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# A Holy Nation: Bible Study

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The Fifth Episcopal District of the  
African Methodist Episcopal Church  
**Year Four - Kingtomtide**

Rev. Francine A. Brookins, Esq. and Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D., Editors

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*Associate Pastor, Grant AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

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*The Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.*

*Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

# 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 fourth 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 fourth quadrennial year, we focus on the Season of Kingdomtide (ordinary time). This is a season of growth during which we concentrate on the local church. The themes for this season include care of the local congregation, the edifice, the community, and the mission; it is a time of advocacy for something/someone. We take the charge of the late Bishop Howard Thomas Primm seriously to "latch onto a cause that has eternity in it and let it lift you." While the central scripture of the call to be a "Holy Nation" issued at the Watergate continues to be our primary scriptural focus for the quadrennial (Nehemiah 8:1-10; I Peter 2:1-10), the scriptural focus for the 2019-2020 Annual Conference Year, in particular, is Psalm 126.1-6:

**1** When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. **2** Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." **3** The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. **4** Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. **5** May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. **6** Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

and Matthew 13.10-17:

**10** Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" **11** He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. **12** For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. **13** The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." **14** With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. **15** For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them." **16** But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. **17** Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

This Bible Study Guide engages each of the lectionary texts assigned in the Revised Common Lectionary for Pentecost 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 Kingdomtide.

Each contributor was asked to observe the following format for the Bible Studies, a revised model for this Annual Conference Year that builds on a model from the Council for World Mission. It is as follows:

I. TITLE

II. PRAYER

III. SCRIPTURE

IV. WRITING REFLECTIONS – We have asked writers to handwrite one or more of the verses from your text for two to five (2-5) days, and then write a journal-style reflection on what arose for you during the process. Bible Study participants should be asked to do the same thing before each class session.

V. EXEGESIS – Writers were also asked to address the historical, cultural, sociological background of the text answering questions like: What was happening at the time it was written? Who had power, who did not? Who was included, who was excluded? What was the position of the writer(s)? Writers were encouraged to provide references and any suggested further research.

VI. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION – Writers have sought to explore how this text translates in 2019/2020.

VII. CONVERSATION – Here, writers have been asked to focus on a selected theme from Kingdomtide that Bishop Fugh has designated.

VIII. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – Writers provide relevant discussion questions.

IX. SUGGESTED MEDIA – Writers provide relevant media (i.e., a song, image, or other depiction related to the Bible Study text and theme).

## 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 also wish to thank our faithful copyeditor, Mrs. Amy Emery Brown.

Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.

Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.

# In the Meantime and In-Between Times: Sowing in Sorrow & Reaping Sheaves of Joy

*Rev. M. JoDavid Sales, Ph.D.*

*Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Marysville, CA)*

*Chair, CA Conference Christian Education Committee*

**13 October 2019**

## **Scripture**

Psalm 126:1-6

## **Prayer**

God, grant us the wisdom to see you and our work with a seasonal perspective. Help us, O God, to remember and anticipate our restorative moments. Help us to sow with our full selves, even our tearful selves, trusting that we will rejoice with you at harvest time.

## **Writing Reflections**

Over the course of a week, this passage truly struck a chord in my spirit. I couldn't help but think of the metamorphosis a caterpillar undergoes as it changes into a butterfly. I've continuously recalled the video Bishop Fugh showed at Annual Conference, which struck me deeply. I've pondered those moments of being in a cocoon, when the creature is in the chrysalis phase, neither a caterpillar nor a butterfly. I thought about my own journey and discernment as I try to hear the voice of God in the midst of joy and sorrow. This passage reminds me of life at its most mundane, but no less meaningful. We live most of our life in the meantime and in-between times. There are high heights that bring us joy and wonder, and there are valleys that brings us into the dark night of the soul. While every day is a day of thanksgiving, every day is not a day of restoration. Some days are as dry as the Negeb, the southernmost land in Judah known for receiving less than 8 inches of rainfall annually. Yet, even in our driest of days, we cry out for restoration. I wonder if there are any witnesses who are reading this who feel like they have been in a cocoon and are waiting to emerge, restored and refreshed.

## **Exegesis**

Psalm 126 appears to take place in the meantime and in-between times. The first three verses speak of the past, and the last three verses speak optimistically of a future that has not yet taken place. Verses 1

and 4 speak of restoration; verses 3 and 6 speak of rejoicing. Verse 2 speaks of joy and laughter, while verse 5 speaks of tears and joy. As poetic verse, this psalm appears to be chronicling a moment in-between two moments of restoration and rejoicing. From the perspective of the faithful, the psalm declares that if God restored us before, God can restore us again. But there are some subtle moves in this short poem that are worth mentioning.

The first half (vv 1-3) appear to represent the time when the exiles from Babylon returned to Jerusalem after their 70-year sojourn. The restoration, the return was so awesome and great, it felt almost dreamlike. God moved in such a way that folks wondered if it was real. But it was real and so awesome that even non-Jews commented and gave props. In memory of this event, the writer declares the truth: God has done great things. But that restoration is now in the past, and the psalmist declares that the community needs to be restored again. Summer has turned to Autumn, and Autumn is now Winter. Spring has not yet arrived. This is a word for the meantime and in-between time. But it's a word that discloses to us something about God and God's kingdom.

This psalm also underscores the seasons of life. God understands that life is not a linear progression from Point A to Point B. There are twists and turns. Life repeatedly brings us Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. This psalm, like many of Jesus's parables, uses agriculture to make a theological point, and in so doing, arrests our (post)modern attempts to make our lives and God revolve around linear and unsustainable growth. This psalm offers us a cyclical and seasonal understanding of God's activity and life. The idea that a community's life won't have periods of growth, bounty, and harvest *as well as* dormancy, rest, regression... these ideas are alien to God and to an agricultural community like the ancient Jewish people. A life of consistent growth, a chart of community that has rapid growth but no decline, a roadmap that prepares only for plenty, but no famine—such ideas, though prevalent—are still ungodly and unsustainable. I believe this passage has many implications for the current state of our denomination. God will restore us, but we must be willing to sow in tears.

The last three verses of the psalm are key. The psalmist compares the community to the Negeb. The climate of the Negeb is harsh, although there are many springs and wells and oases. But since rainfall is limited, one must use sustainable farming to grow a crop in the midst of the desert. Watercourses spring up when the rain falls, but since rainfall is scarce and the land is dry, the surface water will soon dry up. Restoration in the Negeb requires conservation and imagination. Finally, there is the matter of sowing in tears and reaping the sheaves with shouts of joy. Lord have mercy. To go out weeping and to sow with tears—to water the ground with our tears is to water the ground with repentance, mercy, and justice... To sow with love. It's no secret that if we truly love someone, we will be eventually brought to tears—for various reasons, but especially when we are estranged from the ones we love. Restoration requires us to sow and be honest about our grief, our need for restoration, our hunger of righteousness; our thirst for love—in a world and at times, in a church, that are bereft of compassion and goodwill far too often. But we must sow anyway and remember the words of Paul. We must try our best to not grow weary in doing what's right, for we will reap at harvest time. We will come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves. The tears will be transformed into sustenance for the seeds. God will wipe away every tear; no hunger and no thirst; for then, and truly then, the Kingdom of God will be at hand.

### **Application and Conversation**

Bishop Fugh chose a great hymn for this year of Kingdomtide: "Bringing in the Sheaves." It is a wonderful and ageless song that chronicles the times, the seasons, the ups and downs of life yet ends with a refrain of celebration. In effect, it's like good, relevant, and theologically informed preaching. The hymn is clearly inspired by Psalm 126. To end this Bible Study, let's take a look at the last verse.

Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master,  
Though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves;  
When our weeping's over He will bid us welcome -  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Like Psalm 126, the first line of the third verse makes it clear: serving God will not always be with rejoicing and there will be moments of hardship and, yes, depletion and sorrow. Yet, we still have seed in our hands. This is very insightful. We may think that our depletion depletes us of seeds, but this is not the case. While we may experience fatigue, burnout, frustration, and sadness, these feelings/realities coexist with sowing seed. There is loss that grieves our spirit; there are moments that take our breath away; times where we are not being negative—just real. We are real enough to cry out in protest and lamentation concerning the loss, the injustice, the hardship. This loss and grief is also a part of story and our work. If we work for the Lord, we will lose sometimes; things will not always go our way. BUT when the weeping is over, God bids us welcome. I love the word “welcome.” To welcome is to be happy to see someone. I really don’t welcome people into my space. I may *let* them into my space. I may *tolerate* them... but welcoming implies a smile, a shared meal, you don’t have to ask to use the bathroom (a real sign of welcome). Welcome means, “I’m happy to see you.” This part reminds me to do a theological exercise that I try to do once and awhile to help me with the human penchant for idolatry. And now, I will share it with you.

### Discussion Questions

Clear your spirit and mind. Ask yourself: Can I picture God smiling? Can I picture God smiling at me? In my mind *and* spirit, do I have a firm picture of God being happy and joyous? Are the only pictures of God that readily come to mind filled with seriousness, judgement, and power? Is my picture of God distinctly and exclusively masculine? Is God a serious masculine man? Do only serious men get things done? Is God Spirit? What does a happy God of Spirit look like? Can a happy and joyous God save? Can you see you and God rejoicing as you bring in the sheaves, as you celebrate and lament your work for the Lord? When you see the line “we shall come rejoicing,” do you include God in the “we?” Circling back to the first Old Testament passage Bishop Fugh used for his vision of a Holy Nation, Nehemiah 8:10: is the *joy* of the Lord—is God’s joy your strength?

Sisters and brothers, I’ll tell you the truth. I don’t want to worship a God that has a hard time smiling and being happy. We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

# The Kingdom of God and the Anti-Kingdom: Which One Do We Mediate?

*Rev. M. JoDavid Sales, Ph. D.*

*Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Marysville, CA)*

*Chair, CA Conference Christian Education Committee*

20 October 2019

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, help us to discern with fresh eyes and open hearts what the Kingdom of God might mean for us today. Help us to examine ourselves and discern which kingdom we mediate.

## **Scripture**

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

## **Writing Reflections**

The Kingdom of God is among us. Right here. Right now. God's Beloved Community is at hand. Yes, there are other kingdoms and other arrangements in this world, and we must contend with those. But at this very moment, do we really have faith that God's kingdom is at hand? After a Lenten Fast, an Epiphany Restoration, and a Pentecostal Resuscitation, we should be able to declare it: God can open up a space right here and now, and in this space, new life and new possibilities emerge. In the season of Kingdomtide, we should be sensitive to the ways in which we participate in and disrupt those places and moments where and when God moves. We have journeyed through Lent, Epiphany, and Pentecost... and these seasons and years have led us back to beginning, to the central message of Jesus Christ: "The Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe the Good News."

But what is this Kingdom? And how does Jesus relate to it? And where do we fit in? These are important questions, not just for today, but for tomorrow as well. Let's take a look at the text.

## **Exegesis**

Matthew 13 focuses on the Kingdom of God/Heaven through the use of parables. Jesus's parables are stories (symbolic narratives) that tell us something words cannot fully describe. The meaning of the parables is veiled to those who fail to understand (for various reasons). But the disciples have been given insight by Jesus. But even with this insight, the true and deepest meaning of God's Kingdom remains a mystery. This is why Jesus tells so many parables. One story cannot contain the reality of God's Kingdom. And in fact, the word "kingdom" can throw us off Jesus's intention, but he had to use human

language to convey something that was not human. So, the language of “Kingdom” was a placeholder for folks in the ancient world to halfway understand what Jesus was talking about. Some theologians say it another way: Jesus is speaking about the Reign of God. These parables talk about what happens when and where God reigns, and the parables tell us about the forces that seek to disrupt and subvert God’s reign. Where and when God reigns: sin and death have no dominion; separation and injustice must leave; sickness and misery must depart; and life, love, mercy, and justice must shine brightly. The Reign of God finds great resonance with the idea of a Beloved Community—a world where God and God’s love permeates and binds all of our activity.

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus does not preach himself. He preaches an apocalyptic message about the Kingdom of God. In summary, the apocalyptic aspect of Jesus’ preaching is informed by at least two things; 1) the reality of evil and injustice and the need for their ultimate correction/transformation and 2) a cosmic and spiritual battle of eternal consequence between God and the forces of evil, led by the Slanderer-Accuser. Ancient Jewish apocalyptic, thought varied, generally held that at the consummation of this present age, God’s Kingdom would win out and a new age, a new heaven and earth would be established. However, until the new age arrives, the Kingdom of God must be mediated. That is, the Kingdom will not be fully manifested until the new age arrives. In the present age, the Kingdom of God is mediated by Jesus. But there are other “kingdoms” that operate in this world. The Anti-Kingdom also operates in this world. And the Anti-Kingdom has its own mediators: death, sin, sickness, religious and imperial domination systems, and ultimately, the Slanderer. Or stated another way, anything or anyone that stands in opposition to God’s Reign is a mediator of the Anti-Kingdom. This background information is indispensable with regard to this particular parable.

In this particular parable, we are told that there is something beyond human activity (an enemy) that operates in our world that seeks to frustrate and perpetrate as God’s Kingdom. Jesus tells us that there is evil in this world that God did not intend. Yes, we planted some weeds and have planks in our eyes. However, there are some spiritual and cosmic weeds that are of neither human nor divine origin, and we, by our human power alone, cannot and should not pull these weeds out. I want to be clear. We are living in times where folks feel like talking about “Satan” or the “devil” is old school. But I’m not interested in talking about a name—because a name is a word/symbol that tries to point to something real. This is not about the name. This is about reality and what mediates our reality. Jesus reminds us, there is something out here that sows dissension and separation. Arguing over the name or if an actual entity who goes by and answers to the name “the devil” misses Jesus’ point. Here’s the point. “An enemy has done this.” We must know that “an enemy has done this.” There are forces in this world that seek to defeat and disrupt the plans and Kingdom of God while we are unaware and asleep. There is no level of “wokeness” that will completely protect the Kingdom in this present age. The enemy’s activity is beyond human “wokeness.” There are forces that sow darnel seeds, which, when they grow into maturity, are known as “false wheat.” Jesus was telling the people of his day, in a language they could understand, something about God’s Kingdom and the Anti-Kingdom. Both kingdoms sprout and grow, and at times are hard to distinguish between the other. But at the end of the age, when God will be all and in all, the real will be sifted from the fake; the wheat from the weeds. Even the causes of evil will be consumed.

Make no mistake: we must deal with social injustice, ecological destruction, and interpersonal violence. But, my brothers and sisters, there is a such thing as spiritual wickedness. And this wickedness exists in high places and is mediated in our world through various actors. We ignore this reality at our own peril.

### **Conversation (Exegesis and Interpretation Continued)**

I have faith that other Bible studies will illuminate the connection between the parables in Matthew 13 and Bishop Fugh’s vision. But given the times we are in, the Spirit put something on my heart concerning this particular parable, which made me dig a little deeper.

There are many, too many, implications with this text, but I would like to focus on one clear though subtle conclusion: when it comes to judgement and the apocalyptic activity of separating the wheat from the weeds—that judgment and activity has nothing to do with the “slaves.” That job is and will forever remain beyond their pay grade. The slaves, the disciples, asked the Master, “do you want us to take these plants up?” And the Master, the Son of Man, Jesus the Anointed one of God said, in essence, “No. Weed removal is not your job. You will hurt the good plants if you do this. I have some heavenly/cosmic landscapers who know exactly how to conduct this apocalyptic harvest.” However, too many times, Christians have tried to play angels and God. Non-believers have been murdered. Women were burned at the stake and called witches. Scientists were silenced, excommunicated and killed. Jews were slaughtered and gassed. Native Americans were labeled as savages, destroyed and pillaged. Africans and their descendants were enslaved, lynched, and hung from trees, while the lynch-mob went to church the next Sunday. Even today, many Christians are hostile towards and vilify immigrants, transgender, gay and lesbian folks, and those who have left the church. All of us may have different opinions/beliefs about these groups, their practices, and situation. But our opinion is not God's activity. Just because the slaves knew some bad seeds had been sown, that knowledge did not tell them which crop was good and which crop was bad. We need to stay in our lane. We need to stop thinking that our knowledge of God and Scripture gives us the right to speak about anyone’s eternal identity and destination. Contrary to popular belief, from the perspective of eternity, we do not know who is wheat and who is a weed.

The Kingdom of God does not operate like the Kingdoms of the World. Those of us who try to use the Kingdom of God, God, and Church as a justification to pronounce the ultimate worth and dignity of others are nothing more than tools of the enemy, and paradoxically—we become mediators of the Anti-Kingdom. This is why the church and the Kingdom of God have never been synonymous. Because God and God’s love do not always reign in our churches. Greed, fear, hatred, distraction, and the thirst for power too often reign in our individual and communal bodies. And therefore, our bodies cannot fully mediate the presence of the Kingdom. God’s kingdom is Holy; it is radically different than our world and our ways. But in those moments when good seed bears fruit, when those of goodwill and those who follow Jesus let their lights shine, and when people show the world that a different, godly, and loving way of living is possible—in those moments, the Kingdom of God is truly at hand. Let those with ears hear. And let us repent and believe in this good news.

# The Lord's Prayer

*Rev. Betty Hanna Witherspoon, D.Min.  
Pastor, Primm AMEC (Pomona, CA)*

27 October 2019

## Prayer

Dear Lord, we come into your presence today requesting that you teach us, as you taught your disciples, how to pray. Amen.

## Scripture

Matthew 6:9-13

## Exegesis

It is perhaps seventy years into the common era when a Jewish follower of Jesus the Christ sat down to write about his life. We do not know the name of the person who wrote the book we call Matthew, but we do know from the book itself that his intent was to instruct followers on how to follow Jesus. Chapters 5:1-7:28 of the book put the readers in a class on discipleship. The remembered teachings of Jesus are delivered in a mountain setting; perhaps to recall other important mountain settings in Jewish history. Although only four disciples have been called in the narrative, we sense that we are supposed to see crowds packed into this outdoor classroom. They are the Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Jerusalem has been destroyed and they are estranged from fellow Jews who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The crowd is a motley crew. Many of them are sick and poor. These teachings will become known as the Sermon on the Mount. They teach how to live in a society where existence was a daily struggle.

Our verses, chapter 6:9-13 called "The Lord's Prayer" is a primer on how to approach God. Jesus teaches his followers how to petition God, what to ask from God and who they are to be if they want God to hear them. Before these verses, he has taught that their prayers are not for the purpose of impressing others. Then, Jesus, having told them what not to do, tells them in verse 9 what to do, "Pray then in this way." Call the name/title of the one you are addressing. Jesus calls "Our Father". Jesus establishes a relationship with "The Father". It was not often used as a name for God in Jewish liturgy, but here it established an intimacy between petitioner and the petitioned. Note, however, that our Father's name is to be revered, blessed, sanctified. Even in the intimacy there is to be a degree of separation, it is required because of the majesty of God.

Verse 10 calls for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. These words transform the prayer from being about the petitioner's desires and turns it into being about the great purpose of God, the coming of God's kingdom.

Verses 11-12 acknowledge the petitioners' survival needs. These verses gave permission to be about themselves in prayer. In a world where hunger was ever present, the followers of Jesus were told they could ask God for daily bread or bread for tomorrow in another translation. They could also ask for their debts to be forgiven, but with the caveat, that they also forgive their debtors. The people sitting on the

mountain knew what it was to be without food and to owe debts they could not repay. They knew hunger and they knew what it was to be sold into slavery for debt.

Verse 13 is hard to interpret scholars say. Let us interpret it as a plea for God to save the petitioner from a world where evil dominates and where the petitioner must be saved from his own sins.

### **Contemporary Context**

In this century we are often asked “Can everyone relate to God as “Our Father?” We need not argue about it. Jesus is providing us with a model of prayer. Jesus has a relationship with the one he addresses. That teaches us that we, too, should have a relationship with the God we address. Who is the God that we know? With whom and how are we in relationship? Is God father, mother, rock, protector, healer, provider, the essence of life, the creator of all things, a father to the fatherless and a mother to the motherless? Who is God in your life?

The promise of the coming kingdom of God where sickness will be healed, hunger is banished and debt is not a controlling factor in life continues to need to be preached.

Our survival needs continue to include daily bread and relief from debt. The level of chronic diseases in our communities cry out for prayer. The need for resources to minister to families experiencing hunger and debt continues to rise. Followers of Jesus are called to pray and put hands and feet to their prayers. As we look around our communities, we find much for which to advocate: the elimination of food deserts, the stocking of food pantries, the regulation of pay day loan companies and the restructuring of student debt.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Name who God is to you and why do you experience God in that way?
2. What do you think the earth would look like, if God’s kingdom were to come? Why?
3. What do you believe are the biggest needs of your community? Do you agree to pray for them?
4. What one thing can you see your church doing to minister to the needs of the community?

# The Lord's Prayer

*Rev. Betty Hanna Witherspoon, D.Min.  
Pastor, Primm AMEC (Pomona, CA)*

3 November 2019

## Prayer

Dear Lord, we continue to pray for you to teach us how to pray. Teach us as you taught your disciples. Amen.

## Scripture

Luke 11:2-4

## Writing Reflection

This version of the Lord's Prayer does not have the emotional hold of the Matthean version. Since the words are the same, it must be the love that surrounded the early learning process that makes the Matthean version so special. Learning to pray is also learning what it feels like to be loved.

## Exegesis

If Matthew was about biography, Luke is about history. The writers share Mark as a source, but they use it very differently. The gospel that Mark writes in the first century is designed to show how Jesus' life is the logical next step in the life of Judaism. Jesus is born bringing salvation for the Jews with his birth. Luke has Jesus deeply involved in ministry before he teaches his followers this model prayer. He has already gathered disciples and chosen twelve to be apostles (6:12-16), become known as a healer and teacher, stood before a great multitude composed of disciples, sick persons and those with unclean spirits (6:17-18), gained a reputation for teaching with authority on matters of importance to first century Jews- Sabbath observance, cleanliness rituals, who neighbors are- and been questioned by John the Baptist about his messianic status.

Jesus has been seen in chapters 3-10 recasting first century Judaism through actions and teaching. Now, in chapter 11, his disciple asks him to teach them how to pray as John had taught his disciples. The disciples brought the request and there are not the preceding teachings that were present in Matthew. The NRSV translators have chosen from among a number of ancient renderings of this passage. Verse 2 has Jesus saying "When you pray, say Father, hallowed be your name." In succeeding verses 9-12, he describes how this father positively responds to requests. Later, he will say in verse 13 "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" NIB\* notes say "it was important that the fatherhood of God be qualified in terms of generosity, compassion, care, and faithful activity on behalf of God's children."

Verse 2 also says "Your kingdom come." Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4 that he had been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lords favor. This preaching and liberation will usher in the kingdom of God.

Verse 3 see last week's comments

Verse 4 petitions for forgiveness of personal sins and asserts that the petitioner forgives those who are indebted to him or who have sinned against him. The petitioner also asks to be kept from temptations

and trials; possibly from the evils found in the Roman imperial state and the sins found in his own humanity.

### **Contemporary Context & Conversation**

Luke wraps Jesus' naming of God as Father in stories that speak to modern questions about abusive and absent fathers. There are those who cannot picture God as Father because the father they knew was either not present or abusive. Jesus describes this Father-God as one he knows intimately (see 10:22) and as one who responds to persistence and is a giver of good gifts. The disciples knew Jesus and had experienced his compassion and caring. They had heard him described as kind and merciful. (6:35-36) This is not the abuser or absent one.

As disciples of Jesus when we pray for God's kingdom to come, are we prepared to add our energy to change the world. If the coming of the kingdom calls for the changes Mary sang about in Luke 1:51-53, what will it mean to scatter the proud, to bring down the powerful, to lift up the lowly, and to fill the hungry?

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Can you name any groups in your community that are working to provide support for children who are experiencing the absence of a parent?
2. Do you believe the church should engage in advocacy work to lift up the lowly, such as, the homeless community under bridges, those on parole, and those suffering from mental illness.
3. Can you imagine the kingdom of God? What is it like?

### **References**

\*NIB-The New Interpreter's Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2003.

# Bloom Where You Are Planted

*Rev. Debra A. Whitlock Lax, M.Div., D.Min.  
(ABD)*

*Association Minister, St. Paul AME Church  
(Berkeley, CA)*

10 November 2019

## Prayer

God, how awesome are Your works and the greatness of Your power that your enemies submit themselves to You! Help us worship You and sing praises to you for Your name lives forever. We pray this in Jesus Name Amen

## Scripture

Jeremiah 29:1-7

Psalm 66:1-12

## Exegesis

Jeremiah began as a young preacher lacking confidence and questioning whether God knew who He had chosen. God, unmoved by Jeremiah's youth, fear, and ignorance of divine power, touched Jeremiah deeply and filled his mouth His Word. Jeremiah became just what God had spoken and ordained; he was a prophet to Israel, extending to gentile nations during the revolt of Babylon beginning in 626 BC. Even though God called Jeremiah and anointed him to speak, the Jews rejected the words he uttered. Rather than incline their ears to obey God, Judah continued to play the harlot and go after gods which were no gods. Jeremiah 29:1-7 meets the people of God approximately two years after Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem and deports its leaders in 597 BC. Jeremiah, hearing rumor of false prophet's lies and empty words (Jer. 14:14; 23:21; 27:14, 15) promising the Jews release from captivity, compelled Jeremiah to write the Jews in captivity. The letter was delivered by "the hand of Elasah, the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah, the son of Hilkiah," encouraging the Jews to build houses, gardens, marry, have children, and enjoy their grandchildren. The prophet admonishes the Jews to settle in the land of their captivity and to ignore the deceptive words of false prophets. The Jews were admonished to come to terms with the fact that their idolatry, apostasy, and their refusal to listen to God's prophet caused God to carry them away to Babylon for seventy years and not two. Lastly, the Jew's welfare and peace inextricably connected to their obedience to pray for their city its governmental leaders.

## Contemporary Context

When I think about what our African (American) forefather's accomplished in a land not their own, my mouth stays open. They were virtually exiles living in America. That had so little but did so much, and we in our modern-day have so much, and we do so little. What did exiled African diaspora members know or understand about God that is missing from our faith praxis today? They refused to take an easy way out and return to Africa when they had the opportunity mid-1800's. They made a conscious choice to bloom where they were planted. Frankly, they built America infrastructure. What are we building today?

How are we transforming our communities? Like the Jews taken from Jerusalem some against their will and other out of obedience to become Babylonian exiles. Today's study challenges us to recognize our exilic condition being that we are citizens of heaven awaiting the return of our savior. (Philippians 3:20-21) How might we bloom where we are planted to rebuild the infrastructure of our churches, our communities, and our country for Christ?

### **Conversation**

God calls all of His children into service. We must remember that all ministers were laity at some point. Like Jeremiah, the call into the service of the Lord can be intimidating. We should feel inadequate in our power and dependent on God's touch and anointing. Stay away from folks who have no fear of God; they are not wise but weak. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom that builds our strength and courage.

The challenge the Jews faced was who they were listening. Jeremiah tipped the scales. He was the real deal. Believers must discern whether the Word that comes out of those who say they have "a word from God" is truly from God. Be careful when churches put more emphasis on prophesying than obedience to God. Had the Jews listen to the false prophets, they would have been numbered with the dead. Jerusalem was slated for destruction. Those who remain in the land of their captivity would experience peace predicated on the ability to pray for their captor.

To bloom where you are planted demands an investment in one's country, community, church, and cause. We have more in common than we difference. The government or its leaders are not our enemies. We may not like what they do but complaining about their non-sense without taking action to change our circumstance is just as insane. Looking for an escape to Africa, Canada or Europe or in another place is not the answer. Moving out of our neighborhoods is not the answer! What's the answer? Our knees. Prayer changes our ability to "bloom."

If you want to bloom where you are planted, I dare you to stop complaining, gossiping, and looking for an easy way out but pray until something happens (P.U.S.H). Pray until you birth something new in where you abide. When we take ownership of the land for which we dwell, we also take action to remedy our circumstance. The false prophets were tinkling ears and when friends at the expense of their soul and those they influenced by their empty words. Far too often, we look for an escape route out of our situation. What we do not realize is that the way of escape might be to stand still, pray, and wait on the Lord for our peace and to improve our welfare.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. God calls all of His children into service. What has God called you to do and what excuses have you used to set aside the call God has upon your life?
2. When someone gives you a word from God, whether in a sermon, through prayer, or advice, how do you discern whether the word is truly a prophet and sourced from God?
3. How might you pray more earnestly so that you experience a heightened sense of welfare and peace?
4. What benefit is there in building houses, planting gardens, marrying, and having children in a community from which you would rather move away?

# Bible Study

*Rev. Francine Brookins, J.D., M.Div.  
Pastor, Bethel (Fontana, CA)*

17 November 2019

Prayer

Scripture

Psalm 119:97-104

## Writing Reflections

For this lesson please have each student take the time to handwrite each of the verses before the class begins. After each verse they should write their own reflections. This hour together will be spent sharing reflections and discussing what has come up for each person as they spent time with the Word.

97 Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

When was the last time I meditated on God's law all day long? As I watch what is wrong in the world, I only know that it is wrong because of the Word that dwells within me. In that way, I suppose there is at least some thought of God's law all day long.

98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,

for it is always with me.

If I spent more time in daily meditation on the Word then it would spring up more easily in times of trouble. When I'm searching for answers and the Word is fresh in me, it shows me the right way to move. Wisdom is alive and unique and right on time.

99 I have more understanding than all my teachers,

for your decrees are my meditation.

We presume that the teacher has the answer. Teachers often have information. If we don't know what to do with the information we've been given, then it is meaningless. The Word shows us how to understand information and how it applies to our situations. People can give us their opinions and even instructions, but God's Word helps us put it all together.

100 I understand more than the aged,

for I keep your precepts.

Length of years on the planet does not make us wise. Some people grow old but never learn anything, never mature in wisdom. They have grown bodies and baby minds, hearts, spirits and understandings. One way to ensure constant growth as we live is to study the Word and follow its instructions (keep the precepts).

101 I hold back my feet from every evil way,  
in order to keep your word.

When we know better, we do better. Hearing is not the same as doing. Once we start listening and heeding God's Word and doing what it says, we discover its benefits. If we never try it for ourselves, we won't know for ourselves. When was the first time I resisted participating in evil ways and what benefits did I receive from obedience to God's law? What impact did it have on my future decisions?

102 I do not turn away from your ordinances,  
for you have taught me.

When we trust the teacher, we are less inclined to turn away and do things 'our way.' When we trust God as our teacher we tend to look to God for instructions. When we don't trust God, we look elsewhere for guidance – what does my friend say, what is the politically correct thing to do, what would please my family members, what do I feel like doing --- all of those become options when we don't trust the teacher. God wants us to trust God as our teacher.

103 How sweet are your words to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

The idea that we can taste the Word of God is exciting. I only eat raw honey when I'm terribly ill with a sore throat. Honey is a soothing agent for the throat and the stomach. When the Word of God is in us because of our daily meditation it is also a soothing agent. It leaves a pleasant taste in the mouth.

104 Through your precepts I get understanding;  
therefore I hate every false way.

Once we've experienced the benefits of doing things God's way and being in a community that shares common reverence for the Word of God, we see the damage caused by false guidance. Loving our neighbors means ensuring they have access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is not the same as using others as objects for self-gratification. I hate the lies that the enemy has told by distorting the Word of God. The more we study for ourselves, the more easily we can recognize the lies.

### **Discussion Questions**

Each person should share their reflections on each verse if they have not yet done that in the class.

1. Do you think your life would be better if you spent more time reading, studying and meditating on the Word of God? What will you do differently now?
2. God's Word is not hidden. Every believer has access to the written Word. Why don't you spend more time meditating on it?
3. Lack of education creates great disparities in society. The Psalmist indicates the Word can level the playing field through the gift of heavenly wisdom. I knew a lady who learned to read by studying the Bible with the Holy Spirit as her teacher. On the other hand, people who think they already know everything have a more difficult time. Read these scriptures and discuss how the Word can be a teacher: Luke 10:21; 1 Cor. 2:8; 1 Cor. 1:18ff; Acts 6:10; 1 John 2:27; Hebrews 5:11–14; 1 Corinthians 14:20.

# Transforming Power

*Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell, M.Div.*

*Pastor, Second AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

*President, Fifth District Women in Ministry*

24 November 2019

## Prayer

Lord, thank you for the anointing power of the Holy Spirit. Allow us to operate as change agents under your divine direction as we make a difference in the lives of those individuals who need revival and restoration. In Jesus name AMEN

## Scripture

Joel 2:23-32

## Writing Reflection

This text deals with God's redemptive saving power to change situations and empower individuals who avail themselves to exist as vessels gifted by God with transforming power.

When the idea of transformation comes to mind, I recall the observation of a young child holding a superhero figurine as I stood in line at the grocery store. My attention was directed to a magazine at the checkout stand. I looked back at the young child and noticed the superhero figurine was now a truck. In a flip and turn, the young child changed the truck into a jeep. My inquisivity drove me to ask, "What type of toy is that?" The young child answered, "It's a transformer." God grants us the same influence to transform the environment where we walk. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are endowed with a witness to bring about life changing situations as change agents of the Almighty God!

## Exegesis

The book of Joel is one of prophecy which addresses the plight of Judah during the rule of King Joash. (837-800 B.C) Joel which means, Jehovah is God, ministers as God's messenger to deliver a word of judgement to Judah and God's people. The people have turned away from God by worshipping idol gods and engaging in their own self-centered agendas. They demonstrated disobedience and practiced life styles which displeased God. Judah was sinking deep in sin and took God for granted by ignoring the Lord's commandments.

Joel delivers a prophecy of judgment which describes Judah's consequences to reflect a state of locust devastation. The Prophet describes a plague of locusts which result in severe destruction. This imagery expresses God's punishment for sin is overpowering. The destruction of the locusts result in a chaotic situation. Locusts are known to devour and destroy vegetation and some scholars suggest the locusts to symbolize military demolition to a people and its land.

The Prophet also calls the people to repent by turning from their sinful ways. As a result of their heart to return to God, the Almighty promises to restore and revive the sinful and devastated nation.

Joel takes a turn by delivering a message of hope for the future which promises the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all humankind. There will be signs and wonders. The Prophet Joel declares that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Note Peter preached this text on the day of Pentecost and 3000 souls believed on the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 2)

### **Contemporary Application**

God's transformative power is available to restore, revive and refresh any devastating situation. No matter how far an individual is sinking in sin, God's transforming power is available to forgive, cleanse and retrieve from any overwhelming situation.

In order to tap into this transformative power, we must stand on God's promises. This word of the Prophet Joel delivers the promise of restoration. God promises to give "new life" to the fruit of the earth; remove any danger of devastation and place joy within the hearts of the people.

If we repent and express a desire to participate in God's transformative process, we are able to reap God's promise of restoration and renewal. Standing on God's promises require us to have faith versus fear. The transformative process involves believing, trusting and anticipating God to perform a good work within us, through us and all around us.

Transformative power also requires one to speak God's prophetic Word to a sinful world. Just as Joel was called as God's spokesperson, in 2019 the outpouring of God's Spirit is still flooding the hearts of women, men, boys and girls to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Preachers, teachers, prophets, evangelists and exhorters are also called to speak God's prophetic Word to those devastating experiences of despair such as disease, disappointments and disasters. The Holy Spirit gives power to speak the Word of God with a convicting force that brings about transformation. Those called by the Almighty God are empowered as change agents to speak life into those locust plagued situations.

God's transformative process calls for us to stand, speak and then see the signs, miracles and wonders of the Lord. God's transforming power allows us to see the sin sick saved and made whole; depressed filled with joy; the fearful overcome with faith; diseased gratified with healing; oppressed overflowing with hope; and whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be covered with the blood of Jesus.

### **Conversation**

Several of our churches in the Southern California Conference participate in the Winter Shelter Program and offer the church as a place of residence for those homeless individuals who sleep on our steps and in the streets. The Winter Shelter operates December 1 through March 30. During this Kingdomtide Season the church has the opportunity to become a resource center in some manner throughout the entire year. This permits the doors of the church to remain open for hot meals, showers, health referrals, housing placement, job placement and allowing our lights to shine a ray of hope into their situations. Ministry to the homeless begins with reaching out and meeting the needs of those individuals sleeping on our streets. Consider a cause that demonstrates God's transformative power!

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What examples of locust plaguing situations do we observe in today's society?
2. How should the church respond to these situations?
3. Identify the church's role in the implementation of God's transformative process?
4. Share a situation that demonstrates God's transforming power?

### **Suggested Media**

"Changed," Tremaine Hawkins

# Lessons Learned From A Suffering Servant

*Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell, M.Div.*

*Pastor, Second AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

*President, Fifth District Women in Ministry*

1 December 2019

## Prayer

God, we are grateful for the gift of salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Thank you for sending a Savior to pay the price for our sins. Thank you for the redeeming saving power of Jesus that heals, delivers and sets us free from the bondage of sin and shame. In Jesus name AMEN

## Scripture

Isaiah 53:4-12

## Writing Reflection

The hymn, “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone and All the World Go Free?” asks a question. Songwriter, Thomas Shepherd answers the question in the next line. He writes, “No, there’s a cross for everyone and there’s a cross for me.” While growing up, I really thought of this in a symbolic manner. Yes, we all wear a cross around our neck or showcase in our homes and offices. However, I have discovered that suffering is a reality associated with our relationship with Jesus Christ. In many arenas of Christianity the concept of suffering is omitted and even alleviated. The life of the Christian is painted as one of prosperity and as an “Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” experience. The production “Annie” included a song expressing, “It’s a Hard Knocks Life.” The lyrics to the song describe the life of children in foster care as one of hurt, pain, exclusion, neglect which all involve a certain degree of suffering. The children in this production represent one aspect of suffering. We all have experienced hurt and hardships. These experiences occur to teach and to test us. As we move through our seasons of suffering, often the lessons learned are revealed in the future. We discover the “hard knocks” were designed to mature us, to grow us and strengthen us!

## Exegesis

This passage in Second Isaiah is a literary piece written in poetic form and describes the experiences of the “suffering servant.” In the context, the identity of the servant gives reference to Israel’s plight as well as a collective theme that weaves throughout the Hebrew Bible. However, the “suffering servant” has been identified as the future Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would suffer for the sins of the world. God reveals to Israel in this prophetic word the imagery of the sacrificial lamb and the act of sheep going astray which present the need for a Savior to save a sinful world.

### **Contemporary Application**

Lessons Learned from the “Suffering Servant” are designed to develop Christian principles in the life of the believer. Lesson one presents humility as a virtue represented in God’s motive to send the Messiah as a “servant versus king.” Too often leaders are self-seeking, pretentious, arrogant, egotistical and conceited. An individual walking in humility allows God full control of their conduct and condition. Humility offers the opportunity to serve as God’s human vessel and to demonstrate the Lord’s saving power. Lesson two teaches us that suffering opens the door to hope. The text paints a picture of a wounded, bruised, and stricken servant which describes a Savior’s redemptive act for the sins of many. This image expresses that Jesus bore our transgressions and iniquities. The Lord made intercession and as a result this salvific act, we are forgiven of sin, cleansed from unrighteousness, and healed from all disease. This hope and healing comes through a relationship with Jesus Christ and the blessed assurance of eternal life. Lesson three teaches us that suffering presents the opportunity for healing. The pain that we experience during life’s challenging situations are to strengthen us. Gold is perfected by the fire that it goes through and the polishing of it requires friction. As we move through seasons of suffering, the trials build us and make us whole. Romans 5:3-4 states, “Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Thank God for the “suffering servant” representative of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who became the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

### **Conversation**

It is necessary to be open and direct in regard to the issue of suffering in the life of a Christian. This is an appropriate Season to preach and teach text that demonstrate leaders in the Bible who engaged in suffering. The New Testament books offer narratives describing the sufferings and struggles of the First Century Apostles. As African Americans our history is embedded with suffering and struggle which expands a month of celebrating our culture to an ongoing exploration of how God provided Jesus, as a Savior, to oppressed peoples.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Describe humility in the life of a Christian.
2. How is mercy represented in the “suffering servant”?
3. What are the prerequisites for an individual to experience healing? When we pray “by Jesus’ stripes we are healed”, are we referring to physical or spiritual healing?
4. What other lessons learned from the “suffering servant”?

### **Suggested Media**

“Through It All,” Andrae Crouch

### **Prayer**

God, we are grateful for the gift of salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Thank you for sending a Savior to pay the price for our sins. Thank you for the redeeming saving power of Jesus that heals, delivers and sets us free from the bondage of sin and shame. In Jesus name AMEN

# That's My Jam

*Rev. Swayne Cofield*

*Pastor, Rose of Sharon AMEC (Norwalk, CA)*

8 December 2019

## Prayer

Father, we thank you for allowing each of us an opportunity to sing your praises in the midst of our unworthiness. Please lead us to openly sing your praises among the nations and bring offerings into your courts to lift up your Kingdom. As we study your word, keep a song on our lips that proclaims your glory. Amen

## Scripture

Psalm 96

## Exegesis

This psalm consists of three separate hymns (vss. 1-6, 7-9, 10-13), but is often regarded as a single hymn with three separate concepts. We are summoned to praise the Lord for his wonderful deeds in creation that set him above all gods. The song moves forward inviting worshippers to bring offerings into the temple. The psalm persuades “families of nations (NIV)” to acknowledge the power and glory due to the God of gods, and upon entering the temple we should bow down in worship before Him. The high moment of this processional song arrives when it is proclaimed “The LORD reigns! (v10)” and has come to exercise rule over the earth.

“Sing to the LORD a new song (v1)” can be “new” in nature because it holds old themes of the Lord’s marvelous works of salvation and deliverance from chaos. An old song can remind the nations to honor God and His majesty despite facing injustices and inequalities. Let the heavens and earth rejoice because His reign brings order in the times of discord. An old song in a New Year reminds the nations that the Lord’s kingship was neither a relic from the past nor a hope deferred to the future, but a present reality. The Lord comes to rule anew in power when we need Him most.

## Contemporary Context

In contemporary culture, the phrase “That’s my jam!” refers to one of our favorite songs. It is commonly yelled out loud when someone hears the first few seconds of his or her favorite songs. This phrase has been adopted by many worshippers (often younger worshippers) to relate to their favorite hymn or gospel song. Our favorite songs take us to a place of joy and remind us of times when Jehovah pulled us through our valleys and life and made a way when there was no way. Take a moment to reflect on your “jam” and what this songs has meant to your soul throughout your life experiences.

During this season of Kingdomtide, our concentration is on the local church and community and being advocates for something and/or someone. We are surrounded by injustices and inequalities in our nation; racism, health care, homelessness, education, discrimination, poverty, unemployment and

underemployment to name of few. These injustices could potentially lead to men, women and children losing their joy and not having a song to sing.

### **Conversation**

How do we retain a song in our hearts during our times of trials and tribulations? As children of God, we have been taught that we cannot offer a testimony of grace without a journey through the valley. We make it through each and every time through our praise and the song (or “jam”) in our souls reminding us how we made it over in the past. We don’t need the first few seconds of music on the radio or in worship to cue our praise and trust in Shaddai that sees our needs and meets our needs in every circumstance.

We must admit it is difficult, yet not impossible, to recall and sing our songs of the testimonies of the past during the present storms facing us. Injustice finds us when we least expect it and leaves us vulnerable. Our “new” song leads us back to a Creator who is just and “He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness (Ps. 96:13b).”

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What worship song or hymn is your “jam?” Share what the song(s) speak to your soul and encourage you to encourage your sisters and brothers? How do we help sisters and brothers remember their songs in the heightened moments of grief, despair and doubt?
2. Read Psalm 96:1-3 aloud (or play audio). How is singing a natural part of true worship? What does it mean to sing a new song? What experiences in life could lead us to want to sing a new song?
3. How do verses 4-6, and others you know of, teach us that God is worthy of our praise? What does it mean to fear God? Why is it vital to fear God?
4. Why must true worship involve giving? How do we give God glory and strength (v. 7)? What other things can we give God? How can we make sure that we are giving God what He is worthy of being given?
5. How does true worship involve celebrating? What things do we typically celebrate more than we celebrate God? What things about God, and the things he has done, are worth celebrating?

### **References**

*Bible Gateway*  
*WordSearch 11*  
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# Show Me The Kingdom! - Kingdomtide

*Rev. Sandra E.H. Smith Blair*

*Associate Minister, St. Paul AMEC (Berkeley, CA)*

15 December 2019

## Prayer

Precious God, we are grateful for being shown the mysteries of the Kingdom and its wondrous possibilities. We welcome the message of forgiveness, salvation, redemption and restoration given to us through Jesus Christ that transform us into a Holy Nation. Help us to give ourselves wholeheartedly so the Spirit of God may move in our hearts and its divine power work in our lives. We genuinely seek to know and understand the fullness of the Godhead and commit to sharing it with joy and enthusiasm in our communities. Amen!

## Scripture

Matthew 13:3-9, 36-43

## Writing Reflections

In reflecting on the parable of the sower that Jesus used to demonstrate the varying responses of people when He tried to teach them the meaning of the Kingdom of God, I was reminded of a memorable phrase from the movie “Jerry McGuire”. Jerry, a successful sports agent, realizes he and his colleagues value clients as paychecks instead of people and he commits to care more about his client’s welfare than profits. When his agency fires him and steals his clients, he establishes his own agency but is left with one client, the football player Rod Tidwell, They don’t initially agree as Rod claims Jerry is not trying hard enough to get him a contract, while Jerry claims Rod is not proving himself worthy of the money he wants. Rod forces Jerry to scream at the top of his lungs: “SHOW ME THE MONEY!” affirming that to keep his client Jerry must adapt Rod’s attitude of profit or nothing. They develop a close relationship through which Rod becomes a better player and Jerry becomes a better man. Ultimately Jerry lands a super-large contract for Rod, and shows him the money, proving that profit follows putting people first.

## Exegesis

Jesus Christ put people and their souls first. He came to earth to show us the Kingdom of Heaven and its better way, and the Gospel of Matthew focuses on the history of salvation from Abraham to the end time with Jesus’ return. The gospel has been attributed to one of the first disciples Jesus called to follow Him. Because the book reflects a social context of a prosperous urban Greek-speaking area in which Christians were persecuted by Jews, scholars believe it was likely authored several decades after the death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem by an unknown Christian probably at a church in or near Antioch in Syria. The text also reflects the later theological influence of rabbinic training with use of parables, a common teaching tool of rabbis in Judaism. The gospel includes 28 parables, eight of which

are recorded in chapter 13. Jesus used parables to teach people what they should believe and how they should behave, showing the crowds what the Kingdom of Heaven is like and what they need to do to experience it.

### **Contemporary Application**

A parable is a short story that draws on ordinary activities from everyday life to illustrate an important moral or spiritual point. The hearers can relate to what is familiar to them and are better able to grasp the meaning of the parable. The first parable in chapter 13 is that of the Sower in which Jesus depicts the practice still found in Palestine of scattering the seed before the soil is plowed. The seed falls on four types of soil, each of which represent a different response to the message of the Kingdom. Those who don't fully understand the Word and who allow problems, material possessions and other people to diminish their faith and joy are like hard, rocky and thorny soil in which the seed cannot take root and flourish. By contrast, those who grasp the Word and are fruitful in their faith are like the good soil in which the seed is nourished and produces an abundant harvest.

Jesus and the crowds he taught lived in a primarily agricultural and pastoral economy. Most people were small farmers raising crops and tending livestock, and coinage was just emerging as the standard of exchange for goods, services and payment of taxes. In a February 26, 2012 Forbes newsletter article, Geoff Loftus analyzed how today's global economy is wedded to the "show me the money" organization plan that justifies whatever has to be done to maximize shareholder value and corporate profits, even with very risky investments that create financial crisis, plummeting of shares and profits, and collapse of institutions. By contrast he pointed out how Steve Jobs, the co-founder, chairman and chief executive officer of Apple, Inc, focused on putting people (his customers) first by making high-quality, innovative and user-friendly products that people didn't even know they wanted but couldn't live without once they were launched. Apple's success and profit margin have proved the validity of his approach.

Jesus was the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven and it is the most central aspect of His teachings. The importance of His Kingdom lessons is stressed by Jesus' saying: "He who has ears, let him hear." (13:9). He showed the Kingdom as a time to come when the conditions of human existence will be completely transformed, and God's reign of peace and justice will be established. Every time he healed someone, embraced an outcast, respected a woman, forgave someone's sin and cared for the poor He was showing the nearness of the Kingdom. We await the realization of the Kingdom but in the interim, we can enjoy in our lives the presence and power of God that we will fully experience in the future union with the Godhead. We do so by showing the love for God and others modeled by Jesus, by putting God in Christ first in our priorities and interests, and by being faithful and fruitful disciples and witnesses.

### **Conversation**

The discipline of science used the rules of empirical, testable, demonstrable protocol to identify and observe phenomena. We humans tend to depend on our sensory perceptions as evidence of reality. We trust what we see, know what we hear, are affected by what we smell, respond to what we touch, and identify things by their taste. Our five senses are major factors in us determining what we know, understand and believe but our human limitations will never allow us to completely comprehend how God, Christ and the Holy Spirit function. Through this Kingdom parable Jesus shows the profound mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven that are a new way of relating to God and understanding our faith, a reordering of priorities, a restructuring of social institutions, and a restoration of justice. As we journey through this year of Kingdomtide, we continue our celebration and reflection on the reign of Christ in heaven and earth and affirm that God is close at hand in every aspect of daily life. We have the opportunity to consider the secrets that are only revealed to those who seek and accept them by faith, and we can fulfill our mission to reach out to those who have yet to be shown and receive the Kingdom.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Can you explain such Kingdom mysteries as salvation, prayer, miracles, and supernatural healing?
2. What experience(s) of divine grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love can you share with others?
3. How do you respond to people who reject, are indifferent to, or easily lured away from the Kingdom message?
4. What are the necessary conditions for fruitful discipleship?
5. What spiritual gifts do you desire for yourself during the Season of Kingdomtide?
6. What spiritual growth does your congregation need to cultivate during the Season of Kingdomtide?

### **Suggested Media**

“Open My Eyes That I May See” (Hymn #285)

# Attention: Pastors, Prophets, Priest!

*Rev. Debra A. Whitlock Lax, MDiv, DMin  
(ABD)*

*Association Minister, St. Paul AME Church  
(Berkeley, CA)*

22 December 2019

## Prayer

Open our eyes to see the truth and shield them from those who practice evil. Give us discernment to see wolves in shepherds clothing and give us the courage to blow the whistle and call them out for the Body of Christ sake and to save souls. Amen.

## Scripture

Jeremiah 23:1-16

## Contemporary Context

Have you walked by someone in authority who mentions your name or title? Do you stop and listen? Do you slow your pace and eavesdrop? Or, do you shrug your shoulders and keep on walking? Truthfully, if we are honest with our self, our answer might be; “it depends.” Nowadays the man who rules the highest office in America is ignored by most while a 100-year hold grandma barely whispers stopping the room, causing a hush to overtake it and a movement of urgent leaning to glean whatever comes out of her mouth. Jeremiah’s spoken words stopped the room and caused those who have ears to hear strain to hear a word from the Lord. His message ultimately points to the Sovereign God and King. Sometimes church members get wrapped up in the messenger (the Pastor) and miss the divine message of God that judges the heart of man and render promises and penalties like no other. In what follows, Jeremiah examines crooked politicians, false prophets, tippin’, and dippin’ priests, through a true prophet’s lens.

## Exegesis

Jeremiah began as a young preacher lacking confidence and questioning whether God knew who He had chosen. God, unmoved by Jeremiah’s youth, fear, and ignorance of divine power, touched Jeremiah deeply and filled his mouth with His Word. Jeremiah became just what God had spoken and ordained; he was a prophet to Israel, extending to gentile nations during the revolt of Babylon beginning in 626 BC. Even though God called Jeremiah and anointed him to speak, the Jews rejected the words he uttered. Rather than incline their ears to obey God, Judah continued to play the harlot and go after gods which were no gods. The book of Jeremiah is most difficult to translate into what we might consider “a book.” Jeremiah’s writings are controlled chaos. The uninitiated reader might feel frustrated and become increasingly irritated if they attempt to read Jeremiah like a novel or a chronologically ordered history of Israel’s woes. The outline below attempts to capture the essence of each section.

- A. God will punish Judah (1:1–12:17)
- B. The Lord reveals his plans for the fall of Judah (13:1–20:18)
- C. God will judge and punish Judah and Jerusalem (21:1–29:32)
- D. God will bring His people back to their land (30:1–33:26)
- E. Jeremiah delivers messages to Zedekiah and the Rechabites (34:1–35:19)
- F. Jeremiah suffers because he delivers the Lord’s message (36:1–45:5)
- G. God will punish the nations (46:1–51:64)
- H. An appendix on the fall of Jerusalem (52:1–34)

Jeremiah 23 promises divine judgment and punishment of Judah and Jerusalem. God unmasks those that have the audacity of calling themselves Pastors, Prophets, and Priest and reveals their true character as destroyers and scatters which reflects negatively upon God and thus dishonors Him and hurts His people. God’s big enough to withstand blows to his character. What he will not tolerate is profane, pastors, priest, and prophets, by their folly and blasphemous ways, hurting his people and causing them to err (23:13).

### **Conversation**

We’ve landed on Jeremiah’s tenth sermon, and it’s a doozie. The first word of the passage is “WOE!” We must hear the reverberation in Jeremiah’s voice today as he spoke in antiquity. He directs his message to pastors, priests, and prophet who are malevolent towards God’s people. Jeremiah lifts the skirt and reveals the covenant family leaders are given to covetousness. They all deal falsely (6:13). The pastors get fat while their proverbial sheep waste away and eventually scatter from a lack of care. The prophets prophesy falsely, commit adultery and walk in lies and strengthen the hands of evildoers (23:14). The priest rule by human power. The gluteus maximus clencher, God’s people love to have it so. (5:31) Today there is a type of scattering of God’s people. The membership in our churches show evidence of ministers more interested in what they can get out of the church than how God can empower them to bring glory to God and advance the Kingdom. Their conduct reveals a lack of acquaintance with the living Savior Jesus Christ. Christians must be on guard to not follow those who do not know God. Rest assured God will attend to them! We have good news from the Lord. He will gather the scatter and bring them back. They will be fruitful and increase. You may have had a bad experience with a leader of God’s people. Hear God’s promise to you. He is setting up shepherds over you that will feed you! In other words, you have nothing to fear or be dismay over; God cares for you and hears your cry. If you left God because of human misbehavior, return to God and allow Him to direct you to a church where he has positioned a true man or woman of God to nurture, grow, and develop you.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Make a list of reasons why people are leaving the church. How many items are connected to a failure of leadership?
2. What steps should a person take when they spot a Pastor, Priest, or Prophet who is leading a person or group of people astray?
3. How might a person protect their heart from being led astray?

# Choosing To Be Blessed

*Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min.*

*Pastor, Allen Chapel (Riverside, CA)*

29 December 2019

## Prayer

Eternal God, with all the choices available to us in life, help us to make the right decisions that will ultimately please and honor you. We depend on you to give us the strength. In Jesus Name, Amen

## Scripture

Psalm 1

## Exegesis

This Psalm summarizes the two ways of life that each of us has the option of choosing each day. The way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. As the psalmist outlines each way only one of the ways is the person blessed.

The word “blessed” is translated to mean “happy.” The psalmist is speaking of the person as “blessed” not because they are aiming at happiness, but because they are seeking right relationship with God. Personal happiness is but a very small part of the “blessed” life for the blessed life does not necessarily equate to a happy life. The blessed person is the one who seeks to please God. This is done by being aware of who you walk, stand and sit with.

One thing that the psalmist makes clear is the one who makes the right choice will be like a tree. A tree suggests strength, stability and fruitfulness. Contemporary Context

I noticed, as my family was out of town, I went to the grocery store to purchase what I thought was a simple item, butter. When I got to this section I was overwhelmed by the different choices available for a stick of butter. There were at least 7-8 choices just for a stick of butter. When did this simple transaction become so difficult? Just as simple purchases have become so difficult, so are daily decision as to how we live our life. Do we want to be blessed or not?

## Conversation

There is more to our life as believers than saying we are saved and go to church. We have to make the right choices on a daily basis. Each day, we face the tensions of life through temptations and trials and we have the opportunity to choose how what we say, how we respond and how we behave. This is the difficult part of our faith journey because making the right choices when faced with these various tensions can be extremely difficult. If we want to be blessed by God, there is a way we are to conduct our daily lives.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the ways the world describes being blessed? How do they differ from God’s definition of being blessed?

2. Reflect on Matthew 5:2-12 and discuss how Jesus described the person who is blessed? How difficult is it to make the choices to be blessed?
3. As the Psalmist discusses the similarities of the blessed person and a tree, what are some of the commonalities of a tree and blessed person?
4. Discuss what “chaff” is and how it is similar to the wicked person.
5. How is the Lord knowing the way of the righteous, good news? How does it encourage your daily choices in life?

# Worth The Investment

*Rev. Terry McCray Hill*

*Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Portland, OR)*

5 January 2020

## Prayer

Holy God: Thank you for the hidden treasure found in a manger that was fit for “the King.” What seems useless at times serves an awesome purpose in your master plan. A pile of hay suddenly becomes a mattress filled with silk and rose petals; rubble becomes rubies, and a crown of thorns transformed into the crown of life. We are grateful for your generosity and grace shown towards us. **AMEN.**

## Scripture

Matthew 13:45-46

## Reflections

As I have grown older, the Season of Christmas has always been a relaxing time for me as opposed to the rushed and hurried feeling experienced during my younger days. Now I take the time to reminisce about the lessons learned from those years in which I was *growing, changing, transforming* and I often find the occasion to pause and say, “*Thank you, Lord.*” 2019 is no different. I remember as a young girl spending the better part of a year pleading with my parents to gift me at Christmas with a *Chatty Cathy Doll* by Mattel. You could press a button on her tummy and she would talk — *imagine that!* Christmas morning was so exciting that year that I could hardly wait to tear off the wrapping paper that covered my *Chatty Cathy*; but within days, I’d be in tears.

My older brother, in training at the time for the engineer that he would later become, decided he would like to know the internal mechanisms that made *Chatty Cathy* talk, so using my Dad’s tool kit, he took her apart. After putting her back together, *Chatty Cathy* couldn’t utter a single sound. Disappointed, I lost interest in a speechless *Chatty Cathy* and placed her in a shoebox and out for the trash pickup. My mother discovered *Chatty Cathy* and retrieved her. Upon returning *Chatty Cathy* to me, she said, “*You asked for Chatty Cathy and she’s yours. You’re going to keep this doll no matter what condition she’s in.*”

For years I moved around with *Chatty Cathy* in her shoebox which was almost her coffin. *Chatty Cathy* was just as itinerant as I, until June of 2012 while pastoring in Colorado Springs, CO when I noticed an advertisement in a local newspaper for a Toy Show featuring vintage dolls. After going through several boxes, I found the shoebox and whisked *Chatty Cathy* off in hopes of getting a few extra bucks for her. I was shocked when a toy collector initially appraised *Chatty Cathy* at \$400 even as speechless as she was. He asked if he could remove her back panel which revealed that none of her inner mechanisms were missing, my brother just hadn’t put them back correctly. After a few minor adjustments and a fresh set of batteries, *Chatty Cathy* was “good as new.” The collector was so excited that he offered an additional \$200 and I agreed requiring cash. He dashed off to the bank to retrieve the six (6) one hundred bills to purchase his new treasure, *Chatty Cathy*.

## Exegesis & Contemporary Context

As noted in Matthew, Jesus speaks to the people in “everyday language” known as parables to direct their attention to the notion of the dynamics of the Kingdom. It takes most people a moment to remember that the genesis of a valued pearl is generated within an oyster by a single grain of sand or meniscal bit of trash that has been filtered in between its shells — thus ultimately becomes a cultured pearl. Simplistically, Jesus offers hope as the objective of the Kingdom. Where humanity sees trash, the Kingdom vision is treasure. Where one nation views another as refugees of “\$%\*@ hole countries,” the Kingdom vision is an army of redeemed and liberated freedom fighters and advocates for justice — a new breed declaring, “*Let my people go!*” Furthermore, to a jeweler, collector or artisan a cultured pearl is such a rare find that its value is noticed immediately to the point where they are willing to invest a hefty sum for its purchase. God has invested greatly in us — ***his only begotten soon.*** (John 3:16) God gently calls to each of us, “*You are valuable to me in any condition.*”

### Discussion Questions

1. When was the last time you threw something in the trash and later realized its value?
2. Write how you might have dismissed another person, colleague, family member, friend, etc. as “worthless to your cause” but later time would reveal the difference that they have actually made in your life.
3. Share/testify in class on whether on or not you are worthy of God’s investment.
4. Although it is the Season of Christmas, direct attention to a hymn usually sung at Easter and during Communion Services, “*Jesus Paid It All.*” Listen to the lyrics and thank God that the Kingdom depicts Christmas as Easter and Easter is Christmas — *life to death/trash to treasure.*

# Bold Belief

*Rev. Marvin L. McKenzie, M.B.A., M.Div.  
Pastor, Walker Temple AMEC (Los Angeles,  
CA)*

12 January 2020

## Prayer

God, help us to not depend on what we can do but upon what You can do through us. Help us to not limit Your power by our disbelief. Help us to see ourselves truly as more than conquerors able to do all things through Jesus name.

## Scripture

John 6:1-21

## Exegesis

A major theme of John's Gospel is that those who should have believed and displayed their belief by actions, often failed to do so. John's Gospel contains teachings of Jesus not seen in the other Synoptic Gospels and is the most theological of the four Gospels. After beginning this Gospel presenting Jesus as eternal, John provides a series of miracles that proves Jesus' divinity. Despite these proofs, the disciples are usually left baffled and confused.

In our text, despite witnessing many miracles, the disciples still seem to doubt the power of Jesus. As Jesus performs miracles, He teaches that He is that Bread of life, the Living water, the Light of the world, the Door and the Good Shepherd.

Although the disciples doubted His power, Jesus is able to take a boy's lunch and feed a multitude. Not only is Jesus able to supply their needs, the Bible records that there was an overflow as twelve baskets filled with bread remained. God can not only meet our needs, but He can provide abundance.

Contemporary Context

Economics is defined as the study of matching limited resources to unlimited demands. Many of us often find ourselves considering the economics when planning Kingdom work rather than depending on the power of God. As believers we must remember that our God can supply all of our needs according to His riches and glory. We must not limit the power of God by our lack of faith or resources. Matthew records that Jesus didn't perform many miracles in his hometown because of their lack of faith (Mat 13:58). In this passage Jesus is able to use little to supply the needs of many. When we use what we have been given and believe in God, we can accomplish more than we think.

## Conversation

In our text a huge multitude had been following Jesus because they had seen the miraculous things He had done and how he had healed the sick. These crowds followed Jesus with expectation because of what they had seen and heard. The great expectation of the crowd is quickly contrasted by the lack of

faith by the disciples. Jesus turns to Philip who lived within this region and was one of the first disciples as a point of resource. Despite witnessing countless miracles, Philip performs a calculated assessment based on economics and tells Jesus that the task at hand is impossible. The problem within many of our churches today is that people come with great expectations only to be limited by the lack of faith by church leaders. We focus so much on what we don't have and operate from a perspective of defeatism. We claim to be more than conquerors, but we worry about witnessing in our neighborhoods. We claim that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us but yet we panic when bills are due. We ask God for increase and to enlarge our territory, but we have no vision. Like Philip we operate based upon what we have rather than upon Who we believe.

How many people have been turned away from the church because they have witnessed our lack of belief? How many ministries have not been started because we were afraid to step out on faith? Could it be that the reason for decline in church membership is that we stopped believing in the impossible? When people come to our doors, they are expecting positivity as they hear negativity each day. Jesus told the man with the demon possessed son that anything is possible for those that believe.

### **Contemporary Application**

During your church's next planning meeting, set bold goals that can only be achieved by the power of God. Consider what you have accomplished in the past and now be intentional in prayer and fasting and expect to do much more. Rather than planning to slowly reduce debt, make a bold declaration to be debt free before the end of this year. Rather than planning to lose a few pounds, boldly declare that this year you will be in the best shape of your life.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why do we often look for human solutions to divine problems?
2. How have you limited God's plan for your life by limiting them to human solutions?
3. How has your church been limited by depending on man/women and not on God?
4. What are the areas in your life that you need to depend more on God and less on yourself?
5. The young boy in the story believed enough to offer up what he had, is this why Jesus said that we need to believe as children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

# Check Your Posture — Stand Tall

*Rev. Quantá M. Crews*

*Historic Tanner Chapel AMEC (Phoenix, AZ)*

19 January 2020

## Prayer

Most merciful Father, thank you for calling us to be your children. Thank you for your unconditional love and the sacrifices you have made for us. Please be with all who meditate these words and help us to all stand tall in you. Remind us that though we may have challenges, disabilities, aches and pains, we are yours. That it is in you that we find our strength and ability to stand tall and face the wickedness of this world. We love and appreciate you, oh Great Jehovah and we praise your name. Although we could never repay you, we can try. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

## Scripture

Psalm 146

## Exegesis

1 Praise the Lord!

Let all that I am praise the Lord.

2 I will praise the Lord as long as I live.

I will sing praises to my God with my dying breath.

Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. G-d has been so amazing and so merciful. In any situation, G-d is the best friend I need. I will glorify my creator at all times. Praise is my lifestyle. My praise is continuous. Regardless of the season I am in, I will shout Hallelujah!

3 Don't put your confidence in powerful people;  
there is no help for you there.

4 When they breathe their last, they return to the earth,  
and all their plans die with them.

5 But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Regardless of what is going on, I will continue to honor the name of the Lord. The powerful seem to have it all, but I know better. Lord, please be with me always, in especially when I encounter wickedness. Grant me the wisdom and discernment to point them out, and the necessary steps to remove them from my life. I am so thankful to have you on my side. I place my hope in you.

6 He made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and everything in them.

He keeps every promise forever.  
7 He gives justice to the oppressed  
and food to the hungry.  
The Lord frees the prisoners.  
8 The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down.  
The Lord loves the godly.  
9 The Lord protects the foreigners among us.  
He cares for the orphans and widows,  
but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.

Lord, there is no ending to your power or your love for your people. People experience freedom because of your Word. While this world changes and friends and family come and go, you are still the same. You're the same G-d who made Adam and Eve, the same God who blessed us with the solar system that includes this place we call home. You are truly amazing, and I honor you today.

10 The Lord will reign forever.  
He will be your God, O Jerusalem throughout the generations. Praise the Lord!

In 2020, you Lord, deserve the praise. In 2220 you will still deserve all the praise. Your reign is everlasting, and you continue to show us your love. Thank you for carrying and teaching us, for developing us season after season. As a recipient of your forgiveness, mercy and grace, I am prepared to face whatever the world throws my way.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the era of this Psalm, its point is clear and would be uplifting to the recipient whether before or after Babylonian exile. The text is the first of the Hallelujah Psalms. The last five Psalms begin and end with "Hallelujah". Each one discusses a specific aspect of praising the Lord. The 146<sup>th</sup> Psalm takes on a very personal tone from the beginning. Additionally, the psalmist speaks in first person to intentionally make worship relational. The writer says, "Let all that I am praise the Lord!" The psalmist continues to say that they will praise the Lord until their last breath. The text begins with a tone of worship and later takes on an educational tone. The lecture explains what to do and what not to do. The powerful are mortal beings, and their glory and power will die when they do. Their strength is not eternal. Their plans are temporary. King David, who is believed to have written many of the Psalms, comes to mind as I consider the declaration that all should praise the Lord. King David praised the Lord despite his earthly titles. He worshiped the Lord and placed his confidence in G-d. He knew G-d held all power and held his life in his hands. The next few verses are a reminder for the reader. The psalmist teaches about the Lord's power and authority. The Lord is committed to justice and the welfare of those who are less fortunate. Throughout the Bible and in this passage, we see G-d's consistent concern for orphans and widows. Finally, the psalm concludes with love, adoration and praise to the mighty Jehovah. This reading ends with a simple yet strong word, Hallelujah! It provides instructions to all who read and hear the Word.

### **Contemporary Application**

This season has been called Kingdomtide. This is a season to expect growth and the mighty move of God. The Psalmist declares that they will praise the Lord until their last breath and encourages us to do the same. While we are experiencing growth during Kingdomtide, others in the world are experiencing some of their darkest days. As believers we are not exempt. We also feel the darkness of this world. Mental health is a real threat to many believers, and we don't discuss it enough. The cost of living in many places continues to increase dramatically, sometimes at twice the rate of incomes. Across the country many are losing their homes due to property tax liens and foreclosures. The personal and

collective trauma of the frequent murders of black lives by law enforcement and civilian ignorance is heavy. Yet the psalmist said to remember who God is and put our trust in Him.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How are standing in your faith this season? Is there a concern you haven't fully given to the Lord?
2. Sometimes we are the only Bible people read. What are you sharing with the world day to day
3. What can you do to continue stand tall in your faith and praise intentionally?
4. What are three things you do can to practice self-care and ease the impacts of stress and trauma mentioned above?
5. In this season of Kingdomtide, what are the areas that the Lord is working on in you? What are you hearing? Feeling? Place a note with these areas somewhere you will see daily as a reminder of G-d's promises in this season.

### **Suggested Media**

“When I Think About the Lord” by Jide Adeoye

### **References**

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# “He Included Me . . .”

*Rev. Terry McCray Hill*

*Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Portland, OR)*

26 January 2020

## Prayer

Holy God: Your glory still casts light and peace upon the face the child of Bethlehem, the Christ, through whom you have summoned the world to you. Thank you for casting out all manner of darkness that blinds our path, so that *we may come uninhibited and kneel before Christ in true worship offering our hearts and souls.* AMEN.

## Scripture

Ephesians 2:11-22

## Reflections

After several readings of the text from various translations of the bible, my mind led me back to a time in the early 70's when words like *integration* were new "buzz words" and phrases like *affirmative action* were merely a "social construct" to be debated and never really meant to be actualized. Many of us after being invited to become a part of history would never be convinced of our status especially when we were not even consciously aware of our present reality—*in or out?* Back in the day, this simple question caused an enormous amount of friction between the so called "insiders and outsiders," not unparalleled to similar questions posed by the text—*Jew or Gentile? Included or excluded?*

The good news is that at that same period in time, I also vividly remember sitting on a pew in my home church and having my hope reassured as the Inspirational Chorus belted out, "*I'm so glad that when Jesus was passing out all the blessings, He included me. When He said 'Whosoever let them come. Jesus, He included me.'*" Then I knew, embraced and understood that *the concept of diversity* was "*Kingdom talk and action.*" (Given the intended date of this teaching, shall I call my discovery an *epiphany!*)

## Exegesis

Ephesians 2 challenges so called "insiders" (Jews) to remember their own story, but not in the manner in which they were presently experiencing it at the time, but from the perspective of their current state of having received God's welcoming grace—*unmerited favor.* Maybe difficult for them to see themselves as such, they too were once "outsiders": *separated, without hope, and without God.*

For the early church, the question which caused an ongoing conflict was how would "outsiders" (Gentiles) ever be recognized as God's people. This question caused separation among Christians (members of the faith community) who were both Jews by heritage and Gentiles alike which at times caused great painful and had become increasingly violent with the constant clashing of divergent cultures and convictions and mutual speculation and suspicion.

*Divisiveness is a goal of sin--if not careful it will divide and conquer and disrupt the peace that God has intended. The author of Ephesians wrote to heal a fractured people by informing them that they now both were included in a story that moved from exclusion, hostility, and deprivation to inclusion, welcome*

and reconciliation, through God's gift, Jesus Christ. I can imagine the author also phrasing it in this manner: ***"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*** (1 Peter 2:10)

### Contemporary Context

Despite God's reconciling peace, grace and mercy towards us, we often allow social hostilities to divide us and to distort our view of God's mission. In today's world, the terms in which this text describes this reality is startling. We often cannot avoid the very concrete issues surrounding who some are willing to welcome, and who some are eager to exclude. But as "Kingdom people" we are challenged to:

12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, ***excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise***, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 ***For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility***, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself ***one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace***, 16 ***and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility***. 17 ***He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near***. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. 19 ***Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household***, 20 ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone***. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 ***And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit***. (excerpts from Ephesians 2).

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever invited a ***culture other than your own to worship God with you*** without raising a "critical eye" for how they praise, express and fellowship?
2. Are you an advocate for social justice: ***"Tear down walls. Build relationships."***
3. Spend class/private time designing a direct service project that can effectively address the ***needs different from yours*** of the hungry, homeless and otherwise disadvantaged.
4. The texts suggest that God is forming a new community (Kingdom) not based on social privilege nor capitalism, but on the grace of God towards the whole world. Through Christ, God draws both those who are "near" and those who are "far away," and we are sent as carriers of that reconciliation. ***What message are you carrying about the Kingdom of God?***

# Surviving The Struggle of Suffering — Kingdomtide

*Rev. Sandra E. H. Smith Blair*

*Associate Minister, St. Paul AMEC (Berkeley, CA)*

**2 February 2020**

## **Prayer**

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered. We have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered. Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast. God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who has brought us thus far on the way. Thou who has by Thy might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path, we pray. Amen!

## **Scripture**

Job 23:1-17

## **Writing Reflections**

My family once lived in the Abacos in the Bahamas where the white sand beaches, clear blue water, pastel colored buildings, and native Bahamas pines have made the chain of islands and coral reefs popular for swimming, diving, water sports, sailing and fishing. In March 2018 I revisited the Abacos and found it as picturesque as I remembered. Sadly, the islands are now not the same. In early September they were flooded and flattened after two days of Hurricane Dorian hovering with 185 mph wind speeds, 225 mph wind gusts, 23 feet high storm surges, and 30 feet of rain. With over half of the buildings destroyed, property damage is estimated at \$3 billion. The initial death count of 50 is expected to rise as hundreds of the 17,224 population are unaccounted for. Over 70,000 people in the northeast Bahamas need food, water, clothing, shelter, medical aid, electricity and telephone service. Adding to the nation's greatest crisis were the heavy rains and strong winds of tropical storm, Humberto, which lashed the devastated parts of the Bahamas two weeks later. The extensive destruction and indescribable human suffering bring to mind the story of Job.

## **Exegesis**

This Psalm summarizes the two ways of life that each of us has the option of choosing each day. The way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. As the psalmist outlines each way only one of the ways is the person blessed.

The word “blessed” is translated to mean “happy.” The psalmist is speaking of the person as “blessed” not because they are aiming at happiness, but because they are seeking right relationship with God. Personal happiness is but a very small part of the “blessed” life for the blessed life does not necessarily equate to a happy life. The blessed person is the one who seeks to please God. This is done by being aware of who you walk, stand and sit with.

One thing that the psalmist makes clear is the one who makes the right choice will be like a tree. A tree suggests strength, stability and fruitfulness.

### **Contemporary Context**

Hearing God boast of Job's goodness Satan credited it to God's abundant blessings and asserted Job would change if tested. Job's first test was the death of all his children, servants and livestock which he mourned but still blessed God in prayer. His second test was being afflicted with sores over his body. Job refused to accept his wife's advice to curse God, as well as his three friends concluding that his misery was due to some sin he needed to confess to God. Convinced of his innocence, Job sought vindication but was unable to confront God in person to complain of the injustice of the innocent suffering while the wicked prosper. Job wanted God to either acquit him of any wrong doing or reveal God's indictment against him. Ultimately reconciled to the sovereignty of God, Job was left with unanswered questions but secure in his relationship with God, His Redeemer. This lesson draws people to the book of Job when they are suffering.

Suffering is physical, emotional, mental, psychological or spiritual pain and distress created by depression, isolation, loneliness, grief, anxiety and other types of crisis. Whether is it our own or that of others, be it deserved or undeserved, suffering is one of the most challenging and persistent problems in life. Throughout human existence, people have struggled with its presence and sought ways to understand and cope with it. There are several Biblical interpretations of suffering:

1. Sin and suffering which because of Adam and Eve's disobedience were introduced into human nature.
2. Suffering as being redemptive and resulting in some greater good, benefit, or lesson learned.
3. Suffering being inflicted by evil forces that are more powerful than humans and as powerful as God.
4. Suffering as a mystery that is beyond human comprehension and known only to God.
5. The need to find answers and relief when suffering leads to turning to God in prayer and faith.

In Job's culture, the prevailing viewpoint was that suffering was caused by the sufferer's sin and, therefore, they deserved their anguish and agony. Our belief is that both good and wicked people can be affected by sin and suffering. One result of suffering is the feeling that God is silent and has abandoned us when we are in greatest need. This can cause us to feel angry and hopeless especially if we believe that our suffering is not deserved. The fact that this happens to others is no consolation. A common response in the midst of suffering is to ask: "Why"? But this can be futile. Whether or not we get or find answers to our questions, we need some way to cope with the immediate experience. A more pertinent response is to ask: "How can one survive?"

### **Conversation**

The environmental reality that because of climate change the Category 5 Dorian had the strongest intensity on record in the Atlantic is little comfort to those suffering its after effects. They are a miniscule fraction of the world population that is contributing to global warming through greenhouse gas emission, chemical fertilizers and deforestation. Across the world individuals are suffering from conflict, famine, disease, injustice, poverty, deprivation, and other inhumane conditions they have little or no control over. An important need for sufferers is to receive spiritual support to alleviate their trauma, and assurance of God's sovereignty, loving presence and caring providence in the midst of their distress.

In local congregations and in the communities we serve, there are people suffering. Sometimes they keep it private and we have to depend on the Spirit to discern and respond to their needs. Spiritual growth takes place when we are able to help them on the path to healing and guide them in developing their faith through a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Methodists believe in striving toward divine perfection, and while we do not reach that in mortal life, we are empowered to be witnesses of a perfect God and are

inspired to do our part in realizing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. During this Season of Kingdomtide we are seeking to be transformed into a Holy Nation. A vital ministry is pastoral care and counseling that enables people to cope with and overcome their suffering. With God's help we can become whole. Kingdomtide affirms that God in Christ Jesus entered into and identifies with the human experience of suffering, both deserved and undeserved. In the midst of our struggle God hears, responds and enables us to survive.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How do we explain suffering that occurs in a world created and governed by a gracious God?
2. How do you define suffering that is deserved versus suffering that is undeserved?
3. What are some ways we can endure and overcome the negative effects of suffering?
4. How do you cope with the experience of God's silence and absence?
5. What assurance do we have in our Christian faith in the Season of Kingdomtide?

### **Suggested Media**

"I Know My Redeemer Lives" (Hymns #166 & #167)

# Prescription for Life

*Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett*

*Pastor, Hope Community AMEC (Tucson, AZ)*

9 February 2020

## Prayer

O Lord, on this day draw our attention, desires, and thoughts to Your will and way for our lives. Forgive us for wandering away from You and strengthen us to do justice. In Jesus name. Amen.

## Scripture

Amos 5:6-15

## Exegesis

Amos came from the southern kingdom of Judah, Tekoa, a town that was in the hill country about twelve miles south of Jerusalem. His prophecies were addressed primarily to the northern kingdom of Israel. He insisted that he was not born into a prophet's family but was called by God to be a prophet. Before becoming a prophet he had been a rancher and a farmer, breeding sheep and caring for sycamore figs.

God hated the Israelites' hypocrisy because they kept up a religious façade. The Israelites boasted about their obedience to the ritual requirements of the law as they brought sacrifices, tithes, thank offerings and freewill offering to the sanctuaries at Bethel and Gilgal. But at the same time they carelessly crushed the helpless, ignoring the fact that in the law G-d had ordered that such people receive care and protection.

Amos has no desire to see the nation of Israel destroyed and that is why he raises a lamentation over the fate that will befall them. Seeking the Lord for them. Seeking the Lord will involve a total transformation of their worship and of their private lives. God speaks out against their perversion of justice. He knows their sinfulness, and they should not expect that he will allow them to enjoy the beautiful homes they have built and the crops they have grown.

## Contemporary Context & Conversation

We are witnessing a moral decline and humanitarian crisis in our nation. The values we once were known to hold dear and promote to the world are being dismantled. Our nation no longer welcomes immigrants trying to escape violence in their countries a safe place of refuge. Our inhumane immigration policies separate families and places children in cages. The courts are being filled with judges who are in agreement with large corporation and wealthy owners. The most vulnerable among our population are not provided the education, healthcare nor safe communities to ensure good quality of life. The senseless murders by mass shooters reveals the hate in the hearts of white nationalism extremist. Worshippers are not safe in their respective houses of religion. Property tax increases are causing the poor and middle class to lose their homes. The lack of environmental stewardship has affected the climate causing unprecedented number storms, fires, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes. Many families are concerned about meeting the basic needs for daily existence and some of our community's most vulnerable senior citizens are on the verge of homelessness. Our nation has a leader that daily demonstrates a lack of honesty, lack of integrity, and a lack of empathy.

Dr. James Cone, father of black liberation theology wrote. “Because the church is the community that participates in Jesus Christ’s liberating work in history, it can never endorse “law and order” that causes suffering.”

The late Howard Thurman, theologian, poet, philosopher wrote in his book titled. *Jesus and the Disinherited* “The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.” What are we to say to them?

The prophet Amos speaks to the nation of Israel about their failure to observe the law of G-d and the impending destruction that will come upon them unless they turn from their sin and transform their heart to worship G-d. The poor among us are precious in the sight of G-d and how we treat them will impact our lives. When we seek good, we live.

### **Conversation**

We are a holy people, called out and set a part for the service of God. We can make a difference in the lives of all people and our respective communities as we seek to do good. The rise of hate in our nation beckons us to demonstrate love. We cannot be at ease in our sanctuaries while communities around us are suffering. G-d has promised to never leave nor forsake us. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread the kingdom of G-d. Let us move forward in this season of Kingdomtide and live!

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What actions might we take today to spread the kingdom of G-d in our community?
2. How will we address the urgent issues in our community?
3. What is our role in transforming the nation to practice equality and justice?

### **Suggested Media**

Hymn # 97 “Revive Us Again”

### **References**

Adeyemo, Tokunboh. 2006. *Africa Bible Commentary*

# Waiting for Restoration

*Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett*

*Pastor, Hope Community AMEC (Tucson, AZ)*

16 February 2020

## Prayer

To You alone O Lord we lift our voice in worship. You have been our help through out the ages. We wait with expectation for your deliverance and restoration in this time of distress. Have mercy on us and lift the weight of sin from our families, communities and nation. In Jesus name. Amen.

## Scripture

Psalm 90:12-17

## Exegesis

The book of Psalm represents the hymnbook or the prayer book of the First and Second Temple. *The Midrash of Psalms* document, “As Moses gave the five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel. Book IV begins with Psalm 90. It is the only Psalm written by Moses. It references the exile of G-d’s chosen people with the deportation of Judeans to Babylon in 597 BCE, continued with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 by the Babylonians, and lasted until 539 when Cyrus permitted the Judean exiles in Babylon to return to Palestine. The exile was a theological problem, and it represented an ongoing theological crisis well beyond 539. The destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation to Babylon meant that the people of G-d lost their three most fundamental and cherished religious institutions: the Temple, the land and the monarchy. The loss of the monarchy was an ongoing theological crisis that made it necessary for the people of G-d to come to a new understanding of G-d and their existence under G-d. Book IV takes the reader back to the time of Moses. It offers the answer that pervades the psalter and forms its theological heart: G-d reigns! In short, even without land, Temple, and monarchy, relatedness to G-d is still possible, as it was in the time of Moses.

Verse 12 is meant to be hopeful and encouraging. G-d teaching us to accept our allotted time as a gift – when this is done, then a “heart of wisdom” is gained, and physical death is no longer a problem. Verse 13 has a connection with the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:36, where Moses affirms that God will “have compassion on his servants”.

Whether the situation is the Babylonian exile and its aftermath or contemporary experiences of alienation and despair, Psalm 90 affirms that G-d’s faithfulness is the face of human unfaithfulness is redemptive.

Reference: *The New Interpreter’s Bible*

## Contemporary Context

We are living in uncertain times. One does not know if they will return home from work, school, shopping or worship. The time allotted to us by the Creator should be spent in loving G-d and others as ourselves. The results of 2016 presidential election has resulted in unprecedented reversal of many rights

African American fought to secure for a bright future. The most vulnerable of our population are experiencing anxiety around healthcare and daily existence. Programs designed to provide security for the poor are being stripped away while the top 1% in our nation thrives. We, like the people exiled in Babylon wait on the Lord for restoration. As a holy people, we seek the Lord's guidance for today and the future. We are thankful for each day and commit to live as children of the kingdom.

### **Conversation**

The church is positioned to make a difference in the lives of people today. For people that are experiencing the negative impact of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, sexism, anti-religious bias and other forms of marginalization, our message of justice, righteousness and steadfast love is needed. While this administration enacts public policy, laws and executive orders that disenfranchises group of people, the church can implement support networks to ensure no one is lost. During this season of growth, the kingdom of G-d will shift, transform and manifest resources.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the most pressing issues in the community?
2. Who might benefit the most from the church's outreach efforts?
3. When is the best time to begin support efforts in the surrounding area?
4. If we had unlimited resources, what service might we provide now?

### **Suggested Media**

Hymn # 441, "Never Alone"

# TAKE ME BACK

*Rev. Barry Settle, D. Min.*

*Pastor, Allen AME (Riverside, CA)*

23 February 2020

## Prayer

Eternal God, may your Holy Spirit revive the depths of our love for you as we continue in this journey we have before us. We thank you for your unwavering love for us that You have shown us through your Son, Jesus Christ. In His name, Amen.

## Scripture

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

## Writing Reflections

This love note reflects the excitement of the love of two people and the depths of love in their relationship.

## Exegesis

The Shulamite here goes back in thought to the scenes of her home-life, and the sweet days of first love. She is longingly looking for the arrival of her shepherd lover. At last she hears him. Excitement mounts: “Behold! he comes!” at least in her imagination. He is as anxious to be with her, as she is to be with him. He comes “leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.” She must be alluding to her shepherd, since the language would hardly be appropriate to Solomon (2:8).

The maiden describes her beloved as “a roe or a young hart.” Both animals are shy. She is within the house when the beloved arrives. “Behold, he stands behind our wall, he looks in at the windows, he shows himself through the lattice.” He stands behind the wall outside the house. He playfully looks through the windows, now through one and now through another, seeking her with his longing eyes. The “windows” (lit., the openings) probably refers to a lattice window, a pierced wooden structure (2:9).

At last the shepherd speaks: “My beloved spoke, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one and come away.” These are the first words attributed to the shepherd in the book. He asked the young lady to leave the house and accompany him on a walk (2:10).

It was a beautiful day for a lovers’ walk. The winter rains were over. Flowers were appearing throughout the land. The air was again filled with the songs of birds, especially that of the turtledove. Vines and fig trees were blossoming and filling the air with fragrant aroma. The shepherd’s invitation was to fellowship in the midst of the pure loveliness of nature, when all was suitable to sustain the initial feelings of awakened love: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:11–13).

### **Contemporary Application**

As a mental health counselor and dating consultant, Samantha Burns knows a thing or two about successful relationships. And this self-proclaimed "millennial love expert" stands by her advice to wear your wedding dress wherever and whenever you want. (Seriously!) "I've always been passionate about love and relationships," Burns told TODAY. "They are what bring us so much joy in this world." And for her, wearing that most-special dress every anniversary is what will keep the romance alive.

The wedding dress is a reminder of the love that she shares with her bride-groom and the vows that were exchanged on that day before God. Not sure if they were the traditional vows or special vows that this couple offered to each other, but it appears the wedding dress is the reminder of the love and covenant relationship between this couple.

### **Conversation**

One of the first things that I thought of when reading this text is the marriage between a husband and wife. How we probably do not do enough to celebrate, nurture and develop marriage in our church today. Hebrews 13:4a reminds us "Let marriage be held in honor by all." Wives and husbands both need encouragement, spiritual counsel and support in order to strengthen the marriage, as the covenant between Christ and the church is the model for a marriage between husband and wife.

As the Shulamite woman recalls the days of her first love, let us recall our first days when we came to know Christ and reflect on the excitement, the joy and the hope we felt. If you are unable to remember the specific date, pick today as the day you will annually begin to wear your wedding attire again, to keep your romance alive with Christ.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. As we listen to the tone of excitement in the readers words, what are things that make us excited about the relationship we have with Christ.
2. When in relationships, we show our appreciation, our love, by things that we do. What are some things we can do to show our appreciation and gratitude for the relationship we have for Christ?
3. One of the vows of the covenant of marriage speaks of forsaken all others. Discuss the traits, attitudes, lifestyles and behaviors we should forsake for the sake of Christ.
4. Discuss the relevance of Revelation 2:4-5 with this text in Song of Solomon.

### **Suggested Media**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0I9iEUfRvI>

# A Parable of a Mustard Seed (faith, hope, perseverance)

*Rev. Patricia Freeman*

*Associate, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

1 March 2020

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, we know you are present in the little things of life. We sense that the seeds of faith which you continue to plant within us will grow, even without our awareness. When we are discouraged, remind us again of this story, this image of growth that we might take the longer view, we might see the bigger picture, and we might be strengthened by the good news that you are not yet through with us. In Jesus name. Amen.

## Scripture

Matthew 17:14-20

## Writing Reflections

Mustard seeds are one of the smallest seeds, the trees can grow up to 20 feet tall and 20 feet wide. The tree can grow in arid, dry climates and thrive even in clay or sandy soil. It can grow in hot, dry weather or cool, wet climates. I see the mustard seed as being symbolic of faith in that our faith can be tested in the “dry times”, the most difficult of circumstances. Also, even if the tree is cut down to the trunk, it can grow back again, even during times of pruning, the believer can overcome and come back stronger than ever, just like the mustard tree that’s been severely pruned and even if only a tiny bit of faith remains. The mustard tree is drought tolerant and if we have faith even the size of a tiny mustard seed, we too can tolerate the dry times in our lives, the difficult growing seasons of a Christian, and even when we are “planted” in poor soil we can still grow, even if we only have a small amount of faith.

## Exegesis

Jesus walked with His disciples from Bethsaida to the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi. Six to eight days later, Jesus went up into a high mountain to pray, taking Peter, James, and John with Him and leaving His other nine disciples behind. There He was transfigured before the three. Meanwhile in the valley, the remaining nine disciples failed to cast out a demon from a young boy. Descending the day following His transfiguration, Christ healed the demoniac boy.

The failure of the nine disciples had given the scribes fuel for criticism of both the disciples and Christ. When Christ arrived on the scene, the scribes were being critically disruptive about the failure. The scribes were not known for their questioning as much as for their refuting and disputing. The success of Christ, however, countered the failure of the disciples, shutting the mouths of the critical scribes. His coming upon this scene of dispute, chaos, and darkness must have been an incredible contrast to the honor, power, and glory that He had just experienced on the mountain in the Transfiguration. The case

of afflicted children should be presented to God by faithful and fervent prayer. Christ cured the child. Though the people were perverse, and Christ was provoked, yet care was taken of the child. Jesus talked about faith like a mustard seed twice. In Matthew, mustard seed faith is tied to expelling a demon, and Jesus says those who have such faith can move mountains (Matt. 17:20). In Luke, those with mustard seed faith will be able to forgive those who sin against them since such faith can pluck up mulberry trees and cast them into the sea (Luke 17:6).

### **Contemporary Application**

Matthew expected his audience to learn from these recorded signs of Jesus, just as the first disciples did when they witnessed them. We who read these accounts in the Bible should be growing in our faith relationship with Jesus, as the disciples did who first walked with him. How often do needs around us go unnoticed because we neglect radical trust in God, especially on behalf of others' needs?

### **Conversation**

Little faith is not so much the quantity of faith as it is the quality.

Prayer is the key to unlocking amazing faith. Faith without prayer is powerless. You have got to claim it, believe it have faith and wrap it up in prayer.

You may start with the faith as the mustard seed but with prayer you will see your faith grow and continue to grow larger and larger and you will trust God in more and more areas of your life.

Faith is given to us as a tool for our journey of life. The more we use it the better we become at living by it. Our faith is the enabler in our Christian walk.

When we believe Christ for the small things and see them take care of it will help us to move up to the bigger things in life. As we bath our faith in prayer and as we see Christ growing us strong in our faith, we will become amazed at the things G-d has in store for us here on the world we call home.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is faith like a mustard seed?
2. Why doesn't our faith move mountains?
3. Are we failing to see great things from God because of our lack of faith?
4. How can we survive in a drought?
5. How can we activate the power G-d gave us?

# Liberating World Changers

*Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett*

*Pastor, Hope Community AMEC (Tucson, AZ)*

8 March 2020

## Prayer

O Lord we thank you for this season of personal and corporate spiritual growth. Awaken us to rise and be the transforming agents of Your kingdom in the earth. Let Your will be manifest in our daily lives. In Jesus Name. Amen

## Scripture

Matthew 13:33

## Writing Reflections

The lesson of the kingdom Jesus shares with the followers reminds me that it does not take large numbers of people nor great actions to shift, transform and manifest significant change in the world. Small steps ordered by G-d lead to expansion of the kingdom.

## Exegesis

This one verse provides insight into the kingdom of God. Jesus is preparing his followers to live under an oppressive Roman government and a corrupt religious system. Jesus was a Palestinian Hebrew, a man of color, a practicing Jew who had no rights under the Roman law. Many of his followers lived from day to day on meager existence and had no hope of a prosperous future. It was under these social, political and religious conditions that the Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God. This lesson about the kingdom comes after two previous lessons on the wheat and tares. Jesus reveals special truth to the disciples through parables. Jewish teachers used parables as sermon illustrations to explain a point they were teaching. The parables were understood to be primary allegories-encoded teaching that could be decoded into edifying lessons for Christian life. This parable main character was a woman. Jesus' ministry was inclusive. Some of the women that traveled with Jesus were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others. These women went against cultural and religious norms by accompanying the 12 on the road to witness Jesus teaching, preaching and healing ministry. These women supported the ministry with their finances which made it possible for others to travel. The making of bread was the responsibility of women. They could understand the significance of yeast in the bread making process. Yeast are small, single-cell organisms that feed off of simple sugars, breaking them down into carbon dioxide, alcohol, flavor molecules, and energy. Carbon dioxide is one of the major gases responsible for leavening in baking. As the dough rises and proofs, carbon dioxide is formed; this is why the dough volume increases. A small amount of yeast mixed within the dough would produce a large amount of bread. The amount of flour involved here represents roughly fifty pounds (which is more than one would use for a daily meal), providing enough for over one hundred people. The illustration suggests that the kingdom far exceeds daily examples to which it may be compared. Yeast and the illustration of a woman in this parable draws to the small amount and least among the society that can produce a great movement. The

hearers of this parable are liberated from their limited thinking and become world changers as they spread the message of the kingdom. The transforming power of the kingdom can be seen in the individual after conversion. One's liberation empowers for kingdom building.

### **Contemporary Context**

On December 1, 1955 an African American woman 42 years of age, refused to give up her seat to a white rider on a Montgomery bus. She was a woman of faith and would no longer accept the inequality of that day. Rosa Parks did not know that her small action would lead to the Montgomery Boycott and spark the Civil Rights movement.

Today as our nation prepares for the Presidential Election, we are witnessing a rise in racism, xenophobia, homophobia, mass shootings and inhumane immigration policies. The disenfranchised, disinherited, marginalized, and ostracized in our society continues to increase while the top 1% profit on the backs of struggling masses. The parable of the yeast, the small ingredient added to the flour of society can produce a shift, transformation and manifest a new society – one of justice, righteousness and steadfast love. Each of us are called to add what G-d has given to us in this season of Kingdomtide.

### **Conversation**

We are a holy people of hope. Our history of struggle and success in a nation that construct systems to exclude people of color from affordable healthcare, quality education, safe housing, and economic security cannot be denied. The future of our churches and communities depend on each of us, working together to ensure all are liberated from the barrier that prevents one from their full expression of the gifts G-d has given for kingdom building.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What actions might be taken to help the community around the church to reflect healthy growth?
2. Where will you use your “yeast” to solve community issues?
3. If you have unlimited resources, what would be the first outreach project for the church to promote national change?

### **Media**

AMEC Hymn #471 “Sowing in the Morning”

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# Where Is The Love?

*Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D.*

*Associate Pastor, Brookins AMEC (Oakland, CA)*

15 March 2020

## Prayer

Dear God, help us to love one another as you love us. Help us to exercise greater love for each other as we strive together toward deeper levels of spiritual maturity. Fill us with a spirit of peace and love. Amen.

## Scripture

Ephesians 4.1-16

## Reflections

**Day 1** – VS 5 “...one God, one faith, one baptism.”

The declaration of one god, one faith, one baptism was still a very radical claim in Paul’s day. Monotheism was still not accepted, and this further exacerbates the differences between those who professed Christ and the rest of the Roman world.

**Day 2** –VS 7 “*But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.*”

The use of gifts was not for self-aggrandizement put for the benefit of the wider church (others), therefore we must not be puffed up but eager to serve

**Day 3** –VS 15 “but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

The church is still lacking in spiritual maturity and has yet to become a fully grown/mature body after all of this time. We are only as strong as our weakest link and must seek to protect and uplift others who have not come into more mature levels of spiritual awareness.

## Exegesis

Scholars continue to disagree about whether or not Paul actually wrote the epistle to the church at Ephesus, but they all agree that it genuinely reflects his thoughts and theology. Ephesus was a small city located in Asia minor. In chapters 1-3 the emphasis is upon the meaning of divine love as expressed in Jesus, while chapters 4-6 address how we can put that love into practice as a community of believers.

## Focus Scripture

V1-6 - The writer uses a list of virtues in his opening verses. This was a common writing style of the time and lists 7 virtues (symbolic of divine perfection). The Ephesian church contained a mixture of both Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians whom Paul wished to encourage to continue integrating and uniting as one group under Christ (the church).

V7-13 - The writer wishes to unite them so that they can all grow together. The differences that separated these 2 ethnic groups (Jews and Gentiles) must be overcome through unity and love.

V14-16 - Their mission is to come into full maturity as a church so that they are fully functioning members of the body of Christ.

### **Contemporary Application**

Many of our churches have become so filled with cliques and divisions among the members that non-Christians who heard these stories would think we were talking about a high school. The church is supposed to be a place of equality for all regardless of race, ethnicity, social status, class or previous behaviors. Yet we often find all sorts of divisions, gossip, and back-biting within our congregations. Some members have even dared to commit acts violence or admit that they outright hate one another. If we truly want to be effective members in the body of Christ, we must put aside our differences and come together in love as one unified body. Our inability act in love and function together harmoniously is a powerful indicator that we as a church are lacking spiritual immaturity.

In these kinds of environments, we often find that those who possess spiritual gifts are either extremely arrogant or kept from effectively exercising their gifts due to the jealousy of others around them. This is not what Chris has called the church to be. The spiritual gifts we receive are a form of grace given through Christ as means of serving others in the church so that we can help one another to achieve higher levels of spiritual maturity.

Our call is not to just confess Christ and receive his spirit through baptism, but to actively work at building up our local church so that it can serve as a cohesive and fully contributing member to the overall body of Christ. This requires that we learn to work together in unity and work through our differences with a spirit of love. This means we must not only choose to grow, but we must also actively work to maintain harmony and exercise love in all of our relationships-period. No one can do the work for us. This is a part of our mission and calling in Christ.

### **Conversation**

*MISSION:* When we speak of missions in the church most of us instantly think of evangelism and the Great Commission. But Paul reminds us that we also have a greater mission to achieve within the church. That mission is to become a unified a body of Christians as we strive to reach spiritual maturity. We must actively root out and work through divisions among us in order to create and maintain unity. Our spiritual gifts should be exercised first and foremost to benefit the local church body. We must encourage, uplift and teach one another in a spirit of love. Spiritual maturity demands regular consistent prayer, meditation, teaching, scriptural study, and devotion. An excellent gauge of our progress is reflected in our love for Christ and our love for one another as fellow believers. We can't expect to draw others from outside the church, if we are unable to exercise unity and love inside the congregation. Growth in Christ is our primary mission.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How does your church handle problems and divisions?
2. Identify three things you can begin doing right away to help create more unity and love among your fellow church members.
3. On a scale from one to ten how would you rate your own spiritual growth? Identify three things you could begin or spend more time doing in order to deepen your spiritual walk.
4. Name two of your spiritual gifts and list ways you can use them to serve others in your local congregation. If you are already actively using those gifts, name three ways you could achieve greater results.



# Don't Worry, I Got You

*Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D.*

*Associate Pastor, Brookins AMEC (Oakland, CA)*

22 March 2020

## Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for all that you brought us through. We know that you who watch, protect, and provide for all of your children. Thank you for all that you done to make a way for The Black Church and the Black community. Amen.

## Scripture

Exodus 16:2-15

## Exegesis

The Book of Exodus is best divided into 2 parts: 1 - the power of divine might (chapters 1-15.21), and 2- the nature of God's divine presence in the world (the remaining chapters of Exodus). God uses the forces of nature to display divine might against Pharaoh, and then uses those same forces to show compassion, care and protection for the Israelites in the wilderness.

### Focus Scripture

V2-8 - The Desert of Sin is a hot, dry, barren region that lacks any real sources for human provision. The children of Israel had only been freed from captivity for one month before the events in our text occurred. As the recently emancipated community becomes afraid, they begin to groan and complain to Moses and Aaron.

V9-12 - The Israelites are told to draw near to God in their time of need and see how God listens and provides for the community's needs.

V13-15 - The term "*manna*" used to describe the bread Yahweh provided refers to flakes of frost that were gathered like grain and pressed into honey-tasting pancakes.

V16 - one "*omer*" of flakes was equivalent to 1-2 liters by contemporary measures. The Israelites are given all that they need to not just survive but flourish in the midst of a hostile environment

## Contemporary Context

Reading this text reminds me of the struggles that accompanied the emancipation of Black-Americans from slavery. The newly freed slaves-the majority of whom were uneducated, lacked the skills to support them in living out their newly acquired freedom. Some were so afraid that they remained on the plantation and continued to labor for their former masters as if nothing had happened. Others left the south and journeyed out into unknown territory only to find themselves lost and alone in the midst of a harsh and hostile environment that most of them were ill-equipped to navigate. Yet they cried out to God for succor, sustenance, and provision. They let their faith lead them and God provided for their needs as they learned, matured, and acquired the skills they needed to survive. With time, they not only survived but flourished.

The Black-American community knows without a doubt that God will and can provide. We understand the need for divine providence because we as a people have experienced it. Providence can best be described as, *“God’s timely arrangement of protection and care for all of our future needs.”* Black Americans are a people who have relied upon and been sustained by divine providence. We too have been freed and then traveled through the wilderness with only God’s promise of providence to guide us. We know that God will and can provide!

### **Conversation Theme: Community**

Black American congregations intimately know the value of community. We not only gather together for worship, but we depend upon one another for saintly fellowship and mutual aide- both inside and outside the church. Unfortunately, many of our churches have become so distanced from their surrounding communities that they no longer have a voice or active presence within them. We must continue actively working to build spiritually safe and welcoming communities within and without the church edifice. We do this by intentionally creating safe places, that are welcoming of all who may enter them. We must never forget that our churches have survived by engaging with the wider Black American community and reminding those within and without, that God will and does provide.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Each of us has been through a wilderness experience in our lives. How did you experience God’s divine providence during that time?
2. The Israelites groaned and complained to Moses and Aaron not just because they were hungry but because they were afraid. Have you ever been so afraid that you thought of turning back to an unhealthy situation, habit, or relationship that God had delivered you from? If so, how did you get through it?
3. Despite their fear and complaining God still provided for the needs of the Israelite community. In what ways has God provided for you in spite of...? Make a list and give thanks to God for saving grace and divine providence.

# Among Us

*Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.*

*Pastor, Campbell Chapel AMEC (Denver, CO)*

29 March 2020

## Prayer

Ever loving and kind, all knowing and seeing, all powerful G\*d, help us to see, appreciate, and pray for all who are among us. Amen.

## Scripture

James 5:13-20

## Reflection

Who is here? Who is in our midst as we read, write, think, pray, study, and worship together? Do we know who is among us? Do we know the people we meet and greet week after week as we gather in and beyond the church? Do we know what hardships those around us have endured and are enduring – and if we know, do we care and show our care? Do we know what joys other members of the body of believers are celebrating, what victories have been won – and if we know, do we care and express our gladness in the gladness of others? Who is here? Are there any sick and suffering? Are there any cheerful? Are there any in need of healing or forgiveness? Are there any in need of re-direction, re-orientation, guidance, or teaching? Who is here and do we care? Are we the gossips who talk about who has shown up and who hasn't shown up – or are we the prayer warriors who are more concerned with the conditions, needs, and help of those who have come than the enumerations and analyses of those who have come? Who is among us? This kind of assessment ought to be done every time we gather. We ought to ask these three basic questions: (1) Who is here? (2) Of what do those who are here stand in need? (3) Given who is here and what their needs are, what is *my* role in meeting the needs that have been presented?

## Exegesis

The authorship of James – as well as the date of its writing are widely debated. Some suggest that the author may have been James, the son of Zebedee or James, the son of Alphaeus – two of the disciples of Jesus. Others suggest that it may be James, the brother of Jesus (also known as James the Just). However, the epistle may also have been written by someone who simply took the name James or assigned it to this text. Some suggest that the text was written as early as the 60s CE – before most of the Pauline epistles; others argue that the text was written as late as the 200s CE. If James was written closer to the earlier date, it would have preceded the 70 CE destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman Empire – a time of increasing social upheaval and suffering. If James was written closer to the later date, it might have been after the rebuilding of what was formerly Jerusalem (130 CE) and during a time of great persecution for Christians (preceding the conversion experiences (312 CE) and decisive civil war victories of Constantine (324-325 CE)). In either case, those following Jesus were generally socioeconomically poor and vulnerable; their ethnicity along with their convictions made them unique targets for state violence.

The epistle is, perhaps, best known for its “show-me” perspective (i.e., “I can show you better than I can tell you.”). The most cited text in the epistle is James 2:17, which reminds us that faith without works is

dead. This text becomes critically important as reformers like Martin Luther, frustrated with the tendency of believers to attempt to work, earn, or buy their way into the kingdom of G\*d, insisted that texts such as Romans 3:24, Romans 5:1, and Ephesians 2:8 were clearer indicators of G\*d's plan for human salvation. The reformers – of whom we are descendants as protestants – strongly affirmed that we are saved by grace through faith – and not by any of our works. Still, James' message is one that we all must take seriously: what we believe and say *ought* to change what we do.

### Contemporary Application

James 5 gives us very clear instructions about what we ought to do. And the instructions recorded in James are instructions that we can and should follow even today. First, we must figure out *who is among us!* Having figured this out, here are some of the next steps that the epistle commends:

- **For those suffering:** Pray!
- **Those cheerful:** Sing songs of praise!
- **For those sick:** Call for the elders of the church! Pray! Anoint with oil! Do this in the name of the Lord!
- **For the sick and for those who have committed sins:** The prayer of faith!
- **For *we* who sin:** Confess our sins *to one another!* Pray *for one another!* Be healed!
- **For wandering sinners:** Bring back from wandering!

The key here is that we are to *pray* for one another. Interestingly, there *may* be sick, suffering, or cheerful among us; when they are among us, James clarifies what is to be done. And when it comes to sin, the assumption is that *we all sin* and *confession* is appropriate for all of us. It is not for us to judge one another. It is for *each* of us to encourage one another to be our best selves and to turn away from our sinfulness. In this way, we are to participate in one another's saving from death and the covering of a multitude of sins.

### Conversation

Kingdomtide invites us to “advocate for something/someone” in a missional sense. This is the very spirit of James's encouragement for the post-resurrection disciples of Jesus to *pray* for one another. Prayer for one another means that we get to know one another in deep and meaningful ways – not just on the surface – and means that we lift one another up in prayer according to actual circumstances that we are facing.

### Discussion Questions

1. Get to know those with whom you are in Bible Study. Take a few minutes to share two stories with one other Bible Study participant: (a) The first story should be about an experience that has formed a positive characteristic within the storyteller; (b) The second story should be about an experience suffering, sickness, or sin with which the storyteller struggles.
2. How do we create *safe* spaces for members of the church to share deeply with one another? What is safe space for sharing? What does safe space look like? What does safe space feel like?
3. How else might we get to know one another beyond surface levels?
4. What is our role in discerning that which is sin within us? What is (and is not) our role in discerning that which is sin in others? What are helpful and unhelpful ways to bring those in sin from wandering?

### Suggested Media

“Somebody Prayed For Me”

# Holy/Hole-y Traditions

*Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.*

*Pastor, Campbell Chapel AMEC (Denver, CO)*

5 April 2020

## Prayer

Great G\*d, in pride we have made idols of our traditions — even our traditions of faithfulness. Please forgive us. Loving G\*d, we have denied the hallmark of holy traditions: love. Please forgive us. With you love, liberate us from the traditions that bind us. By the inspiration of your love working from the inside out, heal us into free expressions of holiness. Thank you that *You* — Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End — are eternal, unconditional, everlasting agape love. Thank you that truest tradition is *You*, O G\*d who is Love.

## Scripture

Mark 7:1-23

## Writing Reflections

Traditions can be dangerous!

What comes out?

## Contemporary Context

In this text, Jesus responds to the critique of the Pharisees and scribes who challenge his disciples through an invocation of “Corban.” Corban is a Hebrew term that signifies an offering consecrated to G\*d. No claim for any other purpose could be placed on such an offering. As such, there were those in Jesus’s time who did not want their resources to be available to their parents or to be considered fair game in what would be expected for the honoring of one’s father and mother. Accordingly, they would declare some of their resources as “Corban” so that they would not have to use those resources to support their parents. In this scenario, one law was used in order to circumvent another law. Among other vices (or defilements of the heart), this scenario may have been a way to cloak avarice, wickedness, deceit, folly, and/or other vices. How often do we use one expression of righteousness to pridefully cover-up our vices? We do this consciously and unconsciously . . . *constantly*. What is one common example of this?: we use “giving honor where honor is do” to justify our neglect of “the least among us.” Are our traditions holy or hole-y (i.e., with holes in our logic and compromises in our integrity)?

## Exegesis

It is easy for us to get caught up in our traditions. Some of these traditions are even rooted in commandments that we maintain as coming directly from G\*d. Mark 7 provides just such an example. At issue in the dialogue in which Jesus is engaged is a question about a tradition rooted in the commandment to honor one’s father and mother. This tradition has become an idol and an occasion for hypocrisy. To disrupt the tradition associated with the honoring of father and mother (v.10-13) — as well as Jesus’s disruption of what was acceptable to consume (v.19) and whether or not it was acceptable for his disciples to eat with unwashed hands (v.2-5) — was very likely deemed sinful. In other words, the

religious leaders who were Jesus's contemporaries thought he was more than a misfit: he was a sinner and one who was leading others astray with his teachings.

Consider the words Jesus is recorded as having spoken twice over: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (v.15) and ". . . it is what comes out of a person that defiles" (v.20) — finally declared: "All these evil things come from within and they defile a person" (v.23). Jesus continues to explain that foods go in and come out just fine (and what comes out after food has been consumed is actually part of a purifying process). However, there are also virtues and vices that our lives produce, products of our hearts (if you will). *These* are the outcomes with which Jesus is concerned. These are the outcomes that can corrupt and confirm the corruption of a life and of a soul. Verses 21-22 record: "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." We are challenged to consider what all comes from each of us — and the subtext of this invitation is that we look at what comes out of each of us (ourselves) *before* we look at what comes out of others — or what others are doing. The context from which this passage is drawn, we do well to remember, *begins* with Jesus's defense of his disciples after Pharisees and scribes have criticized them for their improper approach to accepting dining traditions of the time and culture.

### Conversation

How often do we overlook our own limitations because of our focus on the limitations of others? This is a critically important question for each of us to ask ourselves individually and for us to consider collectively for the sake of the like of the church. We often sow in tears and lack a harvest of joy because of the sorrow that we cause and reproduce with one another through our hast to judge. We have a responsibility to do the hard, heart work of purifying ourselves for more excellent service unto G\*d. We who have ears to hear, *this* we must hear; we who have eyes to see, *this* we must see.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are your favorite and most cherished church traditions? Why?
2. What are your least favorited church traditions? Why?
3. In what ways do these most and least cherished traditions reflect love? In what ways do these most and least cherished traditions reflect something other than love?
4. Consider the stuff Jesus names as what can come out of the heart. What virtues and vices are *our* hearts producing? How do these purify and/or defile us and others.

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# An Odd Refusal, A Bold Response

*Rev. Rochelle Settle, M.Div.  
Allen Chapel (Riverside, CA)*

12 April 2020

## Prayer

Lord, we thank you for showing us mercy when we didn't even know you. Help us to accept those who come to us, the rejected ones, the ostracized and show them the same grace and compassion that you have shown us. We also want a spirit of persistence, even when we are rejected. Do this by the power of your Holy Spirit, in Jesus' Name. Amen

## Scripture

Mark 7:24-37

## Writing Reflections

Reading through this passage, the one thing that jumps out is this woman persisted despite an original rejection. She did not allow offense, rejection or hurt feelings to stop her from pressing towards what was more important; the deliverance of her daughter.

Prejudice and rejection are two realities and are not right. There are many who are cut off from society, the rejected ones, the unacceptable, the ostracized and voiceless. We as a church must seek these out, converse with them and discuss the differences; and then work to meet their needs.

## Exegesis

Jesus had already been rejected by his own people, the Jews. In this passage Jesus travels, outside of Jewish territory and crosses over into Tyre, it was immediately north of Judea and Sidon was immediately north of its border. This was Gentile territory. Jesus was looking for a place of quiet for him and the disciples. This was the only place where he could find freedom from the crowds and from those who persecuted him. No Jew would likely enter a Gentile area.

Even though his 'escape' to a quiet house was hoped for, Mark says "He could not keep his presence a secret."

The woman in this passage had two strikes against her. First, her daughter was possessed by a demonic spirit. In those days, entire families were shunned and cut off if one had demonic possession. Two, she was a Greek, Syrophenician or Canaanite by race. They were enemies of the Jews, being driven out of the land of Canaan in the Old Testament. She knew Jesus was a Jew (just like the woman at the well in John 4, a Samaritan recognized he was a Jew most likely by his clothing), yet she still came to him.

## Contemporary Application

There are 6 takeaways as we read through this passage:

a. Jesus is showing that he came to save the whole world and not only Jews.- This is an important point in this pericope. This event was a foreshadow of the gospel being spread throughout the world. It is God's desire for all to come to Christ and barriers to be broken down. (Eph. 2:11-18; 2:19-22).

b. Jesus sought time to rest.- There is a time for everything, including extended rest. God rested on the 7th day of creation. It is vital that we who labor in God's Kingdom schedule and seek out times of rest and refreshment in God's Presence. It is a time of renewal, refreshment and personal revival.

c. The woman is acting on what she has heard about Jesus.- Since she was a Gentile who lived in Tyre, she was not exposed to the miracles of Jesus, but she heard about them or she wouldn't have sought him out! Word must have gotten around that Jesus could cast out demonic spirits. He had already done so for the demoniac in Gerasenes (Mark 5:1-20). Jesus was also the most popular religious figure in the land, so his name went before him. Do you talk about what Jesus has and can do?

d. The woman humbled herself before the Lord by falling at his feet and begging him to help her.- This woman did not allow the fear of being rejected to stop her. Fear often stops us in our tracks. She had much to be afraid of because of the two strikes against her. She also did not think too highly of herself and fell at Jesus' feet and begged him. The word "begged" is in the Greek imperfect tense which means she kept on begging and begging. Jesus continued to listen to her. When we find ourselves in dire situations, pride is not something that we should bring to God to get help. We, like this woman, must humble ourselves before the Lord. (James. 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6)

Tim Keller says of her "We're told she fell down...Nothing would stop her. No one could stop her. In fact, in Matthew 15, the other account, the disciples begged Jesus to stop her. They can't stop her. She won't let anyone! She won't let anyone tell her no. She won't take no for an answer. She is just talking and pleading and pleading with Jesus without interruption."

e. The woman didn't allow offense to overcloud the big picture.- Even though she humbled herself at Jesus' feet and begged, Jesus still refused her initial plea. Verse 27, Jesus said "First, let the children eat all they want". He was speaking of the Jews because Jesus came to his own first. He was merely stating a fact here. Jesus told her this because he might have wanted her to persist in asking and he wanted her to know who he was, the Messiah and only hope for all people. She most likely worshipped pagan gods and needed to know whom she was dealing with in Jesus. Jesus is in a class alone. Jesus is the only true living God. Jesus is our only hope. She had to learn that salvation is in Jesus alone, just like the woman at the well.

Jesus also said, "it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (v.27). These words sound harsh but Jesus was not one to reject those who sincerely come to him for help. In today's culture, you call a woman a dog and you might have a fight on your hands!

Dog was usually a symbol of dishonor. It was common in Jesus' day to call people dogs. Jews sometimes called Gentiles dogs as an insult. The dogs here were pet dogs (the children's dogs), like a puppy. But Jesus obviously did not say it in an insulting way because of her response and persistence.

The more she persisted, the more she believed, which is why Jesus pushed her to persist. Sometimes we stop persisting in things in life because we have been offended (personal relationships, career, ministries, etc.). Offense is a trap. It is a discourager and tool used by the devil to keep us stagnant, playing the victim and not reaching our goals. Push through an offensive comment, act or gesture and strive toward your intended goal.

f. Lastly, Jesus is amazed by her faith. – The woman answered "Yes Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Note how she now called Jesus 'Lord'. Her belief is progressing. She recognized that she was nothing spiritually. She was basically saying that she knew she was not worthy, she understood that Jesus came for the Jews first, she knew she was a pagan but all of that didn't matter, but she also knew her daughter needed deliverance. When we hit rock bottom, sometimes that changes our attitude. This mother didn't care what she was called, she desperately needed what she came to Jesus for. She believed that Jesus could meet her need and she would not stop until he did.

Jesus, was amazed by her faith which shined through her persistence. He cast the demon out of her daughter. Luke 11:9 says “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

### **Conversation**

– Community is the focus of this lesson. We must seek to show compassion to those who are normally rejected by others: the homeless, those who live different lifestyles, the addicted, imprisoned, foster children (emancipated).

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Offense can stop us from moving forward with plans, goals, ministries and careers. Have you ever been offended or known someone who has been offended to the point where they quit?
2. This woman was an outsider and was not immediately accepted. How does your local church treat outsiders who try to come in and be a part of ministry? Discuss and seek new ways to welcome those who are different.
3. Is there someone in your family (in trouble, going the wrong way, has a terrible attitude, proud, arrogant, selfish, addicted, lost) who needs you to stand in the gap and be persistent in prayer for their deliverance? Discuss.

### **Suggested Media**

“Redeemed”

<https://youtu.be/5zbNrBWhCNg>

# The God of The Void

*Rev. Renita Marie Green, M.Div.*

*Pastor, St. James AMEC (Cape Girardeau, MO)*

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## Prayer

God of the void of the universe, may you hover in the void of my being. With just one word you can bring forth life and light from my darkness. Do in me, Lord, as it was in the beginning.

## Scripture

Genesis 1:1-20

## Contemporary Context

God is present in the darkest, most empty places of our souls. New life is waiting to emerge from our inner being. There is so much possibility wrapped up and tucked away within. I wonder what amazingness I have stunted with my resistance to grow and change.

## Exegesis

There are many stories of creation that flow through different religions and cultures. The various stories attribute creation to a god or gods, involve animals and humankind, depict the unformed world as being covered with water and have both maternal and paternal characters. While some faith traditions hold the Bible as the infallible word of God, as AME's we are among those who believe in the Bible as the inspired word of God. Most of us learned the traditional view of the creation story—six days of creation and the Sabbath. There is always at least one precocious child who cannot understand how God did all of that in one day. My experience is that the questions of children are shunned when they cause adults to question their own embedded theologies.

In addition to there being a variety of creation stories there are also several creation theories that are often shunned by faith communities. Theories of Evolution, Intelligent Design and of the Big Bang are among the most popular views. The battle between faith and science is long-going. What if we considered that faith explains what God can do and science explains what God has done?

The Bible is often understood to be filled with history, prophecy, metaphors, parables, wisdom and poetry that guide, encourage, protect, heal and inspire the human soul.

The creation story in Genesis 1 is a beautiful story of a Power mightier than the void. I've heard it said that Genesis shows us how God brings something out of nothing. The older I get and the more of life I experience, I identify quite frequently with the void. The void isn't a place of nothingness—the void is a place of the unknown. There are so many seasons of life that are filled with void. When God stepped into the void, She separated bits from parts which created new stories of their own.

The story of creation is of an oral tradition—it was passed down from generation to generation with the best parts being retained and eventually recorded for all times. It is a common belief in the theological

community that stories of the oral tradition lack inerrancy yet are so rich in their moral value that the stories must be retained within our faith communities.

Our challenge and opportunity is to discover the personal and communal relevancy for ancient tales. One point that the communities of faith can agree upon is that however the story began, whatever happened in the process, God was the same yesterday, is the same today and will be forever more.

### **Conversation, Questions and Reflections**

The Creation Story in Genesis 1 provides assurance that the God of life and light is also the God of void and darkness. Perhaps we all have a creation narrative of our own—stories of void and separation and of new life springing forth.

The void is equated with darkness because it is the place of the unknown—it is scary, lonely, and desperate. Divorce, death, reassignment, change of mobility or other physical functions and so many other life-altering events can leave one in a state of void.

The void, however, is not emptiness, loneliness or abandonment. The void is undefined space—it can *feel* empty which leads to feelings of loneliness and abandonment—but, it isn't empty. God is there. Perhaps Jesus was in the void when he cried out, “Eli, eli, lama sabachthani” (Mark 15:34). On this side of the story we know that God was ever present for Jesus. The challenge for us is to remember that God is ever present with us—Immanuel.

The Psalmist asked the question, “Where can I go from your spirit, where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there....If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night”, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Psalm 139:7-8, 11, 12).

The feelings of loneliness and abandonment can be so overwhelming that we miss the beauty and necessity of the darkness. We are socialized to believe that the darkness has some inherent evil associated with its being, but this is not so. Darkness and light are both God. There is no darkness so dark as to nullify the Light. God *is* light. We do not have to dread the darkness as if we are being cut off from the Light. The Light shines in the darkness. The Light and the Darkness are One. The light is also within our own souls, therefore we have the ability to see in the darkness not much unlike the eagles.

Just as the planet needs the darkness to heal and be restored, we too, need periods of darkness in which we are being healed and restored. There are seasons in which we need to be hidden from the world—the darkness isn't *against* us, it is *for* us. There are seasons when we don't need to be picked to be on program or be the speaker. There are seasons when we don't need to be the house for holiday hosting. There are seasons when it seems as if we are invisible. The darkness covers us as we root deeper in the soil of the Kingdom.

God separates light from dark, days and nights, water and land, earth and sky, sun, moon and stars, animals and humans. The great separation creates an orchestra of universal elements each playing their part in the kingdom. The sun can only be the sun and it shines in its time. The moon is the light of the night—the master of darkness. Trees and plants yielding fruits of their kinds. Animals and humans each in their places. Perhaps this is a metaphor for God's kingdom—on earth as it is in heaven. Perhaps this is the first model of the body of Christ—one body, many parts.

Out of the void and darkness order, purpose and fruitfulness emerged. The fruitfulness was a result of each element doing what it was created to do. Imagine if the sun refused to shine because it had to stay up later, burn hotter and do the bulk of the lighting work? The water cycles, sleep cycles, fertility, mood and the brain are all affected by the moon. Imagine if the moon felt like its value was less because its light only fully shined sometimes. We must accept the work of our roles realizing the impact we have on the overall order of the kingdom.

The void—the place of uncertainty—is the space to know what role you are to play in the kingdom. The void is the place to be hidden as God is designing you for this new place. Perhaps you were always the Reverend’s spouse and now you are to be the Reverend. Coming to terms with a new role like that will require some time in the void.

God is the God of the void. God is in the void. Embrace the void. Be still and allow the wind from God to sweep over your spirit. Allow God to speak you into existence. Allow God to separate you and place you in the kingdom’s order.

Being recreated is intense soul work. Be encouraged: the Sabbath rest will come. You will have a “woosaa” period when you are able to simply rejoice in your newfound sense of being. Your soul will have the opportunity to be restored and inspired. Then the Spring will come when you will be expected to bear fruit. Your fruitbearing days will not be bitter for you will know that you are doing (being) exactly what you were (re)created to do (be).

### **Discussion Questions**

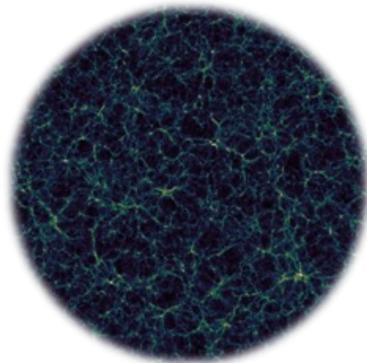
1. Name a time, past or current, that has been a time of void (unknown) for you.
2. List the feelings you experienced/ing in the void.
3. Pray, “God of the void, open the eyes of my heart like the eyes of the eagle, I want to see you in the darkness.
4. Are you aware of being separated from people, activities, responsibilities currently or in the past?
5. How have you felt about/dealt with the separating?
6. Are you now able to consider that God has separated you for God’s purposes?
7. In terms of Kingdom roles, what is your current/most recent role?
8. Are you willing to be separated from that role so as to be (re)created with a new role?
9. If you sense a new role, what do you sense?
10. Do you have a spiritual leader/advisor with whom you can discuss the void & (re)creation, seasons and roles in the Kingdom?

### **Suggested Media**

“Open the Eyes of My Heart Lord,” Michael W. Smith  
Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, Open the eyes of my heart  
I want to see You, I want to see You

### **Depiction of “The Void”**

*Use as a focal point as you seek God in the void.*



# Tear Down Every Idol

*Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes*

*Pastor, Ebenezer AMEC (Kansas City, MO)*

26 April 2020

## Prayer

Omniscient God, who hovers high above the circle of the earth and fills everything with your essence; draw us from every distraction, mold us and shape us into your own likeness and make us wholly yours.

## Scripture

Amos 5:1-15

## Exegesis

Amos the sheep herder from Takoa in the region of Judah receives a revelation from God and shares this insight with God's people in Israel. It is about judgement and relationship and rebellion and coming doom. This text is the opening statement of God's third testimony against Israel. Yaweh proclaims Israel already dead; the outcome of the impending battle will leave 90% of her warriors dead.

God implores the people to seek the Lord and live. Stop the mindless observance of perfunctory worship and live in obedience, justice and righteousness.

They like many of us, were living irresponsibly, indulging themselves with luxury and prideful displays of overabundance. They refused correction and avoided the truth. They were not kind to the poor and weak. So, the Lord says there will be weeping and wailing when judgement comes and they are taken into exile.

## Contemporary Context

We are always rightly encouraged to reform our ways and to abandon the practices and indulgences that ultimately destroy us. Idols are a dime a dozen and easily grab our attention. Things like eating the kind of food that is unhealthy, drinking and smoking too much, spending too much time on electronic devices are increasingly crippling us. We tend to be far too self-absorbed and detached from others, even family in some cases. Some of us look down on others and criticize those who are different. More importantly, we don't spend enough time building a relationship with God. We shy away from sharing our faith with others and when trouble strikes we fall apart instead of relying on God's grace and mercy.

Amos says we should seek the Lord and live, hate evil and love good. This is good advice for all of us.

## Conversation

I get nervous when I think about how America from the positions of its governing structures, has basically ignored or disowned the poor and the needy and given all of its attention to the rich and greedy. Righteousness has made her great, but to mistreat the most vulnerable of our society is a recipe for disaster. I'm awfully afraid we have some dark days ahead. The idols of money, fame and excess will keep us from seeing the revelation. And while our back is turned our adversaries will get the best of us. No idol will be able to help us.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some of your wilderness challenges?
2. How does it feel to be black and American?
3. What idols have come down for you?
4. What new idols have drawn your attention?

**Suggested Media**

“O, For a Closer Walk With God”

# Double For Your Trouble

*Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes*

*Pastor, Ebenezer AMEC (Kansas City, MO)*

**3 May 2020**

## **Prayer**

Gracious God, giver of all good and perfect gifts, help us to trust your justice above all else and to rest in the knowledge of your steadfast love for all of your people. Do for us what you deem best and we will be blessed. Amen

## **Scripture**

Zechariah 9:1-12

## **Exegesis**

This chapter alludes to God's universal plan of messianic rule which will be revealed by the aligning of nations in and out of Israel's history as friend or foe. Part of God's justice is dealing with the unjust, those who have invaded and reappropriated certain territories that were awarded to the people of Judah and Israel. Also a part of the plan is to include those actions which were previously thought to be excluded.

In the concluding verses (9-12) of the passage, Jerusalem is encouraged to rejoice for your king is triumphant. He will overcome the warring nations and command world peace.

And because of the covenant in His blood, all those condemned to the pit will be liberated and restored double.

## **Contemporary Context**

Restorative justice is a contemporary idea that looks at ways of making up for wrongs that have been committed. Victims advocacy is another way of helping to give compensation or help to those who have suffered in the fallout of violence. Reparations is an old idea that has recently resurfaced which seeks to repair the damage done to slaves and their descendants. All investigations of injustices that may have occurred in the past, like convictions of people who did not commit crimes, represent ways that we can participate in God's requirement for kingdom living. All the social justice efforts to include those who have historically been left out or treated unfairly, remind us that God's love is inclusive of all.

## **Conversation**

I'm reminded of the MLK quote, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere". the pledge "with liberty and justice for all" And Micah, says we are to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. These are all good road maps for life and living. What a world this would be if we practiced these values as well as preaching about them. As the hymn writer penned, I'm gonna treat everybody right til I die. It is a battlefield fighting for justice, but when the battle is over we shall rule with Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What vision of justice do you latch on to?

2. Is righting a wrong essential or significant for your life? Is mercy in the equation?
3. Does insurance (life home owners, medical) symbolize protection against wrong doers?

**Suggested Media**

“Restoration” by The Winans

# Friends With Jesus

*Rev. Carole Nelson Ingram, M.Div.  
Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

10 May 2019

## Prayer

Jesus, please teach us to be how You want us to be. There is so much ‘he said, she said’ stuff that sometimes it’s hard for us to discern Your voice, even in the church. Make Your will and Your way plain for us through the word and Spirit. We really do want to be like You want us to be. In Your name and for the sake of all You did, we pray. Amen.

## Scripture

Matthew 5:1-12

## Writing Reflections

Doing the exercise of writing some of the verses repeatedly, I kept being drawn to the ‘come unto Me all you who are weary and I will give you rest.’ Also the part about ‘my yoke is easy and my burdens are light.’ I’m not sure if that was because they are the most familiar, or if those are the verses the Holy Spirit knew I (and we) most need to be reassured still stand.

## Exegesis

Matthew’s gospel continues to present Jesus as teacher and incarnate demonstrator of the ways of God. It reveals how living the ways of God typically created some confusion in even the most faithful, as the verses immediately preceding ours show Jesus even having to help John who baptized him to understand better who He is. Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of religious people of his time, the folks who criticize over what is ‘godly’ to eat and to drink, and who they hang out with. Jesus criticizes those religious folks who do not like him being merciful to tax collectors and others considered sinners by religious traditions. He makes it plain that God’s ways are different. Jesus is bold. Dr. Michael Joseph Brown, President of Payne Seminary (AME), in his commentary on Matthew states re: verses 20-24 “Evil cannot be destroyed by ignoring it. We must speak to it.” As Jesus did, we must also, is the implication.

Jesus prays, and Jesus declares who He is in relationship to God. And THEN, Jesus invites those present with him then, and invites us now, through the gospel’s writings, to move in closer, to work with Him, the Son of God. He says He will provide strength and rest along the way. His followers, His friends, won’t have to do it alone.

## Contemporary Context

So very much in the condition of the United States these days is simply evil. Furthermore, much of it seems to be supported by misguided so called Christians, aka white evangelicals, and we KNOW they are wrong when their positions directly oppose what Jesus taught. Many people search through trash cans behind restaurants and grocery stores searching for food, when there really is enough food to go around. Lead poisoned water comes out of faucets as people seek to satisfy their thirst and cleanse themselves. People seeking refuge from violence our country created are locked up and separated from their children. Health care costs are ridiculously prohibitive for many as pharmaceutical executives prosper. Prisons are

profiting off the backs of Black and Brown people. There's a lot of evil to call out, according to the things Jesus said were important.

The truth is that many of us are tired. We don't always know what we should be doing. Hearing Jesus say "Come here! I know you're weary and I know you are tired of fighting the fight. Come here!" Jesus is saying, "Let me just hug you and hug you and give you a break, a break from having to be strong all the time. Just rest for a little while."

When we've rested in the arms of Jesus, we can yoke up with Him and each other, and be even better friends with Jesus, and learn a little more and do a little more.

### **Conversation**

As election season is happening, it is important that we help make sure people are registered to vote. As those who seek to follow Jesus' teachings, it is essential that we reach out to do what we can to improve the conditions of the least, the lost, the left out. Register voters, including young people just reaching voting age. Perhaps your church could be involved as a polling place, if it isn't already. Church members can make sure their friends and neighbors get appropriate transportation to the polls. Community residents may need assistance in something as simple as stamps for mail in ballots. Certainly some also serve as poll workers, and there might be a need for more.

Research candidates' positions on gun control, mental and physical health care, climate issues i.e clean water, etc., rent control, and other issues you believe Jesus would care about. Share what you learn. REST!

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the ways you have found most effective for restoring your soul, your faith, your energy when you've been trying, trying, trying and you're just worn out?
2. Do you have ideas on how to show your friendship with Jesus to people outside the church without using traditional evangelistic words and might bring them into fellowship with Jesus....and maybe the church?
3. Are there ideas or ways you need to let go in order to be more effectively yoked with Jesus?

### **Suggested Media**

Think of hymns that were important in your past that might help your soul feel refreshed when you are weary. Mom's hymn, grandmother's hymn, dad's hymn, or old school church hymns?

# Hidden Treasure

*Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.*

*Pastor, Campbell Chapel AMEC (Denver, CO)*

17 May 2020

## Prayer

Your reign come, Your will be done, O G\*d, on earth, in the cosmos, in our lives, even as it is in heaven. Amen.

## Scripture

Matthew 13:44

## Writing Reflections

**Day 1:** I write the verse; my spirit pauses on the question: what is treasure?

**Day 2:** My spirit pauses on the idea of “treasure hidden in a field.”

**Day 3:** In conversation, Rev. Dr. Alton Pollard a reading of Derrick Bell’s 1992 short story, “The Space Traders”; I read part of Derrick Bell’s “The Space Traders.” I rewrite the verse; I read the end of Bell’s “The Space Traders.” My spirit pauses on the following:

- How might we understand this parable of the “hidden treasure” better if we identified the treasure specified in this verse as people of African descent living in what we now call the United States?
- What is the significance of hiding what is already hidden?
- Has the treasure been hidden from itself? Has the treasure been hidden so that the one who finds it — and others like that one — would *not* find it or would not value it and/or so that the one who has hidden it would not be tempted to use it?
- Has the found treasure been re-hidden so that the one to whom it originally belonged would not find it or use it, or so that no one new would find and use the treasure, and/or so that even the one who has now found it would not use it or be tempted to do so?
- When treasure is unrecognized as such — and then recognized, is it protected or exploited?
- What would motivate someone to buy a field with hidden treasure in it — especially if something else of value presents itself? To embrace the treasure, to exploit the treasure, or to further resent it? What would motivate someone to sell a field with hidden treasure in it? Not knowing the value of the treasure, not knowing or respecting the agency or future of the treasure?

## Exegesis

There is something not quite right about about the person who finds hidden treasure in a field, (re)hides the treasure, and buys the field. One commentator writes that “[b]y covering up the treasure and buying the field, the person deceives the original owner” (Funk, 196). The buyer has an interest in the treasure — not the field, but buys the field. We do not know about the buyer’s motivations for *the treasure*, but we *do* know that the buyer’s motivation for buying the field is to *have* the treasure (that the owner probably doesn’t realize is there). In a sense, the buyer is willing to buy more than what the buyer needs to get what the buyer really wants — spending more to get (even) more. Further, the buyer is willing to part with every other possession in order to get that field and the hidden treasure: the buyer knows that the hidden treasure is more valuable than anything that the buyer already has. Importantly, the *treasure is more*

than worth what the shrewd buyer sacrifices in terms of what the buyer spends and, in a sense, *also* in terms of how the buyer shrewdly deceives. The treasure is of value — and like the kingdom of G\*d.

This Matthew text is very similar to a rabbinic parable recorded in the Gospel According to Thomas 109:1-3, a text that was written during the same period as the other Gospels and that includes many similar passages, but is not included in the canonical Gospels. *The Five Gospels* records Matthew 13:44 as saying: “Heaven’s imperial rule is like treasure hidden in a field: when someone finds it, that person covers it up again, and out of sheer joy goes and sells every last possession and buys that field.” The parallel in Thomas reads:

The (Father’s) imperial rule is like a person who had a treasure hidden in his field buy did not know it. And [when ] he died he left it to his [son]. The son [did] not know (about it either). He took over the field and sold it. The buyer went plowing, [discovered] the treasure, and began to lend money at interest to whomever he wished.

Unlike the Matthew passage, where the kingdom is like the treasure, in the Thomas passage, the kingdom is like the person who had treasure in their field, but did not know it. The one who has treasure but does not know it is also of value — and like the kingdom of G\*d.

In neither case is the kingdom of heaven like the buyer! In fact, in the Thomas passage, the buyer uses the treasure of the field as collateral in order to start the unethical profession of lending money at interest. This is critical to understanding what the kingdom is and is not according to the written record of what Jesus said. Matthew 11:12 explains: the kingdom suffers violence and the violent take it by force. And, for those of us who value the kingdom of G\*d, we must be cautious and courageous in the face of those who would attempt to buy, take, or violently secure the kingdom of G\*d, its righteousness and value. We must know: even if *we* don’t appreciate the true and full value of what G\*d has to offer through the kingdom of G\*d, others — even and sometimes especially the unrighteous — *do* recognize and appreciate the full value of the kingdom. Such who would take the kingdom of G\*d violently, by force, through deceptive purchase, or theft have compromised or unknown motivations when it comes to their acquisition of the kingdom, its value, and righteousness; the kingdom does not rightfully belong to such consumers.

### Contemporary Application

In the story and film “The Space Traders,” Derrick Bell presents a scenario in which aliens come to earth and offer to cure all of the problems of the United States in exchange for all of the people of African descent living in what is called the United States. The ethical dilemmas presented in and through this scenario reveal that those in power who advocate given Black people to the aliens do not really care about the agency or future of people of African descent; they are primarily concerned about their own profit and resent Black lives already. Those in power who advocate for Black people staying are motivated by the profit they stand to lose if Black consumers are lost. In each case, the true treasure that Black people are — and the agency, dignity, and right to self-determination that Black people ought to enjoy — is erased. When we consider Jesus’s parable in Matthew alongside Bell’s, we are reminded that *we* as people of African descent are not only an invaluable treasure — worth tricking, stealing, fighting, selling, buying, loving, sacrificing, and giving for, but also that we are also an expression of the very kingdom, kindom, and reign of G\*d.

When we consider the Matthew parable, “The Space Traders,” and the Thomas parallel parable all together, we are also reminded that we ultimately belong to G\*d — who knows our value and is willing to protect it. However, there are those who are willing to barter for us who are *not* of G\*d’s kingdom and who compromise it. Interestingly, those who own the field where treasure is hidden, but do not know about or have forgotten the treasure are not compromised as reflections of G\*d’s kingdom. Treasure is unmolested when the first owner has it, but the value of the treasure is unrealized — and is vulnerable to

exploitation. Not only treasure, we, as people of African descent, are also *carriers* of treasure that we often do not know. And in another, more troubling, sense, those who see us as the treasure in their fields rarely recognize our actual value. May the kingdom, as the person with unknown treasure, be protected from those who better see and would exploit our value.

### Conversation

In the story and film “The Space Traders,” there is a conservative Black man, Gleason Golightly, who tries to convince the Black community to trick powerful whites not to trade them to aliens. When he fails to persuade them, he laments:

that without power, a people must use cunning and guile. Or were cunning and guile, based on superior understanding of a situation, themselves power? Certainly, most black people knew and used this art to survive in their everyday contacts with white people. It was only civil rights professionals who confused integrity with foolhardiness.

Golightly continues: “‘Faith in God is fine,’ Golightly muttered to himself. ‘But God expects us to use the common sense He gave us to get out of life-threatening situations.’” How we utilize the power of everyday common sense and the extent to which that invites cunning is as yet being clarified in and through the model and parables of Jesus. However, that we are valuable and must honor our value as kingdom treasure of G\*d is clear and must be maintained. Consider the way it is affirmed in II Corinthians 4:6-10:

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

### Discussion Questions

Along with the questions provided in the Written Reflections, consider these questions:

1. To what extent do and/or should we deploy cunning and guile to secure the kingdom of heaven and its cultivation on earth? Why or why not?
2. In what ways do we and others honor ourselves/us as manifestations of G\*d’s kingdom and treasure? How do we and others fail in doing this?
3. In what ways do we and others honor ourselves/us as owners of fields that hold known and unknown treasures? How do we and others fail in doing this?
4. How does integrity permit and disallow shrewdness?
5. How must we live differently knowing that we *are* the hidden treasure and/or *have* the hidden treasure within us?

### Suggested Media

“The Space Traders” by Derrick Bell  
“Space Traders” (Derrick Bell’s Movie)  
“Corinthians Song” by Kathy Taylor

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# In The Eye of The Beholder

*Rev. Joyce Reece Kitchen*

*Pastor, Emanuel Turner AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

24 May 2020

## Prayer

O Lord God who we call Jehovah Roi, the God who sees us, we call upon you to help us see You in all of Your wonder and glory. We also ask to see others as You see them, fearfully and wonderfully made. May we see life's challenges, not by the size of our problems, but from the perspective that we serve a God that's bigger, stronger, and greater than any problem that comes our way. May we see ourselves, not through the lens of low self-esteem, the negative opinions of others, or even the guilt and shame rooted in the mistakes of our past. Instead, help us to see ourselves as "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37); as "heads and not the tail, above and not beneath" (Deuteronomy 28:13); as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, (Your) special possession" (1 Peter 2:9). Thank you, Lord, for giving us the ability to see life from a "God's Eye View". Amen

## Scripture

Psalm 8:3-6

## Writing Reflections

When reading, writing and meditating on this scripture the picture of those who are without permanent housing came to my mind. My heart was heavy thinking of those men, women, and children who have been made in the image of our God and are languishing on the streets of our cities. We have been called to be stewards of the resources of God and it seems like we are failing to appropriate the resources in a way that honors Him. This can be the reality not because of what we see, but because of what we do not see. We do not see people as holy, godly, and the image of God. We see filthiness, disgrace, loss, brokenness and illegitimacy. All of these descriptors are what our Savior looked like after being handled by humankind who could not see the beauty in which He came. So, they abused Him. When we cannot see the value in something or someone our natural tendency is to be threatened by it and to misuse it. Thus, the plight of men and women and families who are without an address. What would happen if we saw people, not for the clothes they have on, but for the Savior that lives in them? What would happen if we saw people, not for how clean or dirty they are, but for God's plan and desired purpose for their lives? What would happen if we saw people, not for their education, possessions, achievements, privilege, position, or power, but instead we saw them as Jesus sees all of us, sinners who are saved only by His amazing Grace?

## Exegesis

This Psalm was written by David considered by commentators as a familiar hymn sung at evening worship. It celebrates the majesty of God and the dignity of mankind, His created beings. In the Old Testament the Psalm was used by the children of Israel as part of temple worship as they looked to the skies beholding the wonder of God. For New Testament believers and beyond this Psalm belongs to

those who have committed their lives to Christ and as a result celebrate God and His creation in worship. It is a reminder that God sees us, loves us, blesses us, favors us, and has anointed us to carry forward His plan in the world. David acknowledges within this text, that we are not worthy of this kind of blessing when he asks God: “What is man that You are mindful of him?” And yet, we cannot question God’s blessing on us, we can only make sure we make the most of it. We have been blessed to be a blessing. We must not waste that gift.

Interpreter’s Commentary on the Bible, Charles E. Laymon, Editor  
Bible Commentary, Charles Spurgeon

### **Contemporary Context**

When we consider the world around us, all that God has made and then juxtapose that with the knowledge that we have been created in His image, in-breathed with His Spirit and given authority to manage God’s creation we should be awestruck. What a privilege but also what a responsibility.

We as God’s children have inherent value because we were created by Him. He loves us because we were made by Him. And just as He loves us, He loves all those we see on a daily basis in all of the different statuses and situations of life. He loves the rich, and the poor, the kind and the unkind, the housed and the homeless...and so should we. God beholds us as precious, valuable and worthy of His regard. When we look at those who are struggling we should behold them even as God beholds both them and us, in love and compassion. We must acknowledge that everything and everyone created by God deserve honor, respect and dignity (even if they do not look it or live up to our standards). This requires us to look deeper than what is apparent on the outside, from their social status, dress, or living status. God has assigned glory to those that He created with status just a little lower than His own. We are assigned dignity not because of what we have done, or who we think we are but because God has ascribed it to us. We must remember that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

### **Conversation**

The body of Christ called church, is invited by our Creator to take the lead in addressing the plight of homelessness in our communities. We should not be waiting and depending on government to provide solutions. As God’s children the plight of the homeless is our concern. Those who are suffering are our Father’s children hence our brothers and sisters. And we, the church, have the capacity and should have the passion to help. Paul reminds the church at Ephesus and us:

For we are His **workmanship** [His own master work, a work of art], created in Christ Jesus [reborn from above—spiritually transformed, renewed, ready to be used] for good works, which God prepared [for us] beforehand [taking paths which He set], so that we would walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us].” Ephesians 2:10

In the third chapter of Ephesus Paul declares: “Now all glory to God who is able through His mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.”

### **Discussion Questions**

How do you behold those who are homeless? How do you feel when you see the plight of our homeless community? What have you done; what are you doing or what can you do to help them? Do you allow God to direct your management of the resources that He has made available to you? What do you sense the Holy Spirit is leading you to do?

### **Suggested Media**

“If I Can Help Somebody”

# You Have Permission To Be A Copycat

*Rev. Joyce Reece Kitchen*

*Pastor, Emanuel Turner AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

31 May 2020

## Prayer

Father God, who has called us to be imitators of You, help us to prepare ourselves through prayer and study of the Word to lead others from darkness to light. We know that we can only show the way if we know the way ourselves. Prepare our hearts and minds for tiling, planting, fertilizing, waiting and harvesting souls for the kingdom. You have commissioned us to go make disciples and then disciple them that they might disciple others so that Your kingdom might continue to advance. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices showing that which is holy and acceptable in partnership of Your mission. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

## Scripture

Matthew 28:16-20

## Writing Reflections

As I sat with this scripture three things came to mind. First, I reflected back on my time as a beginning martial artist. When learning the different forms, strikes and kicks, the instructor would often stand in front of the class demonstrating the technique and say: "Look like me". Our goal as students, was to "imitate" the movements of the instructor who had studied long and hard to perfect his technique. By "copying" the movements of the instructor, we developed into skilled martial artists, that eventually led our own groups of students, in which we encouraged them to "Look like me". It was Ju-jitsu but it was also discipleship.

Second, when I worked in medicine as a medical assistant and later as a physician assistant the doctor would say to me: "See one, do one, teach one". His philosophy was that if I had mastered something I should be able to teach someone else. In other words, you don't really know something, until you can effectively teach that "thing" to someone else. The doctor who trained me understood that good medical practice is passed on when everyone is committed to insuring that others are continuously benefiting from the good training of others. It was medicine, but it was also discipleship.

Finally, in Philippians 4:9 Paul tells us to "put into practice all we have learned and received from him" which He in turn received from God. Paul is encouraging the early church to "Look like me" and to "See one, do one, teach one". He is affirming that the practice of modeling and mentoring that is necessary for church growth. It was church planting, but it was also discipleship.

There's a saying: It's alright to be a copycat as long as you copy the right cat". In a world in which most people strive for individualization, the growth of our church necessitates a measure of being a "copycat". As Jesus' disciples we should desire to be models and mentors able to evangelize and then disciple those who are coming to Christ. We are challenged by our Savior to seek those who are lost and say, "Look like me". See one, do one, teach one" and "Copy the right cat". We have permission and we can give others permission to be a "copycat, because we are copying the right cat.

### **Exegesis**

Within the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, we find the final words of Matthew about Jesus. As we would with most people's final words, we should pay close attention as the writer gives us the final commands of Jesus, who saved his life, and transformed him from a tax-collector to one of the first tele-evangelists. Following this book, we don't have any other written material from Matthew. So, in his final word what does he have to say to us? He gives us permission to be copycats, as long as we copy the right Cat. Even though Matthew's gospel is said to have been written to the Jews we notice in this passage that instead of sending His disciples back to the house of Israel, Jesus sends them forth into all the world. The Kingdom destined and prepared for Jews, but rejected by them, will now be offered to the Gentiles in accordance with Jesus' earlier parables. This passage confirms that the Jewish nation was to be the beginning of the kingdom not the end. It was through them that the world would see God, come to know God and then serve God. Now Jesus gives the direct command to New Testament disciples and us to evangelize. But He doesn't want us to just tell the world about Him, He wants us to teach them what it means to be like Him. To love like Him, serve like Him and live like Him. We can walk in Christ's authority when bringing His truth of salvation to the world because He has empowered us and given us His authority and wisdom to do so. Our job is to submit and be obedient to His command and to be His faithful witnesses – proclaiming to others about His saving grace through faith in Him. When we do this, the Lord Jesus Christ will draw men and women, boys and girls, to Himself.

### **Contemporary Application**

Did you know that God never intended us to keep what He teaches us to ourselves? Whether it is resources, advice, healing, clothes, money, insight, or truth, He wants us to share it with others. Each of us has something to teach or disciple new converts on: such as marriage, parenting, stewardship, prayer, suffering...and the list goes on and on. There is an enormous blessing to be received by extending our hearts and lives to those who need to know about the unconditional love, grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus also never intended for the disciples to keep the unadulterated truth of His Word reserved or stored away in their reservoirs of knowledge. Rather, He directs them to share all they received from Him. He commands us to do the same. We must remember that the greatest lessons can be conveyed not by what we say we believe but by how what we say we believe informs our behavior. Don't be a bad advertisement for the Kingdom!

Apostle Paul as well, admonished his son in the ministry, Timothy, to communicate the truth he had learned to others who would, in turn, pass it along (2 Timothy 2:2). Scripture also says, "We are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). The primary purpose of an ambassador is to convey the guidelines, instructions, and decisions of their superiors to the people of the countries where they are sent to serve. Likewise, we have an obligation to declare the divine plan and scriptural guidelines of our Master. As ambassadors of Christ we pray, speak the Word (so we have to know the Word), worship, serve, evangelize, and yes, come alongside others to mentor or disciple them in the ways of the Lord. Remember living a Christ-centered life is the only effective way to disciple others to do the same.

### **Conversation**

Each of us are communicating something by what we say and don't say, by what we do and don't do. For example, a husband who never reads the Bible is essentially telling his wife that he does not care enough about the Lord to study His Word. His lack of desire in this area sends the message that he believes he is wise enough to make his own decisions apart from God's input and guidelines for husbands.

### **Discussion Questions**

What gifts and talents has God given me that can be used to disciple someone in Christ? Is my life reflective of the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Would someone be able to learn from my example what a disciple of Christ looks like and acts like? Do I study so that I can "rightly divide the Word of truth?" Can I say to those who I have influence over "look like me and walk this way?" Am I copying my family, my friends, or even my foes, or am I copying my Savior Jesus Christ?

### **Suggested Media**

"Look and Live"

### **References**

*The Interpreter's Commentary on the Bible*, Charles M. Laymon, Editor  
*The Kingdom Agenda*, Tony Evans

# Keep Crying Out

*Rev. Carole Nelson Ingram, M.Div.  
Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

7 June 2020

## Prayer

God, our Creator and our Redeemer, please help us understand your ways a little better. We know You are there and here, and we know You know us, but there's a whole lot that doesn't make sense to us. Shine Your light on this word so that we may know better what we're supposed to be doing these days. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## Scripture

Jeremiah 15:15-21

## Writing Reflections

The most profound insight that occurred for me in doing this exercise was discovering that different translations and versions of this scripture tended to give quite different perspectives on the conversation between Jeremiah and God. The perspective of the translator matters! Are they looking from the perspective of privilege – or are they looking from the perspective of the least of these or from somewhere in between? Lesson: it is important to read the same scripture from various translations in order to get more of the 'God meaning' for us today.

## Exegesis

If we were to analyze the composition of Jeremiah in today's language, we would say there was a lot of 'cut' and 'paste' involved, since it was assembled at various times and in various circumstances. Different paragraphs were written at different times and then assembled into the final book of Jeremiah we read today. Scholars indicate that while the prophet Jeremiah, a prophet called by God, worked over a 40 year period, around 600 years before Jesus was born, the exact situation he is crying out about here is not precisely known. The government of the land of Judah is messed up and a lot of people are going along with it. Jeremiah seems terribly sad and frustrated because folks in leadership and power are attacking him for calling them to account for their exploitation of other human beings....and some of the people he and God are trying to help are joining in with criticism of his words and work.

Our text is what is considered the book of Jeremiah's second lament (the first being 11:18-12:6). A lament, of course is a wailing out to God, for the pain one is experiencing. In his case, Jeremiah cries out because he's been trying to do what God is calling him to do and saying what God tells him to say and as a result, he is continually being rejected and persecuted.

God responds, and says, in short, "Hang in there. Hold my hand. You are saying the things I asked you to say to the people I asked you to say them to. I hear you and I get it and I got you."

## Contemporary Application

As I am writing this several months before you'll read it, I just wonder what will be going on in the world as you study this lesson. Right now, I cannot even imagine! The oxygen producing trees all over the

world are on fire, orchestrated by governments in complicity with profit making corporations seeking to make more profits at the expense of the poor and disenfranchised all over the world. Children are still being separated from their parents and people are put in cages and jails and permanent trauma is being inflicted on them and on all of us. God does not like this treatment of human beings by other human beings.

Jeremiah is still speaking to us, sharing the words and the grace of a God who not only created the world and all that has and has had life, i.e. human, forests, oceans, rivers and skies, and Who still calls out to us, and he's telling us don't quit!

God is THIS DAY saying, "Do not believe those who say I have forgotten. I have not forgotten. Let me hold you while you cry. I cry with you as you seek to do My will. And then WE will get up and do what WE do. WE have the last word."

### **Conversation**

Often we do not share some of the thoughts we have about the circumstances in the world, in part, because we do not know who might get mad at us, or whose friendship we might lose. It is important that we do express ourselves in groups, like Bible study, so that we can learn from each other, and find the best words. None of us knows it all. It helps us if we discuss these things in 'safer space community', like a Bible study group, to learn what God has spoken to the hearts of each other before we talk with those in the larger community.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think Jeremiah would have to say today? How would his words be received
2. Have you had the experience of being criticized for doing things that you KNEW were what God wanted you to do? Did you feel hurt? What did you do with the pain? Is there another way that it would have worked out better?

### **Suggested Media**

The song 'God Has Not Forgotten' comes to mind! "God has not forgotten, God has not forgotten, God has not forgotten, God knows my name!"

# Living Our Best Life

*Rev. Mary S. Minor, D.Min.*

*Pastor, Brookins-Kirkland Community*

*AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

14 June 2020

## Prayer

Dear Lord, please forgive us of all wrongdoings. Forgive our sins, for we all have sinned and fallen short of your glory. Thank you for declaring us “not guilty” and for loving us by sending Jesus Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. In the name of Jesus, Amen!

## Scripture

Romans 5:1-8

## Writing Reflections

Before writing this lesson, I asked myself a couple of questions: What does it mean to be justified through faith? How does the justified through faith process work? In many biblical translation, Chapter 5 began with a “therefore adverb.” A “therefore adverb,” according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, is “used to introduce the logical result of something that has just been mentioned.” In other words, something written in the preceding chapter explained what was to be discussed in the succeeding chapter. So, I read chapter 4 to gain better insight to chapter 5:1-8.

## Exegesis

The Roman Emperor Claudius threw out many Jews and Christians living in Rome because they argued with one another about who could be a part of God's people. Among the group was a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers (Acts 18:1-4). Since Paul was a tent maker, he became their friend and lived and worked with them while in Corinth.

The apostle Paul is said to be the writer of the Romans letter, since he self identified in 1:1. Some scholars say it was written during Paul's third missionary journey. All do not agree where the letter was written — Corinth or Cenchrea — during Paul's three month layover in Greece (Acts 20:2-3). Therefore, the date of the letter varies between A.D. 55 - 57. Most scholars agree that it was written to the church in Rome, a predominately Gentile church with a minority of Jews. It purposed to present God's plan of salvation for all people, Jews and Gentiles.

Paul wanted to visit the church at Rome to share the same blessings that the Holy Spirit gave him (1:11). However, on the occasion of writing this letter, he was unable to make the journey. He felt it was his duty to personally deliver the collections from the Gentile churches to the poverty-stricken Christians of Jerusalem. This letter was sent “to prepare the Christians there for his intended visit in connection with a mission to Spain.”

The theme of the entire letter is found in chapter 1, verses 16 - 17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:16-17, NRSV).

Paul dealt with the theme “imputed righteousness.” Imputed righteousness is the righteousness of someone credited to another enabling that person to be justified. In Romans 3:21-4:25, the concept of imputed righteousness received by faith is established and illustrated. Imputed righteousness of God was established by faith in Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Romans 3:22). In Romans 4:1-25, Paul illustrated how God’s “imputed righteousness” works.

The Jews ancestor, Abraham believed God’s promise to him with unwavering faith. The Lord promised Abraham a son, and his offsprings would be as many as the stars. Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord was pleased with him (Gen.15:4-6). The apostle Paul reminded his readers of Abraham’s faith. In Rom. 4:3, Paul referenced Gen.15:6: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Abraham had strong faith in God, not weak faith. He believed God’s promise to him even though he did not have a child, he was 100 years old and his wife, Sarah was unable to bare children. Paul said Abraham was fully persuaded that what the Lord promised, God was able to perform. Abraham had complete confident in God. Abraham demonstrated that the righteousness of God is received through faith not works. Abraham’s righteousness is imputed or credited to his offsprings.

God’s justification was not only for Abraham. It was for all — “assuring us that God will accept us in the same way he accepted Abraham—when we believe the promises of God who brought back Jesus our Lord from the dead. Jesus died for our sins and rose again to make us right with God” (Rom. 4:24 - 25, TLB). Whoever believed in Jesus Christ became fully acceptable to God. That included Jews (circumcised) and Gentiles (uncircumcised). That includes you and me!

“Justification is a legal term meaning to remove the guilt (liability to punishment) of the sinner.” The demand of justice was satisfied and the guilty became righteous. Sinful humanity was made right in God’s sight by faith in God’s promises through Jesus Christ. The results of God’s justification though faith are listed in Romans 5:1-5. Paul explained what it means to be acceptable to God:

1. Live at Peace with God
2. Access to God through grace (God’s undeserved kindness)
3. Receive Hope of God’s glory
4. Rejoice in suffering (perseverance, character, and hope)
5. Hope that does not disappoint
6. Receive God’s Holy Spirit
7. Heart filled with God’s Love

It is all because Jesus Christ died for us all at a time when we were helpless and sinful. God showed his love for humanity by having Jesus Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

### **Contemporary Application**

It appears that the American system of criminal justice is biased. The scales of justice are unbalanced. Justice is not colorblind. The arc of the moral universe does not bend towards justice for people of color. If the American system of criminal justice were fair to all people, why would a homeless black woman seeking a better education for her son be sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment for falsifying her address and a rich white actress involved in the largest college admission scam receive 14 days in prison, 250

hours of community service and a \$30,000 fine? "Liberty and justice for all" includes those of affluence and excludes the poverty-stricken. "Laws catch flies but let hornets go free" (Scottish).

When Allen Iverson, former NBA Basketball star, was seventeen, he was convicted and found guilty of three counts of mob violence and sentenced to five years in jail. Iverson and three other black youths were involved in a racially divided bowling-alley brawl on Valentine's Day 1993, and sent three people to the hospital. Iverson wrote a letter to Governor Doug Wilder where he admitted wrongdoing and asked for a second chance. Eight months before he was scheduled to be paroled, Governor Wilder granted Iverson conditional clemency and ordered him released from jail. Wilder required Iverson to pursue his high school diploma and not play sports. Governor Wilder gave Allen Iverson a second chance. "Anytime a politician is involved people will say it's political," State Sen. W. Henry Maxwell, D-Newport News, said. "The governor did it out of concern. He tried to right a wrong."

### **Conversation**

Community is the chosen theme of focus this season. Believers know how to do church within the walls of the church. They know how to execute the various parts of the liturgy. The choir knows how to sing "the horns off a billy goat." The preacher has the ability to speak a word on God's behalf. The minister knows how to prayer a stimulating prayer. However, do me know how to evangelize and make disciples for Christ. After all, this is the mission of the church as found in Matthew 28:18-20. Ministry should overflow beyond the walls of the church and spill into the world.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What does justification through faith look like to you?
2. What is evangelism?
3. What is discipleship?

# Free At Last

*Rev. Mary S. Minor, D.Min.  
Pastor, Brookins-Kirkland Community  
AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

21 June 2020

## Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for Jesus Christ who died for my sins. Thank you for giving me a new life through Jesus Christ. I pray that someone who does not know you in the pardoning of their sins will come to know you by accepting Jesus Christ as his or her personal savior. May he or she die to sin, be baptized and live a new abundant life through Jesus Christ, Amen.

## Scripture

Romans 6:1-11

## Writing Reflections

My reflections on the Romans 6:1-11 text led me to my own baptism experience. I was five years old. I never fully understood what the preacher was saying, but on that particular Sunday morning, when the invitation to Christian discipleship was extended, I heard something I never heard before: “If you don’t want to burn in hell, except Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.” I did not want to burn in hell, so I ran down the aisle to the front of the church and gave my life to Jesus Christ. Then, I was submerged in a pool of water. I was now saved from burning in the pit of hell or so I thought. In my childish mind, the water baptism saved me.

It would be twenty-five year later and a lot of life experiences, good and not-so-good, when I totally surrendered to the will of the Holy Spirit. It was the best decision I ever made in life! Allowing the Holy Spirit to control your life is a different experience than receiving the Holy Spirit. Somewhere between the water baptism and that moment of surrender, I received the fire baptism of the Holy Spirit. My life has not been perfect, but I believe it is better with the presence of the Holy Spirit than it would have been without his guidance.

## Exegesis

During Jesus’ time, John the Baptist preached baptism by water for the forgiveness of sin. He told people to be baptized as a way to preparing themselves for someone who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, although Jesus did not need to be baptized, but he did it out of obedience to God. Jesus’ baptism pleased God. God baptized Jesus with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God came down on him like a dove (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). Jesus did not baptize anyone (John 4:2), but he instructed his disciples to teach and baptize people of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

The book of Acts gives many accounts of the disciples baptizing new converts to the early Christian church. On the Day of Pentecost, after the appearance of the Holy Spirit, 3,000 new converts were

baptized (Acts 2:41). Jews and Samaritans were baptized (Acts 8:12). Philip baptized an Ethiopian official (Acts 8:38). Cornelius, a Roman centurion and his household were baptized by Peter (Acts 10:47, 48).

The apostle Paul taught new converts that they should leave their past lives behind and become new people of faith. He explained baptism as dying to sin and being raised to new life, just as Jesus died and then was raised to life by God. The persons they used to be are nailed to the cross with Jesus. Their old lives of sin were put to death on the cross with Jesus. Persons who die with Jesus Christ will be raised to life and live with him in eternity. Jesus Christ makes people completely new inside and out by giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit. New converts must be ready to show that they want to stop sinning and ready to enter a new life with Jesus Christ.

### **Contemporary Application**

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church recognizes two sacraments: (1) Baptism; and, (2) the Lord's Supper (also called Holy Communion). The English word "baptism" comes from the Greek verb that means "to dip in water." In the AME Church, baptism can be preformed by the choice of one of three modes: (1) immersion in water; (2) sprinkling of water; or, (3) pouring of water. In no case should a person be re-baptized. This is prohibited and is a violation in the AME Church. "Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference; but it is also a sign of regeneration, or the new birth."

The AME Church baptizes young children unlike other denominations. Children who have been baptized are regarded as preparatory members under the special care and supervision of the church. (Read "Baptized Children and the Church" in *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church - 2016*.)

### **Conversation**

I heard someone say the other day, "Preachers don't preach about sin anymore." If this statement is true, the church is in a dangerous predicament. Jesus Christ came to redeem sinners from sin. This is the message of the church. If the church is not preaching repentance of sin, then why do people need the Lord?

Sin is described in a number of ways in the Bible:

- Disobedience to God (Gen. 3:9)
- Breaking the Law of Moses (Ex. 20:20)
- Rebelling against God (Jer. 2:22-24)
- Acts of violence (Gen. 6:10-12)
- Pride (Jer. 17:9-11)
- Not reflecting God's glory (Rom.3:23)
- Wrongdoing (Jos. 7)

All people are descendants of Adam and are inheritors of sin that leads to death. Jesus brought a new understanding of sin. Jesus brought forgiveness. God used Jesus' death to take away the power of sin. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:19). Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of the world. People should die to sin and live anew in Christ Jesus!

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How do you define sin?
2. Does sin need to be preached from the pulpit?
3. Discuss your baptism experiences — water and fire.
4. Discuss your conversion experience.
5. If you desire to be baptized, tell your instructor or speak to a minister.

### Suggested Media

1. Play this song at the beginning of the Bible Study: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If6i59NUfkk>
2. Read John 3:1-21
3. *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church - 2016*
4. Play this song at the end of the Bible Study: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luErZSa93sI>

# The Struggle

*Rev. Rochelle Settle, M.Div.  
Allen AME (Riverside, CA)*

28 June 2020

## Prayer

O God, we thank you for being acquainted with our struggles. We thank you for not leaving us alone in our struggles and for giving us a way to have the victory. We thank you for Jesus, who is our refuge, strength in weakness, hiding place, restorer and friend. Help us to run to Jesus when we feel overwhelmed with the sin that we encounter daily, knowing he will deliver us. Give us strength to walk in authority and victory as your children, in Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.

## Scripture

Romans 7:15-25

## Writing Reflections

The newness of salvation is a beautiful honeymoon. I believe God does that on purpose. Immediately after one's confession of faith in Christ as Savior, they are swept off their feet in a whirlwind of encapsulating emotion and waves of zealous faith.

YES! I CAN do all things through Christ!

YES! I must go out and tell others about this awesome Savior who forgave me, took my burden away and wept me off of my feet. When I first gave my life to Christ, I ate, drank and slept Jesus. Rejection from the world? No problem, I expected and rejoiced in that because God has so much more in store for me than the world.

Then years pass. Challenges come. Temptation persists. Temptation to look behind, flirt with the familiar, do me, take a break from doing the right thing, blurring the lines and allowing situations to harden the heart.

Temptation persists. It does not sleep or rest, even for the righteous.

## Exegesis

It is clearly stated in 1:1 that Paul, the Apostle is the writer of the book of Romans as well as personal references in Chapter 15. It was written in A.D. 55-58. The audience is "to all of you in Rome who are loved by God and are called to be his holy people." 1:7. This book is written for every person, the church, theologians, new converts, mature believers, legalists and unbelievers. The church at Rome was strong. The Roman citizens were known to have embraced the faith. There is no date of when the church was founded or by whom. It could have happened by someone who was at Pentecost (Acts 2:10), "visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism". Paul also knew several Romans personally, even some who were in Christ before himself, for example Andronicus and Junia (16:7). During this time Rome was the capital of the world with many roads leading to it. Many lay missionaries became the carriers of the

Gospel message and it was only a matter of time that Rome would have a church erected in Jesus' name. They were spiritually mature and dined on the meat of the word of God. Paul entrusted the theological feast the book provides to this congregation. There are no wasted words in the book of Romans, for each page is weighty with doctrine necessary for the founding of the Christian faith. Rome was mainly a Gentile church. Paul had to remind them of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, therefore promoting Jewish respect. The church in Rome was also severely persecuted. Nero was the Romans Emperor and blamed Christians for the burning of part of the city, which was done by him. Christians were charged with atrocious crimes they did not commit, such as cannibalism, immoral practices and being an enemy of the state. Although persecuted, they were brave and triumphant, and unashamed.

*The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible: Romans* by Alpha-Omega Ministries, Inc.

*Life Application Study Bible: Romans*

*Thinking Through Paul: A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology*, Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still

### **Contemporary Context**

How does this text translate in 2020? As long as humanity lives in this world, in a house of flesh and has the ability to choose, there will be a struggle between God's way and our own way. This text, in its context will never be outdated. The wonderful thing about this passage is that it plainly spoken. One can relate to it from an unbeliever, new believer, and mature believer status. This passage is a glimpse of Paul's struggle within to follow God. There are different interpretations of when in Paul's walk that he experienced this type of intense battle within. Some say this reflected his life before Christ.

Others, a daily striving to follow God's will.

Whenever the timing, all can relate to his burdensome cry "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do." (v. 15).

There are four takeaways here as we all fight this ongoing battle with our sinful desires.

1. Knowing the rules will not help you.- The purpose of God's law is to only expose sin. There is no salvific formula in keeping the law because one simply cannot do it. Verse 14 tells us that the law is spiritual and good. The trouble lies within us. If we don't know what God requires, we can feel good in our messed up state. Knowing God's way, God's rules, God's will in Scripture, shines the light on our rebellious behavior.
2. Willpower will not help you. Verse 15 we see how Paul sins in ways that he doesn't even want to or understands. The word "understand" (ginosko) means to recognize, to know, to perceive. He recognizes that it is sin, but has relied on personal strength to try and overcome.
3. Salvation from sin does not exempt you from the struggle and temptation of sin.- Someone once said that salvation is past, present and future tense: we have been saved (2 Timothy 1:9), we are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18) and will be saved from sin (Romans 5:9-10). We currently live in the "being saved" tense, which is in the present perfect tense. It started on Calvary, then individually through our confession of faith and continues presently each day. This is the process of becoming like Christ, which is a struggle because we still must crucify our flesh daily.
4. Jesus Christ is our deliverer from the struggle in the daily Christian walk.- This inward struggle with sin is real. It can be overwhelming and make us want to give in. The "power within" (v.23) is our flesh, the sin nature that we inherited from Adam and Eve. This power is at war with everything connected to our previous life without Christ. There's no compromising or no flirting with it. It is a spiritual battle that must be fought by spiritual means. Paul exhausts his own efforts of trying to fight it by being good enough through good deed (keeping the law) and by his own willpower. He returns back to the One who already conquered sin on the cross of Calvary, Jesus the Christ.

### Conversation

Teaching believers how to daily fight through the struggle against their individual sin is a necessary component for spiritual growth. It takes mature believers to disciple new converts and baby Christians. Growth happens in more ways than just numerically. Growth comes in daily form, in daily victories and even daily defeats. Becoming Christlike does not happen in the moment of salvation, it takes a lifetime. (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

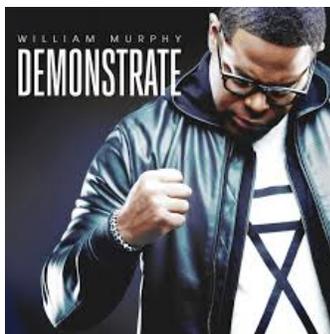
### Questions

1. Are you currently struggling with a specific sin? (examples of sin can be found in Romans 1:29-32. Feel free to discuss your struggle (with or without naming your specific sin, your choice). Does it sound like Paul's description in the text?
2. When you fall into periods of sin, do you find it difficult or easy to attend worship service? If difficult, discuss and explore reasons why? Could it be that a good works mentality is charting your course? Do you feel ashamed? Guilty?
3. Is there someone you know who may have become stuck in a pattern of sin and stopped coming to church because they can't seem to stop? How can you restore that person back into the fold?

### Suggested Media

*Grace to Overcome* by Bishop William Murphy

*Just Want You* by Travis Green



# Now or Later

*Rev. Barry Settle, D. Min.*

*Pastor, Allen AME (Riverside, CA)*

5 July 2020

## Prayer

Eternal God, our prayer is that you provide for us the wisdom and strength to wait on you when our desire is to act against your will for our lives. In Jesus Name, Amen.

## Scripture

Genesis 25:19-34

## Writing Reflections

How hungry would Esau have to be to sell his birthright for such a small price? He obviously did not value a greater inheritance. Why blame Jacob for obtaining something that his brother didn't value?

## Contemporary Context

The world's way is to do what pleases you now as opposed to waiting. We ask why wait, when I can have what I want now? We sometimes believe just because we can have something now, it's your right to have now.

## Exegesis

Two short sketches introduce us to Jacob and Esau. After twenty years of childlessness, Rebekah at last conceived, and she had a horrible twin pregnancy. The babies smashed each other inside their mother's womb. Their pre-birth battle foreshadowed the life-long struggle between them.

Even as they were born, there was no let up in the struggle between them; Jacob came out second, clutching his brother's heel. Esau was red and hairy, and this anticipated his future homeland known as Edom and Seir. Similarly, Jacob's name was interpreted in terms of his behavior at birth. Jacob is an old second-millennium name (as are Ishmael and Isaac), which scholars suggest meant '[God] rewards or protects'. But here, as often in the OT, a traditional name is given a new meaning. Jacob is linked with the word 'heel' and is probably understood to mean, 'he clutches at the heel' (i.e. the grasping, cheating competitor).

Though twins, their characters developed quite differently. Jacob became a cool, calculating stay-at-home, whereas Esau became an impetuous, active countryman. One day Jacob exploited his brother's hunger to exchange some lentil stew for his birthright, i.e. the privileges assigned to the firstborn son of the family. The narrator neither explicitly commends Jacob for his unbrotherliness nor Esau for disdaining his birthright, but the incident does show the prophecy of the older serving the younger was already being fulfilled.

## Conversation

An article in the *New York Times* (5-7-06) Walter Mischel launched a classic experiment where 4-year-olds were left in a room with a bell and a marshmallow. If they rang the bell, he would come back and they could eat the marshmallow. If they didn't ring the bell and waited for him to come back on his own, they could have two marshmallows. In the video you saw the children suffering trying to exercise control so they can get two marshmallows. Some succeeded and others didn't, ringing the bell within a minute. Those that waited longer went on to get higher SAT scores, got in better colleges and overall had better adult outcomes than those who rang the bells quicker.

Whether you believe this experiment or not, it is interesting to notice that there are benefits to waiting on the Lord instead of taking what you want in life, when you want it. This is a fine line because who's to say that we should wait when what we want is available to us when we can get it? This takes a great deal of prayer and spiritual discernment to know how long to wait for the blessings of God. Two things I believe this text illustrates: a) if you have something that is of God, you should value it greatly; b) if you have the opportunity of receiving a blessing, do not deceive anyone in obtaining it.

### Questions

1. In v.21-22, we see the importance of prayer in the lives of Isaac and Rebekah as both sought the Lord during difficulty. Discuss and share how important prayer is in your individual lives and how the Lord has answered your prayer. (Matt. 7:7; Luke 18:1, 1 Thess. 5:17)
2. Isaac and Rebekah were the parents of Esau and Jacob. The text reveals that Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob. How much are they responsible for the tension between the brothers?
3. What made Esau give up his birthright and why do you think he chose to do so? Have you ever valued what was greatly desired and available now rather than wait for something greater to come? How did you handle that situation? What would have been a better way for Esau to handle this?
4. What is your overall opinion in this text regarding Jacob (based only on what you read in the text)? Do you blame him for wanting more for himself? What would have been a better response from Jacob? Do you have any similar characteristics as Jacob displayed in this text?
5. We understand Jacob to be a deceiver. What were the consequences of his deception? How important is honesty and openness when dealing with each other? Explain.

# Live In Me Jesus

*The Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.  
Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

12 July 2020

## Prayer

Spirit of Life that lies within every believer, teach us to operate in You, and not in our own selfish desires and limited resources. Teach us to recognize the differences between when we are operating ‘in the flesh,’ or ‘in the Spirit.’

## Scripture

Romans 8:1-11

## Writing Reflections

I was led to verse 9 as I began my daily writing exercise. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. Each day as I handwrote the scripture, I was led to the word ‘in.’

I’ve always viewed the flesh like a garment on the Spirit. Each person has a different clothing over their spirit. With that mindset, the spirit then, is ‘in’ the flesh.

In this verse Paul tells us to operate ‘in’ the Spirit and not ‘in’ the flesh. What arose for me as I wrote the words over and over again, was that I should intentionally clothe myself ‘in’ the spirit, and forget about the flesh. What shall I wear today? A good spirit. What shall I share today? A good spirit.

Some people have nice flesh and ugly spirits. If the spirit inside someone who calls themselves a Christian is mean and unclean, does that mean they do not really belong to Christ? If the Spirit of Christ belongs to us and is in us, then we should be intentional about showing it off.

## Exegesis

When we read about the church in Rome we always know we are talking about the church inside the Empire. In the time of Jesus, Israel was a “domination society.” A society of “unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all.” Walter Wink. When Jesus uses the metaphor Kingdom of God in the context of the “domination order” of the kingdom of Caesar, Herod and Caiaphas, it has political connotations. It would evoke a vision of a political order where God ruled, not Caesar, Herod and Caiaphas. And since the economy was based upon the exploitation of the peasants by the Roman occupying force and the native elite, it would evoke a vision of the renewal of the covenant of justice and compassion between God and his people This vision is expressed in the Lord’s prayer by, “Give us today our daily bread and forgive our debts as we forgive those who are indebted to us.” And, finally, in contrast to the “purity system” it would evoke a vision of an open and inclusive society. Obviously, Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God would be seen by Caesar, Herod and Caiaphas as a potential threat to their power. <https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/the-kingdom-of-god-a-domination-free-order/>

When Paul exhorts the church in Rome to remember that they are ‘in the Spirit’ and not ‘in the flesh,’ he is reminding them/us that in the church there should not be a ‘domination system.’ In the church we are all to divest ourselves of all the privileges (and disadvantages) that the world has given us, and work to create a new kind of community with Christ at the center... The Kingdom of God.

In order to create this new community people who the world has privileged must be intentional about using their privileges for the benefit of those with less privilege. If you are white-skinned in a world where white skin has more privilege than black and brown skin, you must use your white privilege to work to elevate those with black and brown skin. If you are man in a place where men are privileged over women, you must use your privilege to help women gain access to the same privileges. If you are rich among the poor then you should not just share with the poor, but work to make sure all of you share in the same wealth. For we are not IN the flesh, we are IN the Spirit. We are not to regard one another in the way the world has done it. The church is not supposed to imitate the world.

### **Contemporary Application and Conversation**

In today’s society we have many people who say they are Christian but operate in the flesh. Read Romans 8:5-11 in the Message translation. They are self-involved and self-motivated instead of being Christ involved and Christ centered. Some people always give, and others always take. The evidence of spiritual transformation in the household of God is sometimes hard to see. IN the church it is sometimes more treacherous than IN the world. The power dynamics of the church kitchen, the pulpit assignments, the elections of officers and the treatment of visitors often seem very fleshy.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What privileges do you have as a human being?
2. What privileges did you intentionally have to give up in order have your new life IN the spirit?
3. When we operate IN the spirit, we have power that we don’t have IN the flesh. Name some of the privileges of operating IN the spirit.
4. Do you recognize it when you are operating IN the flesh instead of IN the spirit? What do you do when you realize its happening?
5. How would church be different if everyone, or even just the key leaders in the church were to operate IN the spirit when we set our vision, designed our budgets, considered who should be elected to lead, etc.

# Without Meaning There is No Psalm...

*Reverend Terry McCray Hill*

*Pastor, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Portland, OR)*

19 July 2020

## Prayer

God, I trust and adore You. Help my unbelief to be transformed from the negatives of fear of You to a reverence towards You that finds myself marching closer to You. Abide in my soul as I acknowledge and follow Your ways. I declare this day, that my soul loves only You. AMEN.

## Scripture

Psalm 128

## Reflections

One afternoon just before closing my eyes for a long overdue nap, I read Psalm 128 several times. I noted the positive and reassuring themes promised to those who fear (respect) God: food security, well-being, peaceful family life and a prosperous future. I got comfortable and thought, “It works for me,” relaxed and shut my eyes. After waking to continue my day, I kept going over and over Psalm 128 in my mind. Yes, a blessed life is assured, but it does not happen automatically. Plainly depicted in the psalm there is a major requirement: *to trust God and obey-come closer each day*. Wow!

## Exegesis

Centered around worship of one true and holy God, the monotheistic religion of the ancient Israelites (Hebrews) ascribed to The Book of Psalms, also called the “Psalter” as a compilation of Hebrew songs demonstrating power, beauty and a whole range of human emotion from anger and fear to joy and delight used in adoration and praise. The psalms teach about God’s character and ways, and the human response in a myriad of circumstances, offering praise and worship to God in both good times and difficult times challenging humanity to place hope in God and to trust God during times of adversity.

Psalm 128 is categorized as “A Song of Degrees” also known as a “A Song of Ascent.” Noted by many biblical scholars, this psalm is part of a collection of psalms known as the pilgrim songs that pilgrims sang as they went to Jerusalem to worship. The fifteen (15) songs [Psalms 120-134] correspond with the temple’s fifteen steps between the Israelite’s court and the women’s court.

## Contemporary Context/Conversation

What is your focal point that prepares you for worship? Being considered an “OGC” (older girl of the cloth) by most people’s standards, I can remember worship services not so very long ago when the

processional or morning hymn selected would often be hymn #520-*We Marching to Zion*. Most compelling for me was the phrase “*Come, we that love the Lord and let your joys be known.*”

O, how I long for the day in which it would be true that we as a collective were coming to worship God and to share our joys, blessings, satisfaction, contentment, peace and love...and *thus surround the throne*. Zion is God’s place for where the blessed that have walked in the Way is to reside. ***It’s higher ground...***

### Questions

1. How do you prepare for worship?
2. Take a closer look at the words of the hymn, *We’re Marching to Zion*. After reading Psalm 128 and now this hymn, how do you identify as one who loves God, coming to worship and letting your life experiences be known?
3. In any and all of life circumstances that you find yourself, are you still willing to approach the throne of God with a praise?
4. Try writing a Call to Worship based on *We’re Marching to Zion* to share with the class.
5. The lyrics suggest that we are marching to “*fairer worlds on high.*” What is your interpretation of this phrase? Does the Kingdom of God come to mind?

# Detoxify Yourself

*Rev. John D. Hill, D.Min.*

*Pastor, Walker Chapel AMEC (Oceanside, CA)*

26 July 2020

## Prayer

O Lord, help us as your people not to harbor the toxins of jealousy, envy, hate or resentment toward one another. Help us to see the worth, value and uniqueness of all who follow you. Help us that we may continue to grow with our trust, hope and faith in you. Amen!

## Scripture

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

## Writing Reflections

Favoritism displayed by Jacob created an atmosphere of jealousy, envy, hate and resentment among the siblings of Joseph. The gift of a coat unlike any other left the brothers of Joseph with the impression that he was held in higher regard. The sons may have talked about the situation among themselves but, they never expressed their feelings to their father. The siblings did not have a positive outlet to share what was eating them up on the inside. This family situation continues to build up until all they direct toward Joseph is resentment and contempt. The younger Joseph did not help his situation as Jacob's "informer," with nothing but bad news. Being a tattletale surely influenced the father's opinion about the other sons. Joseph has become intolerable to his brothers and thus it is easy for them to want to get rid of him in the worst way. If we are not careful the toxins of jealousy, envy, hate and resentment can build up in us and negatively affect our relationships in our homes, churches and other places.

## Exegesis

This text invites us to consider our family relationships, our community relationship, and perhaps most importantly our relationship with God. A striking feature of the patriarchal narratives is how people in the areas of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, Syria, Canaan and Egypt were able to move freely, and live among each other. During this time there was a feeling of welcome for everyone that came peacefully and had tolerance for differences among the people. The text invites us to see God through seeing the face of our brother. Inside the text is the story of viscous and intense sibling rivalry. The childhood struggle for recognition and sympathy in the family. We find evidence that we can't run from the past, it will always invade our future. We are required to live with the consequences of our past actions, and sometimes even the actions of previous generations. Finally, the text reminds us that we are each invited to continue learning, growing, changing, and moving forward.

## Contemporary Context

Jealousy, envy, hate, and resentment can lead us to a toxic place. Holding on to such negative feelings is not good for anyone, over the course of time these feelings impact our relationship with others. We may not seek to literally kill someone but, name calling, unfounded criticism, talking behind someone's can be just as deadly. We no longer see the value, and the worth of a particular individual. This state makes it

easy for evil to enter into our lives leaving no room for God. We must learn ways to rid ourselves of such toxins when they begin to be revealed in us. As Christians we are reminded that God has revealed unmerited love toward each of us through Jesus Christ. If God has done that for us we can at least in turn work on ourselves to be more Christ like. We must learn ways to rid ourselves of such toxins.

### **Conversation**

It truly does not take much for the toxins of jealousy, envy, hate, and resentment to enter into our lives. The toxins can be revealed in our churches and in our homes when someone has a sense of being overlooked. Rather than celebrating the accomplishment of another individual, we find ourselves tearing them down or being torn down. The narrative does offer us help in overcoming the toxins in our lives. We can start by not playing favorites but instead value each person as an individual and recognize everyone has something to contribute. Celebrate each person's accomplishments no matter how small they may seem. Do not allow things to build up on the inside, talk to someone outside the "circle" that you trust and know will be honest with you. Back off of the situation for a while in order to get a new perspective. Remember we all have faults that can generate the toxins of jealousy, envy, hate, and resentment in others. But as Christians we live covered by Grace, Forgiveness and the Love of God. In this year of "Kingdomtide," it is important for us to detoxify our hearts, souls and mind so that growth can take place in the life of the church.

### **Questions**

1. When was the last time you expressed the toxins toward someone? Why?
2. Have ever been on the receiving end of someone directing toxins at you? How did that make you feel?
3. What did you do about the feelings that were generated?
4. When did you do to begin to see God in the situation? What was brought to your attention?
5. What are some ways you have found helpful with "Detoxifying" your inner self?

# Vision is Mission on Fire: Don't Be Distracted

*Rev. Karla J. Cooper, Ed.D.*

*Pastor, Allen-St John AMEC (Kansas City,  
MO)*

**2 August 2020**

## **Prayer**

God, help us to see without distractions, Your will and purpose. Free us from the distractions to be used as emissary of liberation and hope. Amen.

## **Scripture**

Exodus 3:1-15

## **Writing Reflections**

Since I received the assignment for the bible study and this reflective writing prompt, I have thought about not only my character flaw of procrastination, but how easily distracted I can be from what I either planned to do or needed to do. The distractions are all around me, including, unfortunately, the incessant need to stay current with what is happening on the news, to conversations about annual conference and even the Board of Examiners, not to mention the 25 students I have in class this semester wondering who will report me this year to the Provost for pushing the envelope. I have had to remind myself that a distracted driver is a dangerous driver and no phone call or text message is more important than the vision and mission of arriving safely. How so easily I can be distracted from the vision that isn't about me. The vision is mission on fire yet there are dangers to be distracted from the work of advocating for others.

## **Exegesis**

After Israel or Jacob's offspring became prolific in procreating, there were a slew of Israelites taking over Egypt. The border patrol and immigration authorities in Egypt were getting a little nervous because those people were taking over: those foreigners were eating funny foods, worshipping an invisible God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because Pharaoh understood power dynamics and how the masses could easily overthrow any disparate system designed to segregate, Pharaoh, fearful of losing his power, sent out a decree to kill all newborn Hebrew boys. One boy in particular was hidden by his biological mother Jochebed, the daughter of Levi from the priestly class, who decided to hide this boy child for three months until she could no longer hide him. With Jochebed's wit, ingenuity and desperation, she built a wooded chest of brush and twigs—lightweight enough to float on the Nile. This boy child's sister Miriam watched her floating brother get picked up by Pharaoh's daughter—an Egyptian named Bityah—which literally means daughter of God. Miriam suggests that a Hebrew woman nurse the child and went and got their mother Jochebed. Bityah—becomes the foster mother of this boy child that she names Moses. The name Moses means to be drawn out. Moses was drawn out of the Nile and raised by his

foster mother Bityah, which means daughter of God—even though she was Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses having grown up in a family of privilege has the bloodline and heritage of the oppressed. A dichotomous existence—betwixt and between—was this Egyptian raised Hebrew. Although Moses had the cultural and social capital, his DNA was clearly from the oppressed class. When Moses learned of his identity and his heritage, and after he had killed an Egyptian, he left Egypt by traveling over the Sinai Peninsula into Midian. Moses found respite and a wife with Jethro, who is a priest amongst the Midianites. Jethro is Hebrew for Yatar which means to remain over, be a rest. Moses had to be rested and remain over with the Midianites so he could once again be drawn out to discover his purpose nestled with God’s will. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. Moses was distracted for 40 years till he got his marching orders to advocate for the rights of his oppressed people. The burning bush was Moses’ mission on fire as God revealed to him the vision of freeing a nation from systemic oppression. Although the Israelites won’t be enslaved in the land flowing with milk and honey, it also won’t be easy among their enemies.

### **Contemporary Context**

How does this text translate in 2019/2020?

No matter how many excuses we might make and we all know and understand that “excuses are monuments of nothingness that build bridges to know where; those who use these tools of incompetence are masters of nothingness.” Moses was so full of excuses and distractions, yet God did not let him off the hook! As a matter of fact, God reminded Moses and it is still good advice for us today, that wherever God is God, God is “be-ing” -- I AM (which is the first person singular present participle “be”)! God will be with you (future)! God is with you (present). God be with you (go forth). It is a tough job, but we are called to see the vision that is mission on fire and be willing to go all the way, because God is sending us forth in faith.

### **Conversation**

Sometimes it is so much easier to complain, criticize and critique when it is critical for us to understand our role as agents of change. Perhaps even more crucial is the fact that we first have to experience the transforming power of God’s glory on us and in us to see through spiritual lenses the vision, purpose and mission of our work in the world. Always remember that something or someone needs you. As we all examine and evaluate our positionality in this world, consider this quote: *“Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world’s greatest need.”*

*Frederick Buechner* EDUCATOR, WRITER, THEOLOGIAN

### **Questions**

1. Distraction or reluctance: which poses the greatest hindrance to the vision God has for you?
2. How do you know it’s God calling you to see the vision and do the work?
3. How will you respond to the vision which is mission on fire in your life?
4. What is your excuse?
5. Now, consult God and ask God to give you the burning vision so the mission will burn inside of you, and consume you, until the work is done.

### **Suggested Media**

“Something Within,” Hymn #353

# Beautiful Feet - Without A Pedicure

*Rev. Karla J. Cooper, Ed.D.  
Pastor, Allen-St John AMEC (Kansas City,  
MO)*

**9 August 2020**

## **Prayer**

God, guide our feet so we don't step on each other's toes with our exclusionary ideas and beliefs. We need Your help to be bearers of the Good News so that our heart-filled confession moves to actions that are representative of Your kingdom of grace. In gratitude, we give thanks for beautiful feet that are moving towards justice, hope and peace in this world. How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Help our speech acts line up with our beautiful feet. Remind us, always, that there are no differences between us, just the beauty of diversity by Your design. Amen.

## **Scripture**

Romans 10:5-15

## **Writing Reflections**

Today I finished my second cryotherapy session and had a massage by the best massage therapist this side of heaven. I asked Britni, (the masseuse) if my left side, in particular my left foot, was totally messed up and she said, "Yes. Karla, you really need to do some stretching to keep the blood flowing so that you won't have any issues later on down the road." As I reflected on the beautiful feet analogy in Romans 10, I wondered, what happens if one foot is good and the other not so good? Do you still have beautiful feet? I also thought about my mom who has a partially amputated foot that no one could tell because she literally has not missed a beat with walking. The text is rich in not allowing the social constructs to disrupt kingdom living in faith with our hearts as exposed as our feet. Feet are foundational and important and so are those who are bearers of the Good News. What comes to my mind is the importance of the Speech Act theory which suggests that something greater occurs in our communication, not just words, but actions. Every time we preach, we pray that our words and our actions line up. Our confession and profession must be in sync...declare with mouth (speech), believe in heart (act)

## **Exegesis**

Apparently there were tensions in Rome between Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews that would put a halt on the expanded mission of the spreading the Gospel. Somehow Paul's work was being misinterpreted as his somehow turning his back on his people, the Christian Jews, in favor of the Christian Gentiles as we see in the first verse of Romans Chapter 10 (Paul's heart's desire and prayers to God is that "they" might be saved). This sets up the rest of Chapter 10 with explaining that salvation is

for all, advocating and including anyone who confesses and believes in positive response to the preached Gospel, will be saved.

### **Contemporary Context**

Simply put, walk the walk and talk the talk. Do as I say. Do as I do. Words matter and so do actions.

### **Conversation**

Time is indeed up for those who profess one thing and then live another thing, especially when so many are in need of hope. So how important is preaching? In the AME church, preaching is central.

- Preaching prepares the way for teaching.
- Preaching prepares the way for deliverance.
- Preaching prepares the way for hope.
- Preaching prepares the way for peace.
- Preaching prepares the way for love.
- Preaching prepares the way for God's act of salvation.

### **Questions**

1. Can anybody preach?
2. Have you looked at your feet lately? What do your feet look like, smell like, feel like? (How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!")
3. Are pastors the only ones whose feet should look beautiful?

### **Suggested Media**

"Go Preach My Gospel," Hymn #220

# Stay Focused, Don't Be Distracted

*Karen Coston*

*YPD Director, Southern California Annual Conference  
Cain AME (Bakersfield, CA)*

**16 August 2020**

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, my desire is to keep my eyes on you on a daily basis. Help me stay focused on you and not be distracted by social media, cellphones, television, family, and anything else that will occupy my mind long enough that I forget to read my Bible and commune with you through prayer. When the crisis comes and the storms of life are raging all around me, don't let my eyes go astray, help me keep my mind focused on you so that I can be consumed by your peace that passes all understanding. I will continue to give you all the glory, honor, and praise for you alone are worthy. In Jesus' name. Amen

## **Scripture**

16 August 2020

## **Writing Reflections**

The first time I read this passage, I was reminded of one of my first cellphones with a camera. I was so excited to be able to take candid pictures of my family. The greatest challenge I faced with it was getting the focus right. I would aim the camera and take a picture of my children, only to find that the camera focused on the first thing it saw and the picture of the children would be blurry. I had to learn how to make sure there wasn't anything in between the camera and my family. If the camera decided to focus on a random object, I had to either remove the object or intentionally touch the screen so the focus would be on what I was aiming for. I thought how often we lose focus on our relationship with God because of the things we have placed in front of Him.

The last time I read the passage, I thought about Dug, the talking dog in the Disney movie UP. He was explaining to Carl and Russell that his master is very smart and created a collar that allows him to speak. During his explanation he yells, "SQUIRREL" and turns his attention away from the older man and boy. He became distracted by something he thought he saw in his peripheral vision and in that moment, the man and boy no longer mattered because the squirrel took precedence. It was then that I realized that it is so very easy to get distracted and overwhelmed by the "emergencies of life" and lose focus on God. That is when I saw myself in Peter and decided to show him some mercy.

## **Exegesis**

This is a story that is found in Matthew, Mark, and John. In this text, Jesus had just fed the 5,000 and sent his disciples to get back on the boat and cross to the other side of the lake. Jesus sent the people home and headed to the hills alone so he could pray. While he was praying, the disciples were struggling in the boat because a strong wind had come and the waters were troubled with heavy waves. About 3am, Jesus came out on the water to meet them and they were afraid because they believed it was a ghost at first. Jesus comforted the disciples by announcing himself telling them to not be afraid and be encouraged because He had arrived. Peter then called out and said to the Lord that if it's really him, allow him to walk on water and meet him. Jesus told him to come. Peter climbed over to the side of the boat and began walking toward Jesus. Then he became distracted by the waves and strong wind, got scared, and lost focus. He started to sink and yelled out for the Lord to save him. Jesus reached out and grabbed him telling him that he had little faith and asked why Peter doubted him. They went back to the boat and the wind stopped. At that moment the disciples worshiped him saying, "You are really the Son of God!!".

### Conversation

I used to believe that if I were Peter, and was privileged to witness all of the miracles of Jesus, I would never have been distracted by the wind and waves and lost focus of Jesus. Then I did this Bible Study. I read and meditated on the scripture and the Lord showed me that every night before I go to sleep, I commit to keeping my eyes focused on the Him for the next day. Every morning I pray and tell the Lord that no matter what, I'm going to focus on Him and not be distracted by anything around me. Then I leave my bed. I found that it is easy to be distracted by the winds and waves of being a parent, spouse, an employee, and a student. When we lose focus on Jesus we can feel like we are drowning in family drama, work schedules, schoolwork, responsibility, frustration, depression, and anxiety. We must find a way to refocus, like the camera and take away whatever is blocking our relationship with Jesus. We keep from sinking by increasing our faith and trusting that even in the midst of the storm that God is faithful and just and He will keep our minds in perfect peace if we stay focused on Him.

### Questions

1. Identify some daily distractions in your home and church that keep your attention.
2. Are these distractions keeping you from focusing on God? Why?
3. What are some ways you can refocus?

### Media

The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow

Verse 1:

Like a ship that's tossed and driven, battered by an angry sea  
When the storms of life are raging, and their fury falls on me  
I wonder what I have done, that makes this race so hard to run  
Then I say to my soul, "Take courage, the Lord will make a way somehow."

Verse 2:

Try to do my best in service, try to do the best I can  
When I choose to do the right thing evil's present on every hand  
I look up and wonder why that good fortune passed me by  
Then I say to my soul, "Be patient, the Lord will make a way somehow."

Verse 3:

Often there's misunderstanding out of all the good I do  
I go to friends for consolation, and I find them complaining too  
So many nights I toss in pain, wondering what the day will bring  
Then I say to my heart, "Don't worry, the Lord will make a way somehow."

Chorus:

The Lord will make a way somehow when beneath the cross I bow

He will take away each sorrow; let Him have your burdens now  
When the load bears down so heavy the weight is shown upon my brow  
There's a sweet relief in knowing the Lord will make a way somehow

# What Love Looks Like

*Rev. Dr. Timothy O. Coston Jr.*

*Pastor, Cain AMEC (Bakersfield, CA)*

23 August 2020

## Prayer

Lord as we explore this bible study help us to apply it to ourselves. As we read about what love should look like in our lives let us ask ourselves the question, “does this look like me?” Speak to our hearts and to our minds that our spirits will be renewed with the love of Christ. In Jesus name. Amen.

## Scripture

Romans 12:9-21

## Writing Reflections

As I read this passage several titles for this Bible study crossed my mind. This could have been entitled “Let’s Get Serious About Loving” or “A Behavioral Guide for Christian Living” maybe even “What a Christian Looks Like From The Inside”. Another title I thought about using was “A Call To Action”, because every time I read it I was reminded of what I should and should not be doing as a child of God. This passage would serve as an excellent refrigerator magnet, bracelet, or framed on a wall somewhere reminding us of our character as Christians.

All I saw day after day was what true Christianity should look like. The humbling part is that in so many ways it looks nothing like us. When we take our lives and lay them beside the description of this passage we fail in comparison.

The blessing is that in chapter seven of this book the author writes these words: “*Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord...*”. Praise God that because of the blood of Jesus that washed away our iniquities, when God looks at us, He doesn’t see us as we are but as a mirror image of Romans 12:9-21 because of the love of Christ.

## Exegesis

Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome while he was in Corinth toward the end of his third missionary journey. We know from the opening paragraphs of his letter that he desired to go to Rome and spend some time with the Christians there.

Paul was eager to fellowship with Christians in Rome and share the gospel with them. But Paul had another agenda in mind as well. Toward the close of the letter he wrote about his plan to visit them on his way to Spain. In addition to enjoying their company, he hoped they would assist him on his journey as he looked forward to evangelizing Spain.

For our study, in the verses that we are focusing on, it appears that Paul says a lot to the church in this brief passage however he actually only gave one crucial statement. In the English text all ten statements

in verses 9-21 appear as imperatives or authoritative commands. However in the Greek text only the beginning of verse 9, “love must be sincere” is the only command, the remaining nine statements are adjective expressions. Therefore everything in this passage that follows the command that “love must be sincere” is describing what sincere love looks like. (Bence)

### **Contemporary Context**

As I hold this passage up to our nation at this current time the saddening reality is that we do not fit the description of what love looks like. The United States is arguably the most powerful Christian nation in the world yet we struggle to live in harmony with each other. The daily news broadcasts provides breaking news stories of our inability to live at peace with one another. Our hospitality to those countries less fortunate than ourselves is at times embarrassing.

The church needs to pray for the Spirit of Christ to cleanse us. We need to ask ourselves, “What can I do to be part of the love solution and not part of the hate problem”. We must teach future generations by being a living example of what love looks like. The church must show that love looks like 1 Corinthians 13 and acts like Romans 12:9-21.

### **Conversation**

I challenge the churches of the 5th Episcopal District to make the love in our churches look like Romans 12:9-21. Some may say that this is too big a task for us or that we need to narrow it down, that we need to be more specific as to how we are going to accomplish this monumental task. Start today with yourself. Let this be the cause that lifts you. Let this be your eternity such that one day others will look back and wonder how the church made it through such a time as this. They will see that it is because people like you refused to be overcome by evil, but overcame evil with good.

### **Questions**

1. What area in this passage do you feel that you need to work on the most?
2. What area in this passage does your local church need to work the most? Share it with your pastor and ask if you can help be a part of the change.

### **Suggested Media**

There is a song we sing in the AME Hymnal that reflects the essence of this bible study. Take a moment and read or sing hymn number 461 entitled “Love Lifted Me”:

*I was sinking deep in sin, Far from the peaceful shore, Very deeply stained within, Sinking to rise no more, But the master of the sea heard my despairing cry, From the waters lifted me, Now safe am I. Love lifted me! Love lifted me! When nothing else could help, Love lifted me. Love lifted me.*

### **References**

- Bence, Clarence. *Romans: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Logos Bible Software, 2018.
- Rowe, James. “Love Lifted Me”. *African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal*. Nashville, TN:AMEC, 2002.

# A Praise Report

*Rev. Dr. Timothy O. Coston Jr.*

*Pastor, Cain AMEC (Bakersfield, CA)*

30 August 2020

## Prayer

Lord we thank you that there is always a reason to praise you. As we read this bible study bring to our memories the many times when you blessed us, blessed our families and blessed our church. Open our eyes to your word that our spirit might be fed and hearts will be grateful. In Jesus name this is our prayer. Amen.

## Scripture

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm 138

## Writing Reflections

As we read these two passages of scripture we can't help but come away with a feeling of thanksgiving for what the Lord has done for us. As a matter of fact we could even be the author of either one of these passages.

In Isaiah 51:1-3 we find these words, *"Listen to me, all who hope for deliverance— all who seek the Lord! Consider the rock from which you were cut, the quarry from which you were mined. Yes, think about Abraham, your ancestor, and Sarah, who gave birth to your nation. Abraham was only one man when I called him. But when I blessed him, he became a great nation." The Lord will comfort Israel again..."*

This could easily be our verse when we think about where we have come from and what God had to deliver us from. Israel is told to consider the rock from which they were cut. So often we are so focused on the present that we tend to forget about what God has done in our past. We forget about how He made ways out of no way. How He made our little bit be enough.

Then there is Psalm 138:2-3 that says, *"I praise your name for your unfailing love and faithfulness; for your promises are backed by all the honor of your name. As soon as I pray, you answer me; you encourage me by giving me strength."*

Again we could have written these verses. The same God that provided the unfailing love and faithfulness the psalmist writes about is the same God who provides unfailing love and faithfulness to us each day

## Exegesis

In Isaiah 51:1-6 we find that this passage is meant to encourage an audience of believers based upon their relationship with God and what He has done in the past through their ancestors Abraham and Sarah.

Some theologians believe that verse 6 may have an eschatological theme for in it we read, *"Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and*

*its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”*

In both chapters we find writers that are writing to recognize the blessings and capabilities of God. In both chapters God is given praise for what He has done in the lives of His people.

### **Contemporary Context**

The current condition of this country’s White House begs for deliverance. These passages remind us that we have a God who will both comfort us while we are in trouble and deliver us from suppressive powers. They are a reassurance that “trouble don’t last always”. Isaiah 51:1-6 is a reminder for us today, that our ancestors who endured the atrocities of slavery and the racial cruelties of the civil rights era trusted in God to deliver them and deliver them He did.

### **Conversation**

Lately we have heard so much about how the church is declining, but in Isaiah 51 we read the words, “Abraham was only one man when I called him. But when I blessed him, he became a great nation.” All the church needs is to have the faith of Abraham and the Lord will bless us with greatness.

Abraham was only one man...but God blessed him. It doesn’t matter where we are at the start when God blesses our future.

### **Questions**

1. When you look back over your life what is one thing you are thankful that God delivered you from?
2. The psalmist says that “As soon as I pray, you answer me...”. Recall a time when as soon as you prayed God answered. Why do you think God so immediately answered that particular prayer as opposed to some of your other prayers?

### **Suggested Media**

Hymn #84 - “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Chorus - “Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!”

# Following Directions - A Passover Prescription

*Rev. Swayne A. Cofield*

*Pastor, Rose of Sharon AMEC (Norwalk, CA)*

6 September 2020

## Prayer

Father, teach us for generations to come to celebrate your power, provision and protection over us. Guide us to share a rational fear of your dominion and to remember your covenant through our good and bad times. Help us through the things we do not understand until we come to behold you in your glory. Amen.

## Scripture

Exodus 12:1-14

## Exegesis

The LORD offers Moses and Aaron a “prescription” for the observance of Passover. Their instructions require perfect obedience and timing and is connected to a covenant of protection. The LORD would pass over their households and no destructive plagues would touch them when Egypt was struck (v13); only if the community would place lamb’s blood on the doorframes of the houses where they ate their sacrifices (v7). Their instructions involved accounting for every household in the community and assuring even the smallest household has access to a portion of a sacrificial lamb (v3). Their instructions were not subject to their own interpretations or the people would all face destruction. Furthermore, their sacrifice was to be observed for generations to come (v14).

Passover takes place in the spring and our scripture text says it to occur in the first month of the year. Before the Babylonian exile, Israel’s year began in the autumn during the firstfruits of the wheat harvest (Ex. 34:22). While in exile, Israel began to conform to the Babylonian custom of beginning the year in the spring. Passover is here to stress the lasting significance of the Exodus and to usher in a new age.

The Passover is a family observance and the lamb is its central feature. In Deuteronomy, the family character of the feast has disappeared, and instead of the lamb there was an offering from “the flock or the herd” (Deut. 16:1-8, key verse 2). The lamb must be “perfect”. Burnt offerings consisted of males in their first year; some weeks old at most. The roasting of the lamb is also emphasized in this text with specific instructions on how to eat the lamb and how to handle its leftovers in the morning. This is the backdrop of detail the LORD “prescribes” to the people as He prepares to pass through Egypt on the same night bringing judgement on all the gods of Egypt (v12). Recall the blood of the lamb used from the slaughter at twilight on their doorframes offered as a sign of their obedience (v6-7).

## Contemporary Context

How important is it to follow instructions? Such an important skill we need to get through life and especially important in school and career life. Following instructions requires active listening and paying attention or could otherwise results in negative consequences in our lives. Failure to read instructions while following a cooking recipe leads throwing the ingredients in the garbage. Failure to follow directions when navigating to a final destination results in delays and facing “rough roads”.

Sometimes, neglecting directions or instructions can lead to fatal ramifications. A medical doctor persuades you to follow directions on a prescription bottle or risk horrible side effects and organ failure. Stop signs and red traffic lights direct us to stop or risk unnecessary collisions that may leave us disabled or even dead. Military units drill together day and night following orders from their leaders to avoid losing lives during battle.

### **Conversation**

In this year of Kingdomtide, we have been charged to strive for growth and concentrate on the care of the local congregation, the church building, the community and the mission of the church. Furthermore, we are to seek to advocate for something/someone who may otherwise remain a products of injustice and inequity in society. Each member of this nation called the United States of America must truly search within themselves to assist others in need; or voice a need for assistance for those who may be in need. Exodus 12:3-4 implies the whole community should have access to the lamb as a sacrificial resource. Moses and Aaron were to see that no person was left out. Presidents, state and local officials take an oath to govern the whole and include everyone. Yet, this does not happen. Pastor, church officers and members have been challenged to help fulfill the mission of the church. To what degree does this truly happen?

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Today, how do we assure the “Lamb of God” is available to all people?
2. How can we make the most of the idea of eating a meal together to celebrate the central truth of our faith that Jesus died and rose again to bring salvation.
3. When and where have you experienced the “Passover” (a blessing of protection) because you were obedient to the LORD in a specific matter? Share and discuss your experiences.
4. Meditate silently on the consequences of life experiences when you disobeyed God. Share if you feel comfortable.

### **References**

*Bible Gateway*  
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*The Interpreter’s Bible*  
*Matthew Henry Commentary*

# Both Old *and* New: God's Ongoing Revelation and the Kingdom of God

*Rev. M. JoDavid Sales, Ph. D.*

*Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Marysville, CA)*

*Chair, CA Conference Christian Education Committee*

13 September 2019

## Prayer

Lord, help us, as a collective to seek balance, of both old and new. Help us to embrace the ongoing nature of your revelation and help us to be trained for the Kingdom. Amen.

## Scripture

Matthew 13:51-52

## Writing Reflections

There has existed tension between the old and new since there was an old and new. Oftentimes, this tension finds some of its ugliest expressions in the midst of believers and those called to love God and neighbor. It's probably because we are temperamental. We like things to stay the same but we also like things to change—when either benefits us. But what about when the old and new are to benefit the work of God, and not our positions, institutions, or ideas? This scripture had me struggling to articulate my own uneasiness of the trends I am witnessing in our country and in our church. I wanted to focus my attention, and so I stayed more in the area of the church, and not so much of our larger world... However, I do believe that some of the themes here can resonate outside of the walls of the church... as they should.

## Exegesis

These words of Jesus—found only in the Gospel of Matthew—may at first glance appear to be a parenthetical concerning the various parables of the Kingdom found in Chapter 13. But on second and third glance, we actually come to see how important these words are. And in fact, Jesus's rejection in Nazareth, which immediately follows these words, punctuate the gravity of what's at stake in this short pericope.

Jesus begins this section with a question to his disciples: "Have you understood all of this?" The "all of this" Jesus is referring to is specifically his words and parables about the mysterious Kingdom of God/Heaven. He told the disciples that he would disclose to them the mysteries concerning the Kingdom

(Matt 13:11). And like good students, the disciples claim they understand. That is, they understand the nature of God's Kingdom; the forces that seek to disrupt God's reign; the possibilities for divine and abundant growth that exist because of it; and the final judgment and restoration that will commence when it comes in its fullness. Once the disciples' understanding was confirmed, Jesus said something so challenging and pithy, that I overlooked it for years. He tells them that every scribe who has been disciplined/"trained" for the Kingdom needs to bring out something *both old and new* from their treasury.

First, as we know, Jesus was often in conflict with the Scribes/Lawyers of the Law and Prophets. But now we see that Jesus was not in conflict with them because they were scribes, *but because of their approach to the Law and the Prophets*. In ancient times, a scribe's duty was to read, copy, and at times, interpret the traditions and Scriptures of the people. These duties called them to go back to what was chronologically "old," in order to speak to the world in which they found themselves. But Jesus discloses something: *God's revelation is ongoing*. God's revelation is not isolated to the past or to the Law and Prophets. Jesus is claiming that the words/parables concerning the Kingdom are both old and new words, and to be a good scribe and disciple means that we are consistently looking for the old and the new. Understand, we are not talking about the Old and New Testament—that division of Books of the Bible did not exist in Jesus or Matthew's time. Jesus is talking about the treasure of God's revelation, which has spoken to us in the past and which speaks to us today and will speak tomorrow. A good scribe, disciplined for the Kingdom (not *just* Jesus), understands that the Kingdom of God is in continuity and discontinuity with what has come before. Stated differently, God beckons us to embrace the familiar and unfamiliar. This means that to truly accept the Kingdom and become a follower of Jesus, we must respect tradition and be willing to adjust our theology and expectations to God's continuous revelation.

And this is where a potential problem emerges.

### Conversation

When Jesus returns to Nazareth (Matt 13:54-58), his hometown takes offense at him. They can only see the "old" Jesus and refuse to see the "new" Jesus. He's just Mary's boy, the son of a carpenter; "we know his brothers and sisters," they say. And because they are focused on the "old" Jesus, they miss the "new" work of God being done through and within him. Matthew reports that Jesus did not do many works in Nazareth because of their unbelief. Mark goes even further: he states that Jesus *could not* do many works there because of their unbelief. The bottom line is clear: if we close ourselves off to the ongoing revelation of God, we will miss out on what God is doing. So let us make some conversational observations.

1) In this season of Kingdomtide, it behooves us to state with feverish repetition: we are not only disciples of Christ; we are also disciples of the Kingdom. If our preaching and teaching only mentions Jesus, and neglects the Kingdom of God, then we are giving people living water without telling them where the water is located. The water is located in the Kingdom, *not the Church*. Throughout history, there exists a tendency in the church to either conflate the Church and God's Reign as interchangeable, or we often forget or dismember Jesus's talk of God's Reign. I often wonder if we have become like the scribes of the Law and Prophets in that our traditions and rituals talk a lot about Jesus, but we often fail to open ourselves to the mysteries of the Kingdom and God's ongoing revelation—and in that failure, we ostracize and critique anyone who tries to bring "something new out of the treasury."

2) There are practical implications to this text as well, especially for our church as a denomination. Many of us who love the church are anxious about the future and are looking to God for direction in order to do loving, sustainable, and theologically sound ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Given various studies and statistics, it appears that many American mainline denominations—and now even the nondenominational churches—find ourselves in either decline or stagnant. While those trends have to do with broader shifts

in culture, technology, etc.—and we must be aware and respond to them—I believe it is helpful to do an honest assessment of ourselves based upon what we have just read in Matthew. Are we, at a local and denominational level, willing to bring *old and new ideas/revelation out of our treasury*?

We must not make the false and unnecessary mistake of thinking we must choose either the old or the new. We must seek balance, yet also remember, the longer we hold onto the past for the sake of the past (and not for God), the more radical and upsetting the “new” will feel. And vice-versa. We must trust in a God of ongoing revelation, which means there will be both continuity and discontinuity with what we are doing. Therefore, I would like to end this Bible Study with statements and questions that are meant to foster honest and gracious dialogue.

We can no longer proceed to do Kingdom work utilizing *only and/or primarily* strategies, theologies, and models of the past. We must lovingly and critically have hard conversations concerning the unsustainable trends in our Church(es) as it relates to Kingdomtide. And the first thing we must admit is that: the unsustainability. Again, this issue is not one that belongs only in the AME Church. Thinking that the past and the present is sustainable often keeps us from recognizing the urgency of the new. And believing that all of the past and present is unsustainable keeps us from recognizing, celebrating, and replicating what has worked and what is working. But this “working” must not work solely for individuals or even the Church; these “workings” must work for the Lord and the Kingdom of God. Which policies, habits, theologies, and models within our church truly stifle and seek to eliminate the Reign of God in our midst? What are the longstanding traditions in our church that truly make it hard for us to do God’s will? Just because they are old and we know them, doesn’t make them right or godly. “We’ve always done it this way,” is a demonic saying that is often used to oppose the move of God. What practices used to work, but no longer work? What practices are working, but may need updating? What and where do we see God doing something “new” and are we willing to go there? When have we been hoodwinked for the “new” and threw the baby out with the bath water? If African Methodism, and if any church, is to be a viable, prophetic, and compassionate voice and institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, then these kinds of questions must be asked *and answered*. We must bring out the new and the old from our treasury.

# It's The Climb

*Rev. Nicolette B. Wilson*

*Pastor, St. James AMEC (Los Angeles, CA) &*

*Rev. Noella A. Buchanan (Retired)*

*Associate Pastor, Grant AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)*

**27 September 2020**

## **Prayer**

Father God we are asking you to change our attitudes about the climb, about still having to climb, about not wanting to climb, but still wanting to reap the benefits of a mountaintop experience without having had to climb to get there or actually be present on the mountaintop. Please help us Lord to remember that to hear from you, it's worth the climb.

## **Scripture**

Matthew 5:1-12

## **Writing Reflections**

Day One (verses 1 and 2) Was Jesus climbing a mountain side a means of rest or escape? He often when up to rest and to talk with God, but how often was he followed? The text doesn't mention that he invited anyone to go with him, but something made them go.

Day Two (verses 1 and 2) How did they climb a mountain side back then? Was anyone lost who attempted to make the climb? How many people turned back?

Day Three (versed 1 and 2) Only the people who climbed up the mountainside with Jesus actually heard the Sermon on the Mount. WOW! Understanding now that Jesus was originally talking to his climbing companions does that change the lens in which we see the Beatitudes? A climb is required to be in God's presence.

## **Contemporary Context**

For the benefit of this study let's first agree that I am not advocating that anyone find your nearest mountain and start physically climbing it. So, when a speak about "climbing" it's a place of making personal sacrifices to get closer to God to hear more clearly what he has for you. I don't need no AME's falling off mountains and blaming me.

We don't often discuss the cost of discipleship as prescribed in Luke 14:25-33. Perhaps we fear that if we did that both the new and seasoned converts would run and hide. The truth is that even if we don't discuss the cost, we all will and have had to pay it in our desire to follow Christ. The idea of their being a climb to commune and spend time with God could be considered one of those cost. Now look you don't

HAVE to climb to get the message. There are plenty of others who will climb up to get it and down to tell it to you, but it will cost you and its not always just financially. Ponder for a moment that those who made the climb were the intended audience of the message. One could say that the Beatitudes, that have blessed many, were meant for them. Now imagine the power from hearing Jesus speak directly into your life and situation. Not that your Pastor doesn't do a great job at sharing a word from on high but given the chance and opportunity to hear directly from God "ain't no mountain high enough," or so we say.

More often than we are willing to admit God has asked us to reach just a little higher or dig just a little deeper to find what new Beatitude he has for us. Woefully the request was met with attitudes of being complacent with where we are. We may have made other climbs in the past and have deemed that our climbing days are over or we have made where we are so comfortable (amazon knows our address) that we are not motivated to climb or worst yet that it looked too hard so we never even tried. In all these cases we have become ok with living off what God has given to someone else that may have a Universal application concerning us.

Let me encourage someone in saying that you're not too anything to climb to get a word concerning you from the Lord. You're not too old, or too young, or too poor, or too rich, or too tired, or in too much pain to climb. God wants to commune and talk to you about you, but sometimes you will have to climb.

### **Exegesis**

According to a search of my trusty Logos software a mountain is mentioned over 500 (five hundred) times in both the Old and New Testament of the Protestant bible. Mount Ararat served as a resting place for Noah's boat after the flood (Genesis 8:1-5). Moses received the Ten Commandments in Exodus 19 -20, 24 on Mount Sinai. Solomon's Temple can be found on Mount Zion (1 Kings 8:1-66). On Mount Tabor Jesus is transfigured and is joined by Moses and Elijah in the presence of the disciples (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36) and Mount of Olives is where Jesus is found teaching his disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world (Matthew 24). It was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the slopes of the Mount of Olives that Jesus agonized with the Father (Matt 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18) and later his ascension into Heaven (Acts 1:9-12, Luke 24:50). It is then no doubt that the people of this time would understand that mountaintop experiences were synonymous with spending time with God and receiving personal revival, church revival and blessings. More than that they would know that a meeting on the mountain top required a climb.

See there were no easy ways up the mountain and given the varying elevations the climb was quite dangerous. Therefore, those who chose to climb were in a real way risking life and limbs to follow a message from on high, literally. Taking that into consideration the decision to climb to hear the message firsthand meant making a real and personal commitment in their pursuit of learning from the source itself.

### **Conversation**

So what does a "climbing" church look like within our Kingdomtide season? A church that is still willing to climb to hear what God has for them is a church in tune with the needs of its membership. Often churches are quick to feed those on the outside of the church before asking if those who are tasked with feeding are hungry themselves. So, while the church has prioritized its members needs for the sake of what they are DOING more time could be spent on their BEING. How many persons in our congregation are no longer climbing and are just waiting for someone to notice that they aren't and for someone to offer an invitation to be a climbing companion? If we want to see growth let us take up the work of undergirding and inspiring those that we see every Sunday and start the work of healing and reconciliation within the body of Christ. One thing is clear if we can get everyone climbing together, we create a shared WIN for all that will not soon be forgotten and told to generation to come.

### Questions

1. Are you the type to sacrifice to get a word from God or the type to get a word from God from someone who sacrificed?
2. What have you sacrificed to get in God's presence?
3. What makes a good climbing companion? How can you help encourage someone to climb?
4. What does a climbing church look like to you?

# The Struggle Is Real

*The Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.  
Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

13 September 2019

## Prayer

All powerful God. Let the One Holy Spirit be so strong in each one of us that we are able to work together with ease for Your glory. When we suffer for righteousness, help us not to feel abandoned. Use our sufferings to strengthen the Body of Christ on earth as we prepare for heaven in Jesus name.

## Scripture

Philippians 1:21-30

## Writing Reflections

- I hand wrote all 9 verses the first day and vs. 27 kept jumping out.
- The second day I meditated with vs. 27 from NRSV. What is the life worthy of the gospel? What kinds of things was Paul hearing about the church in Philippi? What do people hear about us? Is it based on what we are actually doing, or does people's sharing reflect them, more than it does us?
- The third day I used the Common English Bible Translation for the repetitive writing on vs. 27. It reads very differently with an emphasis on our ability to work together to bring God glory. In the NRSV it seemed more personal, about my conduct when nobody was looking. But with the CEB perspective it reminds me of the Mizpah – a keeping of watch between us when we are absent one from another. God cares about how well we work together. Others are watching, and our work together impacts how/what they think/feel about God.

## Contemporary Context

We are blessed by working together on a common agenda. There is power in people working together. This is part of the reason some people enjoy watching sports. Practicing team moves, and watching teams work successfully together, makes us shout! Nevertheless, it seems like the church is full of separate individuals working on their own separate agendas. In your average local church, only a few of the people do most of the work and sometimes the few, work separately. If you think of the AME Church as one body, you can see the same phenomenon of disconnection. The churches in the Annual Conference rarely work together. The Episcopal Districts rarely work together. What could we accomplish for Christ if we set a common goal and worked together to achieve it? Paul wanted the church at Philippi to work together no matter what the cost. When we are motivated by our faith in Christ, we can do all things through him who strengthens us.

## Exegesis

Paul has been incarcerated for his proclamation of the Good News. He writes to the church at Philippi to assure them his imprisonment and possible martyrdom will neither hinder the gospel's progress nor cause a breach in their partnership. They must continue the work without fear. As a person enduring suffering, Paul wrestles with whether he wants to live or 'die.' The judge will ultimately decide his fate, but he struggles with his desired outcome. He resolves that as long as his life has purpose for others, he

wishes to remain on earth. Because of his witness and proclamation, even in suffering, others can learn of Christ and receive the joy of salvation. He calls the people who are the church to live like Christ lived (read chapter 2).

To live a life 'worthy of the calling' is to live like a citizen of heaven, to be bound by common principles and actions that characterize our lives as Christians:

- Act ethically towards your neighbors
- Stand fast. Exercise the courage of your convictions. Don't be wishy washy or change your opinions just to accommodate the crowd.
- Work together in the faith. Gospel work was not intended to be done as individuals, but as a community.
- Do not be intimidated by enemies of the gospel who are our adversaries.
- Bear your cross. Everyone must suffer. To be exempt from suffering is to be exempt for the true life of the believer. (Matthew 5:10-11). The love of Christ on the cross is both the means of our salvation and the mandate for our ministry.
- Entrust your life fully into the hands of God.

### **Questions**

1. What is your cross? In what ways have you suffered for the gospel?
2. Can you imagine suffering being a blessing? Explain
3. Paul was facing his death and wrestling with whether he wanted to live or die. Have you faced your own death? In order to truly live, we must be willing to die.
4. Name two things that have prevented you from working with others on a common goal in the church?
5. Describe a time when you were able to work together as a church and the impact that had on others in the community.