

A publication of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary



LENTEN SERMONS



For those engaged in theologically reflective ministry

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As you prepare for the Lenten season, we hope that you'll find these reflections by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty scholars to be helpful. Perhaps these sermons will inspire your own message, lead to a small group Bible study, or simply bring you closer to God—the One who in Christ has drawn close to us.

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WHAT COLOR IS LENT?



Steven Tuell

James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament

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My calendar says that today is February 19, but I don't believe it. No way have there been only 19 days in February. There have been *at least* 30; I don't know, maybe 60. You know what I'm talking about, brothers and sisters. Those cold, grey February days just go on and on and on—and I don't care what the groundhog in Punxsutawney says, there are always six more weeks of winter at least. Now that we're almost to the end of February, still the 20th of March, the first day of spring, seems light years away.

Into the midst of this winter malaise comes Lent, which may seem fitting. Lent is a pretty wintry season of the year: cold, dark, forbidding, unforgiving.

The liturgical color for Lent is purple: an appropriately mournful and lugubrious shade. But I find myself thinking of Lent more in wintry hues—the penitential black of clergy robes and leafless branches; the gray of Ash Wednesday daubs on foreheads and hands and of grit and salt on the highway; the off-white of sackcloth and dirty snow.

Yet curiously, the word “Lent” has nothing to do with winter or darkness or fasting or penitence for that matter. The word Lent is derived from the Middle-English *lenten*, the Old English *lencten*, and the High German *lenzin*, all of which mean—get this—“spring”! It's going to take me a while to wrap my head around that one.

All our springtime associations connect to Easter, and rightly so. In the sixth century John of Damascus, in his great hymn that we still sing in our churches, acclaims the feast of Christ's resurrection as the "spring of souls" ("Come You Faithful, Raise the Strain," *Glory to God*, No. 234). Even in the secular world, Easter is celebrated with signs of new life: new clothes; eggs, brightly colored in the shades of spring flowers; bunnies, famous for their fecundity.

By contrast, these 40 days of preparation are appropriately penitential. They are marked by self-examination, by prayer and fasting. We may well wish that we could skip the preparation and go directly into the celebration, but we can't do that.

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Remember what Mark's Gospel tells us—that after Jesus was baptized "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mk 1:12 NRSV). The Spirit drove him out! Jesus could not avoid this time of trial, and neither can we. But we misunderstand our Lenten disciplines, brothers and sisters, if we think that the point of all this is that we can somehow make ourselves worthy of God's love.

In the hymn that we sang this morning, the grand old American tune "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor And Needy" (*Glory to God*, No. 415), we sang, "Come ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined by the fall. If you tarry 'til you're better you will never come at all. Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream. All the fitness he requires is you feel your need of Him." "Fitness" is vain dream. We cannot earn God's love and regard. We can't.



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CAN'T DO THAT.**

But the good news is, we don't have to. The text shared with us this morning from Deuteronomy affirms that the people Israel—and, brothers and sisters, I believe we as well as the people of God—are a people holy to the Lord our God. "The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut 7:6 NRSV). This isn't a status that we must earn. It is simply the case, declared so by divine decree.

We have not come to this place because we are the best and brightest. We have not come to this place because we are great enough or good enough. In our text this morning, the Lord says "it was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors" (Deut 7:7-8 NRSV). It was because the Lord loved you.

Brothers and sisters, we are loved by God. That's why Jesus came to us as one of us, to see us with human eyes, to hear us with human ears, to embrace us with human hands and human arms. That is why Jesus embraced the fullness of our humanity and did not spare himself our loneliness, our pain, our grief, even our death. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright reminds us the Bible does not say "for God was so angry with the world that He sent His Son." That's not what *my* Bible says. God so *loved* the world that God sent God's Son. So if we are already loved and chosen and called, why do we need Lent? What is the reason for this penitential season of preparation?

Remember what Lent means? This is springtime for our souls. This is a time for growth, a time for renewal, a time to embrace our God-given identity and to learn together how to live it out more fully. We reject this opportunity at our peril. In the text shared earlier, we are warned twice that the consequences of rejecting God and God's call are grim. "The LORD repays in their own person those who reject Him. He does not delay, but repays in their own person those who reject Him" (Deut 7:10 NRSV). So brothers and sisters, let us not reject this opportunity.

Purple is the liturgical color for Lent. But I thought about wearing green, because I'm persuaded that Lent is a green season, brothers and sisters. It's a time of growth. Lent provides us the opportunity, the space to dig down deeper into our tradition. Lent

prompts us to break up the fallow ground of our cold hearts so that the water of life can seep down deep into the center of who we are. Lent is the time for the Spirit to prune away our dead branches so that we can bear fruit. Lent is the season of new life, springtime for our souls. Brothers and sisters, may God grant us all a green, growing, life-filled, God-filled Lent.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Steven Tuell's particular research interest is the biblical literature of the early Persian period. He has written numerous articles and book reviews, including multiple entries in Feasting on the Word (a commentary on the Common Lectionary published by Westminster John Knox). Tuell has written The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40-48 in the Harvard Semitic Monographs Series; a commentary on 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Interpretation Series; a commentary on Ezekiel, published by Baker in the Understanding the Old Testament Commentary series; and with John Strong co-edited Constituting the Community, a collection of essays on community in the Hebrew Bible. Tuell has just completed a commentary on Nahum through Malachi for Smith-Helwys. An ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, Tuell preaches and teaches frequently throughout the area.

This sermon was preached at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary February 19, 2015 .

Listen to it online: www.pts.edu/Lent16.

TRUSTING GOD IN THE WILDERNESS



Leanna K. Fuller

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care

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We come to worship this morning standing in the midst of the season of Lent—that period of the church year that stretches between the celebrations of Epiphany and Easter. Lent has traditionally been understood as a time of spiritual introspection and preparation, a time when we examine our own hearts and minds in an attempt to recognize and weed out anything within us that is inessential, or that is keeping us from a closer relationship with God.

Because of this focus on our inner lives, Lent is also a time when we reflect on our own humanness—on that which makes us mortal, fallible, imperfect. One way that many Christians observe the beginning of Lent is by participating in an Ash Wednesday service. The ashes that are placed on the forehead during such a service help to remind us of our status as finite creatures whose earthly life is limited. From dust we came, so the saying goes, and to dust we will each return. The ashes remind us that as humans, we are subject to sinfulness, failure, suffering, and ultimately death.

Our Scripture reading for today is especially appropriate for this season in which we find ourselves, because at its heart it is a very human story. It is a story about temptation, about the desire to give in to something that will bring temporary satisfaction, but that will ultimately lead to separation from God. It is, of course, a story about Jesus—but it is a story that describes Jesus as one of us, a human being who faced the same struggles

and trials that we do. And precisely because it tells of an experience which we all share, the story has much to teach us.

One of the first things we might notice about this passage of Scripture is its placement in relation to other parts of the text. According to Luke, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness comes just after his baptism in the river Jordan, and just before he begins his ministry in Galilee. So we can see that the time of testing for Jesus comes between two high points, between the recognition of his identity as the true son of God and the living out of that identity among his own people.

So, it is this in-between time, this period between Jesus' calling and his entrance into ministry that is the setting for his temptation. Now, when we think about temptation, we usually think of it in terms of transgressing certain norms for moral behavior: we think of being tempted to lie, to cheat on our income taxes, or perhaps to gossip about other people.

But these are not the kinds of temptations that Jesus had to face in our story today. The trials that Jesus had to endure were of a much deeper sort; they were temptations that touch the very core of our human nature. At their most basic, they were temptations characterized by the desire to be in control, and to put humanity in the place of God. We can see this in all three of the tests that Jesus faced.

For instance, the first test that the devil presents to Jesus is to prove his identity by turning the stones around him into bread. The text tells us that Jesus had not eaten anything for 40 days, and that he was famished. The devil knew that Jesus had the power to do this; otherwise it wouldn't have been a temptation for him. But the sin that the devil was tempting Jesus to commit was not so much about using his power inappropriately, but rather trying to control how God's blessings would come to him in his time of need.

In other words, Jesus was tempted to take matters into his own hands and turn the stones into bread, rather than asking God to provide bread for him. Surely this is something to which each one of us can relate. How often do we ask God for things that we need, and then proceed to tell God exactly how and when we wish to receive them? You see, as human beings we like to be in control, and at times that leads us to want

to control God. But, as Jesus reminds us in our story today, when we confuse our place with God's, we fall into sin.

After Jesus passes this first test, the devil gives it another try. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and promises to give him authority over them if only Jesus will bow down and worship the devil. And yet, despite the allure of all that was offered to him, Jesus responded to this test with humility and integrity. The price of idolatry was simply too high. Jesus refused to commit the sin of putting something else in the place where God should be. As followers of Christ, we are called to respond in the same way when we are tempted to compromise our relationship with God to gain something for ourselves.

In the final scene of our story today, the devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, and tells him to throw himself down to prove that God will rescue him. Now, to us, this may not seem like much of a temptation, since most of us probably would not be eager to jump from a great height just to see if God would intervene! But again, the temptation here is something much deeper than it may seem at first. It is not simply about putting God to the test, but it is also about having to prove God's place in our lives by creating sensations to attract the attention of others.

You see, in Jesus' time, miracles and wonders were extremely popular, and were often used to verify God's activity in a given situation. It may be that if Jesus had followed the devil's suggestion, many people would have been attracted to Jesus and his ministry. But Jesus knew that to test God in this way would ultimately cause people to focus on himself, and not on God. Even though he was the very son of God, Jesus was always careful to point away from himself and to God the Creator as the proper object of our worship. In this text and indeed throughout his ministry, Jesus made it clear that he knew where the source of his own power was, and that only God deserved the glory for it.

Although Jesus the man is far removed from us in space and time, most of us can probably identify with his experience in today's text, as his faith was challenged in the midst of an inhospitable wilderness. At different times we have each traversed our own

wilderness places and felt the spiritual desolation that can come with that. Perhaps today some of us are still facing the wilderness of illness, death, grief, loneliness, or fear. Some of us may feel that we are stuck in those places where we find it hard to hear God's voice, or to feel that God is with us. The truth of the Christian life is that it is precisely in those wilderness places that we are most vulnerable, because that is when our faith is truly tested in the crucible of our experience. It's easy to say we believe in God's goodness and providence when things are going well for us. But when things start going badly, and we suddenly find ourselves in the desert, it's tempting to begin questioning God's role in our lives.

We start to wonder if God really knows what's going on, and we start to believe that things would be better if we were in charge. Slowly but surely, we begin trying to put ourselves in the place where God should be, and that is when we go astray. Like any other temptation, trying to gain that sense of control that we thought would be so comforting ultimately leads only to more emptiness. But, the good news that this text offers us is that our spiritual hunger will be satisfied, though perhaps not always in the ways we might predict or desire.

The part that each of us has to play in this is trust: we must trust that God will remain with us and will show us the way out of the wilderness. Our story today reminds us that the way Jesus came through these tests of faith was by trusting in God. After all, Jesus was starving; he could have turned those stones into bread, but he chose instead to trust that God would provide. Like us, Jesus was human; he could have



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sought out power and recognition for himself, but instead he trusted that the Spirit of God that had come upon him at his baptism would be enough to draw others to him, that he didn't need fame and fortune to accomplish God's work. Jesus could have put God to the test, but instead he trusted that God didn't need to rely on sensations to reach people. He trusted that God had in store for him a better way to touch people's hearts—the way of service, and ultimately, the way of the cross.

Today, as you and I journey through this Lenten season, God reminds us that in those times when we are most vulnerable to tests of our faith, we are called to place our trust in God alone. Whatever the individual wilderness that each of us traverses, we have a promise that God will accompany us there, just as God accompanied Jesus in the desert so many years ago. And just as God gave Jesus the strength to resist temptation, God promises us the strength to face the truth of our own brokenness and to move beyond it, so that we may once again live with purpose the life to which we are each called. May it be so. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Leanna Fuller is a graduate of Vanderbilt University (Ph.D.), Vanderbilt Divinity School (M.Div.), and Furman University (B.A.). Her dissertation is titled "When Christ's Body is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations." Fuller has earned numerous fellowships, awards, and honors. She received the Louisville Institute Dissertation Fellowship in 2010-2011 and multiple graduate teaching fellowships from Vanderbilt. Fuller's most recent conference paper, "From Tragedy to Vulnerability: Finitude, Difference, and Conflict in Practical Theology" was presented at the Academy of Religious Leadership Annual Meeting. Her ministry experience includes serving as associate pastor of Oakland Christian Church in Suffolk, Va., where she coordinated youth ministry and Christian education programming. Fuller also worked as chaplain resident at Riverside Regional Medical Center, in Newport News, Va., providing pastoral care for patients. Fuller's family includes her spouse, the Rev. Scott Fuller, a UCC minister and chaplain; and their young son, Simon.

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LET GO OF JESUS



John P. Burgess

James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology

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I'm a member of the sandwich generation, that is to say, I'm at that age in life where I'm sending my kids off to college and learning to care for an elderly parent. I visited my mother this past weekend. She lives in an assisted living facility in Pasadena, Calif. And what struck me was that as people grow older they talk a lot about their physical ailments, but what really is going on is a spiritual struggle. The questions come back again, "Is there really a God?" and "If there is a God, does that God really care for me?"

Well, interestingly, that's the question that faced these two disciples on that Easter morning. They had followed Jesus for three years. They had watched as he was crucified. They had even heard from the women that he was no longer in the tomb—that he had been raised from the dead. And they were quite unimpressed. They went for a long walk.

A visitor joins them along the way. They begin talking about the events in Jerusalem, and these two disciples are astounded. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who has not heard of everything that has taken place?" The irony is, of course, that they are the ones who really don't understand what has taken place.

When we don't understand how to see Jesus, when we don't know anymore where to find Jesus, when we struggle to know if there is really Emmanuel, "God with us," Jesus meets us along the road. He reads the Scriptures and interprets them. He breaks bread. He gives us a sermon and a supper. And ever since that moment at Emmaus, Christians, when they have wanted to see Jesus, have gone to the Scriptures and celebrated communion.

Jesus sends us to the Scriptures to see him. The ancient theologians of the church and then again the Reformers in the 16th century were fully confident that you can go to the Bible and encounter the living Lord. And Jesus becomes present as we hear the Scriptures read and interpreted. That is as true of the Old Testament as it is of the New. Everywhere in the Bible we are given eyes to see Emmanuel, God with us.

The same thing happens when we're invited to the table. Theologians have argued over the centuries about what exactly it means to say "This is my body, this is my blood." But Christians have been fully in agreement that when they eat the bread and drink the cup, Christ himself is present. We go to the Scriptures and to the table to find Jesus.

But here's the strange thing—you notice that as soon as the disciples' eyes were opened, Jesus vanished from their sight. And when we come to the Scriptures and the table to see Jesus, we're not really going to find Jesus after all. He will have vanished. Scripture and table will not give us a Jesus that we can hold on to. But they will do this: they help us see the world with the eyes of Jesus.



... WHEN WE DON'T
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Here you are at seminary, and you want to see Jesus. You're taking classes in Bible and theology. You're even required to take "Christology," so that you can see Jesus. And you're going to learn about worship and the sacraments and celebrating the Lord's Supper, because there you encounter the living Lord. We gather together for Word and Sacrament in the chapel because we believe that Christ himself is here. But along your own road to Emmaus, you may also make the startling discovery that as soon as you've seen Jesus, he vanishes.

Just what does it mean to worship a God who became human flesh that we could hear and see and touch and yet now has been crucified and has vanished from our sight? I wouldn't want you to quote me—I speak too sharply in order to make my point—but quit looking for Jesus. Quit looking for Jesus, because the point is not for you to grab hold of Jesus but for Jesus to grab hold of you. And the point is not for you to look at Jesus, but for you to look at the world that he has changed and to look at it through his eyes.

You see, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, when we hear the Scriptures read and interpreted, we learn that Jesus is not just here or there but that he is the light that illuminates everything, everywhere. So, go live in the light, do good, seek peace, and praise the God who is always with us.

The Rev. Dr. John P. Burgess is the author of Encounters with Orthodoxy: How Protestant Churches Can Reform Themselves Again, The East German Church and the End of Communism, Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict, and After Baptism: Shaping the Christian Life. He is currently a faculty mentor for the Company of New Pastors, a Lilly Endowment-funded program that assists Presbyterian candidates in the transition from seminary into ordained ministry. Burgess was a Fulbright Scholar to Russia in 2011, a Luce Fellow in Theology for 2011-2012, and a research fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry during the 2014-2015 academic year. These awards have supported his current research on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping a new national identity for post-communist Russia.

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Listen to it online: www.pts.edu/Lent16.*

TWIN DOUBTS



L. Roger Owens

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Thomas gets a bad rap. We don't call Peter "Denying Peter." We don't call the disciples who slept in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was in agony "the Drowsy Disciples." But Thomas is and always will be "Doubting Thomas." But at least he's not alone. The Bible says Thomas was a twin. And if we are honest with ourselves, we might be able to admit that we are sometimes his twin.

I was Thomas' twin not long ago on a plane from Nashville to Charlotte. I'd been watching the weather all morning—watching a line of storms thundering across the Southeast. I'm an anxious flyer anyway. (Once I was telling a Bible study group about my fear of flying, and someone asked if there was a part of the flight that bothered me most. "O," I said, "just the part in the air.") And it's even worse when the weather's bad. The skies were clearing in Nashville, because the storms had just passed. So when I boarded the plane, I asked the flight attendant, "Did you just come from Charlotte?" "Yes." "How's the weather?" "You want me to be honest?" I had to think about that one. "No—OK, yes." "It's pretty shaky."

By the time I got myself buckled in, anxiety was gripping me tighter than I was gripping the armrests. I was doing OK until we hit the turbulence. The plane shook. Up and down. Left and right. That's when it became clear to me: There's no foundation here. Nothing is holding us up. And I would like to believe God will keep us in the air, but

there are enough flights God didn't keep in the air, so why would he keep me in the air. And then I thought, "I must not really believe what I've preached so many times on Easter, about the resurrection, if I'm so afraid of crashing." And it wasn't much of a leap in my mind to get from there to, "There is no God."

When the foundations of our world start to shake, our faith can become shaky as well. Look in the mirror if you want to see Thomas's twin, because he's not the only one with shaky faith.

It seems like the foundations have been shaking lately—as they have always been, sometimes literally: March 22—mudslide in Washington; April 2—earthquake and tsunami off the coast of Chile; April 18—avalanche on Everest; April 18—earthquake in Mexico city. Today—April 24, 2014—the one year anniversary of a garment factory's collapse in Bangladesh. But more often the foundations shake metaphorically: stabbing at nearby high school; shooting at a Jewish community center; massacre of civilians in South Sudan; 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Or more personally, a middler-year seminary depression descends. A relationship dissolves. A parent, a friend, a spouse dies suddenly. It's easy to become doubting Thomas's twin even in a place like seminary, where we think our job is to build strong foundations of faith.

The other disciples are excited and enthusiastic—"We have seen the Lord." But Thomas has felt the foundations shake, and he hasn't seen the Lord, so "Unless I see, I will not believe." Maybe we who are Thomas' twins can understand that.



**WHEN THE FOUNDATIONS
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Jesus can understand that as well—why else would he make an encore appearance just for Thomas? The week after Easter the disciples are gathered again. This time Thomas is with them—he wasn't on Easter Sunday. The others—they're living in the peace Jesus offered them; poor Thomas is still gripping the armrests with sweaty palms.

So Jesus appears again, says "peace" again, then makes clear he's here for Thomas. Thomas, he says, put your finger right here and see my hands, reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Just as he showed the other disciples the week before, he shows Thomas today. Scars, wounds—I've got them, but I'm alive. Look and believe.

It looks like Jesus was offering some kind of "proof," some kind of unshakeable foundation for belief. Maybe. But he was doing something else as well. He was also legitimizing Thomas' doubt. Yes Thomas, there are good reasons to doubt. Thomas you are right: Sometimes mountains do tumble down. Sometimes the earth does shake. Sometimes tragedy strikes, and strikes hard.

If the scars in Jesus' hands and the wound in his side are proof of anything, they're proof of this: Faith-shaking events really happen, and Jesus himself wasn't spared the worst. We don't get foundations. We don't get certainty that's immune to this kind of doubt. At least I don't.

Here's what we do have: We have a God who has been buried in the mud. A Savior for whom the earth shook one dark Friday and was swallowed. A Savior who has



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experienced the darkness, who has felt the absence of God. And yet this wasn't the end of him.

Novelist Ann Hood lost her five-year-old daughter, Grace, to a sudden and virulent form of strep. Ann had always been a spiritual seeker, a searcher, but had settled into churchgoing with her husband, Lorne, and had come to a kind of belief. But the tragic death of her daughter ended all that. She wanted answers, and no one could give her any. So she stopped believing in God. "Foolishly," she writes, "I believed that clergypeople might hold the answers I screamed to God for every night. I watched as my husband's seemingly unshakeable faith wobbled too. Together, a unified force, we drove to talk to famous rabbis, priests, religious experts on loss. Dutifully, Lorne took notes, asked questions, listened. But I saw how their eyes drifted toward the clocks on their walls, and when an hour passed, they assured us time would heal and sent us on our miserable way"—a stinging indictment of our work.

So I've spent time wondering what I would have said. And I think maybe I wouldn't have said anything. I would just have taken the crucifix off my wall and let her hold it. Let her see what Christianity has to say: "See, this guy had a Father whose son died. And this Son knew what it was like to be ripped by death from his Father. See, here are the nails that made the wounds Thomas felt. Yet that wasn't the end of him. And just because it wasn't the end of him, it doesn't have to be the end of us either."

Thomas was lucky, I think. Jesus told Thomas, "You have seen and you believe. Blessed are those who believe and yet have not seen." That's supposed to be us—but it's harder that way—which is one reason God gave us this mixed blessing called Church. We might not see Jesus the way Thomas did, but we can see each other plain as day. And as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The Christ in our own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians." And in the Church there are people who have learned to live by faith, whose word has become Thomas' confession: "My Lord and My God." People who no longer fall down with every quake. People who have learned to live in a faith without easy answers. It might not be all of us all the time, but it is some of us. And when our faith is shaking, it's nice to see people who don't fall down—or to learn from people who, when they do fall down, get up again. They keep going. They keep believing. They have learned to live and keep walking even when the ground shakes. They can teach us how to say "My Lord and My God" and are patient enough to journey with us until we can.

The plane I was on was shaking on its way to Charlotte. I was nervous. And about six rows in front of me, there was a flight attendant who wasn't working. She was a passenger, but she still had her uniform on, and the seat next to her was empty. And I thought—if I could just move up and sit next to her, if she could just tell me, “I've been through this, I've come out the other side. It's going to be OK.” If she could tell me what was going on, and I could see in her face she wasn't scared—if I just had someone sitting next to me who's been through it, I would be OK.

Jesus died in the mud. But that wasn't the end of him. And now, through the gift of his Spirit and each other, he sits next to us. Look at his face—he's not worried. Look at his face—he's been through it. And when we get to the final quake, what we think will be the end, whether tomorrow or in 50 years, and when the foundations of this life crumble completely, he's been through that too. He sits next to us on that journey and he says, “All will be well. You will come through this, too, even this.” And you will be able to say, finally, with undoubting heart and unstammering tongue, “My Lord and My God.”

Alleluia, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens is a graduate of Duke University (where he was awarded a Lilly Fellowship for the Formation of a Learned Clergy), Duke Divinity School, and Anderson University in Indiana. Owens is an ordained Elder in the North Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. In North Carolina he served both urban and rural churches for eight years as co-pastor with his wife, the Rev. Ginger Thomas, before coming to PTS. His books include Pastoral Work: Engagements with the Vision of Eugene Peterson (edited with Jason Byassees), Abba, Give Me a Word: The Path of Spiritual Direction, Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life (edited with Joel Shuman) and The Shape of Participation: A Theology of Church Practices, which was called “this decade's best work in ecclesiology” by The Christian Century. Owens serves on the faculty for the Upper Room's Academy for Spiritual Formation, where he lectures on postmodern spirituality and traditions of Christian spirituality.

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