

Episcopal priests spend an inordinate amount of time wondering about, worrying about, readings. This is because Episcopal priests almost never choose the readings we're going to preach on, because as most of you know, in The Episcopal Church, the readings for Sundays and other holy days are chosen for us. Mostly, we love this. Ask any of the preachers in the room, and I'll bet most of them would tell you that just the thought of having to choose their own readings week after week makes them break out in a cold sweat. But I'll bet we've all also had moments when we've looked up the readings for the day with fear and trembling, just praying the lectionary is going to be nice to us. This happens especially when we're preparing for some significant occasion, like the Sunday we're saying hello, or goodbye, to a congregation - or the Sunday before, or after, a national election. Please, please, we pray - give me something easy, some reading that really fits.

Then there are those occasions when it seems like only one set of readings could possibly fit, when the readings are so predictable they're almost cliché. It's like that scene in the movie *Wedding Crashers* where Jeremy and John, the titular wedding crashers, make a bet about the reading at the wedding they've crashed. One says I Corinthians 13, the other Colossians 3 - the joke being that even these two goofballs know it's definitely going to be one of those two. (Spoiler alert: it's I Corinthians 13.) We could easily imagine a similar scene at a funeral. Will the reading be Revelation 21 (then I saw a new heaven and a new earth) or John 14 (in my father's house there are many dwelling places)? Of course, there's nothing wrong with this. It makes perfect sense that these lessons get chosen again and again for funerals; they are, after all, easy. They are meant to ease a painful moment; they don't require too much of us at a time when we may not have much to give. They are readings that really fit.

Needlesstosay, if Jeremy and John were crashing this funeral, they would both lose epically. For the readings the Reverend Elizabeth Marshall Felicetti chose for her funeral are, I can safely say, the most unique readings ever chosen for a funeral in The Episcopal Church. They are also the most Elizabeth Felicetti-esque readings imaginable, that is, unless she had also thrown in a really juicy cursing psalm. Elizabeth, obviously, didn't choose these texts because they were easy. No, she chose these texts precisely because they're going to make us work, and she knew that work is worth it. She knew that readings that require something of us still fit, because they can still reveal God's grace, even in painful moments like these.

So let's work. Let's dig in, particularly, to the two readings Elizabeth chose that are the most "outside the box." First, there's the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Honestly, there isn't much of a mystery here. If we didn't hear a reading about John the Baptist today, if we didn't hear about how JBap came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, or about his unusual nutritional and sartorial choices, or about the way he prepares the way for the coming Christ, well, then frankly Elizabeth would be in danger of losing her status, as one of our seminary classmates likes to say, as JBap's number one fangirl. JBap had to be here today.

Now the reading from 2 Samuel requires a little more effort, not only because it's an unusual choice, but also because Elizabeth was head over heels in love with the Hebrew Bible and she would want us to make the effort. So, let's dig. The scene opens right smack in the middle of the story of King David and Bathsheba. Previously, the book of Samuel tells us, at the time of year when kings go to war, David has stayed home - eating Cheetos on the couch and staring out the

window at his very lovely, very married, neighbor taking a ritual bath on her roof. He falls in love, or lust, you can decide – and in order to get at her, he starts doing a lot of sending. He sends for Bathsheba and has her come to him. When she tells him she's pregnant, he sends for her husband to come home to...er...cover things up. When her husband won't oblige, David sends him to the front lines to be slaughtered in battle, and once he's out of the picture, David sends again for Bathsheba and takes her as his wife.

Enter the Lord. God has been conspicuously absent from the first part of this story, but here, in today's reading, God arrives with a vengeance. "The thing David had done displeased the Lord," we hear, finally, and so God has decided to do some sending of God's own. God sends Nathan the prophet to David...to tell him a story. There was a rich man, who had everything he could ever want, and a poor man who had nothing except one little lamb. The poor man loved the lamb with all his heart, let it eat from his own nearly empty plate, drink from his own cup, lie against his own beating heart at night. One day the rich man had an unexpected visitor, and instead of slaughtering one of his own animals for the feast, he stole the poor man's lamb instead, just because he could. Now Nathan's story is clearly constructed to align perfectly, even somewhat weirdly, with David's own actions, but David completely misses the point. He is either so proud, or so guilt-ridden, that he can't see the trap. Instead, he gets himself all riled up, huffing and puffing about what he will do to this nameless, heartless rich man. At this, Nathan pounces and, in one of the greatest moments in all of prophetic history, points his finger at his king and cries, You are the man!

Now Elizabeth didn't choose this reading just because she thought Nathan was a boss, though she absolutely did. Elizabeth chose this lesson because she believed it had something to say to us in this particular, painful moment. Elizabeth, more than anyone I've known, understood why Nathan's words matter, because she understood how important, how fundamental, how crucial it is to speak the truth without fear. This is why she loved Nathan. This is why she loved John the Baptist. Because they practiced speaking the truth without fear, even when that truth wasn't easy, even when it made people confront things they didn't feel like confronting. This is why Elizabeth practiced speaking the truth without fear in her own life – in her preaching, her teaching, her writing. In her very last sermon, Elizabeth charged the congregation to do exactly this – to speak the truth without fear, especially in their prayer. Elizabeth, and Nathan, and JBap understood that the truth is nothing to fear – it has the power to crack us open, to shine light into dark places, to herd us back onto the path of righteousness, to heal us. Speaking the truth without fear is one of the most courageous, most generous, most faithful things we can do to transform ourselves and the world.

Speak the truth without fear. Okay, Elizabeth, let's start here. This sucks. This really, really sucks. None of us wants to be here. All of us, myself included, would rather be listening to Elizabeth preach right now, no doubt saying something pithy and profound, fierce and faithful. Elizabeth wanted that too – she didn't want to leave St. David's, didn't want to stop writing, didn't want to leave the people she loved. She fought hard to stay here, she battled – a word she finally made her peace with, although I'm sure she would also want me to be clear that she didn't lose her battle with cancer: the battle was stolen from her. Which isn't fair. None of this is fair. How could

it possibly be fair, or God's will, that we lose our priest and pastor, a woman who defended those she loved with the ferocity of a wildcat, an artist whose words comforted and inspired us...and made us laugh our heads off. How is it fair for us to miss out on Elizabeth's devotion about John the Baptist, for us to miss out on her next photos of backyard birds or Pepper, for us to miss our sister, our wife, our aunt, our friend? Answer: it isn't fair. Remember? This sucks.

This is also...pretty beautiful. Look at all the souls who were not just touched but transformed by the incredible gifts of this inimitable woman. All the people sitting in this room, wearing these fabulously nerdy JBap & Nathan-themed liturgical t-shirts. All the people watching at home - people who wrote with her and studied with her, people who may not have even met her but who were changed by her honesty and talent and grace. Look at all of us, this ragtag communion, joined together to hear to these wild readings and sing these holy hymns and lean on each other and on the God Elizabeth loved so well. This absolutely sucks, but it is also deeply beautiful.

Finally, this is not the end of the story. The pain is not the end of the story. The wilderness is not the end of the story. You are the man is not the end of the story. The end of all of these stories is unfathomable grace, incomprehensible blessing, some sure sign of God's love that is so present and so profound it makes us fall to our knees and worship. This is what happened to King David, and to JBap, and this is what happens to us. No matter what path we've taken, no matter what mistakes we've made, no matter what pain and loss we've suffered, we will all come to the end of our stories and find those endings changed, rewritten by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who not only promised a new heaven and a new earth, who not only promised that in his father's house there are many rooms, but who also promised that we who eat this bread will live forever. This is the truth at the end of our story - that death has no dominion, that light shines in darkness and the darkness will not overcome it, that through our baptism life is changed not ended, that God's tremendous, fearless, wild and merciful love wins.

Beloved, the simple fact is that all of this can be true at the same time. This is hard, and this is beautiful. We are bereft, and we are grateful. Elizabeth feels infinitely far away, and we are one with her in the communion of saints. We are poured out with grief, and we are filled up with God's mercy and faithfulness. Our hearts are wounded and sore, and our hearts are held, swaddled, strengthened, in the peace of Christ. Elizabeth has died, and Elizabeth lives. Why would we ever want easy, when we can have all this?

*Preached by Erika L. Takacs*

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