons are legion! It is like a

restaurant where the food isn't very good, but the portions are ample.

Why is it that people never seem to tire of this diet of supernatural terror — of demons and devils, and those possessed by them? Why is it that tales of supernatural evil — resident or just stopping by — form such a large part of our popular entertainment? Is it that there aren't enough real horrors to frighten us, or enough human, natural evil in the world that we have to look for evil in the unhuman and supernatural?

Perhaps after all it is just the fear of the unknown, and curiosity. When something strange happens, when we do not understand the *natural* cause of a phenomenon, we are likely to attribute it to something *supernatural* — and people have been doing that since the dawn of human consciousness.

That goes for evil things as well as ordinary things, of course, and in ancient times all such things were divided up into the care of numerous spirits, gods, and demons. Prehistoric people didn't know what the seasons were or why plants grew, or why people got sick or prospered, and so they put all this down to the action of various gods and demons. Early historic people — Egyptian and Mesopotamian — began to record accounts of their gods and monsters. The Sun-God rises at dawn and rides a chariot across the sky, sinking into the west to travel by boat under the earth to re-emerge the next day. Lightning and thunder are a Storm-God's work, waves and floods the work of the Sea-God and lesser cousins the Lake and the River Gods; and evil fortune is the work of nasty spirits who do their mischief in spreading disease.

By the first century, we find Saint Paul somewhat on the fence on the question of whether these gods and demons are real — or not. Now, he has no such

doubt about idols — he continues the well-established Hebrew tradition of regarding idols as lifeless shells of wood, stone, or metal — *real* only in a material sense. After all, it was Christian rejection of idols that earned them the charge of *atheism* — the cause of ill-fortune to Gentile cities by offending their gods — and got Paul and his colleagues in trouble for threatening to put the idol-craftsmen of Ephesus out of work. But back in Corinth, (ah Corinth, Paul’s favorite city — not!) the Christians were wise, a sophisticated bunch, and proud of it: they felt, since only the true God exists, it doesn’t do any harm to pay trivial tribute to the so-called gods. These wise-in-their-own-eyes Corinthians were ready to spill a drop of wine as a libation to pagan gods, with a wink and a nod. “It’s just a formality; we know better, don’t we... *Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink. Know what I mean?*”

Paul warns them that they are treading on dangerous ground, warning them of the danger that a horror movie fan will recognize when a person invites a vampire into their home. “Not so fast,” Paul says: Yes, we know — we wise — we know there is but one God and one Lord, but not everyone is secure in their belief. If you eat in a temple where food is offered to idols, even though *you* know these offerings are meaningless — what if new Christians who still believe these false gods are real eat such “sanctified” food? In the long run, you have done the demon’s work — you have made the demon real by your actions, and lost your brother or sister to their power.

The point, for Paul as for us, is that these gods and demons derive their power not from themselves but from how people relate to them. They *become* real when they are treated *as* real. Such is the power of *belief*. Such is the power of ideology. Paul may be agnostic about whether evil has a personal supernatural existence, but when evil is at work in people, whether individuals or a group, it might as well.

Theologian Walter Wink has written of how the “principalities and powers” can arise out of the human systems that give them flesh and blood — human flesh and blood. The human agents are not consumed *by* the monster but transformed *into* one.

Think for a moment about mob violence, in particular the horrors of group assaults — lynchings, gang-rapes, and gay-bashings — when a mob becomes possessed by some evil spirit that urges them on. There is an evil spirit in a mob — and whether natural or supernatural, it is real.

Good Christian folk — or who think themselves good Christians — can, when gathered in a crowd, do some very un-Christian things. I need not get into politics, though it’s hard to avoid in our current climate. How is it that self-styled “Christian conservatives” can transform themselves into advocates for some of the most brutal political actions and policies we’ve seen since the dark days of the late 50s and early 60s — of the 19th *or* the 20th centuries? What,


you might well think, possessed these good Christians so to forget the rudiments of the Christian faith? Up to what power or principality are they giving themselves as instruments?

The same goes for the spirits that Jesus encountered in his ministry, like the one we meet in the Gospel today. And it's interesting that the Gospel refers to the demon in the singular, while the demon refers to themselves as "us." There is something of a crowd in every demon, such as the Legion that put the Gerasene pork industry out of business; or even this particular demon, who even though singular is still somehow "us." Maybe it's "the Demonic 'We'"! Just as with the Legion, this evil spirit has no effective existence apart from the one possessed by it — that's precisely why evil spirits are so desperate not to be cast out into the abyss, even if the only option is a herd of pigs — not to be driven from the mind and body of the one who gives it the means to function in the physical world.

The spirits can only act in this world through and by means of those they possess. I cannot answer the question as to whether they have any existence apart from this time of possession, though the ancients well thought so. But it is doubtless that they do take on life in individuals and mobs who give themselves over to thinking that it is right to pay tribute to a demon or a false god — an ideology or a cause, or even a person. The powers act through groups who do what few would dare as individuals, as the demonic driver gives each member the opportunity to say, "It wasn't me," or "I was only following orders," or even "I was just a tourist!" Some of the greatest evil in our history is the work of people who thought *it wasn't their fault*. The devil made them do it.

So — that's a ton of bad news! — where's the hope, in short, where's the good news in all this? Where is the gospel in all of this? The good news is that God works for good in the same way the evil spirits work for bad — through human beings, human beings gathered in collectives of the Spirit. The good news is that people can do *more* good as a group than as individuals, and even *as* individuals — when we turn our selves, our souls and bodies, as a reasonable and holy offering and sacrifice to God; when we accept our corporate identity as the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christ's Body — the church. God can and will make use of us for God's good purposes. The good news is that the good that *can* be done is greater than the evil that *is* done, if only we will do that good. Let us pray then that God will strengthen us to be of courage and good will to work *God's* will — together. Let us not turn our hearts and minds to the dark-side of the powers, but to the light and the life of God. To whom we give all glory, and whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.✠

*Tobias Stanislas Haller*



## A Convocation Sermon on Marcella of Rome

### A widow makes her choice



She was a widow, but she was not poor. She grew up in an aristocratic family and her father, who was of senatorial rank, died when she was very young; then as an adult she married, and her husband died only seven months after their wedding. Soon her mother had arranged a suitable match, a retired consul getting on in years. His name was Cerealis, and he wanted to marry her not so much for a wife but for a daughter-figure to whom he could leave his considerable estate. Marcella responded that if she wished to marry rather than devote herself to perpetual chastity she would look for a husband,

not for an inheritance. Cerealis responded, “Well sometimes old men do live a while, and a young man might die early.” She responded, “A young man might die early but an old man cannot live long.”

So Marcella converted her home — a spacious place — into a monastery. She moved there, embracing her widowhood, consecrating her widowhood, and moving together with her mother Alvina and a friend named Principa. They based their life on a rule of the Eastern church that had been described by Athanasius, recently driven out of Egypt by heretics. He arrived in Rome and brought these rules and suddenly Eastern-style monasticism was a “thing” in Rome. They were very curious about this new thing that had been going on back East in Egypt. So Marcella’s group, in adopting this rule and then gathering a group of women together was the first, or one of the first, women’s monastic communities in the Western church. It was urban monasticism, living in the city, devoted to prayer, to charitable works, to study of the Scriptures.

Okay, so we’ve got a wealthy Roman turning a family home into a monastery, in the middle of the city, in devotion to a life of prayer and the study of the Scriptures. Does this sound familiar to you? Brothers, before Gregory, there was Marcella. Now in 382 or thereabouts, Saint Jerome came to Rome and he gives us much of what we know about Marcella, because he wrote lots and lots of letters to her and received lots of letters back, because later he moved out of Rome to Bethlehem. But he worked for Pope Damasus and as a result he got to know the clergy of Rome — of whom he had a scathing view. But in contrast to this he found great holiness in Marcella and her sisters and in other pious women in the city who had consecrated their virginity or their widowhood.

Jerome would hang out at Marcella’s house, debating theology and finding even the clergy — that sorry lot — coming to Marcella for advice, for counsel, for the settlement of theological questions of doctrine and faith. And when he

left for Bethlehem to translate the Scriptures, he wrote that Rome was in good hands. He wasn't talking about Pope Damasus; he was talking about Marcella. He felt that any difficulty that might come upon the Christian community in Rome would be in good hands because Marcella could settle it, and take care of things in good order.

By 410, the Visigoths were at the gate of Rome, and they besieged the city. Alaric, the Visigothic King, was convinced that Marcella had money and riches to be plundered. But it was all gone; it was all gone, because she had in fact become the poor widow that she had not started out as. All she had left was, so to speak, a bit of meal and a jar of oil, and a couple of pennies, maybe some sticks — all the money had been spent on charity. Jerome wrote that Marcella chose to store her money in the stomachs of the poor, rather than to keep it at her own disposal. Well, Alaric didn't buy it, and he had her cudged nearly to death. She took shelter a few days later in the sanctuary church of Saint Paul, where she died.

A sad story, but one of great joy, because she found her joy not in what she had given away, but in the life she had found in giving it away: that life of sustenance in siblinghood, that life of sustenance on the Word of God, and on the sacraments. So it is fitting now that we learn about her as we are here to feed on exactly the same things: much more than a jar of oil, much more than a little meal and a couple of pennies.✠

*David Benedict Hedges*

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## *A Convocation sermon on Brigid of Kildare*

### **For love nor money**

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If you want to know something about Saint Brigid... Oh, that's the end of it. You can't. While there is a brief hagiography in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, dutifully available on our Daily Office app, which confidently says things about Saint Brigid, the most you can rely on is that like most things said about Saint Brigid, it sounds confident in what it says but is mostly unsure. We don't really know if her father was a chieftan, though that's the story, and her mother a slave — that kind of works out nicely: a Christian mother and a pagan father. She apparently squandered or gave away her parents'

wealth as a girl; and if that sounds a little bit like yesterday's account of Marcella, there's a reason for that: this is the standard thing you say about monastics — and especially the standard thing about female monastics who are said to have created monasteries. However with Marcella we have contemporaries who

wrote things down about what she did; we have some confidence they are not just concocting it. With Brigid, we really don't have much at all.

In the 12th century — that's about 700 years later — there was a monastery in Kildare, and the nuns there had the idea of a perpetual flame in honor of Saint Brigid, official founder of the community. And those nuns kept that flame going until the Reformation. Of course, that's 12th century, and we have history for that. Those nuns, true to the tradition of Saint Brigid, kind of made up the idea that this flame was much older than them, and had existed since Brigid's monastery — despite there being no reason to think Brigid's monastery (if there had been one) survived her. It is not mentioned by anyone. And by the 19th century, with the notice that apparently there seems to have been a pagan goddess in Ireland named Brigid, it's as if these two are kinds of flypaper — Brigid-ecclesiastical flypaper, and goddess-Brigid pagan flypaper — and had acquired an awful lot of flies, making it hard to know what's fly and what's paper, and then the two got stuck together.

So then in the 19th century: Well, if the 12th-century nuns said this perpetual flame had been going since the fifth century, why not since pagan antiquity? You will find confident statements that the pagan goddess had her feast day on the same February 1, which is amazing since the Celts didn't use the Roman calendar. So who knows what this "February 1" is that they are talking about. But nor did pagan gods have *feast days* in the sense that we think of them. So there's not much we can do with Brigid.

The compilers of our lectionary, however, have clearly noticed the flame tradition which is represented in our traditional iconography and captured it quite beautifully in the collect. And then they noticed that in the Sermon on the Mount you have these two sections which talk about giving away wealth — oh, that's good, that goes with the story — sandwiched around "the eyes are the lamp of the body." It just seems like a pericope dropped from heaven for Saint Brigid.

But what is Matthew doing here with these texts? Perhaps like Brigid stories, the Sermon on the Mount doesn't get very well used in The Episcopal Church. The Sermon on the Mount is carved up by the Eucharistic lectionary, mostly in Year A, and mostly on those Sundays whose proper gets dropped after Epiphany and after Pentecost. What is perhaps the most profound section of Matthew's Gospel has, by probably relative accident, gotten consigned to obscurity, and *this* passage pretty much doesn't even make that cut.

It starts with what we all know from Ash Wednesday, with the teaching on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, each of which is described as a thing that one should not do the way the hypocrites do it — which is to say, to be noticed, to be respected and honored for it — but rather because of its intrinsic spiritual weight; a good reading for Ash Wednesday, a long-traditional reading for Ash

Wednesday. And the last one of the three is almsgiving, which leads directly to the next, which we have just heard, which is about giving money. And then eyes and lamps and light — we'll come back to that — and then two masters: you cannot serve God and money. And then the teaching on not worrying about where your food and your shelter will come from, because God cares for you more than the flowers of the field and the sparrows.

The unifying theme of all of this is security and where it comes from. Does your prayer, fasting, and almsgiving give you security because you have aligned yourself with religion correctly? And the clear point of Jesus is that if you're doing it because will be noticed by other people and they will then support you and help you — a long-standing risk of the religious life — beware; it's fake, he says. And the Protestant reformers, to their credit, also would add, if you think you're getting God to support you and help you for doing these things instead of the religious establishment — also no good. That doesn't mean you should not do them, but don't do them because you think it may make God especially happy with you, and therefore God will care for you. That's consistent with the end of the passage, isn't it?

So then we are told, you should not serve God and money; you *cannot* serve God and wealth. If you did not know that this was a quote from the Bible and you were told that no one can serve two masters, and you were asked why, you would not give what Jesus says is the reason. You would say because they might give inconsistent commands. The reason you can't serve two masters is one master might say, "Do this," and the other master might say, "Do that," and now you have a problem. This is not what Jesus is concerned about. Jesus is concerned about how you cannot *love* them both; to serve the master for Jesus is to love the master; an odd thing to say. He says the reason you cannot love two masters is that you will despise one and love the other; you cannot love two masters at the same time, and to serve a master is to love that master. He is equating service and love.

And the positive version of equating service and love is what the "eye" story is about. It is what is going on with eyes: the verse that our lectionary excludes from Sunday. Your eye is the thing with which you see the needs of others. If you are going to be doing almsgiving, your eye figures out where to give the money; not in a way that makes the most impressive results for the worldly view but in the place where the need is. And if your eye sees clearly then your love is there, and your service is there, and it will redound in your heart and your whole body will be filled with light. But if you cannot see the need — and our cities are filled with need that we tend to practice very carefully *not* to see — if you cannot see then you cannot help and you cannot give and you cannot love. And that will then be down to your heart, and what a darkness that will be!



So to serve and to love are the same thing. To love money is therefore to serve money; to love money is therefore to be a servant to money, a slave to money. Which is not what the world would have said; the world would have said the reason for storing up treasure is to make yourself secure and safe. And what Jesus says is, if your goal is security and safety, you will end up a servant of the wealth. It will not be your servant, you will be its. And if that goes along with blindness to others around you, the darkness will affect you.

So do not store up treasures on earth, but store them up in heaven, not because you earn safety — do not worry about what you will eat or where you will sleep; God knows that you need food and that you need shelter, and when you are worried about your own food and your own shelter you are very likely to start becoming blind to others who need food and shelter, and you may fail to consider that God has put you there, precisely as God's way of addressing those people's need for food and shelter — ordinary basic human needs. A pox on those who think Matthew's Gospel is all spiritualizing — this is as earthy and direct as it can be. If you are praying, fasting, and giving alms because it makes you impressive, cut that out. If you are praying, fasting, and giving alms because you think God will love you more, you're a fool. God already loves you more than you could possibly know. Do not store up your treasure because you think it will give you safety. Moths will chew your sweaters and thieves will steal your coin — it doesn't work. That doesn't mean you shouldn't have money. It just means it has a purpose and safety was never the point.

The point is your eyes. That flame, keep that flame burning for hundreds of years. If you need to imagine that the flame has been burning for thousands of years, that's fine. God knows what you need. Your goods are there not to provide for your needs. They are there to provide for the needs of others.

*Thomas Bushnell*

*A sermon for Lent 4b*

**Not in Kansas any more...**

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. — John 3:16*

Whenever I hear this verse, the memories of my childhood, and particularly the church of my childhood, wash over me. If I close my eyes, I can still see the images of the church in rural Western Kansas where I attended as a child, with its stained-glass windows, the Hammond organ playing *Just as I Am*, as young and old made their way to the altar to get right with God. And of course, memories of Vacation Bible School in the old church basement also come to mind, for it is here that I memorized John 3:16 as a child. I can still see this faithful, godly woman telling the story of salvation to me and all the children

gathered around her felt-board: beginning with the story of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace in the garden, to the sins the people committed in the Old Testament. The point she was making was that we were all wretched sinners in the eyes of God, deserving punishment. The climax of this story was the recitation of John 3:16 — *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Jesus died for our sins and if we wanted to escape the flames of hell, we needed to accept him into our hearts.

These words from John’s Gospel have become so familiar and I have heard them so many times over the course of my life, that they seem to have lost their meaning and their significance. The familiarity of this verse extends into wider society — plastered on billboards, bumper stickers, signs at sporting events, and so on. Please don’t misunderstand me. There is a reason that John 3:16 is such a widespread and beloved verse. I believe that this one sentence is at the core of the Gospel that Jesus preached. However, when any one sentence gets taken out of context, it can be used or misused for purposes other than originally intended. Let us place John 3:16 back in context into a larger conversation that Jesus is having with a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus may not be the most well-known or beloved character from the Gospels, but I think many can relate to him because his spiritual journey may resonate with our own. Nicodemus is a deeply religious man. He is a Pharisee, a leader in his community. Nicodemus sees Jesus daily in public, but some combination of pride, ego, and social norms does not allow him to reach out to Jesus in public. Something has stirred in Nicodemus that he cannot explain. He realizes something is missing and he knows Jesus is calling to him. He decides that he must meet with Jesus and talk with him — but not in the light of day where someone may see him. There are too many risks if he were seen. Nicodemus risks harsh judgments from his fellow Pharisees and even being labeled a heretic. He could lose his status both in society and his religious community. Perhaps the greatest risk Nicodemus is taking is that he could find himself convinced by Jesus and compelled to make changes that he would prefer not to make.

Nicodemus’ story in a small way is similar to my own. While I have never been a religious leader, I share with Nicodemus a feeling of religious fervor. When I began college over 30 years ago, I was convinced that I had all the right answers and that my expression of Christianity was the correct one. I knew without a doubt who was “in” and who was “out.” Nicodemus also knew who was in and out, and was an authority of what it meant to be a good Jew. He was adept at articulating the intricacies of religion and detecting the logical shortcomings in other people’s faith. Nicodemus is a good person, who does not do the things you are *not supposed to do* and does the things *you are supposed to do*. And yet something in Nicodemus stirred within him when he heard Jesus preach.

Perhaps Nicodemus was caught up in the idea — like so many of us — that we have to earn God’s love. The trap we fall into, with this way of thinking, is that what we do never seems enough. I certainly fell into this way of thinking when I was young. The message that Nicodemus heard Jesus preach proclaimed a radical love of acceptance. Jesus demonstrated this by meeting Nicodemus where he was in his life, both literally and figuratively. Jesus could have easily insisted that Nicodemus meet with him in the morning over the first-century equivalent of a cup of coffee at the local Starbucks. But he didn’t. He took up the request of Nicodemus to meet with him at night. Jesus extended compassion to Nicodemus for the difficult place he was in and met him half way. I believe God does the same for each of us. God has met and continues to meet us where we are in our journey, wherever that may be.

When Nicodemus meets with Jesus in secret, full of fear, he doesn’t get the answers he is seeking but rather more questions, double entendres, symbols, and a foreshadowing of Jesus’ death. What does it mean to be “born from above of water and Spirit?” And what on earth is Jesus talking about when he talks about the wind blowing and the Spirit? Throughout this conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus recognizes Jesus is from God but is still struggling to figure it all out. Nicodemus’ questions indicate that he is slow to comprehend. And yet, Jesus meets Nicodemus where he is in life, and his words are full of love and compassion. Jesus is reminding Nicodemus of the truth of eternity, that God loves us. No exceptions.

As this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus is coming to a close, Jesus once again uses imagery that Nicodemus would recognize from his intimate familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures. But why would Jesus be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness? For many the answer to this question is deeply rooted in their theology of the cross.

Friends, I would invite you this morning to consider anew the work of the cross. Is it merely an instrument of death reserved for the worst of criminals? Or can it be redeemed from the cruel and vile intentions for which it was used? For many the cross is viewed as a salvific act by Jesus Christ. It was a blood atonement to assuage an angry God. This is what I was taught as a child and the meaning of John 3:16 was deeply rooted in this theology. An alternative view of the cross is to see it as a “symbol of the abuse of power, of execution and ultimate violence...” The cross then becomes God standing with the victims of power, those hanging on the crosses of extermination, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, marginalization, and powerlessness. I believe that this is the salvation and redemption that comes to us when we look upon the cross. Love in human form looks upon humanity from the cross and says, “You are not alone. I am with you, now and always.”

My friends, the work of the cross is not finished. As followers of Jesus, we are called to take up our own cross and to continue the work that Jesus began.

Taking up one's cross is an act of willing obedience and self-emptying for the sake of God's kingdom. Taking up one's cross means redescribing reality from the perspective of God's vision. Taking up one's cross means professing that God is the center of existence and the source of grace for all living. The message of the cross extends to all who would choose to be followers of Jesus. We are called to be witnesses of God's redeeming love and to stand in solidarity with humanity just as Christ did over two thousand years ago. When we know someone is struggling, we can extend God's compassion to them. We begin by meeting them where they are, even if we don't agree with them. Christ calls us to follow him not through words but rather by what we do.

Let us pray. God, who has shown humanity a love that is beyond measure through the work of the cross, give us the strength to take up our own cross. May we ever be witnesses of your redeeming love in all that we do.✠

*Francis Jonathan Bullock*

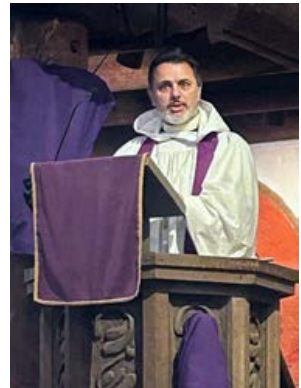
*Another sermon for Lent 4b*

## Of Serpents and Saviors

Today is Laetare Sunday in the old calendar — in the English tradition, “Mothering Sunday” — a Sunday for visiting the “mother” church of one's baptism. *Laetare* means, “Rejoice!” and the other title the tradition reserves for the Fourth Sunday in Lent is “Refreshment Sunday.”

And so our lectionary gives us an unsettling story about serpents in the wilderness!

If we find the reading from Numbers today disconcerting, we are not alone. The episode, even within the patchwork of stories long passed down in the oral tradition before they were compiled into the Torah, is remarkably disturbing, strange, and uncanny in its brevity. It appears to have stuck fast in the hearts of the ancient Israelites, and the later rabbinical tradition had much to say about the appearance of serpents as an instrument of wrath when the people's words betrayed their God — a hearkening back to the crafty words of the serpent ensnaring Adam and Eve in the Garden. The word here for “serpent” in Hebrew is *saraf*, which both signifies the fire of a poisonous bite and points to the winged creature that may well be related to seraphim that would later fill prophetic visions of God's throne. It was a *seraf*, some of you might recall, that brings a hot coal from the altar to cleanse Isaiah's lips in preparation for his prophetic ministry.



The *nehushtan*, the rod with the *saraf* that Moses creates to usher in healing, is part of a small host of snakes (some with wings) on staffs that regularly appear in Near Eastern religious traditions — many of them signifying healing — dating back at least 10,000 years. The most familiar of these to us, of course, is the rod of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing and medicine. That symbol remains prevalent in our hospitals and medical fields to this day.

The *nehushtan* would, centuries later, become a source of concern for the faithful under the kings of Israel and Judah. The reform-minded Hezekiah, remembered in the histories as a good king (and if you know the tales from the Books of the Kings, you know that’s saying something!) destroyed the *nehushtan*, which had become an object of cultic worship — an idolatrous distraction from the God it was meant to point to.

For the rabbinic tradition, this was a key understanding. Moses is commanded to make the *nehushtan* and hold it up to move the people from their downward gaze on their own sufferings and complaints, and upward to confront their sin against the God who had liberated them from slavery in Egypt. Facing a sin was, from very early times, the beginning of forgiveness, and ultimately to turn their gaze back to the God that had promised not only to sustain them in the wilderness, but to lead them to a new life, a new land, a whole new way of being. We cannot but hear very early foundations of our spiritual pattern of renewal as Christians: the sacramental pattern of confession and absolution.

This understanding seems to be at the root of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel According to John — a teaching as foundational to us as it is compelling. He relates the cross to the *nehushtan* of the ancient tradition and pairs it with that most popular of popular verses in John’s Gospel: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”

We don’t have to look far at all here at Saint Michael’s to see how this teaching has compelled us and our spiritual ancestors for 2,000 years. The crucifix is our *nehushtan*, just as strange and moving as the original: an instrument of our salvation, drawing our gaze away from ourselves and our darkness, upwards to the light and to our God, who, rather than sending serpents, offers the divine self in the face of our sin and suffering — offers the Son of Man on an instrument of death so that the world might behold and live and receive life abundant.

I leave that with you this morning as a meditation, a meditation for whatever you bring into this place made sacred by prayer, sacrament, confession, self-offering, and God’s constant, abiding presence — a meditation for this Mothering Sunday, a refreshment for our journey in the Lenten wilderness. Perhaps even a cause for us to rejoice — “For God so loved the world...”

*Richard Edward Helmer*

