
A Holy Nation: Bible Study

The Fifth Episcopal District of the
African Methodist Episcopal Church



The Year of Epiphany

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Introduction to A Holy Nation: Bible Study

Greetings to each of you in the holy name of Jesus!

We have developed this Bible Study curriculum to undergird Bishop Clement W. Fugh's vision for the work of the Fifth Episcopal District for this first year of the quadrennial. Most of our local churches have some sort of weekly Bible Study gathering. It is our hope that the lessons provided here will be used by each local church.

For this second quadrennial year, we have been asked to focus on The Season of Epiphany - Restoring the Temple Order. This is a season of training and reordering ministry. In accordance with this focus, we have been asked to give our attention to the roles of priests, prophets, and pastors; the roles of deacons and lay (lagos); regard for the holy — house and things. While the central scripture of the call to be a “Holy Nation” issued at the watergate continues to be our primary scriptural focus (Nehemiah 8:1-10; I Peter 2:1-10) for the quadrennial, the scriptural focus for the 2017-2018 Annual Conference Year, in particular, is Acts 6:2-8:

2 And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. **3** Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, **4** while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." **5** What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **6** They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. **7** The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. **8** Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

and Ephesians 4:11-14:

11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. **14** We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

However, given the focus on Epiphany, this Bible Study Guide engages each of the lectionary texts assigned in the Revised Common Lectionary for Epiphany for Years A, B, and C. Thus, the studies will support the life of the Church this year and for years to come especially in the season of Epiphany.

Each contributor was asked to observe the following format for the Bible Studies, consistent with the framework used in the Commission for World Mission. It is as follows:

- 1. Title**
- 2. Date**

3. Opening Prayer

4. Scripture

5. Contemporary Context: A descriptive engagement of the context which will serve as the interpretative lens through which you will read the text. The following questions provide a guide:

- a. How do you connect with the text?
- b. Where are you coming from?
- c. What about your context connects with the text and why?

6. Exegesis: An exegetical engagement of the selected text, locating it in its original context. These are as precise as possible with respect to addressing the text/s we assigned because many of the texts are closely connected. The following questions provide a guide:

- a. What is important or helpful to know about the original context of the text (i.e., What was the world like when the text was written? What were people like when the text was written? What other things did people believe when the text was written)?
- b. What strikes you about the words used in the text? Do these words have other meanings in their original languages or contexts?

7. Conversation: Putting the text (as you understand it) in conversation with the contemporary context and exegesis provided. Here, we consider: what does this mean for our lives, and our life as a community?

8. Questions: A set of discussion questions relevant to our community consciousness. These should enable study participants to engage their contexts, dig deeper into the text, and extrapolate from the text such meanings as may emerge for their specific contexts.

9. Media: Engagement with art or other forms of symbolic representation in a manner which could lead to deeper engagement or study.

Contributors

We are grateful for each of the contributors who prepared Bible Studies for this collection. Please review the Table of Contents that reflects the scope of this project and the breadth of participation throughout the District. We are especially grateful to our new and returning contributors. We are also grateful to Mrs. Amy Emery Brown for her editorial work.

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The Burdens and Blessings of Diversity

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5 November 2017

Prayer

Dear Loving God: In our eagerness to please you in our reaching out to serve “all nations and all people,” give us the sensitivity to see our own biases, exhibit humility to feel the hurts and slights of others, and the courage to love everyone equally. Amen.

Scripture

Acts 6: 1-8

Contemporary Context

Our churches are located in multicultural, multiethnic, and extraordinarily mixed communities. In being obedient to the “Great Commission” - we are expected to bring into our congregations persons from various backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, life experiences, generational perspectives, cultures and sensitivities. As we are about the business of “doing good,” we must always monitor the impact of our ministries on those who are *different* than our traditional or historic membership base. This text reminds us that we must monitor the impact of our ministries to see if everyone is receiving the blessings of our ministries as we had intended. Biases can be unintentional and inadvertent yet still hurtful. Promoting and living with the challenges of cultural diversity is hard work.

Exegesis

The early church was living out its mission as expressed in Acts 2: 44-45, “*they gave to anyone as they had need.*” Such graciousness attracted a lot of people, because there were needy people in every community of believers. For the early church, being benevolent had an unintended downside. It was perceived that its benevolence had not benefited all believers equally. This was particularly true for the widows in the early church. The Greek-speaking widows believed that they were being discriminated against in favor of the Hebrew-speaking widows. And apparently, there was some truth to that accusation. This issue exasperated the Apostles because they wanted to focus more of their energy on preaching and teaching. The important work of benevolence was a distraction from their other major ministries. Something had to change.

To address the accusations related to unequal treatment and the Apostle’s need to focus more on their preaching and teaching ministries, they called a “Church Conference” to address those issues. In what was an inspired solution, the Apostles asked the assembled disciples to select seven (7) from within their ranks who were not only well respected, but who were also “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” These disciples would be given the responsibility of directing the benevolent work. More importantly, and it is only

suggested in the ultimate selections, all or nearly all of the disciples who were chosen for this sacred assignment came from the community from which the complaint had been launched: Greek believers.

Conversation

There is something very important for us to discover in examining this early controversy in the early Church. First of all, the Apostles and the disciples did not run from the issue. They did not deny the accusation, but rather addressed it head on. Secondly, the leadership of the Church recognized some important management deficiencies because there had been a lack of delegation for some of the tasks in the Church. The Apostles could not fully use their gifts of preaching and teaching the Gospel of Jesus because they were also occupied with addressing some of the temporal needs of the congregation. Something had to give. They decided to delegate and grant authority to those who were gifted in serving the temporal needs of their congregation. The genius of the actions taken by the early church was not just the empowering of non-apostles, but reaching into the “community of the slighted” for leadership and resolution of the problem of perceived bias.

These are important lessons for the church as we seek to address the issues of diversity in our local congregations and communities. It is not enough that we desire to reach those communities not currently represented in our local church. We must have the courage to recruit, train, and then empower those from the “underrepresented populations” to participate fully in our church and ministries. In 1 Corinthians 12, Apostle Paul lists gifts of healing, helps, administration, speaking in different kinds of tongues to edify the church. This text gives us a blueprint for addressing some of the challenges of diversity the Church. We are to locate and find persons who are well respected in their communities, “full of the Spirit and wisdom,” and then empower them to participate in the work and growth of the Church. In doing so we avoid the problem of perceived or actual biases, because we will have expanded our capacity for empathy and cultural sensitivities.

Finally, one of the unintended consequences of delegation of authority and diversity in the ranks of leadership was the unanticipated but welcomed growth of the Church. The number of disciples dramatically increased, including an unexpected growth of *former* Jewish priests. Perhaps the public display of diversity of leadership in the church and the church’s openness to problem-solving, signaled that there is *room for everyone* in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Questions

1. Is your church able to recognize the concerns, criticisms or hurts of its members? How are you addressing them?
2. What cultural and socio-economic biases are we overlooking in our local churches? How are you addressing them?
3. As you survey your membership, what groups in your community are missing? What are your plans to reach out to those “underrepresented” groups?
4. How diverse is your church leadership? Who is missing on your leadership team? Women, millennials, Latino or Hispanic, parents, youth, recovering addicts, ex-felons, newer members and LGBT?
5. The Apostle’s criteria for leadership was that of *believers* who are **respected, full of Spirit and wise**. Have we in our local churches, created other criteria for leadership and as a result not been able to fully included “slighted communities?”

Just Stay in Your Lane: Growing Up the Head

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12 November 2017

Prayer

Dear God: Your people need to hear a word from you in a nurturing, loving, and growing environment, absent of the confusion of the world. Please give us a discerning spirit and give us the courage to become spiritually mature in a manner that you have prescribed. We acknowledge that Jesus is the perfect Head of the Church, grant us the gift of growing up the Head. Amen.

Scripture

Ephesians 4:11-16

Contemporary Context

The universal church is seen by much of the world, a religious organization in crisis. Millions of people are leaving the church because of confusion and/or personal vendettas and agendas. The church also seems to be a place for religious bigotry, social and political exclusions and hate speech. Denominations are breaking up over issues regarding who can be acceptable believers, and how a loving family is defined. Finally, there are physical fights breaking out at national and international church gatherings, due to differences in opinion about who can be a legitimate follower of Jesus Christ. Where is the love of Christ?

Regardless of denomination, just under the surface, there exist levels of personal and professional animus due to persons not willing to accept nor understand the concept of “staying in their lane.” In professional football, the mantra for being a champion is: JUST DO YOUR JOB! The idea being, if everyone carried out their assigned task (or in the case of the Church) doing that for which one is gifted and qualified to do -- the Church would become more successful numerically and spiritually. The writer of Ephesians is saying that if everyone “did their job” the church would grow in a healthy manner and the church would be full of love.

Exegesis

Once the early church began to grow beyond its base in Jerusalem, and as more persons joined the church, it was inevitable that there would opportunities for misunderstandings with regard to roles and responsibilities. Rightly or wrongly people staked out positions of authority and scopes of duty that did not edify the church, but rather boosted their own self-worth. Individuals would assert their roles based on the strength of their personalities or some mystical demonstration of gifts and graces. Often, they would attack the credibility of others, in order to elevate themselves.

Eventually, there developed three groups of church leaders in the 1st Century of the Church:

- a) Apostles - who by common understanding were those who walked with Jesus, and were witnesses of his resurrection;
- b) prophets and evangelists - persons who roamed from community to community either starting new churches and recruiting members for local congregations and/or asserting that they had a message from God - and claimed to have a prophetic voice; and
- c) Pastors and/or teachers - they would focus their gifts nearly exclusively with a local congregation for personal care, spiritual growth and development.

Each role would be crucial to the growth and success of the Church. The Apostles, long before there were any written records to the contrary, would testify to what they saw and heard and witnessed with respect to Jesus, the risen Lord. Apostles were the elder statesmen for the Church. They had the most exalted position. But over time, both through persecution and natural aging -- their numbers were diminishing and the roles of the other disciples and leaders became more dominant. That led to competition for leadership and importance. The Ephesian author was seeking to bring some order to situations that were getting explosive. Internal competition and jealousy was hurting the growth of the church.

The writer was asking all those in the household of faith to just “do their job” with their roles, ultimately having one objective: to “equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ”

Conversation

In our communities today, there is a lot of confusion as to who really speaks for God. Amazingly there are those who insist on calling themselves “apostles” - a title that would certainly confuse those who walked with Jesus 2000 years ago. Yet some today claim some an ‘apostolic’ standing and expect others, to acknowledge their title. Additionally, there are others who claim some “prophetic gift.” Some do have a gift of religious entertainment and can fill auditoriums and stadia putting on display, their claim for demonstrating their ‘prophetic gift.’ And yet, there are others who, on a less grand scale, demonstrate their forth-telling the will of God. They can, to some extent, fore-tell the future for individuals, and announce the consequences which would follow, if that believer accepts the word spoken into their spirit.

There is no way to credential one’s giftedness, and thus both ‘prophets and false prophets’ are seen in the public square with similar standing. Additionally, there are many persons claiming to be evangelists. Some having some denominational affiliation, and others are just self-appointed. Finally, there are pastors and pastor/teachers and pastor/teacher/bishops -- and other combinations of titles that suggest some gravitas with their ecclesiastical designations. There is confusion in the general community as to who really speaks for God.

With this explosion of titles and roles -- there is not a corresponding explosion in the number of followers and believers in Jesus Christ. In fact the number of regular attenders to churches in America continues to decrease. It seems that the church is not doing its job, and those of us in positions of responsibility in the church are not as effective as we should be. We must be more self-critical. Somehow we are missing the mark, and perhaps we are adding to the confusion in the Body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11 says: “Now these are the gifts Christ *gave to the church*: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers” (*italics mine*). Rather than our claiming our various offices, we should let Christ speak to this generation and allow the Church to receive His gifts rather than our putting wrapping paper around ourselves and claiming that we *are* gift of Christ.

This rush of self-importance, this lack of humility, and this inflation of titles and positions, may be self-satisfying, but it is not helping the Church to “grow up the Head,” which is Jesus Christ. Perhaps the problem of the Church not growing isn’t “*those heathens*” not wanting to be part of the Church, but rather it is us. We fail to see how those outside the Church are *nonplus* to what we call ourselves, and are waiting to see if we can live up to whatever title we claim. Furthermore, we may be failing to recognize that our goal is to grow up to the Head - and help the church to grow in knowledge and love of Jesus, so that we can be more like Christ.

Questions

1. How can we, in our teaching ministries, do a better job in clarifying the confusion in the Church community about “title inflation?”
2. Are we being too ‘politically correct’ in not pointing out the epidemic of self-promotions: “archbishops,” “cardinals,” “bishops,” “doctors,” “prophets,” “evangelists,” “preacher/teachers,” etc.?
3. The text points out that all of these offices or positions are to equip God’s people to do His work and to build up the Church. In what ways can we do a better job in doing the work of Christ and building up the church?
4. Another role of these ecclesiastical offices is to help our members mature in a knowledge of Christ and not be influenced by “every wind of new teaching.” In what ways can we help our members discern the difference between fresh revelations and irresponsible “god talk”?

The God of Second Chances

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19 November 2017

Prayer

God of Heaven, I pray that you will give us eyes to see beyond what we can see. We thank you for being a second chance God. Keep us in your hand that we may not stray, and help us to remain faithful to your will and your way. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Contemporary Context

You're feelin' pretty blue, you didn't do what God requested. Yeah, I'd be mopin' too, if I was gonna be digested. This ain't a pretty picture, no I said, it ain't a pretty sight, no. You ran from God this morning and you're whale chow tonight. But hold up, hang on. Not so fast, your life ain't over yet. See, we're here to tell you all about the forgiveness that you can get. You see God's a God of mercy. God's a God of love, and right now, He's gonna lend a helping hand from up above. Praise the Lord, He's the **God of Second Chances**. You'll be floored how His love your life enhances. You can be restored from your darkest circumstances. Our God is a **God of Second Chances!** Ain't it good to know a God who gives a second chance? Why, that's enough to get a smile from Mr. Grumpy-Pants. So, if you say you're sorry for all the stuff you do, we know that He'll be ready with a second chance for you. Praise the Lord, He's the **God of Second Chances**. You'll be floored how His love your life enhances. You can be restored from your darkest circumstances. Our God is a **God of Second Chances**. Our God is a God. If you believe, God's love is true, then you should know what you should do. If you believe, God's love is true, then you should know what you should do. God gives a second chance. Second chances, second chances, Praise the Lord, He's the **God of Second Chances**.

Those are lyrics entitled "God of Second Chances" from the April 2013 movie animation "Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie". There are three gospel soul singers with a choir in the background clothed in cross robes singing to Jonah about the "God of Second Chances".

Jonah's disobedience to the assignment God gave to him resulted in a "time-out" in the belly of a big fish. Jonah actually benefits through the three-day revival of prayer and restoration. Often times, we need to be still through God's chastisement when we have disobeyed. It allows us to reflect on how much we must depend on God and not on ourselves. With a contrite heart, we are able to connect to God while he gradually works on us.

Exegesis

After Jonah was given the assignment, he immediately placed in his heart that it was a destination he is not willing to travel. The nature, of the Ninevite people, is termed wicked “Go to the great city of Neneveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:2 NIV) due to Nimrod (a great grandson of Noah by Ham); who began his kingdom with Babel and its tower in rebellion against God, “went forth into Assyria, and built Neneveh” (Gen. 10:10-12). When the Ninevite army defeated the opposition, it resulted in beheading of kings or the flaying of generals alive, and cutting off limbs of the body and tossing them for personal trophies. This is definitely not the assignment Jonah signed up for. After Jonah’s release from the depths of the fish, his assignment was restored “a second time” (Jonah 3:1), and he boldly proclaimed the message God had given him for some forty-three days about their destruction because of their wickedness. Clearly, the message penetrated and convicted the hearts of the Ninevites and turned to the God of Israel. All of them fasted and put on sackcloth through contrition, mourning, and repentance. When the king of Nineveh heard, he too rose from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust to show humility (Jonah 3:5,6). God was pleased with the change and spared the city of Nineveh.

Conversation

We are chosen for a season to do what is impossible in our own comprehension, but very possible in the mind of God. We too have turned away from many assignments and when we look back on our misjudgments, God gave us a **Second Chance** (figuratively). God has a right to use whom he pleases to place His plan in motion. We are pieces on the chess board allowing the fingers of God to move into battle zones and claim the victory. It might not have been clear to us before, but through the epiphany it allows us to have a deeper perspective on how God does what God does. “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:16). Our mission is to target the lost, the wicked, the down-trodden, and the misguided, to name a few. The message: if you believe, God’s love is true, then you should know what you should do. If you believe, God’s love is true, then you should know what you should do. God gives a second chance. Second chances, second chances, Praise the Lord, He’s the **God of Second Chances**.

Questions

1. We tend to blow our stack when the “wicked” are given second chances. How can Christians learn to rejoice when others not like them turn to God?
2. Sermons of this millennia seem to be watered down messages. Do you believe that sermons should be harsh, thought provoking, and brazen to get the hearers of today’s attention?
3. Our fraternity/sorority of believers have taken a stance to not reach out to anyone not like them. As a result, churches have become content, complacent, and empty. What type of action should God take?
4. What types of shipwrecks, fish bellies, and/or pits has God released you from? Have you shared your story? Were they convicted? Did they turn to God as a result of your testimony?

Can You Handle His Return?

Rev. T. C. Johnson

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26 November 2017

Prayer

Dear God, we thank you for the sacrifice you have made for us. Prepare us to receive your Son into our hearts and to ready our spirits for His return. In Jesus name, Amen.

Scripture

Malachi 3:1-4

Context

The local news- TMZ, Entertainment Tonight- to name a few, oftentimes show large crowds clamoring uncontrollably in a mob-like manner when a star in entertainment becomes visible. They will press their way or shout as loud as they can to get the attention of their idol. It's amazing the lengths that people go through to throw themselves like rolled up newspapers at the celeb's feet. The Justin Biebers', Beyonces', and the Leonardo DiCaprios' of the world would be trampled if they did not have the army of security to hold the crowds back.

There is something to be said about the nature of crowds; their reactions, their movements, their impulses, and their decision making. Envision the same description of crowds when confronted by the (new) presence of Jesus the Christ. What will they do, as Malachi pens, in the beginning of chapter 3, when they hear the introduction of Jesus by His messenger? The suspense is overflowing with ardent energy as the future bodily presence of the Savior strolls into the Temple. This will be a different Jesus than before. He came to bring salvation. Now, He comes to bring judgment.

Exegesis

At the end of Malachi 2, Israel complained that God seemed to reward the wicked and did not exercise His justice in the world. God responds, "I will set things right with My Messiah, and before Him will come my Messenger." (3:1). In an ancient royal procession the messenger went before the King to announce his arrival, to indicate the route, and to remove any obstacles in the road. John the Baptist fulfilled this exact ministry for Jesus. He will enter the Temple with thronging and boisterous crowds trying to get a healing, a blessing, a word. But this Jesus, this Messiah has come to do some cleaning and to prepare God's children for Himself.

When Christ comes this second time, it will be awesome and terrible, but with a purpose. The launderer and the refiner will work together to clean, and not destroy. Charles S. Spurgeon says,

If any of you, my hearers, are seeking the Lord at this time, I want you to understand what it means: you are seeking a fire which will test you, and consume much which has been dear to you.

We are not to expect Christ to come and save us in our sins, he will come and save us from our sins; therefore, if you are enabled by faith to take Christ as a Savior, remember that you take him as the purger and the purifier, for it is from sin that he saves us.”¹

Conversation

It is clear, God has a mission in place...**clean up**. We are not ready to go before the Father in the state that we are in. There is too much going on within us to approach a holy and righteous God. In fact, we are not prepared for the preparer. The way our world looks at this very moment, is at best, shameful. No time to waste, the Messiah is arriving soon to wash us with the strong lye soap and to burn all of the impurities away. David says “Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Ps 51:9-12). It will take constant time and watchfulness and Jesus is prepared to do it. God’s ultimate purpose is to cleanse society, and to change the hearts of men and women. When Jesus returns in glory and rules on this earth, evil will be quickly punished.

Questions

1. Knowing the bit of information that you know now, will you still be a part of the crowd thronging for Jesus?
2. The way our nation is going, how long will the Father tolerate such blatant sin? Can you see any of His works unfolding?
3. The complaints of the people were heard and God responded. What will happen when the remnant come together now and complained about the millennia?
4. What would be your greatest fear, about yourself, if Jesus returned today?
5. There are major catastrophes all around. There are talks about war between major powers. Diseases and pestilence; hunger and suicides. Where is the church and its leaders that crash into your television stations? Will the Messiah refine and cleanse them (Levites)?

¹ “The Sitting of the Refiner,” *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*. Sermon, The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, 1881. <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols25-27/chs1575.pdf>.

What Does God Want From Us?

Rev. Francine A. Brookins, Esq.

Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Fontana, CA)

3 December 2017

Prayer

God who brought us up and out of Egypt, who calls us by name; God who lifted us from where we were and turned us into a chosen people, a royal priesthood, help us to remember where we came from. Do not let us think more highly of ourselves than we ought.

Scripture

Micah 6:1-8

Contemporary Context

We often find people in churches fighting for position and authority. There are kitchen fights, choir fights, official board fights, annual and general conference fights. Sometimes we are fighting over the menu, the song selection or the agenda, but often we are really fighting over pride, ego, insecurities or hurt feelings. We feel entitled to something and when we don't get it, we become destroyers of one another and often destroyers of the common agenda.

Exegesis

This section of the text begins with a lawsuit where God is both the plaintiff and the judge, Micah is God's counsel, and the mountains and hills serve as the jury. There are four questions for the people: 1) Have I mistreated you? (vss. 1-3); 2) Have I required too much from you? (vss. 4-8); 2) Have I approved of your exploiting one another? (vss. 9-12); Have I blessed your get-rich-quick-schemes? (vss. 13-16) With those questions on the table the people are brought to trial. Today we focus on the first two questions.

Has God mistreated the people? No! God brought them out of Egypt (out of the house of bondage); God gave them spiritual leaders; God turned curses into blessings; God kept every promise made. Hearing these reminders, the people ask what God wants in return (vs. 6). They foolishly think they can offer God things or rituals or even their firstborn children. This proves they have not listened to what they have been told. (vs. 8)

God wants them to: live justly. They are to act with equity, fairness and deference to those who are in a weaker social position – the opposite of violence, oppression, fraud, lying and injustice.

God wants them to: love mercy. A spirit of generosity, loyalty, graciousness, and maintain a commitment to forgiveness for the sake of the entire body.

God wants them to: walk humbly with God. Walking is the Hebrew idiom for what we call one's 'lifestyle.' It is how we live our daily lives (as in how is your walk with the Lord?). Pride insists on taking first place, having the best seat, hearing our names called, and getting the credit. Humility is an act of faith. It is esteeming others as better than ourselves while at the same time knowing that we are extremely valuable in the eyes of God.

Conversation

The people thought they could satisfy God with offerings and sacrifices but they had been told repeatedly what satisfies God (justice, mercy and humility). Maybe it was easier for them to think of giving away their money and stuff than it was to consider doing what God really wanted. Sometimes we hear what we want to hear and refuse to hear what we don't want to hear. The Word tells us that obedience is better than sacrifice. (1 Sam. 15:22).

This year we are focusing on our roles in the church. We are also asking God to open our eyes and reveal things to us that we did not yet perceive. This scripture reminds of the Agenda God has set for our time together as a church on this side of heaven.

Questions

1. What is justice? Is it different than 'living justly'?
2. What is mercy? What do justice and mercy have in common?
3. What is humility?
4. What are the issues of injustice inside the church walls? (Local, District, Connectional)
5. When is the last time you had the opportunity to show mercy? To stand/speak for justice? To put your pride aside and let humility lead you?
6. If you were describing the agenda of your local church would you say that you spend most of your time living into the requirements of this scripture?
7. In what way can you personally implement these things in your daily activities for/with the church?

Walking By Faith

Rev. Francine A. Brookins, Esq.

Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Fontana, CA)

10 December 2017

Prayer

True and living God, remind us of who You really are and what You desire from us. If we have lost our focus or our faith, restore us as we study Your word together today. Remind us of Your power, Your presence and Your promises.

Scripture

Isaiah 40:21-31

Contemporary Context

We have a U.S. President who lies nearly every time he speaks. He admitted that he sexually assaulted women. He defended the Nazi and White Supremacist terrorists who killed a young woman in Virginia as ‘fine people.’ His singular agenda seems to be the undoing of every policy passed for the people by the previous administration. No more Medicare, no more social security, no more health care, no more housing, no more public school, and no more help for poor people in general. If God were to speak to us today and say, *‘it is time to start walking out of this bondage. I have prepared a place for you where no-one will oppress you. All you have to do is believe me, and start walking.’*, how many of us would believe God and start walking?

Exegesis

The generation of people who remembered the homeland of Judah and the city of Jerusalem were dead. The people to whom God was speaking knew only Babylon, and the promise of God as transmitted to them by their ancestors. These people grew up in Babylon, built homes and families, started businesses, and found a way to survive in a hostile environment. Some of them had become wealthy and secure. As long as the children of Israel didn’t cause too much ‘trouble’ speaking up for themselves, they were ‘safe’ in Babylon.

In our text God calls God’s people to come out of Babylon and take a seven-hundred-mile march through rough terrain with only the possessions they could carry on their back and pull in a cart. They were to start walking out of bondage with only the promise of God in their hearts. They were gripped with fear.

Some were settled with their level of success and comfort and no longer yearned for freedom. Some were afraid that if Babylon saw them organizing to leave they would violently suppress the movement. They were surrounded by powerful images they could touch, and some feared trusting a God they could not see or touch. Some feared they would not be strong enough to make the journey.

In our verses today, God speaks to each of their fears with questions intended to jog their memories and strengthen their faith. Take a moment now in this study to review each of the rhetorical questions God asks them in vss. 21-31.

Conversation

Many of us have become comfortable in oppressive situations. We have found a way to 'make it' in the midst of mess. This is true in our families, on our jobs, in our churches and in this Country. Some have accumulated wealth and status while the masses suffer. Those who realize they have nothing to lose may be more willing to take risks for the promise of future gain. Those who 'are comfortable' are less likely to respond to the call to leave the present comforts and walk by faith into the freedom promised for all. But they must travel together if they are going to receive the promise. They must trust God if they are going to move from where they are to where God has called them to be.

Questions

1. If you had to give up \$1.00 on God's promise that in a few days and with a little effort you would get \$50.00, would you do it? Why or why not?
2. Imagine that you are the children of Israel in our text and have a discussion about what concerns people might raise if everyone were asked to show up and walk out of Babylon together.
3. The opposite of faith is fear (**F**alse **E**vidence **A**ppearing **R**eal). Name 2 things that fear stopped you from doing in your life.
4. What decisions would you make if you were not afraid? (in your family, on your job, in your church, in the community)
5. Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things NOT seen. It is easier to trust what we can see. Name three decisions you have made by faith. Discuss how you made the decision, what challenges you faced, and how it turned out.

Pass It On

Rev. Karen Anderson

*Pastor, Ward Chapel AME Church
(Florissant, MO)*

17 December 2017

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for those you place in our lives to instruct and guide us along this journey called life and faith. Thank you for the men and women who take time to speak into us words of affirmation and correction that we might become all that you have created us to be. Mostly thank you for Jesus, the greatest example what a mentor should be. Amen.

Scripture

2 Kings 2:1-12

Contemporary Context

God is constantly raising new leaders. For young adults graduating from college and preparing to enter the world, one piece of advice frequently given is to find a mentor. The dictionary defines a mentor as a wise and trusted counselor and teacher. This person should be someone who preferably has experience in your chosen field of study or interest. A mentor desires for you to be successful and doesn't mind sharing both their successes and failures. Mentors serve as sounding boards for our questions and concerns. Mentors are not threatened by those who come behind rather their desire is to equip the mentee for success, in order that they may excel in their endeavor.

We know transitions are never easy. However, they can be made smoother when someone has been trained and prepared to assume leadership roles.

Exegesis

We first meet Elijah in 1 Kings 17 when he is sent by God to deliver a message to King Ahab that there would be a drought in the land. Elijah learns that to be a critic of the system is not an easy job and he finds himself being pursued by Jezebel. He flees to the desert, hides in a cave and bemoans being the only prophet of God left. In the cave, God lets him know he is not alone, recommissions him for service and sends him back the way he came with instructions to anoint Elisha as his replacement.

Elisha like many of us was a bit hesitant to move into the role immediately, but instead takes on the role of Elijah's companion and prophet in training. So, he travels with Elijah watching, learning and being introduced to the other prophets. We hear nothing else of Elisha until 2 Kings 2:1 when it is announced that YHWH is about to take Elijah away in a whirlwind as they are traveling from Gilgal. At this point Elijah says he will now return to Bethel but Elisha should remain behind. Elisha refuses to allow Elijah to make the trip without him. At each step along the way they meet members of the prophetic community who remind Elisha that the time of Elijah's departing is imminent. Elisha's response each time is 'don't talk about it.' Maybe the thought of being on his own without his mentor created tension in Elisha as he realized the responsibility which he was about to assume.

And so, he asks Elijah for a double portion of his spirit. It would serve as the public acknowledgment of his transition. Elijah hesitates but in the end as he is taken into the whirlwind, Elisha's request is fulfilled. The cloak of Elijah falls to the ground, Elisha picks it up, returns to the banks of the Jordan, and strikes the water with the cloak as Elijah had done as a group of prophets from Jericho watch. The transition is complete.

Conversation

We've all had people in our lives who either directly or indirectly have influenced our growth and development, both personally and professionally. Persons who have seen something in us and have been willing to assist us on our journey, sometimes preparing us to assume their role or to move to a higher level. Someone who has been willing to invest time in us teaching and sharing wisdom and knowledge to assist us in the navigation of unfamiliar spaces. Often, these mentors provide opportunities to gain firsthand experience through shadowing in the work environment, providing an invaluable learning experience. It's also through our relationship with our mentor that we begin to build our professional networks as we are introduced to others.

The text shows us the value of training and preparing others for transition to leadership. It emphasizes the need for mentors and guides to share and pass on knowledge and wisdom to those coming behind them. The passing of the mantle is not the loss of something for the mentor, but an assurance that the work can continue beyond the individual.

Questions

1. Who have been the mentors in your life?
2. What, if any, have been the benefits to you of that relationship?
3. Who have you been willing to mentor?
4. In what areas do you see a need for mentoring in the church to promote smooth transition of roles?
5. As Christians how are we called to 'mentor' people in the faith?
6. What would our church/communities look like if we invested additional time in our youth, taking the time to walk with them as they move through life sharing our successes and failures rather than always pointing out their shortcomings?
7. What would 'a double portion of our spirit' look like today?

Choose Wisely

Rev. Karen Anderson

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(Florissant, MO)*

24 December 2017

Prayer

Gracious God grant us wisdom and insight as we journey through life. Remind us when we are faced with difficult choices to be still and know that you are God, to listen for your instructions and to follow them with a grateful heart. Amen.

Scripture

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Contemporary Context

As a child growing up, when it came time to circle Christmas gifts in the catalog, my mom would remind us to take our time before we made our decision. She'd say, "choose wisely because you can only have two things." Which meant we had to think intentionally about what we wanted because we would have to live with our decision for the entire year. As we got older and were faced with the multiplicity of decisions which must be made daily, her words 'choose wisely' often echoed in my head. Particularly as I came to recognize the fact that accompanying every decision we make in life are consequences. The writer says, 'choose life', it's a choice which carries many consequences.

Exegesis

The book of Deuteronomy or "second law" was written to affirm the centrality of the covenant God made with Moses on Mt. Sinai, not just for the present generation, but all subsequent generations of Israelites. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking to the people as they sit on the periphery of the promised land. It's been a long journey with many ups and downs. So, for the first 30 chapters, Moses reiterates the law and reinforces that there is only one God who deserves their worship and loyalty: the God of their ancestors. He says if they remain faithful to God, God will be faithful and will bless them as they enter this new land. Moses recounts the story of their deliverance, exile, and the journey, as a way of reminding them of some of the untoward consequences when they chose to rebel against God. And so, he concludes this third pastoral sermon by challenging them to 'choose wisely.' Decide between doing the things which bring life and those which promote death and destruction. To choose life is to live with intentionality focused on loving God above all else, listening for God's voice and walking in God's ways.

Conversation

The way the text presents the call to 'choose' might make one think it is a one-time choice, but choosing 'life' is a daily decision. I believe that for most of us, we desire to please God but like the children of Israel, the distractions of the world sometimes catch us off guard. The world is constantly offering us choices which may seem life giving but may result in death for self and/or others. When we choose to

bow down to wealth and privilege, refusing to hold those in positions of power accountable, it can lead to death for the economically disadvantaged. When we choose profit over protection of the environment, we are choosing death for future generations. When we choose to put personal interest above the interest of others, we are choosing to leave them vulnerable to be exploited and left to destruction. When we choose to malign and ostracize persons because they don't conform to our definitions of acceptability, we are choosing death for entire communities. When we choose greed and selfishness over selflessness, we die to ourselves. When we use religion to oppress rather than liberate, we are choosing to sit in the place of God as judge and jury. In the world in which we live, it's easy to get caught up and forget what God desires from us.

It's why Moses spent 30 chapters reminding the people of the times when they didn't 'choose wisely', the times when they turned away from God and suffered dire consequences. This call to choose is one we must hear and answer daily. It reminds us that we must be intentional in our pursuit of God and seeking after the things of God. To choose life means that we don't just choose life for ourselves but that we are committed to revealing God to those we meet. To choose life means following God's instructions to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly. The call to choose life reminds us that our first choice every day should be to love the Lord our God with all our heart, our soul and our mind, and then to love our neighbor as ourselves. Choosing wisely has eternal consequences.

Questions

1. Have there been times in your life when you haven't 'chosen wisely'? If comfortable sharing, what were the consequences?
2. Name a time when you were intentional and 'chose wisely'. What were the consequences of your choice?
3. What are some spiritual practices which can help us to remain focused on the things of God?
4. What role does the church play in helping persons to make the decision to 'choose life'?
5. How can the church be a place of life to persons who have been marginalized and oppressed?
6. Choosing life means we are the examples of God's love on earth. Where do you feel God is calling you to be an example?
7. Name some areas where you feel 'society' has not chosen wisely? What have been the consequences?
8. What role can we play in helping our communities to once again 'choose life'?

A Burst of Mercy!

Rev. Francine A. Brookins, Esq.

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31 December 2017

Prayer

God whose property is always to have mercy, please remind us of the particular mercies you have shown towards us. As we study today, teach us to be merciful. Show us the places where just a little bit of grace would change everything.

Scripture

Isaiah 43:18-25

Contemporary Context

I was teaching a class in a Christian context the other day and I asked the group to share the last time that another human being had been merciful towards them. Nobody spoke. “When was the last time you showed mercy to someone?”, I asked. The examples were ALL of having given money to homeless people. Are there people in your church or family who hold grudges against others? Are you one of them? Could this be an opportunity show mercy as a means of transformation? If God’s property is always to have mercy, then how can ‘the people of God’ be so short on mercy?

Exegesis

The American Tract Society Bible Dictionary defines the word *mercy* as:

The divine goodness exercised towards the wretched and the guilty, in harmony with truth and justice, Psalm 85:10. The plan by which God is enabled to show saving mercy to men, for Christ’s sake, is the most consummate work of infinite wisdom and love. The soul that has truly experienced the mercy of God will be merciful like him, Luke 6:36, compassionate to the wretched, Psalm 41:1,2, and forgiving towards all, Matthew 5:7, 18:33.²

The people of Israel had sinned against God and had been punished by God through the hand of the Babylonians. At some point, God decides that the punishment must end. It could have gone on forever because the people of Israel did not truly repent – even after their fall. They rejected God. They did not pray, they did not tithe, they did not offer themselves in worship, they were not grateful for what God had done, and was doing, and had promised to do- but instead- they complained and cried out because of their punishment. Justice demanded they should die, but God! Instead of a word of condemnation, God promises to forget about their sins and to create a new thing.

Conversation

Nobody ever deserves mercy. As a partner to grace, the nature of mercy is that it is undeserved. It is an alternative to punishment for the goal of becoming whole. It requires that we forgive the unforgivable.

² “Topical Bible: Mercy.” Accessed October 30, 2017. <http://biblehub.com/topical/m/mercy.htm#amt>.

It requires that we swallow our pride. It requires that we desire reconciliation more than revenge. If we want to be like Christ, then we must allow him to work to change our minds and hearts, so that we can see it like he sees it.

Take time to read 1 Corinthians 13 before moving to the questions for today's study.

Questions

1. Do you pray? Talk about your prayer life.
2. Do you tithe? Talk about how you became a tither.
3. Do you offer yourself in worship? Talk about what worship means to you. What is the heart of a true worshipper?
4. Do you spend more time thanking and praising in gratitude, or complaining and speaking negatively?
5. If you were God and you were giving out grades on the basis of the 4 questions above, what grade would you give yourself?
6. When was the last time you showed mercy to another human being? To a stranger? To a loved one?
7. Are there any relationships in your church, your family, your workplace, your community, where a burst of mercy could cause everyone to sing a new song?
8. What is stopping you/them from showing mercy?

The Benefits of Seeking The Lord

Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell

Pastor, Second AME Church (Los Angeles, CA)

Fifth District Women In Ministry, President

7 January 2018

Prayer

Lord, we praise you and thank you for your saving grace. We are grateful for your unconditional love that receives us in whatever state or circumstance. Our desire is to seek first your will and your way. In Jesus name, AMEN

Scripture

Isaiah 55:10-13

Contemporary Context

We are often excited about the benefits associated with position and privilege. Many careers and professions offer medical, financial and economically empowering opportunities that accompany base salary. Some receive advice to pursue a career with promising benefits. There are also certain associations with organizations and clubs that grant access to preferred customer sales, VIP seating and parking. The purpose of this lesson is to bring enthusiasm about the spiritual benefits of seeking God's will and way. One of the great hymns of the church, "Standing on the Promises," continues to resonate while reflecting on the great benefits in store for an individual "who seeks God while the Lord may be found."

Exegesis

The Second Book of Isaiah contrasts with the First Book where the Prophet calls Judah, Israel, and surrounding Nations to repent while issuing warnings of God's judgement and punishment. Whereas, in Second Isaiah, the prophet presents a message of consolation, hope, and the benefits that come through the coming of the Messiah.

The book of Isaiah contains poetry and prose and uses personification by assigning personal qualities to divine or inanimate objects. As a reader, one is moved into a mode of visual imagery through divine inspiration by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conversation

Too often, benefits offer superficial satisfaction. "Silver and Gold, but I'd rather have Jesus, than silver and gold." The songwriter expresses preference for Jesus over the riches of the world. Isaiah 55:3-6 extends the invitation to listen, seek and call upon the name of the Lord.

Benefit #1- Seeking the Lord offers refreshment for our souls. God's salvific plan provides spiritual food for our souls. In the midst of disasters, environment changes, hatred on the rise, threats of nuclear wars and rumors of wars, our souls experience void and emptiness. But the prophet promises those who dine at the spiritual table of the Lord will reap benefits. Verse 12 promises the seeker to "go out with joy and be led back in peace." When the spiritual droughts of life attempt to leave us empty and dry, as we seek the Lord, the spirit will surround us with joy and peace.

Benefit #2- Seeking the Lord gives nourishment through the Word as described in verses 10-11. The Word is actively nourishing as it waters, makes flourish, accomplishes and achieves. Nutrition is essential for our physical as well as spiritual growth. God's Word deposits within us the necessary instructions to build, develop and construct our lives for the Lord's purpose. In Genesis 24:12-16, the Lord summoned Moses upon the mountain in order to give the law and commandments for their instruction. God extends an invitation to us to seek the Lord's presence to allow the Word to saturate in our souls as the rain and snow saturate the earth.

Benefit #3- Seeking the Lord provides everlasting communion with God. This is promised through the plan of salvation and nourishment of the Word. Verses 12-13 express imagery of transformation by describing the actions of trees. Seeking God's presence and power opens the door for deliverance, healing, restoration and renewal. Everlasting communion with God allows the following transformative acts to occur: 1. Those dry places where disasters have shattered will discover the restoration of the Lord; 2. Humankind becomes aware of the necessary changes in which to engage, in order to save and preserve God's creation; 3. The Love Feast is more than a local church ritual but causes love to overflow and overpowers hatred in the world; 4. Peace on Earth and goodwill to all humankind prevail over nuclear wars and rumors of wars. These occurrences express the everlasting presence and power of a transformative God who majors in redemption, restoration and renewal.

Questions

1. We discussed the Word as spiritual nourishment. Name and discuss the importance of other spiritually nourishing activities.
2. What are some other benefits of seeking God's presence?
3. How does the Word of God influence our discovery of God's purpose for our life?
4. What does "Seek God while the Lord may be found" mean?
5. How can we participate as an agent of transformation in the name of the Lord?

Set Apart to Be With God

Rev. Jamal Gallow

Associate Minister, Ward AME Church (Los Angeles, CA)

14 January 2018

Prayer

Our Lord and father- we come to you because you are holy, loving, and compassionate. We have set some time aside to study your word trusting that it will be time well spent. We invite your Spirit to lead and guide us. We are grateful for this time. Amen.

Scripture

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Contemporary Context

We find ourselves in a rush. We are in a hurry to finish one thing so that we can do the next thing. Information is thrown at us a warp speed. Our to-do lists are endless. Even our 'free' time is filled with tasks. We must be disciplined and intentional about setting apart special time to be with God. Time with God is part of our tithes. It may seem like a sacrifice but it turns out to yield more fruit than we could have imagined.

Exegesis

Deuteronomy is the Fifth book of the Old Testament and last book of Moses, written around the 7th century BC. Deuteronomy means "These are the words...". In chapter 4, Moses teaches the importance of having a covenantal relationship with God. God calls us to be holy. To be holy means to be set apart and sacred.

As Moses is giving instruction, we are told of the commandment that set apart the Sabbath day from all other days of the week. This is the day that every living and breathing being in the house (including the animals) does not work. This is the day that everyone has a chance to rest. God reminds Israel that they had been slaves in Egypt, forced to labor under watchful eye of the taskmaster. God's mighty hand is more powerful than any tyrant, master, ruler, monarchy. Taking time to spend with God is worth it!

Conversation

I am struck by the fact that this commandment enforces equity and equality for all members of the house. How do you keep this commandment for any person and animal that you can come in contact? Many people have to work on Sundays in order to feed their families. This is really a societal problem, not a personal problem. There was a time when everything shut down so that nobody expected to be served by others on the Sabbath.

Questions

1. Why would Moses need to both, give a commandment and a reminder of past conditions?

2. Do you participate in Sabbath? Why or why not? If yes, what are the important parts of Sabbath in your life? What are some of the benefits you have gained?
3. Do you have feelings about people who work or do other things on Sundays?
4. Does this commandment effect how you interact those who you come in contact with throughout the day? Do you treat people working in service-oriented jobs any differently on Sunday? Have you considered that they may be knowingly working on a Sabbath so that you are well served?
5. How does self-care factor in to the Sabbath?
6. In what ways is the sacrifice of time part of tithing? What are the benefits of tithing?

Am I Really Committed?

Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min.

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21 January 2018

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for your faithfulness towards us even when we have turned and chased idols. Help us to remain committed to our relationship with you. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture

Deuteronomy 11:18

Contemporary Context

Dr. Cornell West in his book *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* says, “We have to recognize that there cannot be relationships unless there is commitment, unless there is loyalty, unless there is love, patience, persistence.” God is desperate for authentic relationship with us, which has been shown through God’s commitment, loyalty, love, patience and persistence. However, in order to have relationship, there must be another person involved. How committed are we to God?

Exegesis

Here we see God warning Israel of the danger of being enticed to worship other gods, by taking careful consideration because it is very possible that we could be deceived. Deception is problematic because the definition of the word suggests that one could allow oneself to be persuaded and enticed. Israel had pagan neighbors who worshiped other gods and idols, and God warns them not to be enticed to transfer their dependence from the God who delivered them from bondage, to any of these false gods.

Because this was so difficult, Moses instructed Israel on behalf of the LORD that they were to fix those words (commandments) in their hearts and minds. This is commitment. When the words of God inhabit and dominate our complete heart and soul there is no room for anything else. Authentic relationship with the LORD requires from us complete commitment, as God is completely committed to us.

The instruction for us is to carefully consider our commitment and loyalty to relationship with God.

Conversation

A committed relationship is what God desires from us. The word committed suggests dedication, devotion, allegiance, loyalty and faithfulness. When I think of commitment, there should be no competition or threat to the relationship. Anything that competes or is a threat should be eliminated for the sake of the relationship. Failure to realize there are threats to every relationship is where we can be guilty of deceiving ourselves.

In our contemporary culture, we have many things that have the potential to entice us more than they should. Social Media has engaged this culture to the point that many spend considerable amount of time

during their day engaging in the various platforms of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. Television shows such as Scandal, Game of Thrones, Power, and Greenleaf have the potential to entice society so much that we will re-arrange our evenings to make sure we're home to engage in this form of entertainment. The NFL, NBA, MLB, ESPN and other sports paralyze some in society for hours each day. These are just a few areas that may consume our day. What about our hobbies, passions and other desires?

If we were to log the amount of time during our day that we allow ourselves harmless forms of entertainment, hobbies, passions and goals, how much time are we committed to other "gods" in comparison to our commitment to our LORD? Our we truly devoting a tenth of our time to the Lord?

Questions

1. Do you think the LORD is jealous of the other commitments we have in life that take up a considerable amount of our time?
2. Reflecting on other things in our life that we are committed to that compete with our devotion with the LORD, what are some adjustments we can make to our personal lives to make a deeper commitment with the LORD?
3. Discuss the laying upon the words of God with your heart and soul.
4. Frontlets were objects containing scripture passages worn on the forehead and between the eyes. The idea is to keep the word of God upon your mind at all times. What are some ways where we can apply this to our contemporary context?

Righteousness and Justice

Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min.

Pastor, Allen Chapel AME Church (Riverside, CA)

28 January 2018

Prayer

God we thank You for being righteous and just. Transform us as we study Your word today so that when we leave, we are more just and more righteous!

Scripture

Psalm 72:1-2, 12

Contemporary Context

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” We have heard the words “not guilty” long enough, to have the families of those who have been unarmed and killed by law enforcement apply permanent bandages to the wounds of their broken hearts. We have heard “not qualified” long enough from places of employment, even though we have labored and worked hard to achieve the education and experience. We have faced racism, sexism and oppression long enough. God is willing and able to drive a spoke in the wheels of injustice!

Exegesis

When people are defenseless, oppressed and afflicted, they need someone who will defend them on their behalf. The psalmist opens in prayer for God to provide a king that would rule justly and with righteousness as God values justice. What they need in a king is one that administers justice in the event of judging, and righteousness in the manner of judging. This is desperately needed on behalf of the poor and needy, and this psalmist prayed for this type of king for the people. The prayer is for this king to help these people and give them justice.

Conversation

Marc Lamont Hill in his book, *Nobody*, recalls in his introduction the shooting death of Michael Brown, “as in the aftermath of his death, his body was left for hours on the hot pavement, his crimson blood puddling next to his young head, staining the street, flowing in a crisscross pattern, a tributary running slowly to the gutter. Eventually, an officer produced a bed sheet and placed it over Brown’s frame, but the sheet wasn’t big enough to cover him completely – and for the next 4 hours, police officers stood stone-faced and crowds of passer-by gazed in astonishment while his body remained on the street. A local resident said ‘they just left him there. . . . Like he ain’t belong to nobody.’

No parents who love him, no community that cared for him, no medical establishment morally compelled to save him. No state duty-bound to invest in him, before or after his death. They treated him like he was, nobody.”

Society today is filled with “nobody’s” – individuals with no healthcare, victims of natural disasters with no aid or resources; citizens that live in the projects of urban cities that seem to get no help from law enforcement to stop shootings and crimes; children who go to schools without adequate instruction or sufficient textbooks. Nobody’s are the people who no one cares about because they don’t have the resources to improve their situation, regardless of the circumstances of that situation.

Our prayer is for our leaders of the church and government- that they would lead and administer justice with righteousness on behalf of the nobody’s. We pray, watch and if necessary, drive a spoke into the wheels of injustice.

Questions

1. Who are the current victims of injustice in our society?
2. How do you think God expects us to serve the victims of injustice in our society? Can we serve them if we don’t know who they are?
3. What resources are available to help us stay alert to the needs of people in our churches, communities, the United States and around the world? Do you use those resources?
4. How can we encourage the victims of injustice as the body of Christ?
5. Is prayer the only power that we have to fight injustice? If not, what are some other tools?

Feed Them Justice

Rev. Quanta M. Crews

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4 February 2018

Prayer

Gracious Father, we enter this prayer praising your Holy name and thanking you for being a just God. We thank you for creating us, having mercy on us and the sacrifice you made to win our battle over 2000 years ago. We know that while you serve us grace and mercy, there are consequences for every action. Consequences can be positive or negative. Lord help us, the saved, the searching, be more like you and feed justice to those we are called to serve. We have faith that you are who you say you are and that all things can be conquered with you on our side. Lead us in serving justly. in Jesus name. Amen.

Scripture

Ezekiel 34

Contemporary Context

The Israelites had turned from the ways that were delivered to them by Moses many years before. The law was not properly followed and worship of other "gods" had been introduced to the culture. The Kingdom of Israel had gone through many changes after the death of King Solomon, eventually being split into two nations and the tribes being divided. King Josiah, of Judah, had attempted to turn things around making the worship of "I AM" the rule of the land. After his death, the people and the rise of the Babylonian empire, some of the Israelites were taken captive to Babylon. This is where we find the prophet Ezekiel who taught about the judgment of Israel, other nations, and God's plan to restore His people.

Exegesis

In the text we find Ezekiel, the prophet of the Lord, delivering a message to the spiritual leaders of consequences of their actions. God gave Ezekiel the metaphor of a shepherd to explain how He views their actions and how they have mistreated and oppressed those they were sent to serve. In verse four we can find a summary of the issue at hand: "You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead you ruled them with harshness and cruelty." He goes on to inform the leaders that feeding themselves and letting the sheep starve is an abomination. Drinking clean water themselves and giving the people foul water won't be tolerated. Verse sixteen discusses how God plans to deal with the issues between the abusive shepherds and sheep they were tasked to serve: "I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!"

Conversation

In verse four we see that the Spiritual leaders (shepherds) ruled the people (sheep) with harshness and cruelty. While they were tasked the dignified privilege to serve the people and feed them spiritually, they instead oppressed them. God discussed how fat and powerful they were. How the shepherds had clean water to drink and plush pastures to roam. Yet, the sheep were forced to drink the water that the shepherds fouled.

Today there are many people oppressed by western "developed" nations who are forced to deal with the consequences of the oppression of them and their lands. Likewise, there are people in our congregations, outside of our churches, outside of our workplaces, and inside of our homes who are oppressed by society. While mission work aims to meet these needs, there are blind spots we can make ourselves aware of. When God mentions the sick, he means the cancer patient as well as the young lady with bipolar disorder. Sometimes we aren't comfortable with working with that lady with autism or our homeless brother. When we cross the paths of all of God's children we should seek to serve them justice. We should serve them with love like we would serve our best friend. When God says "the lost", He means those who may have been a part of your congregation but have moved on or stopped coming because of an unkind word said to them.

How do we address these needs? We can educate ourselves on these afflictions and issues and seek them out. Maybe they need our help, our time, our funds or maybe they don't. The only way to find out is to take God's lead and feed them justice. When people enter the sanctuary, it should be like a green pasture with smiling faces greeting parishioners regardless of how they look or smell. When a child is in distress and is crying during the sermon in the sanctuary, are the parents met with support or a disapproving stare? When a homeless family sees a church picnic flyer and shows up, do people embrace them or do they move away because of a stench? We are called to serve righteously as our Father in heaven, and feed the masses justice. Justice in our actions, justice in our giving, justice in our service. If you don't feed the people justice, know that it is still on God's menu. The meal you receive will depend on your actions.

Questions

1. What marginalized groups do you see in your congregation that are being underserved?
2. Have you ever been short or rude to a parishioner because they were different? If not have you seen someone else? How might that situation have been handled differently?
3. While the passage singles out church leaders, we are all called as Christians tasked with the great commission. How can we train and prepare ourselves to serve those who are different from us?
4. In our scripture we learn that the sheep were led to graze in dead pastures and drink soiled water. What can we do to strengthen our churches so when people arrive it is alive and their is clean water flowing?

A God of Action

*Rev. Dr. Betty Hanna Witherspoon
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11 February 2018

Prayer

God of Deliverance, we come thanking you for your liberating care in the past, your intervention in our lamentable circumstances, and now in the midst of this present anguish, we stand on your promises to hear our cries and we hold on and hold out knowing deliverance is on the way. Amen

Scripture

Psalm 40:1-11

Contemporary Context

I am an African Methodist Episcopal preacher who believes that the God I serve is a God of liberation. I turn to Psalm 40 and find it is subtitled in the NRSV "Thanksgiving for Deliverance and Prayer for Help". As I turn to the psalm, I am following on social media accounts of clergy engaged in protest marches in St. Louis, MO. The marches are a response to another "not guilty" verdict of a police officer who, it appears, has shot an African American unlawfully. I have a responsibility to stand in the pulpit on Sunday and proclaim a liberating gospel. Thus, I approach Psalm 40 asking, "What does God have to say about my community's deliverance from police brutality and injustice?"

Exegesis

Psalm 40 is an individual prayer. At some point, it is believed, it was two separate prayers; one a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance or rescue from a calamitous situation (verses 1-10) and another, a cry or lament for deliverance (verses 11-17). The order in the psalm, however, seems to be reversed. The psalmist thanks God for deliverance and then cries out for help. There are no internal indicators of what the specific situations were and why the parts are placed in this order. When and where the redaction occurred is not known and it is not clear that such information is important for our purposes. What is important is the psalmist's declaration that he waited patiently for the LORD and the LORD inclined (NRSV), turned to him (NLT). The LORD was **active** in his situation. The LORD **drew** him out of a desolate pit, **set** his feet upon a rock, and **put** a new song in his mouth. It is the action and the praise that interest us.³

Conversation

³ **References:** Buttrick, George. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible an Illustrated Encyclopedia Identifying and Explaining All Proper Names and Significant Terms and Subjects in the Holy Scriptures, Including the Apocrypha.* New York: Abingdon Press, 1962; Tyndale. *Holy Bible: New Living Translation.* Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2006.

While in the original context Psalm 40 is a praise song of an individual rather than a song of the community, the praise and thanksgiving can be easily used in our early 21st century community context. Even the apparent reversal of the traditional order of lament and then thanksgiving can be useful. In our time when the struggle for justice seems never ending, when victories, are soon followed by new instances of injustice, requiring new laments to be sung, there is no order in the application of justice. However, the thanksgiving that declares the LORD was/will be active in our calamitous circumstances, in our struggle for justice, is a proclamation to principalities and powers: We believe the LORD will draw us out of a pit of tumult, will set our feet in a secure place, will give us a new song. What the LORD has done before, can the LORD not do again? Our God is still able.

Questions

1. Describe what you think it is "to wait patiently for the LORD?" Do faith and trust have anything to do with waiting patiently? What do you think may have enabled the psalmist to wait patiently?
2. Have there been times when you have been impatient with God? Do you believe God has been active in the community's struggle for justice? Do you believe God has been slow to act on some occasions?
3. Look at the action words used in your translation in verses 1-3 to describe how God intervened in the psalmist's life. Can you point out any times that you have seen God intervening in these ways in the life of the community?
4. How would you use Psalm 40 for your personal devotions? Would it speak to you in a difficult personal situation?

Seeking God's Face

Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D.

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(Oakland, CA)*

18 February 2018

Prayer

Precious Lord, we are thankful for your presence in our lives and the blessing it is for us to draw closer to you. Our prayer is that you help us to draw closer to you in every aspect of our lives. O' Lord, draw us closer to you! Amen

Scripture

Psalm 27:1; 4-9

Contemporary Context

In these troubled times, each of us needs some assurance that there is someone whom we can count on. The age in which we live forces us to adjust quickly to drastic changes that are constantly occurring all around us. In the midst of these changes each of us needs an anchor, something that we can cling to when all seems to be in chaos. The Psalmist reminds us that God is that anchor if we would only draw closer.

Exegesis

The Psalms are a series of mixed reflections set in poetry and song. These reflections range from songs about the Israelite's communal life, communal worship, and official acts of praise to intimate personal revelations that discuss pain, fear, delight and hope. The main lesson is that God is a being to whom all of us can speak, because Spirit is concerned with every aspect of our lives both individually and collectively.

Psalm 27 is primarily focused upon triumph over one's enemies and confidence in God's divine power. However, the writer also speaks intimately of his struggles with faith, and issues petitions to God for continued guidance and deliverance. In verse 1 we find the Psalmist describing who and what God is to him/her (light, salvation, stronghold), and expressing confidence in God's ability to provide protection and the courage to face fear (whom shall I fear, of whom shall I be afraid?).

In verse 4 the tone changes as the Psalmist now requests to be cared for and protected by God (dwell, behold, and meditate). This care is what is sought after most of all. In a sense, the requests are really about abiding and dwelling with God in an intimate way. To know and be known by the spirit of the divine not only imparts connection and care, but protection as well (verse 5).

Verse 6 is a natural outflowing from the intimacy described in verses 4-5. The result of the relationship and care the Psalmist receives from God initiates both self-confidence (head lifted up above enemies) and trust in the divine, but also worship (I will offer sacrifices, sing, and sing praises).

Verses 7-8 find the Psalmist beseeching God for continued relationship and blessings. The verb "cry" in this case could more accurately be translated as "pray" (*When I pray to you be gracious to me and answer me - v.7*), while verse 8 is an acknowledgement that the writer will always seek to be in communion with Spirit (seeking God's face).

Our final verse finds the Psalmist listing the things that he/she would rather God not do. Do not: hide your face, turn away in anger, abandon or forsake. God is recognized as the one who has saved and will continue to save those who commune with Spirit no matter what the situation.

Conversation

Like the Psalmist, each of us needs to place our hope and trust in God. In our rapidly changing world, knowing that we have the love and support of a loving and caring God can make all the difference. It can anchor us in times of trouble and help us to find the courage we need to face what lies ahead with the confidence that comes from knowing that we are not alone. Superficial prayers and intermittent spiritual practices are not enough to fulfill us – especially in the difficult times. The Psalmist speaks about a faith and reliance upon Spirit that is based upon an intimate connection to the divine. This kind of faith can only come from a real and lasting connection.

We too must seek the face of God and build an intimate relationship with Spirit. It is from this intimate place of connection that we obtain the knowing and the confidence we need to go out into the world and face the days ahead with grace and confidence.

Questions

1. What areas of your life are you keeping God away from right now and why?
2. List 3 changes you could make that would help you to become more intimate with Spirit each day. List 3 action steps you could take to make those changes in the next 2 weeks.
3. Reflect upon some of the times you or others in the group felt the most intimately connected to Spirit. Are there any common themes among these times that you can take advantage of in the future?

Dwelling With God

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25 February 2018

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to not only exercise our faith on a personal level, but to let it be reflected to others in the way we interact with them in the wider world. We know that if we are to truly abide in you, that connection will be reflected in all our dealings with others. Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 15

Contemporary Context

Given the current state of American and world politics, it would seem that the entire world has gone astray. Many claim to be people of faith, but continually act in ways that deny any connection to what the Christian faith is truly about. They do not care for the poor, they lie to the public and present misleading information, they speak falsely against others who oppose them, and care only about their own greed. Psalm 15 serves as a powerful reminder of the responsibilities and qualities that are expected of those who proclaim to be persons of faith on both the communal and personal levels.

Exegesis

Psalm 15 is found in the first section of Psalms (Book 1) which includes Psalms 1- 41. It was more than likely sang or read as part of the Jewish community's ascent up the hill to the temple, or at the temple gates just before entry. Although the Psalms in book 1 are attributed to King David, it was more than likely written during the period of the Israelite monarchy's reign (1000-587 BCE). This Psalm was part of the communal procession and springs directly from the community's worship experience.

In order to place Psalm 15 in context, it should be read with the denunciation of godlessness that is described in Psalm 14 in the forefront of one's mind. Psalm 14 denounces the godlessness of humankind and points out how all have gone astray, but that God will and has delivered Israel. Thus, Psalm 15 reminds the Israelites what the qualifications are for those who plan to enter Gods' sanctuary (the temple) just prior to the communal entry.

The writer begins by posing a question that is directly related to the denunciations found in Psalm 14: If humankind has gone astray, then who may be found worthy of dwelling in the presence of God (Verse 1)? How can one be found acceptable to God? The answer to this question is provided for us in verses 2-5. Psalm 15 lists ten conditions that should be met if one is serious about finding peace and acceptance with the divine (to abide with the Lord v. 1a, and dwell with God in the holy place v. 1b).

These ten conditions are reminiscent of the Ten Commandments given on Mount Sinai. They are expressed both positively and negatively.

Positive = walk blamelessly, do what is right, speak the truth (verse 2)

Negative = do not slander, do no evil, do not place blame or false accusations (verse 3)

Positive = honor those who truly revere the divine, stand by your word even if it is to your disadvantage (verse 4)

Negative = do not lend money with interest, do not take a bribe against innocent people (verse 5a)

Conversation

How much better would our communities be (in the church and outside it) if we who claim to be persons of faith actually followed these ten conditions in all our dealings with one another? It must start with each of us as individuals but must end with those who would claim the mantle of leadership. When those who have been elected to roles of leadership fail to honor their claims of faith, and act unjustly in their dealings with others, it places a blemish upon the community of faith. Our faith is not just personal but societal – it must be reflected in the ways we treat and deal with others! To live for and dwell with the divine demands that we also deal justly with others whether they look like us, act like us, or do not agree with us. This is especially relevant for those who aspire to positions of leadership within the church or the wider realm of politics.

The conditions presented by the Psalmist also come with 2 promises:

- 1 – The Psalmist assures us that those who meet these conditions will have the privilege of abiding with God. That means to dwell in God's presence constantly and be nurtured and cared for by the Spirit (verse 1). They may enter into the holy place (God's tent) and have fellowship with God.
- 2 – They shall not be moved or taken away from God's hand (verse 5b). They shall abide in the divine presence and can never be moved because they have shown that their love of Spirit has been reflected through their love of others.

Questions

1. What do you think would happen if we were to truly place pressure upon our leaders to live by this divine standard?
2. 1 John 4:20 reminds us that we cannot claim to love God whom we cannot see, yet mistreat our brothers and sisters whom we can see. In what ways do you see this reflected in the current political climate?
3. What connections do you see between 1 John 4:20 and our text for this lesson?

Door Duty

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4 March 2018

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, thank You for the doors that You open for us day by day and moment by moment. You welcome us into Your house and make it our home. You shelter us from wickedness and employ us in Your presence. Forgive for the times we have neglected door duty, striving for pleasures that are not meant for us. Humble us that we might find joy in Your service. Now and forever, this is our prayer. Amen.⁴

Scripture
Psalm 84



Contemporary Context

Ushers are often the first people that members, visitors, and friends of our churches see when they come into our churches on Sundays. In fact, they often establish the order of worship and the sanctuary, giving instruction about when people may enter and exit, when people should stand and sit, when people should approach the altar for Holy Communion, prayer, and offerings and how people should return to their seats. Ushers are *essential* for the establishment of temple order! Ralph Wheeler in the African American Lectionary quotes Dr. Andrew Billingsley on the role of ushers:

One element of a dynamic worship service is the auxiliaries, which come out on display on Sundays. The most impressive of these is the usher board. Ushers are essential. They seat the congregation, keep order, help members in distress, including those who get the Holy Ghost and cannot keep their composure, and lift the offering.⁵

Despite the fact that many of us begin worship with a call that includes the words of Psalm 84:10 — “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.” — there is a sense in which we do not really mean this. If some of us lost our status as officers and leaders of the church, not only would we make our abode in tents of wickedness, some of us would *also* attempt create such camps of wickedness *within* the house of our God. For many of us, door duty isn’t flashy enough.

⁴ “Solomon’s Temple.” Wikipedia, February 12, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Solomon%27s_Temple&oldid=825208788, Image.

⁵ Wheeler, Ralph. “Usher’s Day.” The African American Lectionary. Accessed October 31, 2017. <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupCulturalAid.asp?LRID=89>.

Exegesis

This Psalm is likely one that was sung as a song of Zion as individuals journeyed to the temple. Such a pilgrimage would have been made in autumn during the Festival of Tabernacles (Booths).⁶ This holy day is also known as Sukkot. A Sukkah (the singular form of Sukkot) is a “booth” or “tabernacle.” Sukkot were temporary dwellings with plant ceilings in which farmers lived during harvest time in ancient Israel; the festival of the booths, thus, is a time to celebrate (1) the harvest and, especially, the end of harvest time and (2) the Exodus and, especially, the people of Israel accepting their dependence upon God.⁷ Thus, when the psalmist writes “I would rather be a doorkeeper . . .,” it is important to remember that (1) the Sukkot did not even *have* doors, but were more like tents and (2) this song might have been sung as the farmers and other believers were on their way to the temple *with* doors. This powerfully suggests that there is a certain vulnerability outside of God’s dwelling places (wherever and everywhere God is). It also suggests that there is a certain safety within God’s dwelling places. The psalmist in Psalm 84 uses the following metaphors for God’s dwelling places: courts (verses two and ten), home and altars (verse 3), house (verses four and ten). The door of the temple is sacred because it symbolically opens the way to refuge, safety, and salvation in the presence of God; the door is sacred not because of *who* it keeps out, but because of *what* it keeps out: wickedness (verse ten) and danger (in verses 9 and 11 God is a shield). Indeed, there is favor and protection in the sanctuary.⁸

Conversation

Think of the relief and comfort you feel after getting home — or to your quiet space — after a long day at work or a long trip. This is what so many of the farmers in ancient Israel must have felt once they finally made it to the end of harvest time. For those who made it to the temple, they may even have brought a wave offering for the priests in order to celebrate the commencement of rest and safety from the outdoor elements. Even for those who did not make it to the temple, there would have been a sense of completion. Yet, who and what we meet at the door can make or break the moment. If we are met with fussing and fighting, if we are met with dishonor and confusion, if we are met with slothfulness and disrepair, all of these things can take away from the beauty of shelter — and (the physical) sanctuary.

Questions

1. Who and what do we meet at the doors of *our* church? Who and what would we *like* to meet at the doors of our church?
2. For those of us who open and closes the doors as ushers during worship times, as trustees, other officers, and/or pastors, how do we understand our roles as doorkeepers?
3. In what ways are we intentional about this task? What are our best intentions as doorkeepers? What are our limitations when we are on door duty? How do our intentions as doorkeepers line up with God’s intentions for the church?
4. What are some of the rituals we perform (i.e., prayer, meditation, recitation of scripture, burning of incense) in order to set and affirm our godly intentions as doorkeepers?
5. *Who* have we refused while on door duty? How? Why? How might we do differently?
6. *What* have we refused while on door duty? How is this consistent with God’s plan to provide refuge and protection from the dangers of wickedness and natural elements?

⁶ Kee, Howard. The Cambridge Annotated Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 801.

⁷ “Sukkot.” Wikipedia, February 20, 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sukkot&oldid=826731379>.

⁸ Kee, 801.

The King of Wakanda is Not The King of Glory!

Rev. Karla J. Cooper

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NE)*

11 March 2018

Prayer

King of Glory, strong and mighty, everlasting God, we hail your power over our struggles against the evil rulers and evil spirits in the dark world knowing that you can shed light and shine brightly even in the midst of grim circumstances. So we can lift up our heads, raise the gates so that your reign and your kingdom will come on this earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 24:7-10

Contemporary Context

In the epic Marvel comic production of Black Panther, there is a struggle for the kingdom of Wakanda between two cousins, T'Challa, reared in Wakanda and heir apparent, and Erik Killmonger, reared in Oakland whose father was killed by T'Challa's father, the former king. As the challenge came forward to determine who is the stronger, mighty, more able to reign as King, the two cousins battled it out. The superpowers of these Black Panther superhero and villain, pale in comparison to the supernatural power of God, who is strong and mighty, mighty in battle. Who is the King of Wakanda? Who is the King of Glory? Who is the King of your life? Who will repent and enter into the reign of God?

Exegesis

Psalm 24 is a Psalm of David that begins with a liturgical exchange between the priest and worshippers at the Temple Gates. Psalm 24 ends with another liturgical exchange that celebrates God's power as priests and worshippers enter the Temple Gates, in a procession, bearing the Ark of the Covenant, which is the symbolic throne of God. Verses 7-10 in particular are the affirmation of God's privilege on the world in which God created, everything belongs to God—the church, the environment, politics, power.

Conversation

Our liturgical expressions are intentional. As we blend the historical with the contemporary, it is important to understand why we do what we do. The meaning of the processional and the recessional in our worship services are symbolic of our understanding of who God is and where God is in our worship.

Psalm 24 reminds us that the totality of the world belongs to God. Essentially how the world looks depends on how we see God. Imagine David is reminding the heads of power to let God in as King. Imagine that the gates are the ancient doors that are lifted up so that the presence of God can enter and

have a permanent presence in the temple. In our modern understanding, we are the Temple of the Most High God. God resides in our hearts. The way temple order is restored is in the revelation of God's presence, God's power, God's prerogative to reign forever.

Questions

1. Is there a need to have a formal procession in our church today?
2. What gates need to be lifted up so that we can acknowledge God's ever presence?
3. Can our gates of unbelief and indifference hinder our understanding of God?
4. Who is the King of Glory?

Day In The Barrel

Rev. Renita Marie Green

Pastor, St. James AME Church (Cape Girardeau, MO)

18 March 2018

Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, thank you for being the God who always hears us when we cry out, sends help our way, loves us in spite of ourselves and renews the strength of our soul.

Scripture

Psalm 138

Contemporary Context

The psalmist (attributed to David) has just been through *something*. We don't really know if David's troubles were spiritual, political, relational, physical or material. David got through whatever it was and in this writing, we hear his testimony of praise and thanksgiving to our God.

Exegesis

This Psalm is one of praise and thanksgiving for God's unfailing love and faithfulness. The psalmist opens with declaring praise before "the gods" (vs 1-2). During the time frame that the psalm was most likely penned, many gods were recognized and worshipped. The Hebrews had a tough time maintaining a monogamous relationship with Yahweh.

The psalmist is clear that there is no god like Jehovah!

The God who is most exalted heard the cry of David's heart and answered immediately (vs 3). We are not told that the enemies were immediately defeated, however, immediately David's soul was strengthened. The Hebrew word used here (*nephesh*) means heart, life, spirit (*side note: nephesh is a feminine noun which could point to the writer of this psalm actually being a woman*). In other words, David was at the point of giving up when God heard and reminded David of who he was.

David prophetically points to the Christ in verse 4 when he declares that all the kings of the earth will praise God's name (Philippians 2:10).

In verse six the psalmist declares that God sits high and looks low. Many are made to believe that they have been too bad a sinner for God to love and forgive them. This stanza leads into Psalm 139 when the psalmist declares there is no place one can flee God's spirit—even when we make our bed in hell he is with us (139:8).

David experienced the power of God's presence while he was in the midst of trouble (vs 7). Not much unlike Isaiah who declared, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you...when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned" (Isaiah 43:2).

After awareness, hope and help were reassured, David remembered his purpose and was ready and able to continue on his journey (vs 8).

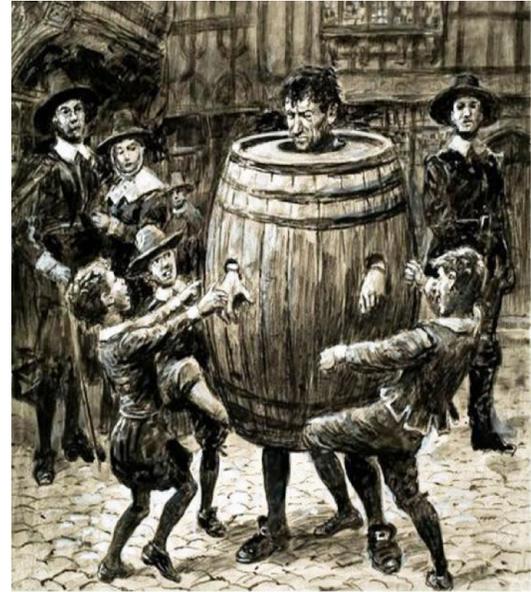
Conversation

Sometimes we get ourselves into trouble and enemies take the opportunity to shame and ridicule—they kick us when we are down. Other times we are in trouble because enemies have laid a trap. And yet other times, the enemy is within ourselves—our doubts, insecurities, impulsiveness, arrogance and/or fears can get us into a mess.

My Nanna said, "everyone has their day in the barrel". The barrel pillory was used in different forms and cultures primarily to bring shame upon someone who had some bad behavior in public—usually drunkenness.

Sometimes the barrel was used to torture a person who was accused of wrong doing (especially adultery). In this instance, the person could be placed in the barrel without food or water—sometimes with little creepy crawlers.

David found himself in the barrel, so to speak. In this dark place, it seems as if David forgot that he had been anointed King. He seems to have forgotten that he was a mighty warrior and about how God had consistently been on his side. David seemed to be experiencing a season (or episode) of despair.



When David cried out, God, true to form, heard and responded. Personally, I have been in enough barrels to know that most often the way God responds is through others. It is not for us to judge the person who has the barrel over their head—it is simply ours to be Light and Life so that they, like David, will feel their soul strengthened.

Questions

1. What are some behaviors for which society places individuals or groups of individuals in barrels?
2. What are some behaviors/characteristics for which the Church places individuals or groups of individuals in barrels?
3. How have you reacted to someone while they were in the proverbial barrel? Taunts? Compassion? Contempt?
4. Think for a moment about someone well known or personally known who is currently in the barrel (for good reason or totally innocent). How can you use your time or influence to have the barrel removed?
5. Now think about subgroups placed in the barrel by the Church or society. How can you use your time or influence to remove the barrel?

Humanity on Trial

Rev. Renita Marie Green

Pastor, St. James AME Church (Cape Girardeau, MO)

25 March 2018

Prayer

Dear God of grace and compassion, let the words of our mouths, the thoughts of our hearts line up with the actions we undertake—and let it all be pleasing in your sight, oh, Lord our rock and Redeemer.

Scripture

Psalm 50:1-6

Contemporary Context

This passage as a precursor to that great judgement day calls “the righteous” of this day to examine ourselves. Humanity is on trial and the cosmos are the witnesses.

Exegesis

Written by Asaph who 2 Chronicles describes as “the seer”, God summons humanity to a trial (vs 1). A seer is like type of prophet who supernaturally flows through time and space into the spirit realm and witnesses that which was, is and is to come. Asaph pens the vision he has of God summoning the earth’s inhabitants to this great trial.

Zion was the place where God was believed to reside in splendor and majesty. Zion was the holiest, most acceptable place to worship. Brighter than the sun, yet awe-inspiring to the eye, God appears to humanity (vs 2).

The imagery in verse 3 commands our attention to God’s authority and power. God has not shown up to simply be seen by humanity. God has entered the scene to be heard and revered.

In a startling move, God allows the cosmos to reveal the faithful (vs 4-5). The atmosphere, stars, moons, suns, planets and meteors are called to the witness stand—who are the faithful?

As both witness and jury, the sun and moon and stars have unanimously declared that God alone is the judge—the one who will pronounce the fate of humanity (vs 6).

Conversation

We have been summoned by the voice of God and gathered together by the great wind. We are in the presence of the Almighty—it is nothing like we could have ever imagined! An awe-inspiring, light-engulfing presence compelling us to come closer though we are trembling from tip to toe.

Looking around, there are so many that are known, so many who are a mystery. What could this great gathering be about? Why have we been summoned? By the looks of those known, we must be being rewarded for our faithfulness! If you only knew how righteous we are!

As we draw closer, it looks like we have entered a courtroom. What is this? It is as if an interplanetary council of creation is present—Mother Earth, Father Time, Orion, Taurus, Lyra and others are all present. God is asking them to be give a testimony—about us—humanity!

The Ozone gives witness of her ruin. The clouds explain why they haven't been able to drop or cease their rain. The moon tells its story of violation and the planets lament being compromised at this very moment by explorers. There is witness about our total disregard for the worlds around us—unless we are somehow profiting.

They tell of how we write checks for causes while supporting the industries which cause harm. They are talking about our press conferences and protest signs, that we drive to in our oversized vehicles. God has heard the stories of our great mission works, but we are being charged for the systems that create the need for missions.

They say that we have no reverence for how humanity and nature are intertwined—we just want to make ourselves feel good and have allowed darkness to rule.

As Psalm 50 continues God rebukes and chastises Israel for their pious ways—essentially for having a form of godliness and denying the power thereof. Offering sacrifices of bulls and burnt offerings. I can hear God with a snarky tone asking, “What do you think you are really accomplishing by offering me what is already mine? Do you think I really need your burnt meat? Look at me! Do I look like I eat that?”

The heavens are a witness to God's righteousness and have witnessed humanity's betrayals. In that great getting up morning, what will the cosmos testify about you?

Questions

1. Do you know your carbon footprint? If not, check here and vow to take action: <http://www.nature.org/greenliving/carboncalculator/>
2. If the cosmos were summoned to witness on *your* behalf, what testimony would be given about your environmental stewardship?
3. List 5 practical “right now” steps you can take to improve your behavior as a steward of the earth.
4. Consider ways in which you witness with your mouth, but your behavior (regarding the environment) contradicts your witness. Will you commit to change?
5. Research the struggles of the environment where you live. Talk to an activist who is attempting to hold humanity accountable. Discuss and discern the role you can serve in helping to create a better witness for humanity.

The Art of Worship

Rev. Jonathan Rhone

*Presiding Elder, Rocky Mountain District
(Denver, CO)*

1 April 2018

Prayer

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.”

Scripture

Psalm 30

Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness. To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever. (Ps 30:4,12)

Contemporary Context

David knew the value of divine worship. He was notorious for dancing in worship unto God; sometimes; without clothing; experiencing firsthand the strength, hope, and peace of mind derived from worship. David longed to renew the nation in the worship of God. To do this, he must bring the long-neglected Ark of the Covenant to his new capital city as a sign that the Lord, the true King over Israel, is once again in the midst of his people. The people must understand that prosperity is in the hands of God: "And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved. For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." (Ps 30:6,5) The people must once again, put worship at the center of their lives. Worship, must be the center of our life as well!

Exegesis

Psalm 30 was set to music to be used as the dedication song for the house of David. The house of David constituted the southern kingdom of Judah over which he presided for several centuries. If David's city was to be complete, it had to include a house of worship dedicated and consecrated to Yahweh. David wanted to build a permanent Temple, but God had reserved that undertaking for Solomon, David's son and heir to the throne. David had too much blood on his hands to build God's Temple. David would construct a tent, a house of worship, in this city of his.

According to 2 Sam 6:1, David gathered together all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand, going to the house of Abinadab to retrieve the Ark and bring it to the city of David; the house of God. David and his men attempted to move the Ark in a manner not prescribed by God. Finally, the project was terminated, and the Ark carried to the house of Obed-edom where it stayed for three months. David would learn a critical lesson here: "Blessings delayed, are not necessarily blessings denied." We must understand this divine truth for our lives as well. Delay, doesn't equal denial!

Conversation

Worship is so important in the life of the believer! We can be in church while missing the art of true worship. Let's look briefly at the life of Isaiah, another worshipper. Although, not a stranger to the Temple, he missed the true art of worship until the death of king Uzziah; which was the turning point in his relationship with God. I believe that nowhere in the bible is there a more concise teaching on the art of worship. In Isaiah 6: 1-8; there Isaiah was setting in church, but, something was different this time. It wasn't his first time in the temple, but this time was different! Can you remember when God first touched your heart? What an experience! What excitement!

Questions

1. When was the last time you saw Jesus in worship? "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." (Isa 6:1)
2. Are you old enough to remember when hymn #25 in the AME hymnal was used to begin worship in almost all AME churches? Hymns and anthems have now given way to contemporary music. We must endeavor to hold on to our hymns! Some hymns talk about our theology. Hymn #25 is one of those hymns, expressing in part, our theology: holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty; God in three persons, blessed trinity! "Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke." (Isa 6:2,3,4)
3. Do you acknowledge your sinful nature while in worship? "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwelt in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Isa 6:5)
4. Do you experience God's forgiveness in worship? "Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." (Isa 6:6,7)
5. Do you feel inspired to leave worship and go do the work? "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me." (Isa 6:8)
6. Even though David was not the one to build the temple, the temple did get built. A blessing delayed is not necessarily a blessing denied! Have you ever been discouraged by a blessing denied or delayed? How did you handle it?
7. David would attempt to move the Ark once again. This time the Ark was handled properly by appropriate people, the Levites, who were the only ones allowed to transport the Ark. My-my-my. Did David ever worship God! He danced all over the place. Can you see him dancing while singing: "For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favor is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."? (Ps 30:5)
8. God uses whom he will to execute his plan of redemption. Can God use you? He has his eyes on you! Are you open to the plans of God upon your life?

Spending Private Time With God

Rev. Jonathan Rhone

*Presiding Elder, Rocky Mountain District
(Denver, CO)*

8 April 2018

Prayer

God, we thank you for your goodness and loving kindness. Thank you for the peace you provide in the midst of the storm. Thank you for a liberating and sustaining gospel. Thank you for the joy of this day, and the hope of tomorrow. Thank you for our private time together. Amen!

Scripture

Psalm 92

Contemporary Context

More than anything else, Psalm 92 talks about spending private time with God. In these verses, the Psalmist gives thanks and praise to God for their personal time together in the morning as well as every night and receives a word of confirmation about the destiny of the righteous. I remember as a young boy my Mother taught me to spend time with God in prayer, both in the morning when I arose, and at night before I went to bed. My wife Margaret spends private time with God by journaling everyday for the past 20 years. Her private time with God is amazing! Admittedly, I'm not as disciplined as she is, but I am unshakably committed. Do you have a daily routine of spending personal time with God? In this fast-paced world we must be intentional about turning off the 'noise' and spending private time with God. In the quiet moments God can reveal things to us about who we are, whose we are, what we are supposed to be doing, and how we are supposed to be doing it.

Exegesis

In Psalm 92:10 the writer talks about the personal benefits of spending private time with God, "But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil." The horn is a symbol of strength and power. The meaning here is, that, while the wicked would be cut off, the believer shall prosper. (Hallelujah!) Now, the unicorn was a mythological creature supposed to be remarkable for the strength of its horn; similar to our present day moose, caribou or rhinoceros. The Psalmist here speaks not so much of himself with reference to his own particular case, but as the representative of the righteous. The notion here is that a righteous person will be exalted by God.

"I shall be anointed with fresh oil." He would be made happy, cheerful, bright, and prosperous. What an awesome benefit for spending private time with God! We too, shall be anointed with fresh oil allowing us to see and understand in a new and very clear way.

The Psalmist reminds us that the rewards of spending private time with God are available to all believers; you and me. My soul rejoices when I know according to verses 12 and 13, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. The palm tree is known for its durability in a storm and the cedar tree for its majestic beauty and strength. The Psalmist tells us that even the trees testify that God is just. The wicked may prosper temporarily, but the righteous, those that are truly planted in the house of the Lord will continue to enjoy the presence of God, the worship of God, and the people of God.

Conversation

Jesus wants to touch us in a manner allowing us to see clearly, not see “men as trees, walking.” Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. I believe, when we spend personal time with God, we are planting ourselves, and it is that planting of our time with God which allows us to flourish in the courts of God’s benevolence.

The life of Daniel in the Old Testament is an example of spending private time with God. According to Dan 6:10, “and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.” Because of Daniel’s private time with God, he was able to overcome undue hardships! One such example can be found in Dan 6:22a “My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths, that they have not hurt me.”

According to Matthew 27:51, Jesus made it possible for each one of us to share direct and private time with God. “And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent.” The privilege of the high priest was now communicated to all mankind: ALL might henceforth have access to the throne of grace.” We can, and must, spend private time with God! In other words, become intimate with God; value private moments with God.

Bishop Clement W. Fugh and Supervisor Fugh, talk about the importance of relationships and how they work at building relationships. Spending time with God is how we build relationship with God. “O taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Ps 34:8a)

Take a moment out of your busy schedule every day to spend some private time with God. Please remember, you can spend private time with God while sitting at your desk, riding along in your automobile, or while you are doing your daily exercises.

Questions

1. Do you spend private time with God? How often? What do you do?
2. What was the last thing that was revealed to you during your private time with God?
3. What gets in the way of your private time?
4. Do you think you suffer when you don’t spend private time with God? What happens?
5. Does your family see you spending private time with God? What impact do you think it has when they see or don’t see you spending time with God?
6. What steps will you take to enhance your private moments with God this year?

Trust God to Identify God's People and Balance the Scales

Rev. Rachel Williams-Glenn

Pastor, St. Paul (Independence, MO)

15 April 2018

Prayer

Most Gracious God, we come together as a community in song, praise and prayer asking you to once again right the wrong(s) done in the world today. Show us who and how you are. Resolve our identity crisis. Empower us to see and correct what's off balance. – Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 99:4-9 & Psalm 103:6-13

Contemporary Context

So much in the world today is out of balance. Without the blue laws that ensured people had nothing else to do on Sundays, the church can no longer assume people will just show up. Now we have to compete with other parts of society for people's attention and allegiance. Yet, how can we successfully compete when we don't know who we are? People in the church have been scared into silence by people inside and outside the church. Folks who do highlight the wrongs done by those who have been entrusted with the tasks of protecting, guiding and leading us are forced out of churches. People are debased and degraded on social media for voicing their dissenting opinions. The church struggles to offer sanctuary to some while ignoring the needs of others. Yes, the world's out of balance and the church has lost its identity.

Exegesis

The Book of Psalms is usually divided into five collections known as Book 1, Book 2, Book 3, Book 4 and Book 5. Psalm 99 and Psalm 103 are both part of Book 4 even though they are not the same type of psalm. Psalm 99 is an enthronement psalm that uses the majesty of God to remind the people of God that God loves justice and brings order to chaos. Psalm 103 is an famous thanksgiving/praise psalm that draws attention to how God keeps seemingly contradictory aspects of God's character in tension so that God can call us on our stuff AND provide a way for us to be delivered from the consequences of our stuff. Each psalm responds to the following identity-crisis creating problems of the loss of the monarchy, the loss of the Temple, and the loss of land that was highlighted in Book 3. All three of these losses represent something that the Jewish Nation looked to as signs of who they were and how they fit into the world around them. Perhaps, that's why Psalm 99 and Psalm 103 call on God's people to look to God to help them know who they are and how they fit into the world. Both psalms also focus on how God used Moses to make the Jewish nation into a nation before they even considered that nationhood was possible for them. It's as if God is telling the people that their identity crisis is not permanent. God isn't finished balancing the scales of injustice nor has God finished God's ministry of checking their missteps and providing the means for them to get back up again.

Conversation

Psalm 99 and Psalm 103 remind us that we don't have to fall apart and give up our sense of who we are in God just because the world around us falls apart. We are not who we are because of the elected or appointed person(s) leading our nation, state, county, city, neighborhood, Episcopal district, Presiding Elder district, local church, organization, ministry or community group. We are not who we are because of our building(s). We are not who we are because we own property. We are not even who we are because of our name or history. We are who we are because our scale balancing God balanced the scales of eternity and made room for us to participate in scale balancing ministry. We are who we are because God is yet now balancing scales in our unbalanced world. We are who we are because God is doing some of that balancing through us.

Like God did through Moses and Aaron, God uses us to call out the modern day Pharaohs among us who no longer respect and/or revere God and God's way. Like God did through Samuel, God uses us to let folks know that God's favor will shift away from anyone who refuses to acknowledge that they need God to rebalance their stuff. We also let people who weren't looking for God to favor them know that God has done just that. Finally, we let people know that God's anger at the injustice that we let slide, is a sign of God's love for us. God does all this to check us so that we can regain our identity as God's church. That way we can invite people into a saving relationship with our scale balancing God instead of scaring people away from an out-of-step community of believers.

Questions

1. What are examples of events that might cause people who have been favored by God to believe that their favored status is lost?
2. What parts of Psalm 99 and/or Psalm 103 help to reassure you that God still balances scales today?
3. What are some events or experiences that might cause a person to become so used to disorder that they resist God's efforts to re-balance their lives?
4. According to the call to worship at the end of Psalm 99, God's holiness appears to be connected to God's love of justice. What do you think your holiness is connected to? Why do you believe this?
5. If you were to write a song, poem or prayer encouraging God's people to look to God to determine who and how they should be in the world, what key ideas would you include?

An Invitation to Hope in a Soul-Soothing God When Disrespect Reigns

Rev. Rachel Williams-Glenn

Pastor, St. Paul (Independence, MO)

22 April 2018

Prayer

O Great God, the haters are on the job. My soul is near a crushing point. Rock me in the cradle of your arms so I don't give up or give out. Show up and show out so that my renewed self can invite someone else to put their hope in you. – Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 131

Contemporary Context

Many people in the United States are struggling with reconciling their notion of proper and respectful behavior with their need to be who God's called them to be. We hear and see the struggle in female pastors who are challenged on social media by people who feel that women shouldn't be pastors. We hear and see the struggle when people of color are asked to explain why the term "All Lives Matter" offends when it's used as a counter response to "Black Lives Matter." We hear and see the struggle when people who work in the White House try to put a positive spin on negative things said by the 45th President of the United States. We even hear and see the struggle in ourselves when someone at a ministry meeting, worship service or convention addresses us in a way that shows they feel we are less than they are. These are those "stay in your place" situations that cause us to take on the mask of humility and swallow our hurt in order to survive.

Exegesis

Psalm 131 is one of the 15 Psalms of Ascent found within Book 5 of the Book of Psalms. Psalms of Ascent are some of the shortest psalms in the book and therefore easy to memorize. It's believed that Psalms of Ascent were sung as people made their way to Jerusalem and/or climbed the Temple steps during religious festivals. Unlike other psalms, Psalms of Ascent often show how God helps people to successfully manage everyday challenges. Psalm 131 paints a picture of a person struggling to maintain his/her integrity as a person of faith. In verse 1 and 2, the psalmist talks about how s/he doesn't let his/her pride get out of control nor does s/he become arrogant enough to take on the characteristics and responsibilities of God. Although women were not allowed to serve as priests or Levites, some scholars believe that the psalmist responsible for psalm 131 was a woman who may have struggled with the social customs regarding proper behavior being forced upon her. If these scholars are correct, it might explain why maintaining his/her integrity is such a challenge. Whatever the gender of the psalmist, we clearly see

that his/her relationship with God soothes his/her soul. This soul-soothing God is the same God who provided the Psalmist with what s/he needed when s/he was new to the faith. Now, this same soul-soothing God provides what s/he needs to restore his/her peace of mind. In return, the psalmist invites all of Israel to put their hope in God. Now imagine this song of hope being sung by a group of people who have been forcibly separated from their homeland. Imagine this song being passed on generation to generation of people who have to get special permission to visit the place where their ancestors worshipped.

Conversation

Our everyday struggles are no less important than traumatic events. It saps our strength, energy and conviction to wear a mask of false respect in order to survive. Perhaps, that's why God never meant for us to assume such false humility. It's definitely why God is ready, willing and able to surround us with loving support so that we can show our truth self to people around us. This means that the Dad who loves to play dress up with his daughters is as manly as the Dad who throws a football with his son. It means that the Mom who teaches her son to fix a car is no less womanly than the Mom who teaches her daughter to cook a meal. Most of all, it means that the Mama God who soothes us when people degrade and devalue us is as much God as the Savior God who went to the cross and now sits in heaven saying our sin debt is paid. May this soul-soothing God comfort, keep and protect us when we grieve, when we hurt and when our energy is spent. May this soul-soothing God remind us that the only image of a humble servant that we need to meet is God's.

Questions

1. What does it look like to be humble?
2. Is humility still humility if someone is forced to act humble? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of things have you experienced with God that sooth your soul when everyday struggles become too heavy to bear?
4. Are there any songs, poems, stories or devotions that you read when maintaining your integrity in God gets difficult? If so, why are those songs, poems, stories or devotions so meaningful to you?
5. How has this Bible Study lesson helped you reconcile your notion of proper behavior with your need to be who God's calling you to be?

Can We Trust The Process?

Rev. Bridget L. Mitchell

*Pastor, St. Matthew's Chapel AME Church
(Boonville, MO) and Campbell AME Church
(Glasgow, MO)*

29 April 2018

Prayer

Merciful and wonderful God, please forgive our unbelief. Help us to have total assurance in You, despite what happens around us and in our difficult situations. Help us to go deeper with our trust in You. Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 31:1-5; 19-24

Contemporary Context

Life is hard sometimes, and it can test a person's spirit to the breaking point. Demons chase us around every corner and there seems to be no place to hide. We get discouraged and we sometimes wonder, "where is God?", in all that is troubling us. However, when we have faith in God, we can be assured that God will walk us through, carry us in his arms, and provide refuge while God is working it out on our behalf, in God's way, in God's time. Trust the Godly process.

Exegesis

In many ways, the Old Testament book of Psalms, essentially the liturgy of ancient Israel, forms the basis of the New Testament. As much as any other book, the Psalms guided the interpretation and even writing of the New Testament authors. Beyond mere interpretation, the early church came to see the psalms as prophecies- predictions of what Christ would experience. There is some value in this approach, but what we lose is the original experience of the psalm authors, and our present-day experiences when we read the psalms.

David's troubles made him a man of sorrow, and he acknowledged that his afflictions were merited by his own sins, but Christ suffered for ours. David's friends didn't give him any assistance and so we should not find it strange when the people who surround us become deserters. The time of life is in God's hands, to lengthen or shorten, make bitter or sweet, according to the counsel of his will. Matthew Henry states: "The way of man is not in himself, nor in our friends' hands, nor in our enemies' hands, but in God's. In this faith and confidence, he prays that the Lord would save him for his mercies' sake, and not for any merit of his own. He prophesies the silencing of those that reproach and speak evil of the people of God. There is a day coming, when the Lord will execute judgment upon them. In the meantime, we should engage ourselves by well-doing, if possible, to silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Read in its entirety, Psalm 31 is one of those "whole story" psalms, including a crisis, prayer, deliverance by God, and subsequent praise.

Conversation

Iyanla Vanzant has a show named, “Fix My Life”, and she implores the people that she is helping to “trust the process.” It’s hard to trust the process when we see so many injustices done to people around us. It’s even harder to trust the process when the trials and turmoil are personal. We feel lost, wandering in the desert, thirsty for relief, and there seems to be none. Friends have left you and family has turned their back on you. When we’re in the crisis, we find it hard to pray. We find it hard to worship because we are scared and angry. However, God’s unfailing love persists even when we can’t see it. It is this reality that saves us, and God is faithful even when we don’t experience it. It is this faith that sustained Jesus, and will save us in our time of trial. When we are awaiting God’s deliverance, it helps to realize we’re only in part of a larger story. Trust the process.

Questions

1. What keeps us from “going all the way” with God?
2. There are specific steps to reaching a goal. Do you/we take the steps, no matter how difficult they may be? Or do you/we skip steps in the process, trying to hurry the situation along?
3. How do you/we trust God’s “process” in the face of adversity? In the face of social injustice?
4. What scripture(s) can you find that will help to increase (y)our faith?
5. Can God trust us to remain faithful, even when it seems that He isn’t listening?
6. Think about your last crisis. Who helped you through it? Where were your friends? Family?

Mystery Solved!

Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes

Pastor, Ebenezer AME Church (Kansas City, MO)

6 May 2018

Prayer

O great and eternal God, welcome us as we welcome the other you put on our path. Teach us to see you as the gracious giver of life who always has us in mind and includes us in every thought. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 2:1-2; Ephesians 3:1-12

Exegesis

Paul was an educated man. But what he learned in his early training was not sufficient to prepare him for the cosmic shift that took place at the coming of Christ. There was about to be a major transformation in his way of thinking and doing and being. This kind only comes by prayer and fasting. There is no substitute for Divine Revelation, especially when God is about to move in a drastically different way. Paul confessed that he was not just unworthy but unprepared for the work to which he had been called. The good news was that the Gentiles together with Israel were to be one body together sharing the inheritance of God. This was easier said than done. But the blessing was for all. Approaching God with confidence and freedom now belongs to everyone.

The wise men also saw the revelation in the constellation of the stars. They didn't understand fully the event that would take place but they saw it as a signal from heaven that someone new was coming to rule Israel that would change things. Little did they know, he was coming to change the world, to open a new and glorious way to God. Their worship was a fitting response to the revelation.

Contemporary Context

Some things are only a mystery to those who refuse to see the truth. The truth was not hidden it was ignored. Any truth that is can be known if one is open and desirous of understanding. The mystery of the Gentiles is such because Israel was uninformed about the true nature and character of God.

How selfish and ignorant of them to think that faith in God was only available to them. All the prophets spoke of them as a light to the Gentiles and the nations. Abraham was told he would be the father of many nations. The world was always included in God's plan to redeem what was lost.

Conversation

Why is it that we are more often than not, willing to leave people out of the equation of grace? Some of us would like for grace to be the exclusive right reserved for a few deserving members of an exclusive club. What Paul calls a mystery is the revelation of God as a just and inclusive beneficent creator who gave the very best for even the lesser of the least of God's people.

Questions

1. How does this lesson influence the way you think about people of other faith traditions?
2. What new revelation have you received recently?
3. Do you believe that anyone can receive Divine Revelation or do you believe it is just for certain individuals?

The Good News

Rev. Karla J. Cooper

Pastor, Quinn Chapel AME Church (Lincoln, NE)

13 May 2018

Opening Prayer

Good and gracious God, we give you thanks for Jesus, who embodied your Word in the flesh, showing us just how you intended us to live equally with no favoritism and who strive to do right by helping where we can make a difference.

Scripture

Matthew 3:13-17 & Acts 10:34-43

Contemporary Context

Have there been times when you were so close to something that it was just too incredible to comprehend? Or maybe as the phrase “familiarity breeds contempt” could be your testimony too. Sometimes the “aha” moments in life happen and we can’t help but to share our new revelation or epiphany. Such was the case for Peter as you will see in this lesson! Here’s a disclaimer: I am always amazed by Peter because I think that each of us have a little bit of his personality in us because we can be determined while at the same time deny! Yet somehow, the Good News gives us the hope necessary to share with others.

Exegesis

Peter opens his mouth and speaks, is how Luke describes the situation in Acts 10:34-43. And Peter is open and honest about how now he believes (nearly 40 years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus) that God shows no favoritism! Why did it take Peter this long to be convinced when he was physically with Jesus to witness up close and personal the healing, delivering, inclusive ministry of God’s only Begotten? Peter is serious in his sharing this testimony of his epiphany that God does not discriminate, no matter our social location or ethnic origin or geographical boundaries can hinder the liberating Gospel of Jesus the Christ. In the eyes of God, we are all equal. Peter suggests that this is what he witness in how Jesus lived. Peter’s aha moment was realizing that if Jesus is the Son of God who showed no favoritism, then clearly God shows no partiality because he witness Jesus helping and healing those whom society had relegated to being nameless and marginalized.

Conversation

Imagine the “aha” moments when you realized that God shows no favoritism. Makes no difference if you live in the United States of America or Uganda, Ireland or India, Asia or Australia, rich or poor, God shows no favoritism. It doesn’t matter socio-economics, gender, nationality—God does not care about what we have socially constructed as barriers.

Questions

1. If God shows no favoritism, then why do we discriminate?
2. If we truly believe that our sins are forgiven, then why do we have such a sin consciousness?
3. Why is it that those who claim to be Christians, are sometimes some of the most mean and hateful, showing bias and prejudices?
4. What does the Good News mean to you?
5. Do you see yourself as included in the Kingdom of God?

What Are You Seeking?

Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min.

Pastor, Allen Chapel AME Church (Riverside, CA)

20 May 2018

Prayer

Eternal God, please give us clarity on who we are seeking on this faith journey.

Scripture

John 1:35-42

Contemporary Context

Google is an American multinational corporation specializing in internet-related services and products, according to Wikipedia. This company was founded by Larry Page and Sergey Brin while they were Ph.D. students at Stanford University. They incorporated Google as a privately held company in September of 1998 and since August of 2004 have been a publically held company whose mission statement from the outset was “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”

I like that mission statement because it is really meaning that whatever you will need, Google will organize it in a way that will be useful for you! And we see that happening don’t we, as Google has expanded to provide many of our basic everyday needs in this 21st Century. They provide productivity software including e-mail (g-mail), office suite (Google Drive) and social networking (Google +).

But the core of Google’s operation is with its core search engine. Google Search is a web search engine and is the most used search engine on the world wide web, handling more than three billion searches each day. So what you do, is you type in the information you want in the search engine, and Google gives you exactly what you need.

But here’s the wonderful thing about Google Search – there are times when I’m searching for something, but I really don’t know what I’m searching for. For example, I need to replace the tires on my wife’s car. As I’m prepared to price this item, I can’t remember the size of her tire. However, all I have to do is type in the year, make and model of the the car and add “tires” and I’ll get exactly the tire I’m looking for. So even when I don’t know exactly what I’m looking for, I know I can go to the search engine and enter something in the vicinity and end up finding exactly what I need.

Google actually has an ad campaign that says “Google knows what you’re searching for, even when you don’t.”

May I propose that our journey towards discipleship is just like that. It is one of continual seeking and going after Jesus even if I don’t realize exactly what it is in Him I’m searching for.

A pivotal statement that's raised in the text. I must have a hint of my search, otherwise I'll just be searching aimlessly with no intention of finding my solution.

Here's a hint – what you are looking for, is Jesus! Not in another god or idol, not in a degree, not in a man or woman. What you're looking for is not found in a blunt, or at the bottom of a liquor bottle. What you're looking for you'll find in Jesus!

- Acts 4:12 – And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Exegesis

John the Baptist had his disciples and the text indicates that as he looked at Jesus walking by, John proclaimed “Behold the Lamb of God.” The word “behold” prompts our attention to the the subject at hand. John focuses the attention of his disciples to Jesus, not to himself. This supports what is mentioned earlier in the chapter, that John is the voice of one crying in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord (1:23). John pointed his followers to Jesus.

At this point, those followers leave John and follow Jesus, even though they didn't know why they were following. They were following because of what John had said. Today, our churches are full of people who are following because of what someone said. They come to church and do their best to be active in church, because their grandparents, parents, or someone said this is what you do. But they don't know who or why they are following.

Jesus, knowing He was being followed, turned and asked them a pivotal question, “What is it you are seeking?” Perhaps this question is deeper than it seems. But to the question the disciples asks for Jesus' address, to which He invites them to “come and see.”

Conversation

This question and statement has the potential to challenge the believer because they are directed to us as believers today. Jesus wants to know are we just following or seeking something? I would suggest our greatest interest should be seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus, not satisfied with our current status. If this is so, Jesus invites us to come and follow Him and see what He has in store for us.

Questions

1. Looking at John the Baptist, how easy do you believe it was for him to lose his following? He appears to not have any problem with his sudden loss of membership but do you think it effected him in any way? If so, how?
2. What would you think is the difference between following Jesus and seeking Jesus?
3. Have you ever wanted something from Christ, and got something else? Explain.
4. How do you know when you've found everything you need in Jesus?

Beginning Ministry

Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett

Pastor, Antioch AME Church (Antioch, CA)

27 May 2018

Prayer

Lord, prepare our hearts that we might be receptive to your call and move from our familiar places to teach and preach the good news of the kingdom. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 4: 12-23

Contemporary Context

We live in uncertain times. Fires, hurricanes, earthquakes and floods have destroyed homes, businesses and lives. North Korea continues to test long range missiles that can reach the US. Global, national and local economies are fragile. Acts of international and domestic terrorism are increasing around the world and upon our soil as witnessed in Charlottesville, VA. Hatred, bigotry, and discrimination are uniting white groups (Alt-Right, Neo Nazi, KKK and others) to inflict terror upon marginalized groups. Police killings of black children and adults continue without justice for the victims. Families are breaking down from the external pressures of jobs, ever increasing cost of living and internal disharmony in relationship between fathers, mothers and children. The federal program that provides healthcare to the most vulnerable of the population is a target for defunding. The proposed restructuring of the tax code is designed to place more money in the pockets of the wealthy. The social, economic, political and environmental instability imposes stress on our lives and drains our strength. Many are wondering how to make it in this world. The message of Jesus and those who respond to His call brings light, peace and healing in the midst of the most troubling times.

Exegesis

The gospel of Matthew follows Mark in beginning Jesus' ministry after John's arrest. The word "put in prison" (NIV) and arrested, (NRSV) is the passive form of "paradiomi", which means "hand over", "betray", "deliver up". The beginning of Jesus' ministry is the fulfillment of the prophecy recorded in Isaiah 9:1-2 which states that the Messiah will be light to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the region of Galilee where Capernaum was located. Matthew addresses three issues in Jesus' move to Capernaum. First, the move may indicate a mission strategy. Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, was a small town. Capernaum was a busy city and Jesus' message would reach more people and spread quickly.

The second issue is that the Pharisees and their successors- centered in Judea- were prejudiced against Galilee, which they used against Jesus' followers. Matthew cites Scripture about a messianic role in Galilee to counter regional prejudice against the gospel. Jesus' seeking out disciples himself may represent a serious breach of custom, "coming down to their level" socially. Jesus' call cost comfort and challenges the priority of family in the lives of the disciples. The three main aspects of Jesus' ministry were:

teaching, preaching, and healing. Where possible, Jesus worked through the existing institutions. He taught in synagogues, as well as the educational and community centers of the day.

Conversation

Our nation is in a state of crisis. The open call to “Make America Great Again” signals to radical groups to discriminate against those of color as well as the physically and mentally challenged among us. These times call for true disciples of Jesus to come forth with teaching, and to preach the good news of the kingdom. The lack of access to affordable and quality healthcare challenges us to practice the gift of laying on hands and believing for healing every disease and sickness among the people. The clarion call to ministry (service) is ringing throughout the land. Will you answer?

Questions

1. What were the disciples doing prior to the call to follow Jesus?
2. How might one reach the most vulnerable with a message of hope?
3. What skill do you possess that might be transferred for ministry?
4. Where are dark places you might go to bring the light of Jesus Christ?
5. This is a painting by an African American teenage artist. How would you minister to a young black man who has witnessed his innocent friend die from the bullet of a police officer?

Message of the Cross

Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett

Pastor, Antioch AME Church (Antioch, CA)

3 June 2018

Prayer

Lord, on this day we ask that our lives might be lived in such a way that others might see and accept you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

I Corinthians 1: 18-31

Contemporary Context

We live in a society where the value of humanity is measured by education, position, wealth and family status. These measures serve to separate, marginalize, and exclude groups of people. As a community of faith, through the preaching of the cross, we are united as holy people called out and set apart for the service of Jesus Christ. The rich, poor, educated, uneducated, male, female, gay, and straight are equal in the sight of God.

Exegesis

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, addresses problems he has heard about and answers questions they have asked of him in a letter. Some of the problems include jealousy, divisiveness, sexual immorality, and failure to discipline members. The Corinthian church was a diverse community of Jews and Gentiles. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city. It was also filled with idolatry and immorality. Surrounded by corruption and every conceivable sin, they felt the pressure to adapt. The apostle cautions all Christians not to blend in with the world and accept its values and life-style. He teaches that God has taken the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. The message of the cross is the foundation of the faith, and preaching Jesus Christ leads one to salvation. God's power is revealed in the crucified Jesus. God's wisdom is inseparable from the cross.

Conversation

The community of faith is challenged today to be the real church of Jesus Christ. What does the real church look like? A church where members recognize that each has been transformed by the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, is a holy community. Every member is called to remember how life was before the light of Jesus shone in their heart. Officers of the church are no more important in the kingdom of God than the child on the front pew. We live in a world that promotes stardom, but God has taken the foolish of the world to show His power. The cross, during the time of Paul, represented failure, but God used this symbol to be a spiritual sign of righteousness, holiness and redemption. If we must boast of anything, let it be in the Lord.

Questions

1. In times like these, what might the church do to promote the message of the cross?
2. Explain how a miracle might influence the decision to accept Jesus Christ as Savior.

3. What actions may be taken at your church to include the socially, economically, and physically marginalized persons in ministry?
4. What is the role of faith for unity among diverse groups?

A Holy Hookup

Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes

Pastor, Ebenezer AME Church (Kansas City, MO)

10 June 2018

Prayer

O Holy One, help us to see what we can and must be through Jesus- our elder brother and trustworthy friend. Amen

Scripture

Luke 2:22-40, Hebrews 2:14-18, John 1:43-51

Contemporary Context

I regard “heaven” as the spirit realm or resting place, and residence of God. This is not a location of concrete conception, but a reality through which God is revealed to all living things. Heaven has been opened to everyone who believes that God is. We are part of, and privileged to receive the unfolding revelation of the Eternal identity, I AM, aka God, our Creator- Caregiver and Constant Companion. This revelation is both, always present and ever unfolding: always present because God is, and unfolding because we don’t see it all at once. This revelation comes to us through angelic messengers, prophetic appointees, and Jesus the Firstborn. Then through us- the latest ones born of the Spirit.

Exegesis

God establishes our kinship through revelation. By showing us what the Divine presence can accomplish (the Almighty), we come to believe that God is the giver of everything good. By establishing the covenants with Abraham and Moses, God reveals the Eternal plan to shed light on our ignorance and rebellion. When God spoke to Abram the promise and plan of God was to make him the human agent through whom the entire creation would come to know God. That was the beginning but it was never intended to be the end all. That was God’s way of showing the Divine will to reveal God’s own nature. Moses is used to reveal God’s character through the giving of the Law - Ten Commandments. Jesus comes to show God’s desire for us to be holy.

Mary and Joseph bring their firstborn to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised according to the law, i.e. revelation of God to and through Moses. Every firstborn Israelite male was to be brought into the covenant community and marked as a member by circumcision, on the eighth day by the priest. According to Exodus 13, the firstborn is holy unto the Lord. Therefore, the child was to be consecrated to the Lord. The first and the best was to be presented to the Lord as an offering of worship.

Simeon and Anna both arrive- by inspiration and revelation through the Holy Spirit- at the same time as Mary and Joseph. they are moved by the Spirit and begin to prophesy concerning Jesus; giving purpose and expectation regarding his role in that community. He would be the light to the gentiles as well as Israel. People would suffer and stumble because of him, but many would be saved and redeemed.

The gospel writer, Luke, affirms that Jesus grew in wisdom and favor as the express revelation and link between heaven and earth- God and humankind. Jesus, himself, tells Nathaniel that the angels will reveal God's glorious light upon the Son of Man, Ascending and Descending to bring power and light to the world through God's Son, Jesus.

Conversation

We indeed have a Holy Hookup! We can know in an instant what God has for us. We can be all that God wants us to be by looking at Jesus- the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We can gradually get to know God by increasing our awareness and attention to the things that have been revealed in scripture and in our lived experience. We can know the desire of God for our life by listening to the Son. We can do what God wants us to do by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have access and ability; insight and wisdom through the revelation of God.

Questions

1. In what ways have you gained knowledge and insight through what has been shared by those persons, preachers and teachers you have known?
2. How have you changed over time because of the revelation of God's commandments?
3. What roles have your parents played in the progress of your spiritual formation?
4. What are your main sources of information and understanding of God?
5. Are you making the best use of your Holy Hookup?

Media

Be Open by Richard Smallwood

Let Your Little Light Shine

Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes

Pastor, Ebenezer AME Church (Kansas City, MO)

17 June 2018

Prayer

Dear God, help us to be for others, who we would like others to be.

Scripture

Matthew 5:13-20; Ephesians 3:1-12

Contemporary Context

In the beginning, says the writer of Genesis, God said, “let there be light” and there was light. I believe that God the creator is above all- orderly and progressive, never working to take us backward but to take us forward. The plan of this orderly God is to reveal more and more of the essential nature of God, which is described as love. The light shined and the darkness was dumbfounded. Where light is, darkness cannot remain. Light allows us to see truth and cannot be hidden. Light transforms us and makes us better. Light is intended to change the world.

Exegesis

The mosaic law was an important revelation. Our relationship with it has developed as humankind progresses. Its importance has not diminished, but our understanding has been deepened through the teaching of Jesus. He made it plain that his intent was not to displace it, but to turn up the light so that we could see more clearly. The commandments are designed to effect our way of life with each other. The importance is stressed because we teach by precept and example. The one who breaks a commandment and teaches someone else to disobey is twice as guilty. Righteousness happens from the inside out.

The plan of God was not to exclude anyone from the covenant, but to include everyone, jews and gentiles. What is referred to as the mystery of Christ is God’s plan to unify all human beings by bestowing the Spirit of Christ- what we call the anointing- to every believer. The tendency to separate ourselves and divide others can be overcome by the renewing power of Divine revelation. Jesus’ affirmation and Paul’s proclamation helps us to know that a spirit of disobedience has misled us into a life of preoccupation with fleshy living. The Spirit of Christ leads us in love and light and commissions us to let everyone know who will listen, that God is not partial. God’s plan is to save us and redeem all of creation.

In order for us to be included, God has commissioned those who know the truth to spread the message far and wide so that others would know the love of God that has been shown through Jesus the Son. We are called to let our light shine. In other words- share what we know, so others would come to know who God really is. God has enlisted us to be true witnesses, not false witnesses who misrepresent the character of God by hiding our light or remaining in darkness after we have seen the Light.

Conversation

I have a flashlight that I carry in my handbag and sometimes other items in the bag cause it to come on. I can see the light shining even though the flashlight is hidden. My point is what Jesus was saying: you can't hide your light, so you may as well let it shine. Jesus made it possible for us to see and be different, holy, effective. The mystery has been revealed: Christ in you, the hope of glory!

Questions

1. Does the law have relevance in today's world?
2. Were you impacted by the ten commandments in your early spiritual development?
3. How has your outlook changed as a result of your deeper understanding of God's law?
4. How do you know someone's light is shining?
5. Is the orderliness of God evident in your life? Share in what ways you identify God's transforming love.

Media

Golden by Jill Scott

A Call To Discipleship

Chaplain Terrance Thomas

St. James AME Church (Chicago, IL)

24 June 2018

Scripture

Luke 5:1-11

Prayer

Most Gracious and Eternal God, thank you for this opportunity to study the text and hear what is being said on how we should not only engage those around us, but make disciples. We ask that you be with us during this time and help us understand what we need to see. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Contemporary Context

In the HBO series *Games of Thrones*, Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Nights Watch, engages in a daring mission to save the Wildlings, a community of people who live outside of The Wall and beyond the “civilized” world, from The White Walkers, an impending evil that would end thousands of lives. Breaking with the tradition of The Night’s Watch to not help The Wildlings in anyway, Jon Snow engages the Nights Watch to save The Wildlings. Though he was not able to save everyone, Jon Snow did manage to save enough Wildlings that they pledged their lives to him; this would become critical during several other events in which Jon Snow would need friends and allies. Jon Snow’s act of kindness and his decision to live in community with, as opposed to attempting to convert or force submission would alter the course of the seven kingdoms. This is not unlike the situation Jesus deals with at the start of Luke 5.

Exegesis

Luke 5 opens with Jesus having left the temple after his call sermon and moving through the common areas where the working-class people lived and operated. While the crowd, was focused on being taught by Jesus, in that moment Jesus was focused on something else; making disciples. After briefly teaching the crowds from the boat owned by Simon (also called Peter) Jesus offers to take the Simon (and his co-laborers James and John) out to the deeper parts of the ocean to help them fish. Simon is skeptical about there being anything to catch; he goes so far to express this to Jesus. However, something about Jesus, perhaps the way he spoke or how he carried himself, caused Simon Peter to trust Jesus and take the risk. Upon following Jesus’ suggestions, Simon Peter brings in a large catch. At first believing himself unworthy, to follow the Lord, Jesus affirms that Simon Peter (as well as James and John) are more than worthy. He promises them something greater if they journey with him. Upon returning to shore, the three men leave everything behind and commit their lives to following Jesus.

Conversation

In considering the actions of these men, it is critical to note that all of this involved a level of trust, risk, and willingness to journey with someone. Not only did they risk their boat (and by extension their livelihood) to allow Jesus to teach from it, they were willing to allow him to take them on what appeared to be a point mission to fish. Jesus, in return did not try to force them into this relationship; he acknowledged their concerns, affirmed their emotions and offered to go with them out into the sea. In

this space Jesus was not attempting to make converts: mindless drones that followed what he said without regard for their safety and feelings, but rather he opted to make disciples: people who would share in his journey to change the world. In this act of balance and reciprocity, Jesus began to lay the foundation for his ministry.

Questions

1. What is the difference between making converts and making disciples?
2. Why do you think the Simon was willing to work with Jesus despite his reservations?
3. What does it mean to give up everything you know to follow God in our context today? Could you just leave it all behind to do Kingdom Work?
4. How are you making disciples in your space?

It's Harder to Love Than it is to Hate

Rev. V. Gordon Glenn III

*Pastor of Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church,
Kansas City, MO)*

1 July 2018

Prayer

Lord, You have shown us by example that we are to love even those most difficult to love. Give us the courage and right spirit to do so. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 5:43-48

Contemporary Context

In the toxic socio-political environment in which we live, in which the President of the United States gives a wink and a nod of tacit (and sometimes overt) approval to white-supremacists and other hate-mongers; where trial after trial of criminally-minded cops bears witness to a conclusion many of us made long ago that only *some* lives matter; and where immigrants and the undocumented hide in the shadows, afraid to go to agencies set up to help the indigent, for fear of detention and/or deportation, it's not *easy* to love our enemies.

But if it was *easy*, Jesus would not have to tell us to do it. If it was *easy*, it would be automatic. If it was *easy*, there'd be no such thing as a "nuclear option." If it was *easy*, we wouldn't need a "War Department." If it was *easy*, Jesus would not have had to be betrayed, beaten and bound to a cross betwixt two barbarians.

Exegesis

There is no doubt among scholars that Matthew, the apostle and former tax collector, wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although first listed in the canon of Scripture, modern scholars note that since Matthew and Luke relied heavily upon Mark's writings, Matthew should be dated sometime after AD 65. Matthew's aim to his mostly Jewish audience is not only to show that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, but also that He is the Son of David. Matthew includes the detailed birth narrative and genealogy that Mark is not wholly concerned with.

For Matthew and his audience, it is important to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law of Moses. Contained in the first division of Matthew's Gospel (chaps. 3-7) following the prologue is the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus shares the very hard instructions on how we should live under the reign of God: *Love Your Enemies*.

Instead of just rubber-stamping the letter of the Law, Jesus, the ultimate teacher, offers full and complete context for the Law of love. Heretofore, the people had interpreted Leviticus 19:18 (“Do not try to get even. Do not hold anything against any of your people. Instead, love your neighbor as you love yourself. I am the Lord.” [NIrV]) to restrict them to loving *only* those whom one would consider “your neighbor” and no one else. Jesus came along and stated that the fulfillment of that law is to love your enemies and pray for those who hate you. As it does *our* ears, it must have struck Jesus’ first century congregation as strange or harsh too.

Conversation

When many of us read the words, “be perfect...,” many of us instantly tune out because we have resigned within ourselves that perfection is impossible. We conclude that, “If I have to be perfect, I guess I won’t be doing it because I’m not perfect.” We stop listening. We accept our second-best status. We hold our heads down and keep on doing what we’ve been doing... content with our state of *imperfection*.

Some have had trouble with this passage because Jesus seems to place these teachings beyond our reach by saying that we must be perfect – just like God! But when Jesus refers to The Law, He does not mean a set of rules and regulations – He is referring to the Hebrew *Torah*, a body of law at once more positive and dynamic. Jesus affirmed the *Torah* and went further.

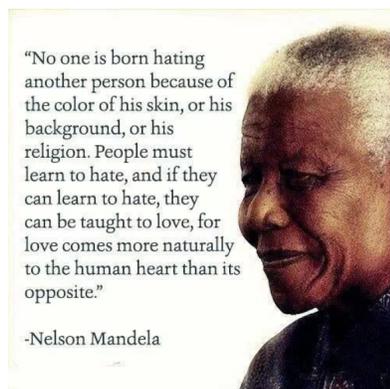
What this means is that we are not merely called upon to be law-abiding citizens, crossing every “t” and dotting every “i,” careful to not be caught running afoul of the written Law. With practice and vigilant watch, we all should be able to do that. But Jesus is calling on us to do the harder thing - to love - even those society has given us *permission* to hate.

Questions

1. What’s this passage saying to those who are doing the bare minimum to fulfill the Law?
2. Must we do *more* than the Law requires? Why/Why not?
3. Are there any present-day obstacles to following the Law as Jesus Christ prescribes?

Media

How do these images/quotes reflect the truth of Jesus’ teaching here?



Basics Just Won't Do

*Rev. Quanta M. Crews, Associate Minister
The Historic Tanner Chapel A.M.E. Church
(Phoenix, AZ)*

8 July 2018

Prayer

Heavenly father, thank you for the power that you delivered during the Pentecost over 2000 years ago. As we approach the battle field during these times, continue to strengthen us as we resist and stay woke knowing that today's battle- like yesterday's- needs to start with prayer. Help us to develop ourselves and build up our spiritual muscles so we can confront evil that can only be conquered through a lifestyle of prayer. Help us to move beyond the basics and enter into a deeper relationship with you, in Jesus name. Amen.

Scripture

Mark 9:28-29

Contemporary Context

Jesus had just come down Mt. Hermon back to Caesarea Philippi, which was not a predominantly Jewish area. When He came down, the crowd had formed and Jesus was presented a boy who was possessed. The disciples had attempted to free the boy from the spirit but were unsuccessful. The boy's father pleaded that Jesus save his son, confessing that he believed. He then asked Jesus to help his unbelief. After the boy was brought to Him and He observed the boy, Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the child, and it did.

Exegesis

The disciples inquired about an evil spirit in the boy and why they were unable to cast it out. Jesus replied that that kind of spirit could only be cast out through prayer. Jesus himself did not pray but spoke directly to the evil spirit in question in verse 26. This text implies that there are degrees of spirits and that some, like the one of this passage, require yet another level of spiritual maturity. Jesus said to them, "this kind" can be cast out only "through prayer". The power in faith the disciples had was not enough and thus they turned to Jesus whose spiritual maturity was on a higher level. Jesus did not pray at that moment but simply commanded the evil spirit to leave the boy.

Conversation

As children of God we have been taught to put on the whole armor of God and use all of our spiritual weapons. Most can agree that we have done that yet it evil continues to spread its territory and run rampant. While we were gifted with the power of the Holy Spirit during the Pentecost, there are situations we find ourselves in where we find it hard to be successful.

There is a new level of evil enterprise. And as evil continues to gain strength and craftiness, and becomes technologically savvy, the people of God are faced with challenges similar to those we see the disciples

struggle with in the text. The disciples were faced with a demon-possessed child and while they gave it their all, they were not able to cast out the demon. Despite the power the disciples had, and despite the miracles they had performed in the past, the boy remained in his affliction.

Some of us today are confused like the disciples. When we continue to battle against the evil forces of this world and come up short, we have to stop and reevaluate the situation. We must continue to build our spiritual muscle through prayer and fasting in order to connect and maintain that connection to the Almighty. This is a time where the basics just won't do. We know Jesus prayed and fasted. Check out Mark 1:35. These two actions together create a spiritual lifestyle that will open up our hearts and push our faith to new spiritual heights. These times are calling for the children of God to pray and fast without ceasing. Being a spiritually disciplined disciple is a requirement for success. Just hanging around catching the anointed residue of others just won't do.

Questions

1. What is spiritual maturity?
2. What are spiritual disciplines that can be taught in our churches to help us develop spiritually?
3. How might we prepare ourselves for the spiritual battles ahead?
4. What signs can we look out for that show a situation needing a higher level of spiritual maturity?
5. Young people are looking for education in spirituality, not religion. How can our churches engage these young people and equip them for the tough spiritual battles they face daily?

ARMOR + Lifestyle

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15 July 2018

Prayer

Most merciful father, thank you for providing your children with a lifestyle model to follow. Undergird us as we seek to fulfill the mission you have for us- personally and collectively. Remove distractions or help us move past them. Clear the way for us to further align ourselves in your army so that we can be effective in this spiritual battle. In Jesus name, Amen.

Scripture

Mark 1:29-39

Contemporary Context

We are taught in Sunday school to put on the “whole armor of God” and this will aid us in the spiritual war against evil. While the armor (Helmet of Salvation, Breast Plate of Righteousness, Belt of Truth, Shield of Faith, Sword of the Spirit, and Boots of Peace) is necessary, one needs to properly prepare for battle and have a clear sense of purpose. Christ set an example by training through a lifestyle prayer and fasting. The Lord practiced self-care after a day of healing and showed how we are to govern ourselves as we continue to spread the gospel and confront evil wherever we see it.

Exegesis

After getting baptized, and after the arrest of His cousin John, Jesus’ ministry continued to develop as He spread the news of the spiritual battles of the time as well as the opportunity to get on the right team. In Mark Chapter 1, we also learn of Jesus’ recruiting strategy. As Jesus travels and teaches, he recruits four fishermen and along the way, heals a demon-possessed man and places the vicinity in awe. The people were amazed by the authority of which Jesus spoke and wondered who he was. The word was getting around about the Word. This had to be the most authentic grass roots campaign to ever hit humanity.

In the text we find Jesus and the disciples heading back to Simon and Andrew’s house. When they arrive they are informed of Simon’s mother-in-law who is ill. The word says Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. She was completely healed and began to serve all of them. By the evening, people were bringing those who were ill and demon-possessed to Jesus for complete healing. Jesus healed the afflicted and did not let the evil spirits speak because He knew he had more work to do. In the spiritual battle, fighting against spiritual wickedness in high places, Jesus took the time to rise early and get some personal prayer in. When He returned he was told that everyone was looking for Him. Jesus chose to move on to the next towns stating that that is why He came. He went throughout Galilee preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.

Conversation

Why did He come? Jesus' mission was clear and He knew what His role was. He taught the masses and-seeing the afflictions of His children- delivered them. While the Lord could have gotten caught up with all of those waiting at the door for Him, He made an executive decision to move on with the task at hand. Some of those gathered came to learn, some to spectate, some to gossip, some to be healed, and I am sure some came just for something to do. God did not let that distract Him. Sometimes those with the biggest bark receive the bone. Here God moves on to the other towns because that is what the task demanded. The example set for us by Christ is to prepare for the work you have been called to do through prayer and fasting, study the word, undergird yourself with the armor you've been given, and have a clear understanding of your role in your current work. Prayer is to be a lifestyle that, if utilized, will aid us on the quest to conquer evil and spiritual wickedness in high places. While we are not Jesus, we can strive for a higher level of spirituality by following Christ and the lifestyle He models for us.

Questions

1. Christ healed Simon Peter's mother and she began to serve them. What do you think of the example that she represents today?
2. Jesus had healed many and then sought personal time the following morning. What does your personal prayer life look like? Is there room for improvement?
3. What are things in your life that may hinder your self-care?
4. Jesus was not distracted by the reaction He received from the people after He delivered some from their afflictions. How does the church move forward when all eyes are on her?
5. How might we prepare ourselves for the spiritual battles ahead?
6. What signs can we look out for that show a situation needing a higher level of spiritual maturity?
7. How can our churches engage these young people and equip them for the tough spiritual battles they face daily?

I've Got A Testimony - The Evangelist

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22 July 2018

Prayer

God we thank You for your compassion towards us and your miracle working power. As we study today, remind us of your loving care for us and the miracles you have performed in our lives. Place a fire inside each one of us that causes us to tell someone about our experiences with Jesus.

Scripture

Mark 1:40-45

Contemporary Context

As we focus on our roles in the church during this season of Epiphany, we will look today at how the leper became an evangelist. Who are the people God chooses to use? Have you ever asked a preacher how they knew they were called to preach? Have you ever asked a Steward how they knew they were called to be a Steward? What about a Trustee, an Usher or a member of the Choir? Everything we do in the church should be because of an encounter (or series of encounters) with Jesus, because only what we do for Christ will last.

Exegesis

Leprosy was thought to be the most hopeless of all diseases. "A leper is not only considered physically incurable, but he also suffers under social rejection and spiritual condemnation." (preaching commentary series Volume I). Because lepers are so grotesque, respectable society labels them as contagious and sends them into exile. It is one thing to be condemned to die, it is another thing to be forced to die in isolation.

In our text, the man with leprosy cries out to Jesus, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." A 'good Jew' would not have responded to the man. But Jesus "*moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, I am willing; be cleansed.*"

The word translated as *compassion* derives from the same Greek word that means 'viscera, bowels, intestines, or guts.' When we read that Jesus is moved with compassion, it means that He feels Himself so deeply into the sufferings of the leper that it is just as if He himself is suffering as a leper.

When he reaches out and touches the leper, he violates every medical warning and every social taboo. With one touch he is saying 'I will take your place, not just in the risk of physical contamination but also in social condemnation.' Compassion is an action verb.

Jesus strictly warns him not to tell anyone about the encounter but vs. 45 tells us the leper went out and *began to proclaim freely and to spread the matter*. As a direct result of his testimony, others were drawn to Jesus.

Conversation

An evangelist is defined by the bible dictionary as a "publisher of glad tidings;" a missionary preacher of the gospel (Ephesians 4:11). They were itinerant preachers, having it as their special function to carry the gospel to places where it was previously unknown. The writers of the four Gospels are known as the Evangelists.

The leper recognized Jesus as a healer and asked him for help. Jesus helped him. The help changed his life. He mentally, physically and spiritually could not keep the good news to himself. He had to share! In spreading the news publicly and widely he became an evangelist, leading many to seek after the Messiah.

Questions

1. How do you think the man's life changed as a result of his encounter with Jesus? (Consider that before this he had no friends but those in the colony, no family connections, no job or job skills – almost sounds like someone who has spent their life in prison)
2. Why did the man disobey Jesus' warning not to tell others?
3. Is there anything God has done in your life that you literally can't keep to yourself? How often and with who have you shared the story?
4. What is the best testimony you ever heard shared by someone else? Who led you to Christ?
5. Would you be more convinced of God's power by someone who had a little healing and transformation or someone whose life was totally turned around?
6. Do you consider yourself an evangelist? Why or why not? If the Pastor of the church shared good news but the people in the church only shared gossip, would you want to join? When people hear you talking, can they tell who you represent? What role do you play in lifting up the name, presence, power and knowledge of Jesus?

Accountability In Community

The Rev. Brandee Mimitzraiem

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(Independence, KS)

29 July 2018

Prayer

God, we come seeking to understand You through your word. You told us that you would be Emmanuel - God with us. Please help us understand what it means that you are God for us. Please help us to learn what it means to be with and for each other. We give you thanks for Your Word revealed. We give you praise for the ability to reason our way to knowing. Please send your Holy Spirit to guide us as we seek understanding. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 5:21-37

Contemporary Context

Back in the day, when we were younger, our community was strong. We could depend on members of our community to help us when we were in trouble, to check us when we were making trouble, to be present for us in our times of need. Our community - churches, neighborhoods, work places - was tangible and, for better or worse, helped shape and form us into who we are.

The definition of community is changing. “Community” no longer refers solely to the people around whom we live, with whom we work or worship. We live in an era when groups of people “gather” in online settings - from their phones or the comfort of their homes - and create spaces to engage and get to know each other. The internet, and social media, have made it possible to create community with those whom we may never meet in person. Even these digital communities help to form and shape identity.

Whether in-person or digital, communities help us to develop into who we are supposed to be by setting standards, rules, and holding us accountable to them. Communities surround us to demonstrate God’s love, mercy, and to help us as we journey through life.

Exegesis

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus interprets the Law of Moses. He repeats to a knowing audience of followers and disciples what they have heard their entire lives. He tells them of the laws that make up the boundaries of their community. And then he flips it. “You have heard ...” this law and that. “But now I tell you...” the fullness of the expectation. Jesus’ goal wasn’t to undo the law or to merely extend it. In this portion of the sermon, Jesus was inviting all who were listening to enter into a community with each other, agreeing to abide by laws that take seriously each other’s personhood and agency.

In considering the Gospel of Matthew, we must discuss not only the words spoken by Jesus but the writer's intention. Matthew was written for a specific audience. This pattern - thesis followed by antithesis - is used to both expand on the law and differentiate the burgeoning Matthew community from the Roman and Jewish communities around it. "Matthew's church has obviously been involved in tense relationship with the surrounding dominant Jewish community, and it cannot be defined, as it did not define itself, apart from that relationship." Thus, Jesus' words here emphasize the boundaries of the community. His choice of laws - murder, adultery, divorce, oath-breaking - in this section aren't about personal morality but about the way individuals relate to each other within the community. Karoline Lewis explains, "This next section of the Sermon on the Mount begins to turn the perspective of the disciples outside of themselves. They are not disciples for their own sakes, and their own actions, but for the sake of those around them as well. There is an accountability, a responsibility to the other for the sake of good of the community." Then, Jesus' extension of Mosaic Law, here, is community building.

Conversation

Lewis continues: "...at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, in fact, the only way that this sermon could be preached, is the premise of Jesus as Emmanuel. When we remember that God is with us, not just that God is with me, we begin to realize we are not simply members of community but shapers of community and are shaped by community, all of which tells a critical theological truth—our God is a God of community."

Being in community - whether in-person or digital - requires adherence to group norms and values. The Sermon on the Mount provides the context through which the Matthew community could hold each other accountable for their actions within the community. Likewise, our community - as congregations, annual conferences, and a connection - have spoken and unspoken behavioral expectations used to denote who we are as a community and who we are for each other within the community. This process of community building and boundary shaping can be helpful - as was the case for the early church who needed to form an identity - but it can also begin to exclude. As we righten the temple order, and reclaim our own community standards, we should take particular care to notice our own implicit and explicit norms and values, how they shape us as a community, and the ways in which they extend (or even oppose) God's love.

Questions

1. What are the values and norms -both spoken/explicit and unspoken/implicit - of your congregation? Annual Conference? District? The Connection? How might Jesus extend those norms such that we might be more accountable to and for each other, and better demonstrate the love of a present God?
2. Laws, norms, and values draw boundaries around communities that help shape identity. These boundaries also denote who is in and who is out. As our communities shift from traditional, in-person, brick and mortar to digital spaces, how might our norms and values be an asset? How might they be a hindrance? In what ways might our norms and values be exclusive?
3. Jesus' antitheses ("you've heard it said ... but I say") were given to extend upon what the gathered crowd already knew, laws with which they were already familiar. In what ways can our community - as local congregations, and on every level of the connection - extend upon the standards with which we are already familiar to begin to develop communities outside of our traditional spaces? How can we adapt our norms and values to be inclusive?

The Master's Builders

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5 August 2018

Prayer

Lord, we are grateful for the bodies that you have given us: both physical and communal. Please help us to get comfortable in being who we are. Help us to see that there is a place for difference because Your gifts make the room. Please help us to value our bodies, each other, and ourselves. In the name of the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Scripture

1 Cor. 3:10-11, 16-23

Contemporary Context: Black Bodies Matter

We are in a health crisis. Nationally, and especially in our churches, we are experiencing an endemic of unhealthy bodies. The myriad of diagnoses we receive from our doctors, the messages we hear on the news and on commercials signify a disorder within our physical bodies. We are unhealthy. Some of us attempt to correct this by changing what we eat, by losing weight, by increasing our exercise. Those activities alone and together can change a negative prognosis into a positive, but the health of our bodies is deeper than the number on the scale, test-strip, or test result. That is, fat and healthy are no more antonyms than thin and healthy are synonyms. Health is not measurable. Health is the proper relationship of all of our working parts. For many of us, our lives depend upon our bodies finding their healthy zone. That is, we must restore the parts of our bodies to their proper order - our lives are at stake.

Likewise, the health and wellbeing of the Body of Christ is not necessarily quantifiable. Numbers on an annual report form - or a deposit slip - are not indicators of the health of a congregation of a denomination. The health of the Body of Christ is a function of the parts maintaining proper relationship.

Exegesis: Whose Building? God's Building

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul attempts to convey what it takes to build a community - a congregation - of this newly-emerging faith. As the people of Corinth eschewed their commitments to previous faiths, Paul assisted them in understanding the need for proper relationships. In this letter, he discussed interpersonal relationships as well as foundational tenets of community building. Here, Paul explains in detail what it means to be a Christian in the midst of the Roman Empire.

The third chapter begins with Paul explaining away the ideological divisions that are arising in the community. He uses a construction analogy to demonstrate the need for Christian communities to be on the same page, to work towards a common goal. "Therefore he warns them," John Calvin explains, "first that they do not persuade themselves that they may build after their own fantasy, that is, that they may

propound and set forth anything in the Church, either in matter, or in type of teaching, different from the apostles who were the chief builders.” This burgeoning church, in order to be a community, had to move past the tendency to use their own personal experiences as foundational to the community they were trying to build. Rather than using their own real, lived experiences to build their church and their community, they should understand Jesus - as understood through the apostles - as the basis for their community. We cannot build the master’s house using our individual tools. That is, the Body of Christ is dependent upon our ability to see past our individuality and see ourselves as relational components of the body, working together towards the common goal of building the kingdom of God. More simply, Paul instructs the Corinthians to get over themselves and focus on God.

Paul ends the third chapter by closing the need for division in the Christian community. Traditionally, the 16th verse has been used as a cherry-picked “clobber” verse, to shame Christians into “proper behavior,” and away from certain activities. But Paul’s admonition is not about individual bodies. It’s a collective corrective. The “you” that Paul uses is plural: “y’all are the temple of God”, and “the spirit of God lives in y’all”, and “God’s temple is holy, which is what y’all are.” The goal here, for Paul, is to demonstrate the need for unity among believers. Like Jeremiah, Paul here is proclaiming “woe to the shepherds who scatter the sheep.” The Body of Christ must stay together. The Body of Christ is the temple of the Lord, it is a Holy Nation, and must be treated as such.

Application: Master Builders

A few years ago, Warner Brother’s released a movie about the popular Swiss building-block toy. The Lego Movie, as it was simply titled, was loosely about intergenerational conflict over a toy - that is, a father and a son figuring out their own relationship over the father’s lego creations - while exploring the possibilities of the various Lego products. The “messiah figures” of the Lego Movie were a group of imaginative characters called “Master Builders.” Master Builders were able to see the potential and possibilities in individual lego pieces and put them together to create new objects. Other characters - regular construction workers - used and followed the instructions provided by large corporations in order to build approved objects. The denouement comes when the Master Builders realize they must come together, create a plan, and follow it in order to save the world. “Master Builders,” as my son says, “sometimes follow the instructions.”

In this chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul calls himself - and all of us who attempt to build and maintain Christian communities - a Master Builder. A Master Builder is one who sees and understands the needs of the community and uses the blocks to build with the instructions provided by Christ. More than that, our goal in building should be healthy community where the pieces fit together according to the Master’s plan and not our own. In order to build healthy communities, we have to see past ourselves to value each other. We have to make room for each other’s gifts and graces - across generations. We must understand our roles within the body of Christ, work to develop and maintain proper relationships with each other without demanding that people stay in externally proscribed “places,” and believe that every role in the body is necessary even if they are not all identical.

Reflection Questions: Loving the Black Body

1. The health of the Body of Christ is dependent upon the health of the bodies within it. If we are physically unhealthy, we are unable to fulfill our roles within the Body. We have to do the work to maintain our own physical and emotional health. We have to take care of ourselves and each other. What resources can the Church - local and connectional - provide to encourage self-care, decrease burn-out, and increase the health of its members? What Biblical models of self-care might we draw upon (How did Jesus model self-care? The prophets?)?
2. For millennia, the Church has been understood to be the Body of Christ. As we endeavor, this year, to restore the Body’s proper functions, we must reconsider our conception of the Church: Who is

the Church? Why does the Church exist? Why are you here? Following Paul's lead, what is the role of the church's leadership in the Body of Christ?

3. I said, here, that numbers themselves are not indicators of the health of the Body of Christ. Finances, church membership, ascensions and conversions, themselves, do not demonstrate that a church is healthy or unhealthy. A church that is in proper working order is healthy - regardless of size. What are some indicators that your congregation is healthy? What are some growing edges that need to be addressed?

Epiphanic Transmissions: What Jesus and Sabbath “Violations” Tell Us About Life and Death

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12 August 2018

Prayer

Help us, O Lord, to be open to You in familiar places. Help us to see how extraordinary our everyday lives are. And help us to discern between the spirit of life and death. Amen.

Scripture

Mark 2:23-3:6 (Primary), 2 Peter 1:16-21 (Secondary)

Contemporary Context

Epiphanies—manifestations of God and moments of great insight—happen amidst the everyday. Epiphanies reveal that there is an inseparable connection between the mundane and the extraordinary, those things around us and those things “beyond” us. Epiphanies massage and often tear apart the porous boundaries between the immanent and the transcendent. Rather than having us choose between a false dichotomy—either transcendence or immanence—epiphanies compel us to consider both the extraordinary and the mundane and how they influence our lives, experience, and worldview.

Think of Jesus’ transfiguration and prophetic inspiration. There, on a mountain and half-sleep, the disciples saw a man they had been traveling with for months, if not years, become changed and exalted. Yet, he was still Jesus. The mountain, though a routine part of the Palestinian landscape and composed of “inanimate” matter, suddenly becomes a place where the very voice and presence of God emerges. Time and space dance playfully as well, so that Moses and Elijah appear alongside a transfigured Jesus. But just as soon as the vision is witnessed, folks are back on a mountain with the dude they’ve been traveling with for months.

I was cooking a pot of grits a month ago. God spoke to me over those old-fashioned grits and gave me a sermon. As the pot bubbled, and as I was about to put some cheese in those bad boys, I heard something tell me that old-fashioned grits are a great metaphor for faith and can tell us something about God. Grits... These are epiphanies. We should ready ourselves to meet the unexpected in familiar places.

Exegesis

Most biblical Scholars believe that Mark was the earliest of our four gospels. It was likely written some 35-40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. This is not just a story remembered. Like all stories, it's a narrative that seeks to make sense of the both the past, the present, and future. But Mark is dealing with contemporary issues, most notably violent persecution. Therefore, many of the controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees have been heightened and dramatized because in Mark's day, there was growing conflict between those who believed Jesus was the Messiah and the Pharisees, who had grown in power and stature since the first generation of Christians. A war had also broken out between the Jews and Romans, which ultimately led to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70CE. Mark was written in a *liminal* moment—a time of religious and political flux and great danger. What we have here, therefore, is not simply a story about “unbelieving” Pharisees and “righteous” Christians. That's a misreading of the story. We have an internal spat between two Jewish groups who are trying to understand what it means to be Jewish under Roman domination and are no longer as bound to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Conversation

The Epiphany here is at least twofold. The first epiphany centers on Jesus; the other revolves around his opponents. Jesus reveals that matters of hunger and sickness—though “mundane”—elicit a higher demand than ritual observance and worship—which we often classify as “extraordinary.” But more than this, Jesus truly reveals *that practices of justice, love, and mercy are acts of worship to God*. This is important to highlight. We are often tempted to think that holiness demands ritual observance, worship, and moral perfection (that in too many cases borders upon self-righteousness). We often miss that love is the other side of holiness. Just as the mundane and the extraordinary cannot be untangled amid an epiphany, neither can holiness and love be disentangled. God is Holy and God is Love. Stated theologically, Jesus is the incarnation of God's holiness and love. Jesus communicates how holiness and love are to be manifested in mundane and extraordinary ways. Though we routinely highlight sacrifice as extraordinary and godly, God demands our first order of business to be mercy, love, and justice—*not sacrifice*. Hosea (6:6), Micah (6:6-8), Isaiah (58:1-12), and Jesus have disclosed this to us. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. *Everything we hold dear depends on this*.

The second epiphany is so ugly and cold-blooded, that we may easily overlook it. Jesus, angry and distraught over his opponents' hard-heartedness, asked if it was lawful to save life or to kill, to do good or evil on the sabbath. His opponents do not respond to his direct question. However, as soon as their religious service is over, the Pharisees, a *religious* group, immediately seek to conspire with the Herodians, an obscure *political* group, on the Sabbath Day to destroy Jesus. This conspiracy is also an epiphany, a moment of great insight.

This second epiphany reveals two things. First, there has never been a separation between our religious and political sensibilities. Our politics have religious dimensions and our religion has political dimensions. I'm speaking of something more fundamental than the First Amendment and separation of church and state. How we understand ourselves in relation to God, each other, the universe (religion) is intimately tied to how we understand and wield social power (politics). Folks often believe that religion deals with things beyond us and politics deals with things around us. Jesus, and indeed God, upends that assumption, and his opponents confirm the truth. Both religion and politics have mundane and extraordinary dimensions. Something about Jesus meant bad news for the religious and political status quo. If our witness only upsets the religious order but leaves the political order untouched, we've not truly understood this epiphany and we have not really followed Jesus to the fullest.

But perhaps the deepest epiphany was that these Sabbath controversies were not simply about God. Perhaps these controversies reveal our longstanding worship of the gods “power and domination” and the mundane and extraordinary lengths we go to defend our gods. Jesus asked if it was lawful to save life

or to kill on the Sabbath... In all manner of ungodliness, and yet for the sake of our gods, we have certainly made it lawful to kill and sacrifice others as an offering to our gods, because we see sacrifice and not justice, mercy, and love as our true and only act of worship. A religion of sacrifice and a politics of domination can only yield one thing: destruction.

Questions

1. How might the flag-kneeling protests in the NFL resonate with this passage?
2. How might this passage help us speak about how evangelical Christians could support a president who jokes about sexual assault, refuses to admit a mistake, and never asks for forgiveness?
3. Have you ever met God or found great insight, in the midst of your everyday living?

Resurrection, the Body, and Victory: The Challenge of Injury, Death, and Despair

Rev. Dr. M. JoDavid Sales

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19 August 2018

Prayer

Lord, please help us see the epiphany within your resurrection. Help us to remember the sites of death and damage amongst us. Help us, O Lord, to not forget our bodies or those who are routinely damaged, killed, and face perilous circumstances. Thank you for the promise of a new body, new heaven, and new earth. Help us to walk in hope and in victory. Amen.

Scripture

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Contemporary Context

Resurrection is like the rain we so desperately need in California. And don't let anybody fool you, the most renowned civilizations and the greatest places on earth have been reduced to memory, rubble, and ruin due to the lack of water. Without water, we cannot live. And precipitation is a primary source of freshwater. People have prayed to God for rain like we pray to God for resurrection. Years ago, there was an interfaith prayer for rain. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and other faiths gathered to pray for water in the drought-stricken, scorched terrain of the Western United States. They gathered to pray for rain. They gathered to pray for life. My Native American ancestors danced for rain. They put their bodies on display and performed for water from the sky. Without the water from the sky, no matter how beautiful and strong their bodies were, no matter how luscious and green the ground seemed to be, those bodies and that ground would eventually decay and die... without the rain. Without rain and snow in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, we have no freshwater, and without freshwater we cannot live. Resurrection is freshwater—freshwater ready to rinse away the brackish standing water of sin, decay, meaninglessness, and death. Sin and death are found in the many ditches of our lives. But the rain will surely wash out the ditches. We need the rain! We need resurrection!

Exegesis

As ancient Jews continued to probe life's questions with the words and traditions of their ancestors, they began to develop a belief in resurrection. Their understanding of resurrection was quite profound. These ancient Jews, like Jesus and Paul, held that God would resurrect the dead and give the righteous new bodies—bodies that were not subject to death, decay, or the ravages of sin. These bodies would be given to us as God recreated the heavens and the earth. This new creation is life unrestrained and uncontested. Death cannot enter. Jesus' resurrection is our sign that the new creation is possible. Resurrection should not be confused with the resuscitation of a dead body or a disembodied soul eternally living with God.

God was going to take our old bodies and this old world of ours and transform them into something new.

1 Corinthians 15 is the earliest sustained writing in the NT on the resurrection, predating the gospels by at least 20-30 years. Paul's writing is the earliest glimpse we have into what the first and second generation of Christians believed when they spoke of resurrection. Though the entire chapter was not assigned for this Bible study, I would encourage you to read the chapter in its entirety. There are many points to highlight, but I would like to focus on two. First, according to Paul, resurrection does not leave the body behind. We will receive a new body, a spiritual body. Second, the resurrection overcomes death. Death is the ultimate enemy. Far from leaving our bodies behind, resurrection affirms our embodied existence. In ancient Jewish and early Christian thought, the idea of a disembodied soul or spirit revolving around a bright light was not "eternal life." According to Paul, eternal life was to be lived in a resurrected, imperishable body. And though sin is the sting of death, sin is not the ultimate enemy.

Conversation

Epiphanies—manifestations of God and great insight—happen in the midst of our everyday. Resurrection, as Paul said, is a mystery that has now been disclosed. Jesus Christ has made this disclosure possible. Our bodies, though mundane, physical, and perishable, will be transformed to something extraordinary, spiritual, and imperishable. The quality of our bodies will change, but we will not lose our embodiedness. Just for a moment, meditate on the term, "spiritual body." We have inherited a way of thinking that often opposes and ranks spirit over body, but here, they are together. What does it mean to have a spiritual body, not a ghost or immaterial apparition? Do not be deceived, our bodies matter. They matter to God; they matter so much to God that God has prepared us to receive a new body. The epiphany is that resurrection is both mundane and extraordinary. Resurrection is the very definition of epiphany.

The most reverberating epiphany in the passage to me is the idea that death, not sin, is the final enemy. So much of our creeds, theology, and understandings of salvation revolve around sin as *the* problem. But resurrection forces us to broaden our scope. Many Christians routinely speak about what is sinful, but perhaps we should be asking who (or what) routinely faces murderous conditions. We are living in times when kneeling for our national anthem is seen as unpatriotic. "Unpatriotic" is a synonym for "sinful" when nationalism becomes a religion. In essence, the sin of kneeling becomes more important than the fact that someone is protesting the state-sanctioned killing of unarmed black persons. We have a way of making sin *the* problem, but not the experience and reality of death, particularly unjust, premature death.

This phenomenon does not stop at the level of the state. After all, our nation owes some of its ideas to Christianity. And the Christian Church—long dominated by men—has routinely highlighted the problem of sin, but remained silent, for instance, when women are domestically abused and killed. Christian theology and preaching will often highlight sins of sexual immorality, greed, and even some kinds of injustice, but when the clear majority of our churches—women—are routinely terrorized, damaged, and killed by men, our lack of measured response equals silence. Perhaps we must remember like Paul, that the bodies of women matter, their bruises and deaths matter, and we need to be transformed. Perhaps we have ingested a theology and philosophy that equates women with the body and men with spirit, and believe that just as the body is lesser than the spirit, so too are women lesser than men. And because our theology refuses to highlight the reality of death and only focuses on the victimizer/sinner, we continue to miss the promise and challenge of resurrection. Instead of only or constantly highlighting sin, Christians should also highlight sites of damage, death, and despair. The victims suffer damage, death, and despair. The victimizer commits sin, which damages, kills, and causes despair. Yes, individually, we are all are both victim and victimizer, but socially speaking, some of us are more one than the other. This is why the gospel, though for all of humankind, must go to the poor and dispossessed first (Luke 4:16-21).

Because the poor and dispossessed are those routinely closest to death, and the gospel preaches a victorious resurrection, the ultimate defeat of death.

With God as our ever-present help, we are charged to transform bodies of death into bodies of life. This prefigures resurrection. God tells us that our bodies matter, and that we will inherit imperishable bodies. We are told that while sin matters, we must focus on the sites of death, damage, and despair, so that we can truly locate and make present the resurrecting power of God today, while hoping for the resurrection to come tomorrow. We need the rain and the Reign of God.

Questions

1. What do you make of the term “spiritual body?”
2. How do you envision eternal life?
3. In your own words, what are we saved from and saved to do?

The No Distinction, Discrimination, Nor Doctrinal Divisions—All Have Fallen Short!

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26 August 2018

Prayer

For those times when we want to privilege our beliefs above others, remind us, God, to not boast, not fight nor hurt those who think differently, or smell differently, or worship differently or skin differently—that we may vainly claim as our enemies in your name. Help us to believe that your love unifies all of your people whom you created and gift with grace and love unconditional.

Scripture

Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31; 2 Cor. 4:5-12; Galatians 1:1-12

Contemporary Context

The Reverend Fred Phelps from the notorious Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka made a career out of preaching messages of hate, frequently damning folks to hell who didn't share his dogma that was linked to the early protestant reformer, John Calvin, who believed in God's election and limited atonement. Is his theology right? Whose side is God on? Does God love some more than others?

As a person with multiple identities, I happen to believe that God does not discriminate based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age or faith tradition. And like Paul, I am not ashamed of the gospel, which is the teaching and the revelation of Jesus the Christ. This is the power of God for salvation to the Jew and the Greek, a unifying force to transform the totality of the world that God so loves!

Exegesis

The Apostle Paul, a Hebrew amongst Hebrews, perhaps asked introspectively as he wrestled with his prophetic call the simple question: How is it that Gentiles (non-Jews) might be placed in right relationship with God, since Gentiles don't have to observe the Torah? For the Apostle Paul, his answer to this question was simply by trust in God and that Gentiles are saved by grace and justified by faith. So having this "saved by grace, justified by faith" as his theology (or understanding of God), the Apostle Paul sets out on this missionary journey to tell the world, as best as he could, about God's activity in the

Christ-event. And he writes as he travels. There are seven letters that have been ascribed as being authentically written by the Apostle Paul. Those letters are 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Romans and Philemon. And in each of Paul's writings there are particular themes for those in the communities for which he is writing. The occasion of Paul's writing to the church at Corinth centered around this fact—Corinth was a newly built port city and in that there were various levels of social stratification that included education, spoken Greek, socio-economic just to name a few. And in Corinth in particular, there were very distinct issues between the “haves” and the “have nots”—the strong and the weak- even those who could eat meat and those who couldn't. Thusly, being able to sit and table-share became problematic - especially since breaking bread and sharing cup was a cultural expression as well as a symbolic remembrance of the Lord's Supper. Being able to break bread and drink was something that not all could do. Yet, how do you include and welcome the other if there is such a chasm in humankind? So, the Apostle Paul employs the church at Rome, Corinth, and Galatia to embody love.

Conversation

If we are followers of the Way, the social constructs of race, class, and gender are in direct contradiction- much like it was in antiquity, especially during the time of Paul's writing. A painful reality is that when church folks privilege beliefs over others, they almost declare- or as Paul suggests- boast that they are somehow better, believing that God is only on their side of “right beliefs.” During the time of these writings, there were two different ideas about what it meant to experience God's salvation: there were those Hebrews who were concerned with the Words of God, and then the Hellenists (Greeks) concerned with who could be at the table. After Paul has his epiphany on the Damascus Road in Syria, he is convicted and convinced that the power of the Gospel is the social construct equalizer, that is to say: because of God's action in Jesus, Gentiles are God's people, just as Israel had been. Now our eternal “Ah ha”: because of Calvary, we give our lives in thankful response to the One who has given His life for our liberty, and we live unified, justified by faith. We have all fallen short of the glory of God, and yet God accepts us, despite our failures. Every system of privilege should be dismantled because none of us can ever earn God's grace, which is indeed unmerited favor! The Gospel is a unifier, not a divider!

Questions

1. Why do we discriminate, especially in the church?
2. How do we let privilege in our beliefs become boasting like God is only on our side?
3. Does the phrase, “God Bless America” stand in contradiction to Paul's writing of an inclusive understanding of God's empire of grace?
4. Paul believes that the center of life is prayer and inner devotion, is this true for you?
5. What is the power of the Gospel for you?