

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

January 31, 2021
Fourth Week after the Epiphany, Year B

The readings this week:

◦ Deuteronomy 18:15-20 ◦ Psalm 111
◦ 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 ◦ Mark 1:21-28

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

There is No Them

I recently read two books by very different authors that both make the same provocative point. One was by a Muslim teenager, the other was by an evangelical pastor...

Brian Zahnd's book, *A Farewell to Mars* (2014), is a good example of why it's misleading to make dismissive generalizations about evangelicalism... Zahnd's book describes how he repented from his "worst sin ever." I'm sure he would resonate with the language of Deuteronomy 18 about the "detestable practices" of God's people. No, he didn't embezzle money or sleep with his secretary. In his description, it was far worse than that...

"How I reached the point where I could weep over war and repent of any fascination with it is part of what this book is about — it's the story of how I left the paradigms of nationalism, militarism, and violence as a legitimate means of shaping the world to embrace the radical alternative of the gospel of peace."

Today Zahnd repudiates the detestable practices of a privatized piety that is merely spiritual and only for a future in heaven. He's no longer a "chaplain" to the state who offers "innocuous invocations" for a Constantinian Christianity. He's shocked to remember how he promoted sacred violence against fellow human beings. Having bid farewell to the Roman god of war (Mars), the last chapter of Zahnd's book is one sentence. It casts a positive vision for the people of God: "There is no them; there is only us."

The Muslim teenager Malala Yousafzai arrives at the same point in a different way. She tells her story in her autobiography *I am Malala* (2013). The book describes how Malala turned her personal tragedy into a global mission. Like Zahnd's repentance of the practices of some Christians, Malala repudiates the "detestable practices" of the Taliban in her beloved Pakistan.

Malala was eleven when the Taliban took over her Swat Valley in northwestern Pakistan in 2008. They bombed everything — power stations, a ski lift, hotels, funerals, and over 400 schools. They conducted public whippings and hangings. They beheaded over 1400 fellow Muslims. Police were so terrified of being murdered that they took out newspaper advertisements to announce that they had quit the force. The Pakistani army eventually rooted them out, or so they said, but the troubles continued.

Malala's father received death threats, which wasn't a surprise given that he was an outspoken political activist who had founded a major school that educated girls. He even kept a copy of Martin Niemoeller's famous prayer in his pocket ("First they came..."). At night, after everyone was asleep, Malala would get up and make sure all the doors and windows in the house were locked.

By this same time, at age eleven, young Malala had emulated her brave father. She wrote a diary for the BBC Urdu station under a pen name that described life under the Taliban. She gave interviews on Pakistani national television. The NY Times did a documentary about her. She had won numerous academic awards. She knew she wanted to be a politician.

When she was fifteen, on October 9, 2012, a Taliban gunman fired three shots at point blank range at Malala as she rode home on her school bus. One shot hit her, and the other two wounded her two class mates. After a miraculous recovery in England, the attempted murder catapulted her onto the stage of a global campaign. On her sixteenth birthday she spoke at the United Nations. In October 2014, at the age of seventeen, she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

On those scary nights when she double checked all the doors and windows, Malala also prayed. "At night I used to pray a lot. I'd pray to God, 'Bless us. First our father and family, then our street, then our whole 'mohalla' (district), then all Swat.' Then I'd say, 'No, all Muslims.' Then, 'No, not just Muslims; bless all human brings.'"

Today Malala is an outspoken critic of all forms of "detestable practices" done against all people, and in particular against women and girls. Stated positively, she's an advocate for the inherent dignity of "all human beings." Her journey from the isolated Swat Valley in Pakistan has taken her to the same place as Brian Zahnd: there is no them; there is only us.

The gospel for this week describes how "the people were amazed at Jesus's teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." What was so amazing, so new, so authoritative about Jesus?

Jesus brought healing and wholeness in all he said and did. He drove out evil spirits. He embraced everyone and excluded no one.

There is no them; there is only us, and so with Malala we work and pray for God's blessing on every human being.

~ Dan Clendenin, an excerpt, *Journey With Jesus*

Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#)

What is the role of a prophet? Does God raise ordinary people from our midst to become prophets? Think of some people you would call prophets. Do they do things differently? Is there a cause for which you might become a prophet? Has God ever put “words into your mouth” to help others? When God sends a message through a prophet, he can sometimes put “words into the prophet’s mouth.” How much do people understand? Does God help them “hear with their ears?” [The Center for Liturgy Sunday](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 111](#)

What is the most memorable work of God in all of history? Why does one scientist fall on his face and worship God in a laboratory, and another does not? Does vs. 1 reflect how you normally act or feel when you are with other people who follow God? Why or why not? What qualities of “godly people” would make the writer of this psalm be thankful? Do you delight in God? What does someone who delights in God do? How does your life reflect these verses? Give an example where God turns the resources of the heathen over to His people. Why is the fear of God important and fundamental as we consider His works (especially the work of redemption)? What are the works of God that give you great pleasure and a tremendous thrill? [Generations, Ken Castor](#)



Praying Toward Sunday

Un-stop our ears, O God,
that we may hear your Word proclaimed this day.
Open our minds and hearts to be changed.
Free us from the unclean spirits of worry, fear,
destruction, and pride.
Teach us, Lord, that we may follow you more
faithfully.

~ Amy Loving, [The Worship Closet: The Place for Creative Worship Ideas](#)

What the Fathers sought most of all was their own true self, in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in “the world.” ...

The simple men who lived their lives out to a good old age among the rocks and sands only did so because they had come into the desert to be themselves, their ordinary selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves. ...

We cannot do exactly what they did. But we must be as thorough and as ruthless in our determination to break all spiritual chains, and cast off the domination of alien compulsions, and to find our true selves, to discover and develop our inalienable spiritual liberty and use it to build, on earth, the Kingdom of God.

-Thomas Merton 1915-1968, [The Wisdom of the Desert](#)

3rd Reading: [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#)

What was the question raised by the Corinthian church? Identify the two types of Christians identified by Paul as those who have knowledge (vs.10) and those who are weak or who have a weak conscience (vs.7,9)? What did Paul say about the activity itself? Was it wrong to eat the food? What does it mean to stumble? What does it mean to cause another Christian to stumble? What does Paul mean in verse 9 by “this liberty of yours”? Is causing my brother to stumble the same as doing something that he disagrees with? Does Paul give any instructions to the weak? Do you think you have a weak conscience in some area of behavior or lifestyle? What are some activities that might cause a weaker Christian to stumble? How do you know when or if some area of Christian freedom you enjoy is or could be a stumbling block to a weaker Christian? [First Evangelical Church](#)

4th Reading: [Mark 1:21-28](#)

How much time have you spent this past week reflecting on Jesus and the hope of the gospel? How do the people respond to Jesus’ teaching? In what way do you think Jesus’ teaching differed from the teaching of the scribes such that people concluded Jesus’ teaching came with ‘authority’? What’s significant about that word ‘authority’ and what does it tell us that the same root word is used for our word ‘author’? How does Jesus demonstrate that His words and teaching have power and authority? How might Jesus’ declaration in Mark 1:15 explain the demon’s response to Jesus and His teaching? What’s the final result of what happened that day in Capernaum? In what way is it accurate to describe the whole of the Bible as ‘Jesus’ teaching’? In what way does this passage motivate you to want to listen more carefully and obediently to Jesus’ teaching? [Christ Church](#)