

HABAKKUK 1:1-4; 2:1-4 or ISAIAH 1:10-18

PSALM 119:137-144 or PSALM 32:1-7

II THESSALONIANS 1:1-4, 11-12

LUKE 19:1-10

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 30, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

A Reformation Tableau!

“Epinoia!” It is a gnostic-infused word that indicates “creative” or “inventive” consciousness. As I sat at home with unfortunately more time on my hands than I can ever remember, much less wanted, I turned aside and read Elaine Pagels’ book *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. The title of her book is a misnomer indeed, perhaps the most incorrectly titled book in the history of giving books titles. While the Gospel of Thomas is indeed a significant part of Pagels’ work, it is only but one aspect, one side, an occasion for her writing but not the driving issue among numerous cutting-edge issues she raises, critical opinions at stake in her musings, revealing her most interesting and intriguing scholarship. “Epinoia!” Intellectually curious! Critically thinking! *The Secret Book of John*, one of the gnostic gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, constituted a game-changing discovery as it put forth the radical idea that human beings are born intuitively creative. Duh! We should all resemble that remark! The recovery of the gnostic gospels has forced the Church to rethink Church Teaching, ancient Tradition, to reexamine orthodoxy, yes, what it means to be a Christian. In other words, these amazing books have given pause and cause for the Church and the churches to take another look, to give a second glance, at least among those who are open to new perspectives, new revelations, yes, a new reformation! Many of the events taking place during the late first

through fourth centuries, often avoided or ignored by Christian rank and file today, very much mirrored much later events much like the historic developments associated with October 31, 1517, All Hallows Eve, in Wittenberg, Germany, all going down when Martin Luther posted his now infamous Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church. Luther's honest and sincere desire for collegial debate and dialogue, his innocent quest for truth through this commonly held medieval conversational practice would spark a whirlwind movement that would come to be known as the Protestant Reformation. Once this bellwether event occurred, this shot over the ecclesial bow would usher in a new day as Christians of goodwill, conviction and integrity, sincere belief and faith, confronted the toxic bane of myriad papal abuses by what became a renegade band of believers who eventually cut ties, severing all connections, all relationships, with Mother Church, extricating themselves as joyfully liberated, radical, rabbleroising, rebels from the confining, constricting, ecclesially claustrophobic clutches of Roman Catholicism, marking a moment seemingly frozen in time that forever separated us Protestants from Rome once and for all.

The Secret Book of John is but one writing among many, another once missing version portraying the life of Jesus, a unique perspective characterizing the Jesus movement, a shining example from a treasure trove, a plethora of distinctly alternative gospel narratives written by those, who just like the four Gospel writers, were trying to describe the man of mystery and intrigue from Nazareth, his revolutionary preaching and teaching, his lovingly gracious mission and ministry. *The Secret Book of John* advocates that "human beings have an innate capacity to know God but one that offers only hints and glimpses of divine reality." In other words, as we have all delightfully discovered, there are different ways and means to achieving spiritual understanding, to uncovering any level of the knowledge of God. Yes, many of these oft enigmatic opinions far surpassed the thinking of the four Gospel

writers, viewpoints held by a male-dominated clerical leadership hellbent on and were far beyond the limitations prescribed by the Church Fathers quashing any and every text that was forbidden into the canon of scripture as we have it today. Yes, they sought at all costs to suppress these supposedly apostate writers, dismissing them outright, classifying the whole lot of them as heretics and heresy, hopefully to never see the light of day as they were ordered to be burned, destroyed for all eternity. Just remember, heresy is always in the eye of the beholder! The early Church pitted the traditional conservatism of Irenaeus against the progressive thinking of Valentinus, a Christian leader of whom you have most likely never heard, a Christian thinker who for all intents and purposes was summarily relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history. Irenaeus won the debate and the battles and the rest as we say, is history. To put it all in a nutshell, the debate came down to accepting either the theological mystery encapsulated in the Gospel of John, or the theological mystery contained in the Gospel of Thomas. Only one unfortunately would win the debate and the day! Frankly, the only reason we have the gnostic gospels at our disposal is because once they were banned, a foresightful thinking soul, or maybe a few, carefully took the manuscripts and put them in earthen vessels and neatly buried those ancient jars in caves at Nag Hammadi, no doubt hoping against all hope that one day they would be discovered. It took more than 1600 years for these fragile documents, preserved mostly in pieces or fragments with some texts missing, to be finally recovered, accidentally unearthed by an unsuspecting local resident who quickly and sadly used some of these findings for kindling. Once the manuscripts, or what was left of them, were translated and published for the general population, all bets were off and now here we are! Even Hollywood has discovered the Gnostic Gospels, as I believe they are inaccurately and incorrectly called. One must look no further than Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code* to see where fact and fiction, myth and legend, intersect, a book deemed demonic by ignorant and fearful fundamentalist pastors who do not want their constituents to even

know this stuff exist because it is a challenge to their pastoral authority, the hold they have over their flock, as well as a major challenge to the canon of scripture as we have it, the order of biblical books that has been in place since the fourth century CE. Get over it!

On this Sunday closest to October 31st, All Hallows Eve, as Protestant people, we once again, not only gather to worship as we do every Sunday in this sacred space, but on this special day we proudly proclaim our independence, celebrating a heritage of Reformation, continuing to live into the freedoms, the liberty of conscience, that is the right of every Christian everywhere no matter their denominational loyalties, no matter the affiliations that only partially serve to define them. In my estimation, one of the biggest problems or obstacles confronting the one apostolic, universal, catholic (lower case "c") Church and all the churches manifest today, is a general failure to continue to evolve, to grow in understanding, yes, to reform in ways that renew and refresh, that restore, us in the faith handed down by our forebears, our forefathers and mothers. We have long been way too comfortable, becoming settled, static, in the traditional beliefs that have wonderfully shaped us in so many ways but have always, at the risk of stagnation, as stale as month-old bread, demanded fresh insight, new eyes and ears. Learning can never be a past-tense verb! In retrospect, Martin Luther either gets way too much credit or way too much blame as the first reformer.

Back in the day it was customary to raise questions for dialogue and debate because this was a major part of local entertainment, media confined to small batch publications and only read by the select few who could read. Luther sought a rational conversation, the equivalent of a fireside chat perhaps. Little did he ever imagine that a firestorm would be spawned as his Ninety-Five critiques of the Church and its hierarchy, including the untouchable Pope, a raging, roaring, fire that would quickly spread and ultimately lead to a necessary and

permanent schism, creating a new way forward for those who could no longer tolerate much less stomach the abuses and the made-up theological fantasies of medieval Roman Catholicism. The sale of indulgences, guaranteed to forgive sins and set loved ones free from purgatory, while paying to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, was the last straw! It also did not hurt the revolt that the printing press had been invented and the Bible was now available to those who could read, revealing to them that so much theological baggage was false and did not even exist, in all honesty much the same as it remains today! Had Luther known the controversy he would create while becoming a lightning rod and its star witness, the centerpiece in the middle of the chaotic vortex unfolding in the small, backwater, town of Wittenberg, a remote enclave, it might be argued that Luther might have chosen to swallow hard and remain silent with a stiff upper lip, continuing to work within the system as a disgruntled monk and priest. We will never know!

What we do know is that Martin Luther, in his best if not intentional, though certainly imperfect, impersonation of Jesus, mimicking in many respects the thoughts and actions of the greatest reformer of all time, once the fuse was lit, never turned back, apparently never second guessing his motives or actions. To use some Jesus imagery, he never turned back to the plow, never returned home to bury the metaphorical dead, never made a farewell tour wishing well and a fond farewell to his family and friends. While Luther had his awful, horrific, flaws, his ironclad feet of clay, atrocities that can never be avoided or ignored when we consider his accomplishments and critique his thoughts, his life and career. Luther carried within his being a rampant antisemitism, literalizing the Jewish hate first exposed in John's Gospel and perpetuated and exacerbated by Irenaeus, all one day coming to full flower in the holocaust, a demonic attempt to wipe out Judaism and exterminate the Jews, yes, all rooted in what became Nazi Germany, Martin Luther's ancestral

home. And don't even ask about Luther's views on the Turks, his absolute vitriol toward them. Both the writer or writers of John's Gospel and eventually, some would say inevitably, the Church Fathers, drank the Kool Aid of believing the false biblical narrative that the Jews killed Jesus, that Jewish authorities were directly responsible for the rabbi's death conspiring with their Roman adversaries. Those hateful views are not only nonsensical, but they are not in the least historically factual, and the world has been a more unaccepting, dangerous, and violent place toward Jews ever since, all because of the perpetuation of this erroneously prejudicial and biased dog whistle. Just look at the insane, damnable and dangerous, ramblings of Kanye "Ye" West! Sick! Besides, only the Romans could carry out capital punishment! Crucifixion was a Roman prerogative reserved for the worst, the vilest offenders. The Romans executed Jesus not because of his theology, but because they believed he was a threat, that he was leading an insurrection, that he was a seditious insurgent, a threat to Rome's sovereignty, not the peacemaking and humbly innocent rabbi he is portrayed to be. The Bible skews what should have been written as plain as day interpretive literature. It was not! The biased biblical narrative clearly had a prejudicially slanted agenda against the Jews. The story tells the story! After all, Jesus was the one who advocated giving unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and in that day that meant and included political allegiance, absolute loyalty to empire and its imperial emperor.

Martin Luther was a mixed bag, as we say, a complex, if even complicated, individual, full of mixed emotions, thoughts and feelings, emerging and evolving beliefs, and thus this great reformer must not only be held in highest esteem, venerated for his work, his accomplishments, but also appropriately critiqued, held to the gospel standard that he proclaimed was his ultimate calling. Yes, he is called to account in history's rearview mirror. He does not get a pass because this is yesterday's news! Not only did Luther level his wrath against all

things Judaica, advocating for the demise of Jews and Judaism for their obstinate failure to follow Jesus and accept him as their Lord and Savior, but he also demanded the murderous wrath against the Anabaptists whom he believed were taking the new movement, all things reformation, way too far. Even so, there is still much about Luther to be admired and honored, along with the other two flawed churchmen credited with initiating and instigating the oft times riotous Reformation, John Calvin, whose “reformed” theology is rubbish in the estimation of many, and Ulrich Zwingli, who removed every symbol, especially the statuary, from church sanctuaries, leaving the rooms devoid of color and imagery, creating dull and boring sanctuaries, austere and vacant worship spaces, a precursor to the Puritan movement that would eventually come down the pike as another sectarian spinoff to the multifaceted Protestant movement, the Genie long out of the jar. Luther, along with all the rest, was a human being and as such often acted very human, yes, including the worst ways imaginable!

One of the things that I love about reading the gnostic gospels, as they are from my limited perspective erroneously called, is their primary focus on the human Jesus, the historical man from Nazareth. Yes, their focus is less on the somewhat myopic obsession on the cosmic Christ of the early Church, prevalent in the canonized books of the Christian scriptures, most of it of course good, efficacious, in other words, saving in quality. While the gnostic gospels focus on Jesus as suffering servant, colleague, friend, guide, mentor, rabbi and teacher, fellow traveler, the canonized Christian scriptures, the New Testament, often places more emphasis on Christ as Christus Victor, Savior and Lord, Messiah, and the other elaborately flattering titles that were reserved for the Caesar in power. My hunch is that this is the reason that the gnostic gospels did not make the cut, that they were not only not embraced and accepted into the canon of the twenty-seven books that form what is traditionally called the New Testament, but that they would be banned

as heresy and all but destroyed, save for the manuscripts that were luckily, perhaps miraculously, saved at Nag Hammadi only to be unveiled in 1945, and all for our perusal, consideration, and enjoyment. Until 1945, relatively recent history, they simply were not! These works focus much less on human beings as evil and wicked, sinful wretches and worms who are hanging by a thread from the damnable fires of hell and brimstone. The gnostic gospels call for followers of Jesus to discover the Christ within, to manifest the spark of the Divine that is already embedded, innately imbued, within each human creature, recalling the vivid imagery described in the creation stories in Genesis. In other words, biblical! This interpretation is shown significantly in the Gospel of Thomas, the writer seeing what many today is suggesting, including scholars such as the former Catholic Priest Matthew Fox, that we humans were created with original blessing and not original sin, that human beings are inherently good as Anne Frank once surprisingly suggested in her diary during her ill-fated hideout from the Nazis. These gnostic gospels also heavily emphasized the feminine divine in their content, advocating equally God as Father and Mother, eternal loving and caring Parent, most likely explaining more than anything their outright rejection as blatantly heretical materials. These writings were deemed demonic, yes, the very spawn of Satan! Yes, the Bible, the canonized books we now read and study, ironically also portray these exact same beautiful and biblically inclusive images, though it could be safely argued they are a touch hidden and it might be argued, less emphasized. You just have to go the extra mile to seek and to find!

Every Gospel text we read, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even John, along with the Gospel of Thomas and every other gnostic gospel, all point to one of the greatest reform movements to ever take place, the Jesus movement that literally divided time and space, the old BC to AD, now BCE to CE! Each and every story in the Gospels, including today's lection about the conversion of the greedy tax collector turned generosity advocate and example, Zacchaeus, is a window, a

door into Jesus' normative and radical reformatory behavior. Conversion is reformation! Change of heart and mind is cleansing and reforming and all at the same time! Today, in this twenty-first century millennia, I believe it is the best time, the most fabulous and amazing period in history to be a person of Christian faith. We have so much at our disposal that our forebears, generations, grandparents and even parents, in the faith were not privy, simply did not have access. Imagine, all these wonderful interpretations of the life and purpose, the preaching and teaching, the mission and ministry, of Jesus were unavailable, nowhere to be found, supposedly non-existent. Their presence demands our attention no matter what fearful, anxiety driven, controlling, sectarian narrow-minds are saying about these books and their content. Whether or not we consider ourselves individually as progressives, this information and the knowledge contained therein, this sacred material, deserves our attention, our careful research, our sincerest analysis and study, open eyes and ears. Today, we get to read the works of new reformers in this new reformation, though these writers would never dare claim that lofty status, declare that was their purpose, humbly refusing to wear that mantle. Scholars like Karen Armstrong, Diana Butler Bass, the late Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Bart Ehrman, the aforementioned Matthew Fox, Rachel Held Evans, Peter Gomes, Dawn Hutchings (see pastordawn.com), Brian McLaren, Richard Rohr, the late John Shelby Spong, Nadia Bolz-Weber, etc., all have made huge contributions causing major strides in what we now know about biblical days and the years following shortly thereafter, the first through fourth centuries being a time of immense shifting and clarification, revealing a wide diversity, anything but a homogenous faith expression, reflecting a variety of ecclesiological and theological opinion. Yes, there was much debate, dialogue, and dissension, much internal strife, minority opinions sidelined, with every decision dominated, becoming doctrinal law in the creeds, the Church's imprimatur firmly stamped for the ages, inerrant and infallible,

codified by the victors, a majority vote sealed by the select few of power-wielding, power hungry, patriarchal misogynists who sought to keep Christian converts, especially temping women, in line. They sought to obliterate these sacred writings, determining each literary offering a despicable sinful legacy. Freedom of expression among the new proselytes, these committed disciples, not only discouraged, but disavowed and disallowed! The early Church, just like every version on the horizon, of course including us, was never one, never unified in any way whatsoever! Yes, I am an unapologetic apologist, advocating for reading not only the Gospel of Thomas but every other so-called gnostic Gospel now available in print, wonderful sources of information about a very elusive and mysterious period in the Church's young history! Yes, what is old is new! What is new is old! It is mystery at work! These so-called gnostic gospels are indeed a treasure trove of literary genius. They constitute an amazing discovery representing a segment of the early Church, representing an important, a most significant and essential, some very faithful folk. They are significant in a whole host of way, yes, parts, pieces, of a much larger puzzle, filling more gaps than we ever imagined! From these ancient and intuitive writers, from adversaries Irenaeus and Valentinus to Luther and his reforming contemporaries, to every thinking Christian since, to all of us today who are taking the mantle and making ginormous contributions in real time, every idea, every thought, seasoned by each fascinated, intellectually curious and critically thinking faithful believer who dares engage. Epinoia! Intuitively creative! Yes, we are! Yes, we can! Yes, we do! We have a great legacy, a wonderful heritage, as part of an ongoing and evolving journey, standing on huge shoulders, learning as we go, part and parcel of continuing revelation, an ongoing reformation, the Church reformed, always reforming, always to be reformed. May it be so with us! After all, the day the Church ceases to reform in its being and in its doing is the day the Church dies a most irrelevant, a well-deserved, well-earned, death!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to renewal, to always be a curiously reforming people always devoted to God's reformation, the Church reformed always to be reformed! Amen and amen.