

Journeys

JUDSON BIBLE LESSONS | Spring 2024 | Vol. 3.3



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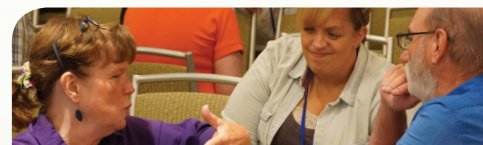
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Journeys

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About the Quarter

Our lessons this quarter remind us that with God all things are possible. As children of the Most High God, we can wake up each morning knowing that God will see us through whatever we have to face. Our posture is one of overcoming as we collectively grow stronger in our faith within our congregations. Together, we can strengthen our spiritual grip through prayer, Bible study, worship, and devotion. Our churches provide us the sustenance we need as we encourage each other in the bond of love. Our commitment to mission and ministry is important now more than ever. We can go forth and fulfill our calling, knowing that in God there is no shortage of resources.

About the Writers

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SALVATION

the message of the cross

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

—1 CORINTHIANS 1:18

Introduction

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he sought to teach them about the coherence between the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Greeks and Jews of his time . . . centering them all on the Cross of Jesus. The Cross is a focal and connecting point—a fulfillment of prophecy—for those who understand it. But for many, it is a point of disagreement, a stumbling block, or even something that seems foolish. Its message is so simple that it can be mistaken for other things. Even the humblest person can grasp the wisdom of the Cross, and at the same time the most highly educated can miss its meaning entirely. All of us can find our own place in its capaciousness if we have ears to hear.

Lesson Objectives

- To identify the continuity of Paul's rhetoric as he appropriates Isaiah's concepts and applies them to a theology of the Cross.
- To reflect on the meanings of the Cross in Scripture.
- To appreciate the implications of a theology of the Cross for the dignity of every person.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 NRSV

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Into the Scripture

Ancient Corinth was located strategically overlooking two harbors: Lechaion facing west on the Corinthian Gulf, and Cenchreae facing east on the Saronic Gulf. Ships were transported overland, avoiding a perilous journey all the way around. They went between the two harbors by means of a road built by the tyrant ruler Periander, who died in 585 BC. Periander established Corinth as one of the wealthiest city-states in Greece. The overland route across the Isthmus of Corinth provided safe passage for traders and travelers alike. Corinth thus became a cosmopolitan city and one of the major trading centers in Ancient Greece. In the time of Paul, Corinth was a place where visitors to the city could encounter everything from lavish banquets at the sanctuary of Asclepius to lascivious rituals at the temple

of Aphrodite.¹ The early Christians lived here in this context.

Today’s text comes near the beginning of Paul’s Corinthian correspondence. It follows a customary greeting at the opening of the chapter, thanksgiving for the recipients of his letter, and his introduction to the theme of the letter, which was the divisions in the

early church that he wanted to address. Paul was at his best in these early chapters in 1 Corinthians—pulling on his training in Scripture as a Pharisaical Jew and the importance of good rhetorical argument which was popular in the Greek world at the time. He summarizes his major point: “that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Paul would develop this theme throughout the sixteen chapters of the letter, taking on various divisive issues in turn.



Corinth became one of the major trading centers in Ancient Greece.

In all things that may be the cause of controversy: hairstyles, speaking in tongues, marriages to unbelievers, being employed by unbelievers, and/or joining in the community feasts where the meat had been used in idol worship—Paul urged unity, simplicity, and servant leadership. Chapter 13, the famous “love” chapter which is read so often at weddings, was originally addressed to a conflicted church. The love that he encouraged them to bear towards one another is *agape* love—the self-sacrificing love that God has for us. The best and greatest symbol of the unity that he urged the Corinthians to embrace is found in the Cross of Jesus.

In this era, Greeks commonly listened to public speakers who spoke outdoors and in amphitheaters. Paul himself typically spoke in Jewish synagogues when he traveled, where he encountered both Jews and those who were attracted to Judaism because of its strong moral and ethical code. There were a variety of speakers which ranged from sorcerers, workers of dark magic, politicians, those who would manipulate their hearers for their own purposes, doomsday prophets, extortionists, as well as those who spoke seeking to promote the common good. The listeners were familiar with the task of discerning between uplifting public speeches and those offered by someone with a hidden agenda.



The members of the early church would have read Paul's letter, in parts or in full, during their regular gatherings. Scribal copies of the letters of Paul were made and circulated among other early Christian communities and read in those communities also, even though they may have had very different challenges where they lived. Nevertheless, learning and hearing about Paul's admonitions to the Corinthian church was found to be instructive to them as well. Because there were people who traveled among the early churches (including Paul, John Mark, Silas, Timothy, Priscilla, and Aquila), the persons mentioned in the letter—such as Chloe's people (see 1 Corinthians 1:11)—would likely have been known to those in other communities as well. This would have made the reading of these letters in all their detail memorable and thrilling to those who first heard them. The letters served as a powerful reminder of the leaders' witness and early work as new generations continued to read them.

Into the Lesson

Paul begins by making an important dichotomy—that people can look at the Cross and take two entirely different messages from it: foolishness or the power of God. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (verse 18). Paul, who was trained in rhetoric, had his considerable rhetorical abilities on display in this passage. He is using language for its highest purpose: to persuade for the common good—for the well-being and instruction of his listeners, and not for lesser purposes which are to manipulate, extort, or trick. This is the question he begins to unpack in our passage. Both are visible in the symbol of the Cross, and both were visible to the people living in Corinth and wherever these words are read.



A Theology of the Prophets

Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 in verse 19: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (NIV). A look back at Isaiah 29 reinforces the argument that Paul is making. Those who put their faith in their own knowledge, accomplishments, and wealth are unprepared for the creation of a new order in which the deaf hear and the blind see.

Those who claim to be able to read are as confused by the vision as those who cannot read at all; “the prophet here looks to the day when the deaf shall hear and the blind see . . . It is a day not far off. Ruthless leaders who oppress the poor through deception and injustice will be cut off, while the meek shall ‘obtain fresh joy in the LORD.’”² Isaiah chapters 28–39 go on to deal with the larger theme of prophecy that a coming king will reign in righteousness—in the near future. Paul is interpreting this prophetic tradition as being centered and fulfilled on the Cross.

A Theology of the Cross

It is easy to look at the Cross and mistake Jesus' death for a failure. Medically speaking, death often comes as a form of failure: fatal accidents, an end to medical treatments, failing to live a few more days. It is hard to identify anything glorious in a death. Death is hard on



It is easy to look at the Cross and mistake Jesus' death for a failure.

the one suffering and dying, as well as on the living. Both are impacted as they witness the suffering of a loved one, and then the prospect of living without them. There is nothing intuitive about a theology of the Cross. The Cross literally inverts the social hierarchy and exalts the humble, redefining wisdom and truth.

Christians need to stand back and realize from time to time that the central symbol of our faith is disorienting to outsiders. The Cross does not convey its meaning in a straightforward way. Christians claim that the most important divine action in history is the humiliating death of a Jewish man from humble lineage, at the hands of the Roman occupiers. The central image, the symbol of the cross itself, is a disturbing symbol—the place and means of his execution. And yet, if it were not for this horrific death, there would be no story of resurrection, divine forgiveness, and triumph. However, this is not to glorify Jesus' pain and suffering—but it is to say that suffering does not have the last word on Christians. And what looks to some that Jesus had been humbled on the Cross, others glimpse even in his suffering, his glory and exaltation. From a theology of the Cross, Christians trace forgiveness of sins, reconciliation to God, Jesus' living presence with us in the form of the Holy Spirit, and Christian confidence in resurrection and eternal life. In short, herein lay many of the most robust theological mysteries in Christianity.³

Paul goes on to call out, even mocking, the elite of his age—the wise person and the teacher of the Law. For Greeks, he says, look for wisdom and Jews demand signs (miracles). The desire for wisdom among the Greeks was well known. Herodotus reports that “all Greeks were keen for every kind of learning⁴ And Jews were known to remember and recite in song the signs and miracles that God had already performed in their history. In the first century the mere mention of the word ‘cross’ is shameful to a Roman citizen and a free man.”⁵ Paul is contrasting the wisdom of the world (see verse 20) with the wisdom of God (see verses 21, 24). Wisdom as a human attainment cannot be compared with divine wisdom. This paradox is central to Christianity and to the symbol of the cross.

Into Discipleship

The Meaning of Youth Ministry

In the youth program at the church I am serving, we take time at every Wednesday evening gathering to ask

the young people to share their highs and lows from the previous week. They can share anything they want—personal, academic, something related to friends and family, etc. It keeps us connected to what is happening in their lives and spiritual journeys.⁶ Inevitably, someone will share that he/she did not do well on a test or quiz. This gives us the opportunity to remind the person of this: *You are not your grades!* This also holds true for those who do well on tests and quizzes. As much as we celebrate their success and hard work, it is still true: they are not their grades! We want to establish church as a safe place for them, no matter where they are on their life's journey. And we want to underscore that the world's standards of knowledge are very different from God's.

Andrew Root states, “Youth ministry is to help kids not waste their lives. Making youth ministry about God helps them aim their lives toward the Good. Seeking a living God means not just committing to some ideas (or even ideology) but encountering God in our lives. God is there, not to keep us happy, but to be an encounter of the Good.”⁷ When they encounter challenges in life, they can understand a person's worth outside of their income or assets or whatever they produce or do in life. Our worth is in our being God's beloved children—a worth which is sealed by Jesus on the Cross. This is already done for us and does not require us to work for it . . . it is a gift.

The Meaning of the Cross

In a sermon by Dr. William Self on this text, he lists eight ways of describing what happened on the Cross:



Seeking a living God
means encountering God
in our lives.



There is a “Ransom Theory.” We’re slaves to sin and Christ died to buy us back. There’s a “Debtor Theory of Saint Anselm.” We are debtors and Christ paid our debt. . . . There’s the “Governmental Theory.” Justice had to be satisfied. There’s the “Moral Theory.” Christ died as a martyr, a moral example for all of us. There’s the “Moral Influence Theory.” His love will move us to repent. There’s the “Universal Idea” of Christ universally repenting for all of us. And . . . there is the “Eternal Cross.” . . . in the heart of God that’s carried there because of our waywardness and our sins.⁸

There is some element of truth in all of them.

The Meaning of an Ordinary Day

One of the things that saints and heroes have in common is that they do not think that what they have done is especially remarkable. The firefighter who rescues a child from the burning building is only doing his job. The pilot who lands the plane safely is only doing what she was trained to do. The emergency room staff that save a life are responding according to protocol. Mother Teresa said, “We cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.” Most of us are not asked to do really great things, but we are asked to do a series of small, even unremarkable, things: follow through, teach a class, park a car, plant a garden, prepare a meal, sing music, show up at

work, listen to someone, be a student, a parent, a child . . . and in these ordinary relationships and small tasks, more than just a few of us have known truly great people. Of course, looking at them objectively at any given moment, their greatness may not be evident at all. It will depend on what you value, and what you have eyes to see.

Notes

1. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 87.
2. Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 215.
3. James R. Payton, Jr. argues in his essay in *The Christian Century* that Western and Orthodox Christians tend to view the cross through a slightly different lens: “Where Western Christianity tends to see it (the cross) as judgment on Christ for our sake, (Christian) Orthodoxy emphasizes that it is his victory for our sake. These emphases are not inconsistent with each other, and both are biblically warranted. But they are at the heart of some of the primary differences between Orthodox and Western Christians.” <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/why-orthodox-christians-see-triumph-cross>
4. Herodotus 4.77.1.
5. Text note 22-23, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press, 5th Edition.
6. This is a spiritual practice based on chapter 6: “The Beloved Community: Covenant Community in Youth Ministry” in *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli; published 2007 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London.
7. Andrew Root, *The End of Youth Ministry? Why Parents Don’t Really Care about Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do about It* (Ada, Michigan: 2020 Baker Academic, 2020), 115.
8. <https://day1.org/william-self-sermon-archives/5d9f5ac887f168638c0000a/no-cross-no-crown>

Closing Prayer

Melt away our false pride, O God. Remind us of those who are weak and despised in this world, that we may listen and attend to your way of righteousness and peace. Bless us with the capacity for compassion as we seek to minister to and with them. Bless our own areas of weakness and vulnerability, that they may be places where the work of your Cross comes alive. We give thanks for the life of Jesus and ask that you inspire us also to walk humbly with you in our day. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Paul's letter was originally written for the Corinthian community who were having specific problems, yet it immediately became popularly appreciated in other early churches. Reflect on what are some of the pitfalls and some of the blessings in reading something that originally had a very specific cultural application.

- Have you tried to bring people together who were in conflict? What was the conflict about? How did you appeal to them to reconcile?

■ Into the Lesson

- Could your understanding be expanded or deepened by a theology of the Cross that is deeper or wider?
- What is important to you about the theology of the Cross? What makes you uncomfortable about it?

■ Into Discipleship

- In a daily capacity do you see yourself as a beloved child of God?
- What does the cross of Jesus mean to you? Spend some time journaling your answer.

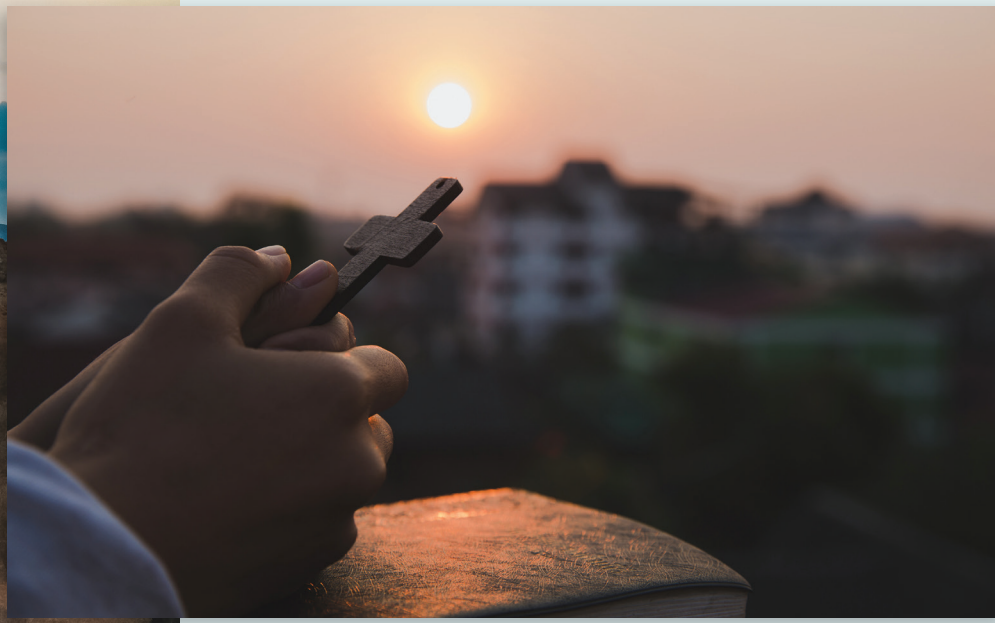
Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Jesus Paid It All," sung by Kim Walker-Smith: <https://youtu.be/Ymkl0t0FOcw?feature=shared>
- "At the Cross," composed by Isaac Watts; Ray Scott, lead vocalist: <https://youtu.be/gYIp4d1Nfss?feature=shared>
- "Near the Cross," sung by the Mississippi Mass Choir: https://youtu.be/JdhUcR_MbTw?feature=shared

Media Options

- Additional commentary on Paul's letters to the Corinthians: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Letter-of-Paul-to-the-Corinthians>



- “Why Orthodox Christians See Triumph in the Cross,” *The Christian Century*: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/why-orthodox-christians-see-triumph-cross>
- **Sermon:** “No Cross, No Crown,” by Dr. William Self, Cooperative Baptist Pastor of Johns Creek Baptist Church, Alpharetta, Georgia; this 2008 sermon title reflects the highs and lows of the text: <https://day1.org/audio/5d9f5ac887f168638c00000a/no-cross-no-crown>.

Activity Ideas

- Share your “highs and lows” from the week as described in the “Into Discipleship” section. Reflect together on whether these may be mixed blessings: what are the hidden blessings which may be part of the lows? Consider if “highs and lows” is a good framework to capture the events you share. Share the state of your “belovedness,” meaning how aware you have been this week that you are a beloved child of God.
- Reviewing the descriptions of the work of the Cross from Dr. William Self’s sermon, ask members of your group to identify which one seems most important to them, and which one they understand the least. Allow time for everyone to share their convictions and their questions.
- In his play *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare said, “It is an heretic that makes the fire, not she which burns in’t.” Reflect together on the meaning of this quote. How is it that some people can be blind to a reality

that is right in front of them? (In Shakespeare’s time, an example would be burning innocent people at the stake for alleged witchcraft.) Are there contemporary examples of this of which you are aware? Discuss.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Third Sunday in Lent

Week of March 3, 2024

Sunday, March 3

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Monday, March 4

Psalm 84; 1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Tuesday, March 5

Psalm 84; 2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19; Hebrews 9:23-28

Wednesday, March 6

Psalm 84; Ezra 6:1-16; Mark 11:15-19

Thursday, March 7

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Genesis 9:8-17; Ephesians 1:3-6

Friday, March 8

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Daniel 12:5-13; Ephesians 1:7-14

Saturday, March 9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Numbers 20:22-29; John 3:1-13

Boomerangs to Arrows: A Godly Guide for Launching Young Adult Children

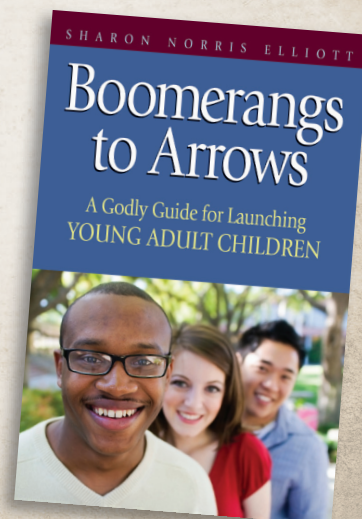
By Sharon Norris Elliott

“A valuable resource for parents who desire to help their grown children build a successfully independent life that reflects God’s purposes for them. You will find Sharon’s insights biblically sound, convicting, and also encouraging. While not specifically addressing the role of grandparents, they also could benefit from reading *Boomerangs*.”

—Cavin T. Harper, Executive Director,
Christian Grandparenting Network, www.christiangrandparenting.net

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FOCUS

look up and live!

So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole;
and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person
would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

—NUMBERS 21:9

Introduction

The story of Moses' raising the bronze serpent in the wilderness was one of the iconic moments in the children of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Its meaning may also not be evident immediately when we read the Scripture. The bronze serpent was an important symbol in ancient Near Eastern cultures, and it is a symbol that the Bible refers to both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. Jesus' crucifixion and its healing powers for humanity are ultimately compared to Moses' raising the bronze serpent in the wilderness—evoking symbols of healing, new life, and redemption. This is a lesson about snakes, fear, and faith (in that order).

Lesson Objectives

- To understand the text's historical context for the Israelites and its implications on the New Testament.
- To learn how the problem of idol worship for the Israelites was addressed.
- To reflect on the process of repenting and receiving forgiveness.

Numbers 21:4-9 NRSV

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on

a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Into the Scripture

Snakes!

In both ancient and contemporary times, there have always been poisonous snakes in the Middle East, including several different species of deadly cobras and vipers around Egypt, Mount Hor, and the Red Sea. In antiquity, there were nearby communities which worshiped snakes. For example, Egyptians used the snake as a symbol of royalty in worship. Also common in this era was the practice of ancient Near Eastern magic, including snake charming. Part of the drama of snake charming included making incantations while a practitioner induced the snakes to expend their venom. Removing the venom from the snake allowed the practitioner to gain power over it, and the collected venom could be used in medicines, such as in diluted form to treat snake bites and other ailments.

In the Ugaritic culture (i.e., of the Amorites), it was believed that healing was arbitrarily granted by their gods and could not be self-initiated.¹ Thus, Moses’ action of setting up a healing totem for the children of Israel contrasted with the

surrounding peoples’ traditions. The certainty of the Israelites’ act of looking up and living was a testimony to the power of their God.

From the Wilderness to the Temple

There is a subsequent reference to this snake incident in the Hebrew Scriptures dating to the First Temple period years later. At the beginning of his reign, King Hoshea cleansed the Temple of all manner of idols, removing the



Jesus eclipses this symbol
of healing for all who
have eyes to see.



Atop Mount Nebo, Jordan
by Giovanni Fantoni

“high places” (places of worship of the Canaanite deities, as well as the bronze serpent that had been placed in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem). “He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan” (2 Kings 18:4). King Hoshea was reforming the worship space in the First Temple. Although the bronze serpent was created by their great leader Moses as a reminder to the children of Israel to look up and live, the symbol subsequently became an idol, defeating the purpose for which it was made.

Just as the Ark of the Covenant, the tablets of the Ten Commandments, and even the temples themselves have been lost to history, so also this symbol of an important turning point in the story of the Exodus was not preserved. In an act of temple cleansing, Hoshea sought to refocus the attention of those who came to worship back to the Holy and away from distractions. Idols can be anything—depending on how we imbue them with meaning. In his own way, King Hoshea was asking the people to look up—this time away from the bronze serpent and to God instead.

In the New Testament

John uses this story from Numbers as a fulfillment of prophecy when Jesus is lifted up on the cross. Jesus eclipses this symbol of healing for all who have eyes to see: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14). The invitation in John is for anyone who will believe (or look up) to do so. John emphasizes that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world” (John 3:17). We are to lift up the account of Jesus’ offering of his life so that everyone can see his salvific power. The language of condemnation is metaphorically more of a downward gaze that takes us in the wrong direction. We are to look up at Jesus, just as the people looked up at the serpent in the wilderness and lived.

Into the Lesson

Fear

This account in Numbers comes at the end of a series of “murmuring stories” that are recounted in the Exodus story. Throughout their journey the people grumbled and did “murmur” among themselves, complaining about their conditions (no food and water). Then, reversing their stance when their need is met, they said that they did not like the food that they did have. They were happy to receive manna in the wilderness until they got tired of it. The murmuring and complaining were directed towards Moses and God and were met by turns with either a solution to the problem (manna and quail, and freshwater), or a rebuke that they had not kept faith in the wilderness journey. They should have never stopped believing that God would sustain



them. Numbers 11, 14, 16, and 20 all carry stories of complaining and “murmuring” in the desert.

In chapter 21, this complaining climaxed when poisonous snakes were sent among them. Rather than continuing the cadence of complaining, now their fearfulness turned to their experiencing an alarming crisis. Many people are afraid of snakes and can become paralyzed with terror when confronted with one. So, you can imagine the terror of being surrounded by many. We can also become paralyzed with fear when confronted with situations that are terrible and overwhelming. Sometimes we have challenges heaped upon us from different directions. When we face the worst in life, where do we go, and what do we do? We can learn a lot about ourselves and others when during crises.

From Fear to Faith

Moses created an image of a serpent that, when gazed upon, healed the Israelites from the poisonous snake bites. In verses 8-9, we read of a bronze *saraf* that Moses created. “Seraph” literally means “fiery.” The “fire” of these serpents is likely the burning sensation in the vicinity of the snakebite. The very thing that killed people was graciously ordered by God, in replicated form, to ward off death and to bring healing. It functioned like the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts in Egypt (see Exodus 12).²



Sometimes we have challenges heaped upon us
from different directions.

The healing was in the gaze itself, lifted and directed at a symbolic and potent artifact, a reminder that the children of Israel were traveling through a wilderness; they were healed and renewed by the appeal to Moses' leadership on their journey and God's power over the perils in their way. Imagining this terrifying scene, it is easy enough to imagine the children of Israel terrified by the snakes around them. When we are fearful, it is often our instinct to look at the thing we fear most, rather than to redirect our gaze to the thing that will bring our healing.

Part of the shaping of the children of Israel into a new people in the wilderness was for them to learn to trust God in all circumstances (which, at that time, included trusting Moses' leadership). The bronze serpent offered them a reminder and a new focus when they looked up. The children of Israel had been in the habit of complaining, and rather than assuaging their complaints, their fears were dialed up dramatically when they encountered the snakes. This is when they realized that they had sinned by speaking against the Lord and against Moses. God did not remove the snakes from the camp but gave the remedy for their pain. Sometimes, life requires us to live with a challenge. Yet, God is present and willing to see us through those difficult days.

We see in this text an arc of repentance of sin, forgiveness, and restored relationship as the children of Israel realized that their complaining had been a sin. It had been a grave disservice to Moses' leadership and to the spiritual purpose of their time in the wilderness. The lesson they learned helped turn their fear into faith.

- Admitting the sin: "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you . . ." (verse 7).
- Moses forgave them when he prayed for the people (verse 7).
- God instructed Moses on how to give them a means of redemption: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live" (verse 8).

Thus, when the gospel of John refers to this event, it is not only to the image of the bronze serpent compared with the cross of Jesus, but it is also emphasizing the manner of restoring relationship: the confession of sin, assurance of pardon, and the restoration of relationship.



God is present and
willing to see us through
those difficult days.

Faith in the Bible is regularly understood as *trust* rather than *belief*. Moses did not expect or challenge people to "believe" in specific doctrines or precepts about God but, rather, through the Law offered them a way of life and a process to follow to remain in relationship with God. The aim of Moses was for the people to move forward, trusting that God would keep the divine commitment to lead the people to a new land and to live with them wherever their lives took them. In the Bible, rebellion against God took the form of faithlessness. And those who are "unfaithful" and "untrusting" are often unreliable toward one another as well as toward God.³

Into Discipleship

Driving along the back roads in Oregon where I grew up, you would see them all the time. There would be a pasture with some cows or sheep, and a white handwritten sign: "Prepare to meet thy God. Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." And you would keep driving over a crossroad, and then in the next pasture (which might be a fescue), another white handwritten sign: "I am the way and the truth and the light, no one comes to the father but by me." As you kept driving, you would find in the next field, maybe a cover crop of alfalfa, the same kind of sign: this one would just say "JN 3:16" (with no other explanation). You could drive for miles like this, taking in this series of messages—lifted up—which clearly bore testimony to someone's sense of healing. But they often also conveyed a hostile edge, or a judgmental tone, lifted



up for everyone to see. I worried about the “JN 3:16” signs—the other signs wrote out all the verses, but JN 3:16 was thought to be self-explanatory. Rural Oregon is not the Bible belt. I envisioned motorists driving along, trying to look up the Bible reference as they drove, wondering to what the sign pertained.

My husband often watches games on TV at home. Maybe you have seen these signs at ball games. After we were married, I started watching with him, and I was surprised to see fans lifting up these familiar signs—JN 3:16—that I used to see in countryside pastures in Oregon. The first time I saw it on TV, I said, “Look, honey, those people are from Oregon!” Of course, I soon realized that JN 3:16 was everywhere: it was a distraction as the basketball player took a foul shot, it was in the endzone when the team scored a touchdown, and it was at the parade at the end of the season. It was found in many places and was always lifted up.

Our interpretation of Scripture has to do with how we look *up*. What expectations inform our lives and what we tell ourselves for which to hope? The quality of the faith we keep is how we look up today. In John 8:28, Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he.” Our lives bear testimony to the people around us about our values and how we have looked up to the Cross. What are we lifting up?

We call this living the good news—when you find others to forgive, maybe in a moment when they

cannot forgive themselves. Or we may offer kindness to someone who will never be able to repay us. Or you may cultivate a spiritual practice of generosity—connecting others with resources when there is no direct benefit to you. When hope dries up, and those around you are hopeless—when you have buried a dear friend—it will be clear to the people in your sphere of influence how the Gospel is lifted up in your life. When you know where to look for new life, others can follow your gaze.

It is easy to spend time worrying about things that have already been forgiven. The Gospels call us to admit our sin, ask for forgiveness, and . . . look up! Look up and see that Christ has been lifted in our wilderness, showing us what healing looks like, and in whom we find our greatest hope. Look up from pain and distractions. Look up from addictions and despair. Look up from a difficult day, wishing things are other than what they are. Jesus was not lifted to reveal our shortcomings; rather, Jesus has been lifted so that we might be healed in our bodies and in our souls—so that we might have new life today and every day. Look up!

Notes

1. Baruch A. Levine, *The Anchor Yale Bible: Numbers 21-36* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000), 89.
2. *Ibid.*, 101.
3. W. Eugene March, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 99-100.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, you lifted Jesus Christ in the wilderness of our lives. As we bear our own burdens, help us to turn our heads and look up to the things that bring your healing. When we witness pain and injustice in the world, help us to hold that together in faith with the knowledge and mystery of your unending love and knowledge that you are reconciling all things even now. We give thanks that you have already reconciled us to yourself; make us your reconciling people. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Thinking about a distinction between faith (trust) and belief, what are the implications for church culture which emphasizes trust over belief, or vice versa? (E.g., A community which trusts each other versus a community which believes the same things.)

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of such institutions? To which would you rather belong? Why?
- Why do we look down at the sources of our pain, rather than up at the source of our healing?

■ Into the Lesson

- Which aspect of the acknowledging and dealing with sin is the hardest for you, and what is the most natural—admitting sin, asking forgiveness, or forgiving someone, or moving forward in a restored relationship?
- In the context of this Scripture, what is the difference between faith in magic and faith in God?

■ Into Discipleship

- Looking outwardly at your life, what would someone see or notice about what is important to you? What are you lifting up?
- Have you had the experience of outgrowing something that used to be really important to you? What happened?

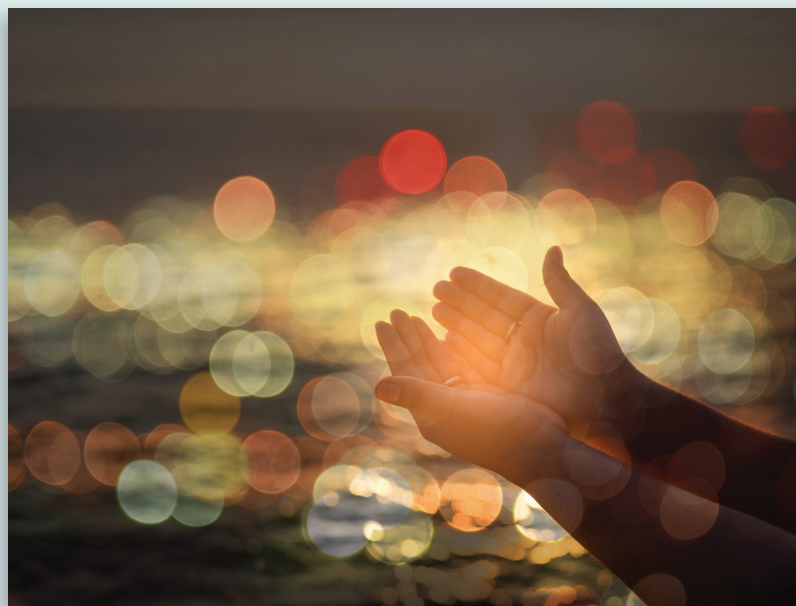
Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Lift High the Cross,” sung by the Chancel Choir, Broadway Baptist Church, (arr. Sterling Procter): <https://youtu.be/GbcBXP4AIE?feature=shared>
- “Hallelujah, Amen” (G. F. Handel), sung by Mars Hill Festival Choir (2014): <https://youtu.be/7RdoufVtgQI?feature=shared>



Copper-plate Engraving, c.1793 by Benjamin West and John Hall



- “Love Lifted Me,” sung by Kenny Rogers: <https://youtu.be/vMH3Vlxzj2w?feature=shared>

Media Options

- **Map and information on the Red Sea:** Red Sea—WorldAtlas.
- **Artwork—oil on wood panel:** The Brazen Serpent (y1990-44).

Activity Ideas

- Sermon by Dr. Kristen Adkins Whiteside (of First Baptist Church, Winchester, Virginia) on today’s Scripture B16: The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B (2021). Discuss it as a class. What comes up for you from the message?
- Spend some time reflecting on the differences between faith and belief. If your church has a mission statement or a covenant, read it together and reflect on the things that these documents ask the congregation to believe. Also talk together about what it means to be a community of faith and what is necessary to believe to be part of that community. What happens when people have faith, but do not necessarily believe the same things?

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Fourth Sunday in Lent

Week of March 10, 2024

Sunday, March 10

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22;
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Monday, March 11

Psalm 107:1-16; Exodus 15:22-27; Hebrews 3:1-6

Tuesday, March 12

Psalm 107:1-16; Numbers 20:1-13;
1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Wednesday, March 13

Psalm 107:1-16; Isaiah 60:15-22; John 8:12-20

Thursday, March 14

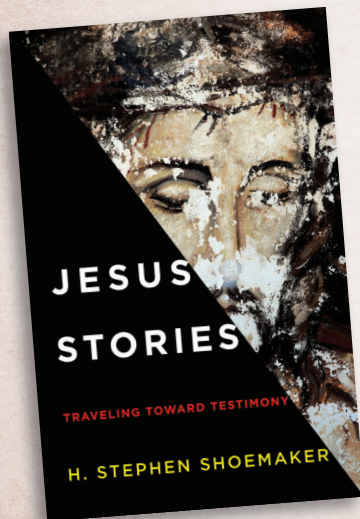
Psalm 51:1-12; Isaiah 30:15-18; Hebrews 4:1-13

Friday, March 15

Psalm 51:1-12; Exodus 30:1-10; Hebrews 4:14–5:4

Saturday, March 16

Psalm 51:1-12; Habakkuk 3:2-13; John 12:1-11



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BLESSING

our high priest forever

... having been designated by God a high priest according
to the order of Melchizedek.

—HEBREWS 5:10

Introduction

Hebrews encourages faith for people who are facing serious challenges in their lives by drawing on the rich tradition of the story of the children of Israel. In this passage, it is the lifting of the figure of the primordial King Melchizedek and his blessing on Abram, which is handed down to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Melchizedek brought blessing to Abraham, which has its provenance in the time of Noah. The community that reads this today may consider the provenance of their own blessings, and how this ancient blessing has been extended to us in the person of Jesus Christ, for our community, and for the world.

Lesson Objectives

- To identify and trace the thread of priestly blessing extending from Noah to Melchizedek, to Abram, to Jesus, and to our lives.
- To reflect on the provenance of our blessings.
- To consider the effect of our own actions on future generations and share ideas on how to have a positive—even blessed—impact on people who will not be able to thank us personally.

Hebrews 5:5-10 NRSV

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; 6 as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” 7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Into the Scripture

The book of Hebrews comes in our Bibles following Paul's letters, but scholars agree that Hebrews has a different author. The vocabulary, writing style, and worldview are different from the way Paul communicates. Hebrews is written to an audience of both Jews and Gentiles, some of whom may have faced so much persecution for their Christian faith that they renounced it. The author seeks to offer a "word of exhortation" (13:22)—that is, a word of encouragement—to this community. Hebrews does not take the usual form of a letter; the style is more like an early Christian sermon, albeit a long one. The book of Hebrews encourages listeners in their faith during contemporary challenges by drawing on the rich tradition of faith, connecting the story of the children of Israel to the story of Jesus himself and then coming back to modern listeners.

Melchizedek in a Game of Thrones

Genesis 14 begins with a conflict among different kings with roots in the inequity and a blessing stemming from the time of Noah. Noah blessed his son Shem (and Japheth) and their descendants, and cursed Ham and his descendants following the Flood. Ham's descendants

went to live in Canaan.

In Genesis 14, we have an account of the rebellion of five Canaanite kings against an alliance of four Eastern kings associated with the Dead Sea region (where Lot is said to have settled). This is understood to have been a conflict among the descendants of Noah. The Eastern kings seized

Lot and his household and took them back towards their home. Abram's ability to pursue and overcome the Shemite (descendants of Noah's son Shem) conquerors reflected his status as heir to Shem's blessing (see Genesis 9:25-27). This is what Melchizedek affirmed with his blessing.¹

The king and high priest Melchizedek is mentioned in Genesis, once in the Psalms, and then again in the book of Hebrews. His name means "My King of Righteousness"; he was king of Salem, which later became Jerusalem. He brought out bread and wine to Abram



Hebrews' style is more like an early Christian sermon.

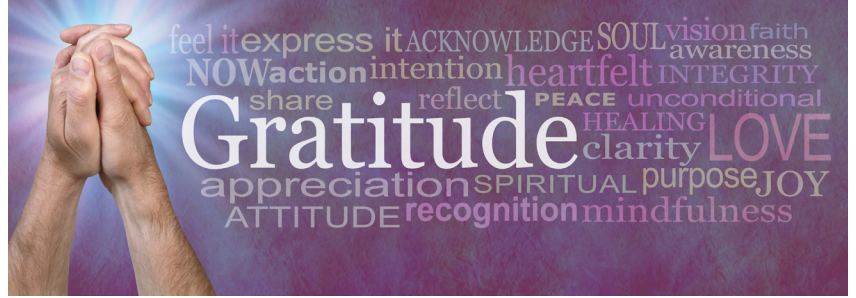
after he won the battle to retrieve his nephew Lot and all his people. Melchizedek blessed Abram, and Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything he had—which served as a foreshadowing of what the people would learn to do much later in the Temple worship overseen by priests before and during the time of Jesus.

Melchizedek's Legacy

Abraham found himself receiving this blessing in this particular place. Melchizedek used bread and wine in his blessing, with all its symbolism, and refreshed the 318 young men who were with Abraham, functioning as his army. This was a critical time in Abram's life. It came in between the two calls to Abram by God recorded in Genesis in chapters 12 and 15. It reflected that the call of Abram would also function as a blessing to the world beyond his tribe. In Israel, kings and priests had different functions—but Melchizedek had both. This is interpreted as a foreshadowing of the duality of Jesus, who would in his person come to fulfill and inhabit the roles of king, priest, prophet, Messiah, and sacrificial offering (as represented by our Communion).

Tradition holds that the place of this meeting was in Jerusalem on the very ground of what later would be the First and Second Temples. The Second Temple was built on the footprint of the First. Some traditions hold that this may also have been the ground where God created Adam and Eve. In the time of Melchizedek, it was a Canaanite community.





In Psalm 110, Melchizedek is alluded to in a psalm attributed to King David, leading him into battle and blessing his leadership. Christian interpretation has understood the king's victory as prefiguring Jesus' resurrection and rule over the nations (see Acts 2:34; Hebrews 1:3, 13). That is as if it promised a spiritual victory with more depth and importance than a political coup. The blessing of Melchizedek was applied here to the Davidic king, into whose lineage Jesus would be born.

Into the Lesson

Hebrews is a theological text which brings together many biblical teachings and traditions. Beginning right before our passage in chapter 4, verse 14, Hebrews introduces the idea of Jesus' being our "High Priest" who can sympathize with our weaknesses (see 4:15 and 5:2), but who also invites us to approach the throne of grace (see 4:16). Beginning in chapter 5, Jesus is contrasted with other historical high priests who had to atone not only for the sins of their communities but also for their own sins. Jesus was the last in the lineage and fulfillment of this order of priests going back to Melchizedek.

In verse 5, Jesus is contrasted with other high priests, such as Aaron, Moses' older brother and the first high priest among the Israelites (see 5:4). Like the others, Jesus did not choose the role, but was called to it. This is affirmed in the description of his baptism using similar language (see Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; John 1:32-34). "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; this quote can also be found in Psalm 2:7; Acts 13:33;

and Hebrews 1:5—a prophecy and fulfillment regarding the chosenness of Jesus Christ the Messiah.

In Hebrews 5:6, we move from the choosing of Jesus to the eternal nature of his call, having begun when Melchizedek blessed Abram in the name of "God Most High, maker of heaven and earth . . ." (the only human blessing Abraham receives)—while God made a covenant with him (see Genesis 13:16-17; 15:18-21), a covenant that promised land and people to Abram and his infertile wife, Sarai, as strangers in this geographical area. While Melchizedek began this order of priestly blessing, it was carried out by Aaron in the wilderness and continued in the first and second Temple worship in Jerusalem—coming to its fulfillment and completion in Jesus himself at Golgotha and finally Resurrection morning.

Verse 7 starts off with this: "in the days of his flesh"—meaning during his lifetime. It describes how Jesus prayed as we do (offering prayers and petitions) and how these prayers were heard by God, accordingly due to his submission to the divine will. Jesus' "loud cries and tears" emphasized his humanity, and the appropriateness of these prayers is established by this language: "to the one who was able to save him from death" (verse 7). Jesus prayed with the emotions of a regular person—as we do—to the one God who hears prayers.



Jesus prayed with the emotions of a regular person—as we do—to the one God who hears prayers.

Verse 8 begins, “although he was a Son”—meaning although he was chosen and a natural heir to divine blessing, he learned obedience in suffering. This is not to say that suffering brings salvation, and certainly we should not celebrate suffering (our own or anyone else’s); rather, in suffering for others, Jesus learned to take on the sin of the world. This is the work of the Messiah of God.

According to verse 9, “having been made perfect, [Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”: Jesus was perfect at his birth as well as in his life, in his suffering, and in his resurrection. Jesus’ name for himself in the Gospels is *Ben Adam*, meaning “the son of man.” Jesus understands himself to be fully human and the fruit or flower of humanity, holding a particular place and having a particular function among us.

Verse 10 brings us back to Jesus’ designation by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek—which is to say that Jesus’ legacy is one of being a blessing to all the world. The kind of blessing that is available to us in Jesus Christ is one that none of us deserve or earn. He has not been legally appointed to look after us, and we cannot earn his attention or approval. Nonetheless, he does arrive (like Melchizedek did) from two millennia ago, and blesses us—with bread and wine, which we share at Communion—and takes the injustice we struggle with upon himself personally.

Our Scriptures promise that through Christ our high priest, we have access to power. We have resources, spiritual and physical; we have a new family, and the communion of saints, which extends throughout time. We have Jesus himself: our redeemer, Savior, and advocate—our high priest according to the ancient order of Melchizedek. The injustice that we experience in our lives is resolved in faith. We have access to power to change the course of human history which God Almighty holds in God’s hands. We have every good reason to be hopeful and encouraged today and for our future, since we each carry this blessing in our own lives.

Into Discipleship

“What’s past is prologue” is a quote from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*. Antonio says it in the opening scene. It signals at the beginning of the play that there are some things that have happened that have led up to this before we started. But what is important now is what is coming next—which are the events of the play *The Tempest*. An Internet search of this phrase reveals that this quote is

used for many purposes. It is often used on TV shows and popular culture. You might also have heard people say that “if you don’t know your history, you are doomed to repeat it.” In the same way, Hebrews brings what has gone before to bear on current circumstances and the future. It provides an opportunity for us to reflect on our own current trajectory and our next steps. “What’s past is prologue” means that everything that has come before will go with you, but in a new form—now is the time to give that shape. What has happened up to now has prepared you.

The book of Hebrews engages us in the same kind of moment by looking at the blessings in salvation history. It is written to encourage. It encourages us to consider what is the deepest core of our faith. How does it affect our identity as we live our daily lives? What builds up faith? And what tears it down? What are the things that turn our heads and play on our fears, or that threaten the convictions that keep our faith alive? When are you most vulnerable to a loss of faith, or just letting it just drift away?

In particular, the writer of the book of Hebrews worried about the effect that systemic injustice at the hands of the Romans was having on the early believers. Much like living with chronic pain, living with injustice wears on the human soul. The person you know whose faith may be the most vulnerable is often the person who is struggling with injustice. Injustice comes in many forms—some of it visible, some of it invisible. The poorest among us often live with institutionalized injustice in ways the rest of us do not confront. The family we are born into determines



The family we are
born into determines our
access to opportunities
and care.



our access to opportunities and care. Yet, injustice festers under many roofs—in homes and businesses, in families, in workplaces, among nations. Even where you think it should not, it can have a life in churches and among people of faith—despite our best intentions.

Hebrews affirms that faith can have an important role in resolving injustice—which we can see first in the encounter of Abram and Melchizedek and that gets carried forward by Jesus. This begins in our hearts and extends to the world—the deep blessing and renewed wholeness that comes by putting faith in Jesus Christ. Hebrews calls him our high priest—a surprisingly effective tool when you consider the injustice loose in the world.

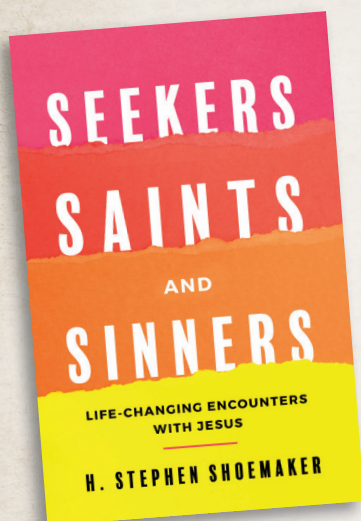
The Scriptures promise that through Christ our high priest, we have access to power by his invitation

to us as we enter discipleship. We can effect change. In the sphere of our influence, we have resources, spiritual and physical, and we have a new family: the communion of saints. We have the church which connects us and continues to influence history, and we have Jesus Christ himself, our redeemer, Savior, and advocate—our high priest, according to the ancient order of Melchizedek.

At its founding, every place of worship was set aside to worship God and to bring that power to bear upon and bless the lives of those living here. What is past is prologue!

Note

1. Text note, Genesis 14, *Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2010).



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Closing Prayer

Leader: This blessing is taken from the book of Numbers, where Moses instructs his brother, Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, on how to bless the children of Israel:

All: *The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and
be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and
give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)*

All: Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- As you trace the lineage of the blessings and the curse stemming from the time of Noah, what other lineages of blessing and curses are you aware of

which have set up conflict for future generations?
In our country? In your family? In your community?

- When have you been aware of people from outside your community who have had a major positive effect on you? Who were they? What did they do?

■ Into the Lesson

- If you have been baptized, what were the vows and promises made at your baptism? How have they shaped your character since then?
- Think about moments when you have suffered in your life. Are there any positives that have resulted from your suffering? How do you think about suffering (yours or someone else's) when it does not seem to have any positive effect? Is the blessing still to come? Is it held in mystery? Something else?

■ Into Discipleship

- What role does being a person of faith play in your life and in your choices?
- For you, what are the important things to remember about maintaining your faith while experiencing injustice?
- Journal a letter to a young person who may be facing injustice in his/her own life. How do you encourage the person to have faith in his/her circumstances?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Only Time," sung by Enya: https://youtu.be/7wfYIMyS_dI?feature=shared
- "The God of Abraham Praise," sung by St. Mark's Church (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania): <https://youtu.be/RmHZq-rowX4?feature=shared>



- “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” sung by Chris Rice: https://youtu.be/ax_NMWLEb6U?feature=shared

Media Options

- Watch the eight-minute introduction to the book of Hebrews from the Bible project: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/hebrews/>
 - What are the important takeaways for you from the book of Hebrews as retold in this short video?
 - In your experience, who needs to know that God will not abandon us in our day?
 - Who needs to hear a warning not to abandon God?
- Read more about the high priest Melchizedek: Melchizedek | Story, Meaning, Priesthood, & Bible Verse | Britannica
- Consider sharing this overview of Hebrews: Book of Hebrews Summary | Watch an Overview Video

Activity Ideas

- In a small group setting, ask participants to list the top three to five blessings in their lives right now. Discuss how many of them they earned themselves and how many of them have a provenance outside of their own actions. (E.g., who their parents were, where they were born, what kind of opportunities they have had, etc.)
- Discuss ways that you can have a positive effect on and even bless future generations. What kind of a church do you want to pass on to future generations? Consider both positive and negative actions you can do (e.g., give my children/grandchildren or children in my

community a good education; encourage their growth in faith; stop contributing to pollution and climate problems where I live by recycling and reusing things more; etc.).

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Fifth Sunday in Lent

Week of March 17, 2024

Sunday, March 17

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12 or Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Monday, March 18

Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 43:8-13; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Tuesday, March 19

Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 44:1-8; Acts 2:14-24

Wednesday, March 20

Psalm 119:9-16; Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23; John 12:34-50

Thursday, March 21

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Philippians 2:1-11

Friday, March 22

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:1-9; Philippians 2:12-18

Saturday, March 23

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16; Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

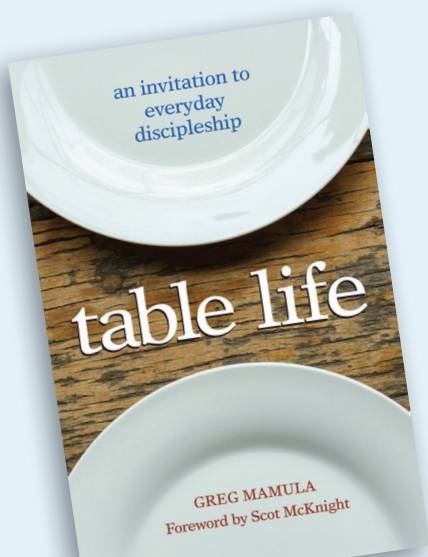


Table Life: An Invitation to Everyday Discipleship

by Greg Mamula

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God's love endures forever

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

—PSALM 118:26

Introduction

On Palm Sunday, we remember and may even reenact the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into the Holy City of Jerusalem where the Second Temple stood, accompanied by a procession. The Gospels provide the account that the people lining the way were singing, waving branches, and shouting words from Psalm 118. As we reflect on this psalm, we see in it the hopes recorded in Scripture, and we gain appreciation for how Jesus enters the story of his people—incarnating, interpreting, and fulfilling the tradition which has gone before: the Law and the Prophets. The book of Psalms invites us to reflect on the story of our faith and how we share it creatively in the seasons of our lives.

Lesson Objectives

- To appreciate how Psalm 118 is used in worship.
- To learn about how it is quoted and redacted in the New Testament.
- To consider the creativity expressed in the Psalms as opportunities for worship and prayer.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 NRSV

1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! 2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." . . . 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. 20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! 26 Blessed is the one who comes

in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. 27 The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. 28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. 29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Into the Scripture

The book of Psalms has served as a kind of prayer book or hymnal for Christians and Jews for millennia. Traditionally, it has been thought to have been written upon the return of the children of Israel from Babylonian captivity. This was as they commenced to rebuild the Second Temple in Jerusalem and return to living in the Promised Land of Canaan. The early Christians and medieval churches emphasized the Psalms in worship, and rabbinic Judaism has emphasized it since the destruction of the Second Temple in the year AD 70. Psalm 118 continues to be used on Palm Sunday for Christians in worship as we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into the Holy City. For Jews, Psalm 118 continues to be used in worship at the annual celebrations of

Passover and Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles).

The book of 150 psalms conveys a wide range of human emotion throughout. Sometimes, an enormous range of human emotion can be reflected within just one psalm, such as Psalm 118. Walter Brueggemann says that "The open poetic language and varied traditions in Psalm 118 suggest that the composition is a kind of model prayer for the worshipping community . . . the New

Testament writers found Psalm 118 to be a beneficial text for portraying the work of Jesus in the world."¹

The original music, melodies, and harmonies for the Psalms have been lost to history; the book today is a collection of lyrics only. In Hebrew, many of the psalms are in rhyming verse or have a variety of other mnemonic



Psalms has served as a kind of prayer book or hymnal for Christians and Jews.

devices built into them so that they are memorable in the way that song lyrics are often memorable when someone begins with the first lines and the tune. The Psalms were written long before J. S. Bach (1685–1750) established the western form of music, which is structured around major and minor scales and chords. Therefore, the tonal quality of the Psalms originally was very likely entirely different from the kind of music that people in westernized countries are accustomed to hearing. The other clue we have about how they sounded is that the Psalms themselves at times refer to instruments such as the harp, shofar (ram's horn), lyre, drum, organ, flute, cymbal, and trumpet used in accompaniment.

Psalm 118 is part of a collection of thanksgiving psalms (113–118) called the *Hallel* psalms—because of their repeated use of the word *Hallelujah*. As the last psalm in this series, Psalm 118 provides an appropriate conclusion to this liturgical group with its emphasis



on the resolution of human distress, the offer of God's salvation, and the repeated refrain of "God's steadfast love endures forever." At the conclusion of the account of the Lord's Supper in the gospels of Matthew and Mark (see Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26), they describe how the disciples sang a hymn or psalm together and then went out into the garden. Scholars do not have enough evidence to be certain of what Passover seders looked like in that historical period. Nonetheless, in keeping with tradition, many suspect that they sang one or all the Hallel psalms before Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray.

The use of this psalm in worship is reflected in the New Testament. This psalm is associated with Palm Sunday today because it is what we hear the people shouting in the accounts of the Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem in the Gospels (see Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9; John 12:13). The verse "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 23:39 and Luke 13:35b, NIV) is associated with the coming of the Messiah. In Matthew and Luke, it is also included in Jesus' lament when he weeps for Jerusalem, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Matthew 23:37a; Luke 13:34a).

Into the Lesson

Psalm 118 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. The psalm reminds us of who God is: YHWH is named twelve times in the thirteen verses in our reading. The psalm begins and ends with a celebration of God's steadfast love. The repeated refrain emphasizes the meaning and invites a moment for collective participation. Stephen Montgomery says, "It starts and ends with a celebration of deliverance. God's 'steadfast love' is the very essence of God's character, which is revealed in acts of liberation and deliverance. The Hebrew root



of 'steadfast love' is a mother's womb—God's strong, compassionate, fiercely steadfast love."² The psalm invites us to remember God's steadfast love when human life runs the gamut of emotions during challenging times.

The voice of the psalmist moves from first-person petitions (e.g., "Open to me the gates of righteousness . . ." [verse 19]), to an invitation to the congregation to repeat lines such as "his steadfast love endures forever" (verses 1, 2, 3, 4, 29), with the use of the second-person plural in "We bless you from the house of the Lord" (verse 26b). Moving between the single and the collective voices, the structure of the psalm invites us to bear one another's burdens, to celebrate what God has already done for us, and to overhear one another's prayers. This carries us into the central elements of worship, reminding us to consider what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do.

Verse 19 begins a new section, stating "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them . . ." In the Holy Lands, "doors" as well as what we call "gates" are both referred to as gates. Imagine approaching the gates (doors) of the Second Temple and asking to be let in. The qualifications for being let in are "righteousness" in verse 20—this door is for the righteous; and in verse 21, we see that the Lord has become "[our] salvation," meaning that the Lord has provided our righteousness. Or one may interpret it as having been "reckoned to us as righteousness" (see Genesis 15:6), as when the Lord reckones Abraham as righteous for his faith. The Lord provides salvation, creating righteousness in



The psalm invites us to remember God's steadfast love
when human life runs the gamut of emotions.

those who would otherwise not be righteous. Righteousness is a quality of God, and humans are righteous to the extent that God has extended an invitation to us. Christians recognize this invitation in the atonement offered by Jesus Christ. Jesus is the righteous one; we are invited into his atoning work on our behalf.

In verse 22, we see that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Jesus himself cites these words in the Gospels (see Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17), referring to the rejection he received and the new righteousness that he offers the world. Cornerstones are unusually shaped rocks upon which a building or fortress may be fitted around and built out from, providing strength and stability to the whole structure. The inversion of the rejected stone which becomes the cornerstone reveals divine intervention in this unlikely choosing—a new orientation for new construction.

Verses 23-25 celebrate that the saving work of God is marvelous and the day in which it takes place is to be celebrated. When we ask, God grants us salvation and access where we have not deserved it.

Verse 26a reads, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.” This is a welcoming of the awaited Prophet/Messiah/King/Priest. It is quoted again in the Gospels during Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (see Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9; John 12:13). And it is answered with the second half of verse 26, with the people’s response: “We bless you from the house of the LORD.” Verse 27 describes how this procession continues with branches (likely palms) up to the “horns” of the altar (the altar had projections on the corners which are described as horns).

The final two verses affirm again that we worship YHWH and give YHWH thanks and praise. The psalmist has given context to what it means that “God’s love is steadfast and endures forever.” Note that the psalm included the account of personal distress, bringing God’s people salvation, naming us among the righteous, and welcoming the One who comes in the name of the Lord. This is the whole story of salvation history in a psalm of Thanksgiving.

Into Discipleship

Although the entire Psalter and all of Holy Scripture are dear to me as my only comfort and source of life, I fell in love with this psalm especially.



The Lord reckons Abraham as righteous for his faith.

Therefore, I call it my own. When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even the saints could not aid me, this psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many great troubles. As a result, it is dearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor. I would be most unwilling to trade this psalm for all of it.³

—Martin Luther

How would you place value on a psalm? Martin Luther’s own life was one of deep struggle. He struggled with the kings and princes of his era as the land that became Germany withdrew from the Holy Roman Empire, led in part by his theological issues with the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church’s hierarchy. Luther objected to the selling of *indulgences* in his day (i.e., the practice of collecting a payment to absolve sins, and/or to release souls in purgatory after death).

While visiting Rome in 1510, he saw the tremendous splendor resulting from the collection of these fees. This display confirmed in him that the practice was corrupt, and the money was being ill-used for extravagant building projects and the personal enrichment of the clergy in the church’s hierarchy. He strongly felt that money should have been used to support the poor and for the well-being of the larger Church.

From his knowledge of the Scriptures and work as a pastor, he remained firm in his conviction that God’s grace is free to all: freely given by Jesus on the Cross. Therefore, to charge a fee for it is to diminish the work that Jesus Christ has already done for the world. Luther’s act of resistance two years later when he nailed his 95



Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg is credited with setting off the Protestant Reformation, which swept Europe.

Where do we find strength when we set forth on a new path? How do we find support when the world's structural and systemic problems become obvious to us in our lives? The book of Psalms has been a source of inspiration for generations. The New Testament bears witness to its continuing influence, and musicians continue to create psalms for today. Paul Simon, who does not describe himself as religious, released at the age of 81 (in 2023) an album called *Seven Psalms*. He says it came to him in his dreams. In it, he offers several metaphors for who the Lord is. In the first track, he sings the following:

*The Lord is my engineer
The Lord is the earth I ride on
The Lord is the face in the atmosphere
The path I slip and slide on . . .
The Lord is a virgin forest
The Lord is a forest ranger
The Lord is a meal for the poorest of the poor
A welcome door to the stranger*

Seven Psalms returns to these images and build on them. In the track “The Sacred Harp,” Paul Simon sings “the Lord is my record producer”—an image very personal to him but also inviting us to imagine how the Lord may be near to us in ways that we may not immediately recognize. Another lyric is, “The thought that God turns music into bliss” . . . In Martin Copenhaver’s review of this album, he states that Simon’s voice sounds like it’s “been hushed into something like reverence.”⁴ This is not a young man’s sound of silence.

Music is created from a backdrop of silence and returns to silence when it is over. How do you value music and think about silence? What kind of music would you like more of and what would you prefer to hear less?

Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 509.
2. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 146.
3. Martin Luther, *Martin Luther Works, Vol. 14: Selected Psalms III*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 45. <https://www.thebaldbeliever.com/post/luther-s-favorite-psalm>
4. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/old-man-dreaming-dreams-psalms>

Closing Prayer

Leader: O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let everyone say:

All: “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Leader: Let those in the congregation say:

All: “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Leader: Let those in our hearing say:

All: “His steadfast love endures forever.” You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Psalm 118 is considered by biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman to be a model for worship. What do you think is important to include in a model prayer or psalm? What would “model worship” look like for you? Have you ever experienced it?

- What is your favorite kind of music? What qualities make it your favorite?

■ Into the Lesson

- How often do you give thanks to God for your salvation or for the salvation of others?
- When you think about the cornerstone which was rejected, what are some other causes that you know of which were unpopular at first but later were affirmed? Why does Jesus identify with the stone which was rejected?

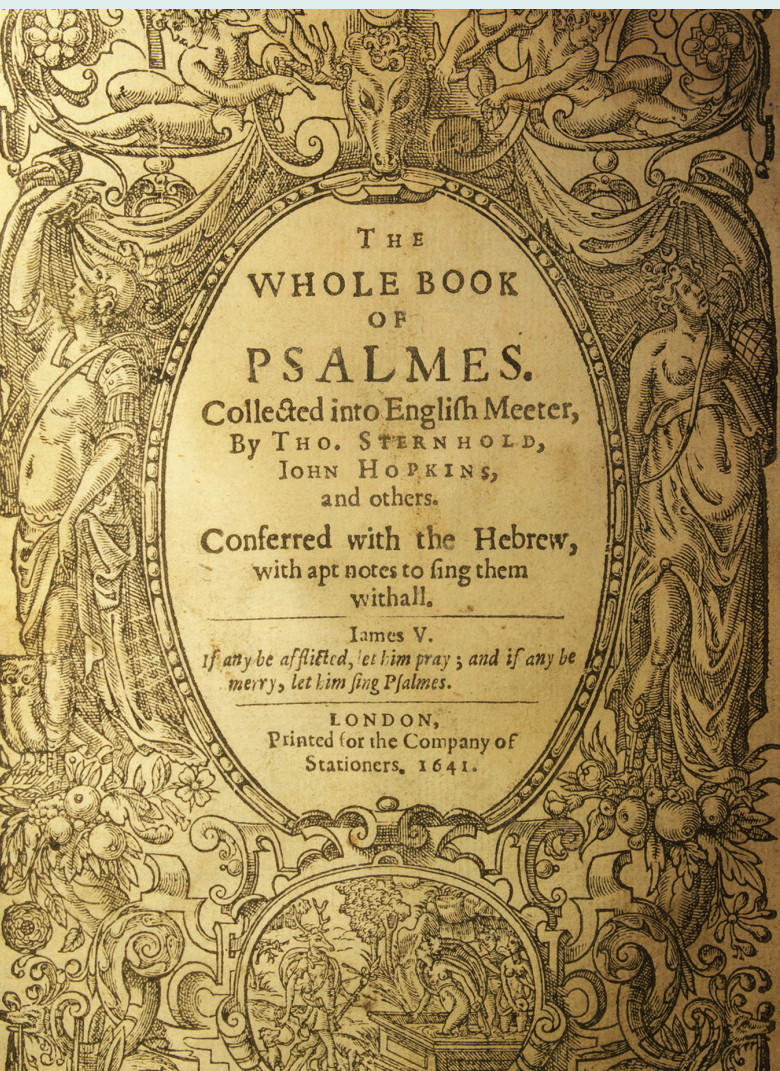
■ Into Discipleship

- Make a list of Scriptures which bring you particular comfort. Journal an answer about what they convey to you and why.
- If someone were struggling and asked you to recommend Scripture for him or her to read, what would you suggest? Would you consider adding Psalm 118 to the Scripture you turn to in times of difficulty in your life?
- If you are a musician or poet, have you ever thought about writing a psalm? What themes and what kind of harmony and melody would you use to write your own psalm?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- *Seven Psalms* (album), by Paul Simon: “The Lord” / “Love Is Like a Braid” / “My Professional Opinion” / “Your Forgiveness” / “Trail of Volcanoes” / “The Sacred Harp” / “Wait”: <https://youtu.be/ANtntuDsInk?feature=shared>



- “Presence of the Lord,” performed by Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood: <https://youtu.be/98XqT4kBWt4?feature=shared>
- “Blessed Is He Who Comes” (lyric video) by Paul Wilbur: <https://youtu.be/o00TrxNmWA0?feature=shared>

Media Option

“The Haggadah lucidly outlines the text for the Seder, the festive meal celebrating the Jewish holiday of Passover, and traces the biblical story of the Exodus, commemorating the Jews’ miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt.” Share this article on “A Haggadah for Sukkot” | The Metropolitan Museum of Art. One of its gloriously completed pages, folio 33r, some of which is provided above, illuminates the beginning of *Hallel*, the joyous prayer of praise and thanks to God (Psalms 113–118) that is sung at the conclusion of the Passover meal. Prato Haggadah, 1300 Spanish: <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/in-season/2016/sukkot>

Activity Ideas

- Listen to all or part of Paul Simon’s album *Seven Psalms* or the song “Presence of the Lord” by Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood. Reflect together on the spiritual themes emphasized in these modern psalms. How would you compare them to the psalms in the Bible (e.g., their relevance to today’s world, what they reveal about God, whether and how they are uplifting, and whether they describe salvation)?
- If you are participating in a Palm Sunday procession today, what words are given to the leader and to the people to say? Where do these words come from? How do you interpret these words this year?

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Liturgy of the Palms/Passion

Week of March 24, 2024

Sunday, March 24

Liturgy of the Palms: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16

Liturgy of the Passion: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1–15:47 or Mark 15:1-39, (40-47)

Monday, March 25

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

Annunciation of the Lord: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 45 or Psalm 40:5-10; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

Tuesday, March 26

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

Wednesday, March 27

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

Maundy Thursday, March 28

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Good Friday, March 29

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1–19:42

Holy Saturday, March 30

Job 14:1-14 or Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24; Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16; 1 Peter 4:1-8; Matthew 27:57-66 or John 19:38-42



The psalm reminds us of who God is.

KNOWING

from fear to faith

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

—MARK 16:8

Introduction

Mark's gospel brings a particular voice to the story of the Resurrection (Easter Sunday). In keeping with Mark's spare writing style, and by ending the gospel where he does, the gospel emphasizes elements of the story such as the vulnerability of the women who first encountered the empty tomb and echoes the way that Jesus himself at times asked his followers not to tell his story to the crowds or to the authorities. Moreover, despite ending the gospel with no one's saying anything, we know that the story was told far and wide in the end—emphasizing even more the miracle of Easter.

Lesson Objectives

- To identify who came to the empty tomb, recognizing the different identities among the women named Mary.
- To consider what the gospel writer is emphasizing about the story of the empty tomb by ending the gospel where he does.
- To be encouraged to live in faith and encouraged to share it in our own words and actions.

Mark 16:1-8 NRSV

1 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be

alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Into the Scripture

It is worth carefully considering the identities of the women who came to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning. This is an important group of women that is easily overlooked and taken for granted, due to their social status as women, and their easily obscured identities. This is the same group that was at the foot of his cross, witnessing his death on Friday prior to the beginning of the Sabbath (see Mark 15:40). Two of these women were named Mary, and because there are six different women named Mary in the New Testament, it is easy to get them confused with one another. The Marys here with Salome are Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Cleopas, the mother of James and Joses.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned twelve times in the New Testament—making her the second-most mentioned woman (following Mary the mother of Jesus) in Scripture. Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the



Resurrection in all four gospels. Famously, Mary Magdalene was the victim of identity confusion early, having been confused in a sermon with an unnamed sinner in chapter 7 of Luke as well as being confused with other Marys in the New Testament by none other than Pope Gregory the Great in the year AD 591.¹ Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus cast seven demons (see Luke

8:2), was a witness to his crucifixion and death, and the one who went and told the disciples that he had risen. She was a prominent figure in the group of disciples throughout Jesus’ ministry. She was called “Magdalene” in reference to the town she was from—Magdala, on the southwest coast of the Sea of Galilee.



Mary Magdalene is
the first witness to the
Resurrection in all four
gospels.

The second Mary at the empty tomb was Mary the mother of James (known traditionally as James the lesser or “the younger”) and Joses; she is also identified as the wife of Cleopas (also called Alphaeus in Luke 6:15). The New Testament writers took pains to identify which of the Marys they were referring to, but they did not always do it in the same way. Being referred to as “Mary, wife of Cleopas” is a good example of this, being alternatively identified by her relationship with any or all three of her family members; in the fifteenth chapter of Mark, the gospel writer includes her son “Joses” as an identifying marker for her but does not include him again in the chapter 16 reference to her. Adding to the confusion about her identity is the fact that Jesus had brothers who also had these names (James and Joses or Joseph)—and their mother was, of course, Mary.

The other Marys in the New Testament include Mary (Jesus’ mother), Mary of Bethany (Martha and

Lazarus's sister), Mary the mother of John Mark (see Acts 12:12); and a “hardworking” Mary mentioned in Romans 16:6 by Paul, one of the people greeted at the end of his letter.

Salome, who came to the tomb with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, was the wife of Zebedee, mother of John and James (who were also disciples of Jesus). This Salome is not to be confused with Salome, the daughter of Herodias who asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. So, the women who gathered at the tomb on Easter morning were connected by strong ties to the disciples and the larger group that had been supporting Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Mark is the most succinct among the Gospel writers, rendering fewer descriptions and details, and focusing on the spare “immediate” next action. And Mark's brevity is nowhere more obvious than in the closing words of the gospel: “. . . for they were afraid.” We will focus on what Mark is emphasizing by ending the gospel where he does. A master storyteller might ask his audience to fill in what comes next.

Into the Lesson

The women's purpose was to bring the traditional burial spices and they arrived as quickly after the sabbath was over as they could have: “very early in the morning.” In each of the gospels, the women at the gravesite first encountered the emptiness of the tomb, and then pieced together (from what they already knew from Jesus' teachings, together with the absent body) that Jesus was alive—the body had not been stolen; rather, Jesus had entered resurrection. The fact that women were the first witnesses highlights their vulnerability—in any court of law, women were not considered credible witnesses



in that era. By contrast, this underscores the confidence that Jesus placed in those who lived on the margins of society (e.g., lepers, tax collectors, non-Jews, those in need of healing, etc.).

Our passage ends where the most ancient authorities brought the book of Mark to a close. If you look at your Bible, you will notice that there are two other endings. But the oldest ending is this one, verse 8—the end of the original gospel of Mark. Most modern Bible translations include two additional endings: “the shorter ending of Mark,” which is added after verse 8; and “the longer ending of Mark,” which appears as Mark 16:9-19. These additional endings were later attempts to provide a more satisfactory ending to the gospel. They describe how the word spread following the events of the first Easter morning. The books of Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts also contain descriptions of how the word went forward and spread abroad.

We read that a young man (an angel?) spoke to the women—after they arrived with culturally appropriate spices for Jesus' corpse—and he said, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (verses 6-7). The women were startled to find the tomb empty and alarmed by the young man dressed in a white robe



The women's purpose was to bring the
traditional burial spices.

talking with them. We hear the charge he gave them—announcing Jesus’ resurrection and giving instructions to go and tell his disciples (emphasizing Peter). But Mark does not tell us how that worked out. The gospel ends just one verse later with the women fleeing from the place in terror and amazement: “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

In the Greek, the ending is even more abrupt, and unusual in style. A translator’s job is to render a given text into complete and clear sentences—but in this case, the last sentence ends in Greek with the word *gar*, which means “for.” This is a little like ending a book with the words “They were all very excited that . . .” or “We gathered together to sing because . . .” Mark says something like, “Being awestruck, they told no one, for . . .” (and he never finishes his thought). It is a two-thousand-year-old dangling phrase. Mark put a fine point on his ending without wrapping up the narrative.

In Jesus’ ministry, it was not unusual for him to tell people not to tell others about who he was or what he was doing. For example, in this gospel (see Mark 7), he healed a deaf man—and 7:36 reads, “Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.” Later in Mark, as Jesus descended from a prayer session on the mountain, in the account of his transfiguration it reads, “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean” (Mark 9:9-10; see also Matthew 17:9 and Luke 9:36).

By ending the gospel where he did, Mark is emphasizing an important aspect of the kind of Messiah that Jesus is. Jesus is the Messiah who invites us to faith, not certainty, to live in hope despite sometimes difficult circumstances. Maintaining faith in ambiguous circumstances is very different from having solid evidence. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). By ending the gospel with the women’s fearfulness, Mark emphasizes the importance of having faith. Because we know this story, each one hearing or reading this gospel is a testimony to how the women got over their fear and went and shared the good news. And because we know the story as well (it is our story, too!), the Gospel may continue to be written in our lives.

Into Discipleship

Jesus entered resurrection; the young man who greeted the women at the tomb said so. We might each consider how we will participate in this Resurrection story . . . and not so much to help Mark get a better sense of how to end a narrative (we have a couple of those endings in our Bibles)—but more for ourselves: how do we complete our own stories in light of this terrifying, awe-inspiring, amazing news? This news sent the women running off, unable to speak because they were so overwhelmed. How do we name and describe this resurrection in our own lives? Mark’s “unfinished” account of Easter pointedly invites us to explore the unfinished business each of us has with the Resurrection and the way the story gets told from where it leaves off.

Maybe this is a reminder that speaking and writing carefully may turn out to be more important than you know. Maybe we should reconsider those half-thoughts through text messages, social-media posts, and emails we send off in the heat of the moment. These messages bear testimony to something about our story. Our story is conveyed by our words and actions, and in the testimonies of the people who know us.

We have been told that he is not in his tomb—that he will not stay nailed down, sealed in, all wrapped up in burial cloths, secured with appropriate spices. He will not be held by death. So, if we will follow him, it will not be to places of (deadly) certainty. It will be forward into the future, out into whatever Galilee to which you go tomorrow. That is where he is already in the world; that is where he will meet you.

This brings us to the heart of the Christian message—the center of the mystery. In Jesus’ triumph over



Jesus is the Messiah who
invites us to faith.



death, he offers us entry into his resurrection. We are invited into resurrection from all the things that kill us in life. This is spiritual power that is available to us. We are broken in many ways in life: from hard work, or underemployment, from addictions, health setbacks, lost relationships, lost opportunities, from failing to do our best, or from having done our best to no avail—or we may be broken just from a sense of having let something get away over the years. Jesus repeatedly offers us the opportunity to come, to be filled and renewed, and to turn and walk in faith and in the light of God. And, in the end, when we are broken finally, when life is taken from our mortal bodies, Jesus offers us a way to new life in communion with those who have gone before us.

The tomb is empty, and the story is open-ended. Like the women at the tomb, we listen again to the evidence they found: the body was gone, we hear their testimony, but nothing has been fully explained. Jesus has gone on before us. He walked out into Galilee

where there were many witnesses. If we come to the cemetery wanting proof, we do not get proof. What we get is life, forgiveness, a new day, a living Lord who is way out ahead of us, inviting us to go with him into resurrection.

What are you to do with such a story? This may be answered differently in every life. Easter is the most well-attended service in the church year. Yet, ironically, the congregation is reminded that Jesus is not contained in the expected ways, and neither is he defined by his death. He was not in his tomb. The women had just missed him. By this time in the morning, he was already in Galilee. He has gone before you. Go! Tell! Jesus is risen! Alleluia!

Note

1. <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201603/who-framed-mary-magdalene/> (N.B. date error in the original article: Pope Gregory the Great's dates are AD 540–604. 1591 is surely a typo; his sermon would have been given in AD 591.)



The Gospel may continue to be written in our lives.

Closing Prayer

God of unexplained mysteries and unexpected events, we rejoice in the good news of Easter. You have given us an invitation to vanquish our fears, a promise of peace, and an opportunity to begin again. May the power of your resurrection transform our fears and self-doubt today, that we will be emboldened to speak truth to power, to persevere in doing good, and to trust ultimately that we will rise with you—as Jesus our brother who has gone before us has done. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- There are six different women in the New Testament named Mary, and they are easily (and often) confused with one another. What do you do to learn the names of new people? In your experience, what are the downsides of confusing someone's identity?
- Mark's gospel leaves the most unsaid. When have you communicated by not saying something? How did you get your point across?

■ Into the Lesson

- What do you think is emphasized by ending the gospel—"and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"?
- If you were listening to the gospel of Mark and heard it end at verse 8, how would you fill in the rest of the story?
- Does it matter that it was women rather than the male disciples at the empty tomb? If so, why?

■ Into Discipleship

- In what part of your life do you most yearn for resurrection? (E.g., is it from personal issues such as broken relationships, or worldwide justice issues such as hunger, political corruption, or lack of opportunity for the world's children?)
- Do you have "unfinished business" with the Resurrection? What is it?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Alleluia, Alleluia! Give Thanks" (Text and music by Donald Fishel; arr. Betty Pulkingham and Donald Fishel; sung by First Plymouth Church, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 27, 2014): <https://youtu.be/DyPYJtxu8cE?feature=shared>
- "A Woman," sung by Amy Grant and Ellie Holcomb: <https://youtu.be/4Je49oC8aVE?feature=shared>
- "Come, Let Us with Our Lord Arise," sung by Metropolitan Tabernacle (London): <https://youtu.be/tvvr6TG7RX4?feature=shared>

Media Options

- **Articles about Easter:** Visit this site at Yale Bible Study to garner more facts about the observances of Easter: <https://yalebiblestudy.org/resources/easter/>.
 - "Easter" from Encyclopaedia Britannica
 - "The Profound Connection Between Easter and Passover" by R. R. Reno
 - "The Ancient Math That Sets the Date of Easter and Passover" by Robinson Meyer
 - "When Easter and Passover Overlap" with Linda Wertheimer and Andrew McGowan
 - "Anno Domini: Computational Analysis, Anti-semitism, and the Early Christian Debate Over Easter" by Sarah E. Bond
 - "Why are there two Easters?" at BBC Newsround
 - "When Jesus Celebrated Passover" by Paula Fredriksen
 - "Was Jesus' Last Supper a Seder?" by the Biblical Archaeology Society
- **Book Recommendation:** *Moved by the Spirit: Religion and the Movement for Black Lives* (Religion and Borders); Lexington Books, 2023: American Baptist public theologian and former teacher and Pastor, Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes says in the foreword to this book she co-edited, "This book is not a space that joins in the dismal dirge that mainline churches are dying if not dead. No, the authors argue that faith is about living and finding our ministries in a time Black religiosity is being transformed. . . . our task is to embrace the swiftly changing culture wars that are all around us and think carefully and faithfully about how we

prepare ourselves to stop worrying so much about growing the numbers coming in our church doors and be much more concerned about thriving and providing models that help all of us live out our faith more deeply. And in doing so, we save lives, offer hope, feed people”* Dr. Townes and others explore how the Spirit is moving forward today in the movement for Black Lives.

Activity Ideas

- Listen to Amy Grant and Ellie Holcomb sing “A Woman” with the refrain, “I will speak”: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1048753262345194>. Discuss the meaning of this song. In your experience, what are the particular challenges to speaking for women? Does this illuminate the gospel narrative?
- As an icebreaker, play *Mad Libs* or any fill-in-the-blank story game. Afterwards, discuss how good stories get told, and how filling in some details or leaving them out changes the story. Then discuss this: If you were retelling the Easter story, which details do you think are critical to include, and which are not so important? Try writing your Easter story together. Discuss your editorial choices.
- **Poetry:** T. S. Eliot described how we live in faith, even while we may have no immediate experience of that for which we are hoping. He wrote in his poem “East Coker” the following:

. . . the faith and the love and the hope
are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are
not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be light, and
the stillness the dancing.[†]

 - What do you believe is the main point that Eliot was trying to convey?
 - Have participants take fifteen minutes to write their own verse that describes some aspect of faith, hope, and/or love as they believe.

* *Moved by the Spirit: Religion and the Movement for Black Lives* (Religion and Borders), Christophe D. Ringer, et al., eds. (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2023), xii.

† T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Easter Vigil

Week of March 31, 2024

Sunday, March 31

Old Testament Readings and Psalms: Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26; Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 and Psalm 46; Genesis 22:1-18 and Psalm 16; Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21 and Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18; Isaiah 55:1-11 and Isaiah 12:2-6; Baruch 3:9-15, 32–4:4 or Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6 and Psalm 19; Ezekiel 36:24-28 and Psalm 42–43; Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Psalm 143; Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Psalm 98

New Testament Reading and Psalm: Romans 6:3-11 and Psalm 114

Gospel: Mark 16:1-8

Resurrection of the Lord: Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18 or Mark 16:1-8

Easter Evening: Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 114; 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8; Luke 24:13-49

Monday, April 1

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Genesis 1:1-19; 1 Corinthians 15:35-49

Tuesday, April 2

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Genesis 1:20–2:4a; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Wednesday, April 3

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Song of Solomon 3:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

Thursday, April 4

Psalm 133; Daniel 1:1-21; Acts 2:42-47

Friday, April 5

Psalm 133; Daniel 2:1-23; Acts 4:23-31

Saturday, April 6

Psalm 133; Daniel 2:24-49; John 12:44-50

FELLOWSHIP

making community

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

—PSALM 133:1

Introduction

Psalm 133 is a paean highlighting the importance of community, where common purpose and sense of identity are revealed to be like “precious oil on the head.” The psalm served as a foundational reflection in the monastic vision of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Now, in a time when so many report that they are alienated from sources of community, the verses have even more meaning. Our task is to try to make our churches places where everyone can find healing.

Lesson Objectives

- To develop an understanding of the importance of Psalm 133 in the development of monasticism.
- To discern the importance of community in a world where many experience alienation.
- To consider how to build communities that are open and inclusive to all.

Psalm 133 NRSV

1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Into the Scripture

The book of Psalms is a songbook. That may seem like a simple remark, but we can often miss the musicality of the text if we are simply reading the book as part of a Bible study. Many of the songs are accredited to David, although several other authors also appear in the book. The songs were meant to be sung, and ancient editions of the Psalms often contain hints about how they were meant to sound. Psalm 133 is ascribed to David, and it is also categorized as a “song of ascents.”

What exactly was the purpose of these psalms remains a mystery, but scholars have variously put forth that pilgrims sang them on the road to Jerusalem or that they served a cultic function in worship at the temple. Whatever their purpose, they vary in length, and two other songs of ascents are only three verses, the same as Psalm 133; they are the shortest psalms in the book.

Psalm 133 continues to be a part of worship in many different Christian traditions, either as part of the Psalter, through chanting, or at Eucharist. It also appears in formal Jewish recitations in the Shabbat prior to Passover. Less formally, it appears in Shabbat table songs—the Shabbat table being the focus of Shabbat celebrations in Judaism. Wherever it appears in Christian and Jewish contexts, it highlights the importance

of gathering together and community, thus its use in Communion, where those gathered commemorate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Bound together by that common story, Christians are called to realize that they truly are “kindred,” as the psalm puts it, pilgrims on the same journey.

Augustine of Hippo, a North African bishop writing in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, credited Psalm 133 as the starting point of the monastic movement. Writing in response to those who had followed St. Anthony’s example and gone into the desert to seek community and isolation in the fourth century, he says, “For these same words of the Psalter, this sweet sound, that honeyed melody, as well of the mind as of the hymn, did even beget the Monasteries. By



Psalm 133 highlights the importance of gathering together and community.

this sound were stirred up the brethren who longed to dwell together. This verse was their trumpet. It sounded through the whole earth, and they who had been divided, were gathered together.”¹

Later scholars would doubt that Psalm 133 had anything to do with such a monumental shift in Christian expression, but Augustine’s words highlight the importance of these verses for those who were thirsting for community. Like the present day, Augustine’s time was tumultuous. Social changes and pressures meant that elites were increasingly concentrated in cities, leaving the poor and rural without any prominent figures to judge disputes—and Christianity was on the rise, having recently been made the state religion of the Roman Empire. Regardless, the psalm continues to hold a special place in the hearts of Christian monastics.

Into the Lesson

We live in a time unmoored from the traditional view of community espoused by Psalm 133—and it shows. On May 3, 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a report about rising rates of loneliness in the United States, calling it an “epidemic.” According to that report, “Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness”; Murthy goes on to note that isolation and loneliness have real health consequences: “The physical health consequences of poor or insufficient connection include a 29% increased risk of

heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Additionally, lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%.”²

Another indication of our fraying social fabric is the growing rates of estrangement. One recent study found that 26 percent of adults are estranged from their fathers, while 6 percent are estranged from their mothers.³ Other polls show similar levels of growing estrangement from families of origin; all are indications that what was once an unassailable, cohesive unit is losing its pull in American life. With our families and our communities breaking down, where are we to turn for belonging?

Religion ought to be able to step into this void. It, too, is a traditional bulwark against loneliness and isolation. Jesus even encourages us to redefine “family” as those who share a common purpose (see Matthew 12:48-50), not unlike the vision set forth in Psalm 133. And yet, religion, too, is in decline. A recent PRRI study found that the percentage of Americans who rated religion as the most important thing in their lives fell by 20 percentage points over a decade to 16 percent.⁴ Churches continue to shutter at alarming rates, and it is clear that church will likely never return to the previous decades’ engagement levels.

Now, all that might seem grim, but I am sure you have stories to tell about community in your own congregation—stories that glow luminously with the hum of people coming together to care for one another, offer spaces to process grief, and celebrate life events. I have been a pastor for a decade now, but I’m only 33. All the data states that I should be in mourning for a church



of the past, but I cannot help but be excited about our future, where we will increasingly focus on building community in a world that so desperately needs it.

Because the world is starved of community, Psalm 133 resonates with our current moment. Community is the precious oil that anoints the head and pours out over the whole self. We know it provides profound health benefits, and we know the spiritual benefits are enormous. It is a priceless commodity in our world, and we are stewards of it. The question is, how do we build communities that are open to all?

Into Discipleship

Churches are what urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his *The Great Good Place* called a “third place” separate from home (“first place”) and work (“second place”). Oldenburg offers several different criteria about what constitutes a third place, but the key is that people are there because they want to be there—that it is not based on hierarchy, that it is accessible to everyone, and that the primary reason for being there is conversation. Typical third places other than churches are libraries, cafés, civic organizations, coffee shops, and gyms. Increasingly, third places are commodified, with corporations profiting off the sense of belonging that they institute.



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness.

If our communities are to live into their call to provide belonging, then they will have to be open to all. Oftentimes, the church has seen to it that only certain groups of people feel welcome in our third place. Whether that is people who share the same race, economic status, ability, age, or sexual orientation, churches can too often become social clubs that exclude as much as they include others. This provides great benefits to those who are already in our communities, but the call of church is to be what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “for others.”⁵ We are only a church if we exist for other people.

Take a walk around your building—is it accessible to those with disabilities? According to a 2020 report from Faith Communities Today, “76% [of churches] have wheelchair access. Thirty percent offer large-print worship materials and about the same portion have hearing assistive devices.”⁶ While those numbers have been steadily increasing, odds are that there are some steps that your community can take to become more accessible.

Other changes may be more difficult. Look around your worshipping congregation—what sort of people attend? Is it multigenerational? Diverse? How about sexual orientation? The church has often been the leading force in anti-LGBT teachings and continues to be active in eroding the rights of LGBT Americans. Can we honestly say that everyone is welcome in our churches? Such questions may lead us to becoming more open and welcoming to our community. The statistics say that people are starving for community, and the church ought to be one place where people can turn to get that need met.

The best part of church is the creation of spaces where we can be truly vulnerable. So often in our lives, we are encouraged to hide parts of ourselves in order to craft a version of ourselves that is palatable to others. Look on Facebook or Instagram and you are sure to see plenty of reputation management, but you are unlikely to find much vulnerability. Vulnerability emerges when there is plenty of trust, when we feel held by something greater than ourselves, and free to be who we truly are.



We are only a church if we exist for other people.

I recently talked to a congregant in my church about what they found to be the most holy element of our worship. Her response surprised me: “coffee hour,” the time after our service when we share snacks and chat about our lives. Her response makes sense in the context of the rarity of the experience of finding true belonging, where one feels comfortable sharing the innermost parts of oneself. It truly is like precious ointment, treating the wounds of life.

Notes

1. Augustine of Hippo, “Exposition on Psalm 133,” (*New Advent*). <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801133.htm>
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States,” <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>.
3. R. Reczek, L. Stacey, and M. B. Thomeer (2023), “Parent–Adult Child Estrangement in the United States by Gender, Race/ethnicity, and Sexuality,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 85(2), 494–517.
4. Jason DeRose, “The Importance of Religion in the Lives of Americans Is Shrinking,” <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/16/1176206568/less-important-religion-in-lives-of-americans-shrinking-report>.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1967).
6. Holly Meyer, “‘Not just the ramp.’ Worship spaces need more accessibility,” *AP News* (December 29, 2022). <https://apnews.com/article/health-pandemics-religion-methodism-f4a42c59f3e17d5e6271b63f17fc44d9>

Closing Prayer

Community Maker, help us to forge bonds with others and to share our innermost selves. Help us to create places where your love is felt, where we receive that precious ointment. Help us to acknowledge and create a feeling of kinship. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Does it matter that Psalms are meant to be sung?
- What role did Augustine say that Psalm 133 played in the creation of monasteries?

■ Into the Lesson

- Why do you think we are experiencing a loneliness epidemic?
- What do you think about the future of the church?

■ Into Discipleship

- How can your congregation create community that is open to all?
- What does it mean that the church is “for others”?

Resources

Song to Consider

- “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love,” performed by Michael Smith: https://youtu.be/dtN_s8BpqYw?feature=shared
- “Let Us Break Bread Together,” performed by Jessye Norman: <https://youtu.be/ZFQqOWh2aOY?feature=shared>
- “We’re Marching to Zion,” performed by Jim Hill: <https://youtu.be/4-EUg3LVj6s?feature=shared>

Media Options

■ Poem: “A Time to Talk” by Robert Frost

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don’t stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven’t hoed,
And shout from where I am, What is it?
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

- Read about ABHMS’s effort to build a strong, vibrant, networking community within our denomination. Read and discuss the mission statement for MinistrElife, and then peruse the website to see its many offerings to connect us as members of the body of Christ: <https://ministrelife.org/>.



- Setting a course for ministry in the 21st century: Connect. Cultivate. Change.
- To bring the healing Gospel to our hurting world.
- We are confronting the future of the Christian faith in the United States and Puerto Rico head-on by asking the questions.
- The net of partners invited to join the networks is cast widely.
- The future of ministry, we are convinced, will be found in a model of sharing.
- We are encouraging network partners to jointly develop ministry and mission proposals that meet local needs and require collaboration among multiple partners.
- There is no shortage of resources, talent or passion for mission when we and our partners combine these gifts for the sake of God's ministry.

Activity Ideas

- Take out a sheet of paper and write down how your church helps build community among its members and those outside its walls. What could you do better? How might you be more inclusive? Share those insights with others.
- Make a map of your life—what is your “first place” and “second place,” and what are your “third places”? Draw yourself in the middle of these places and make a map of how you get from one to the other. Are there

others there? Draw them. What does your map look like? Do you wish you had more of any category?

Devotional Scriptures Year B Second Sunday of Easter Week of April 7, 2024

Sunday, April 7

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Monday, April 8

Psalm 135; Daniel 3:1-30; 1 John 2:3-11

Tuesday, April 9

Psalm 135; Daniel 6:1-28; 1 John 2:12-17

Wednesday, April 10

Psalm 135; Isaiah 26:1-15; Mark 12:18-27

Thursday, April 11

Psalm 4; Daniel 9:1-19; 1 John 2:18-25

Friday, April 12

Psalm 4; Daniel 10:2-19; 1 John 2:26-28

Saturday, April 13

Psalm 4; Acts 3:1-10; Luke 22:24-30

Tempted to Leave the Cross: Renewing the Call to Discipleship

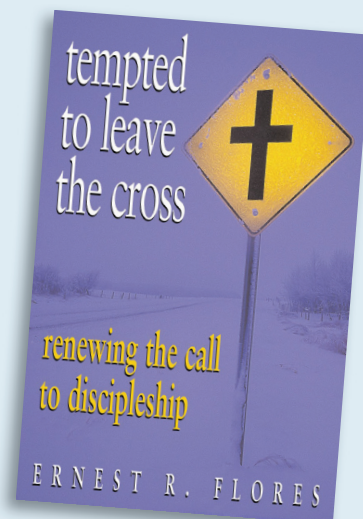
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AUTHENTICITY

ghost stories

They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

—LUKE 24:37

Introduction

Jesus was different after the Resurrection. At several points in the Gospels, it makes clear that his appearance had changed, and he could walk through locked doors—but the real challenge lies in differentiating Jesus' resurrection from a ghost story. We all have ghost stories, and it is likely to be the most readily recognizable form of appearing after one's death . . . but Jesus' resurrection is different. He proved it through eating, showing us the importance of our bodies in this story and in our lives.

Lesson Objectives

- To understand the unique qualities of the book of Luke.
- To appreciate the role of Jesus' eating and drinking post-Resurrection.
- To consider our own ghost stories.

Luke 24:36-48 NRSV

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence. 44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then

he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.”

Into the Scripture

Luke is one of the four gospels that appear in the Bible, although there were many other extra-canonical gospels that circulated in the centuries after Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Scholars think that Luke was written somewhere around 80 or 85 CE. It uses parts of Mark’s gospel, which was written a decade earlier, as well as parts of another source, Q, which both Matthew and Luke drew from. Q is likely a sayings gospel, but a copy of it has never been found. Nevertheless, the fact that Matthew and Luke retain broad sections of Mark and include several similar, near-verbatim stories, suggests there was another, common source informing their work.

Luke was originally joined with Acts as one book, and the author is not named in either text, although it has traditionally been ascribed to Luke the physician.



However, both Luke and Acts begin with dedications to Theophilus, for whom the author has endeavored to compile the sayings and actions of Jesus and of the nascent Jesus movement, “so that you [Theophilus] may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed”

(Luke 1:4). We do not know who Theophilus might be, but we do know that beginning the Gospel with a preface and dedication renders it much closer to other works of literature at the time.

Knowing that, we can see that the author is trying to situate the Gospels as a work of literature to be highly valued. Adding to that argument, the reader can see that Luke was attempting to be historical. He sought out eyewitnesses to the events, “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the

“

The reader can see that
Luke is attempting to be
historical.

word,” and attempted to write an “orderly account” (Luke 1:2, 3). The author positions his work as a careful compilation of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and what comes after.

Luke is unique in several ways when compared to the other gospels because it introduces a cast of characters (more than one hundred individuals) that appear neither in Mark nor Matthew—the other gospels which are often grouped under the umbrella of the “Synoptic Gospels” (which refers to their ability to be placed side by side). The author also places a particular emphasis on the poor, as seen from Jesus’ entry into the synagogue where he read from Isaiah’s scroll: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Women are also featured prominently in Luke’s gospel, where they interacted with Jesus more, were praised for their conduct, and were witnesses to the Resurrection.

Into the Lesson

Luke 24 tells the story of Jesus' resurrection, beginning with Mary (the mother of Jesus), Mary Magdalene, and Joanna discovering that Jesus had risen and rushing to inform the other disciples. Immediately preceding the text for this lesson sits one of the most enigmatic stories in Scripture—the road to Emmaus—in which two disciples talked with Jesus and only realized that he was the risen Christ in the breaking of bread, whereupon Jesus immediately disappeared. One can begin to understand why some would think the risen Jesus to be a ghost. For instance, in John 20:19, he somehow appeared in a locked room—and in Matthew 14:26-31, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water after the Resurrection, they asserted that he must be a ghost.

Ghosts have been a mainstay of human experience for millennia. In ancient Rome, belief in ghosts was alive and well, as evidenced by ghost stories from well-respected authors such as Plutarch, Pliny the Younger, Plautus, and Lucian. Ghosts also appear in the Bible, where the most famous case is when Saul consulted a medium at Endor to speak with Samuel (see 1 Samuel 28:3-25). That particular narrative reflects the belief in Sheol as the abode of the dead in ancient Jewish thought—a belief that would have persisted into Jesus' time. Whatever the case, ghosts were believed to be a possible result of a wronged person's coming back to seek vengeance—and certainly Jesus' death at the hands of the Roman authorities would qualify.

In such a world, the disciples' fear that Jesus might be a ghost makes perfect sense, but we know that Jesus was resurrected in body and spirit. That's why so many of Jesus' first actions after the Resurrection were to eat and drink. It might seem strange and discordant to



readers that some of Jesus' first acts after the Resurrection were essentially to ask if anyone had anything to eat, but those actions were meant to assure the disciples and future readers that he was not a ghost.

Our text offers one of the more poignant examples, wherein Jesus interrupted their joy with a request for a meal: "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence" (Luke 24:41-43). Another example appears in John 21:1-14, in which Jesus simply said, "Come and have breakfast" (verse 12); now that's an invitation you would be unlikely to refuse.

Such stories demonstrate that our bodies matter: we are not simply spirits attached to bodies; our bodies and our spirits are one. This is the promise of the Resurrection—not that we will spend eternity as discorporate spirits, but that God will redeem our bodies and spirits together. How we attend to our bodily needs is not an afterthought; it is an essential part of our earthly lives. Our bodies matter to God, and they are inexorably linked to our future in the resurrection.

Into Discipleship

Ghost stories are often told in order to fascinate, and we continue to hold them in high regard around campfires, but ghost stories are really about the layering of multiple



Jesus was resurrected in body and spirit.



different realities. Ghosts linger in the way we talk. We can be haunted by them, but we can also be haunted by the past, the present, and even the future. Ghosts sometimes cause us distress, but if you have ever spoken with individuals who claim their house is haunted, most of the time they coexist just fine with the current inhabitants of the house—a past reality layered over the current one.

We are haunted, but I would not say we are scared. Jesus' post-Resurrection body was perceived as different by his friends. They could not recognize him even though they walked beside him. He was ethereal and could evidently disappear and appear at will. It sounds otherworldly . . . because it is. Perhaps Jesus was not a ghost, but he certainly was not just his old self again post-Resurrection.

Jesus left the disciples the Holy Spirit, which in former parlance was called the Holy Ghost. He is supposed to be the guide through believers' lives, helping them to know and understand the will of God. I think it is appropriate that he is a ghost, because ghosts are different from us and link us to other stories—in this case, God's story. May we pray to be haunted.

Just as multiple stories layer one upon the other with ghost stories, our bodies also have so many different narratives about them. Some early Christians, especially the Gnostics, were deeply suspicious about the body, and the first Christian monks practiced strenuous fasting and flagellations, and embraced discomfort as ways to punish

their bodies as an act of piety—as if the body could be tamed or eventually left by the wayside on the way to eternity. However, there seems to be very little suspicion of the body in Jesus' ministry. Keep in mind that the vision of the afterlife that Jesus gives does not separate us from our bodies—we, too, are promised a resurrection, the redemption of the body.

Similarly, in our culture there are multiple stories about our bodies that are layered upon one another. We simultaneously celebrate them and ridicule them. Many of us spend much of our lives feeling that our bodies are too tall, too short, too fat, too skinny, too anything, and working as hard as those monks did to alter them. The result is that we miss that our bodies were created beautiful from the start, and that they were beloved by God and were made part of God's redemption plan. God offers us a different sort of celebration of the body, one that proclaims it as inseparable from our core selves—a radiant beauty that cannot be rejected. Our bodies were made for joy and pleasure, and they are part of God's plan, or God would not have created us with bodies.

Embracing God's love of our bodies is countercultural in today's world, and yet it is an important spiritual discipline. Jesus ate and drank after the Resurrection to show that he was not a ghost—not just a spirit or essence of Jesus, but the real thing. For us, that means a radical invitation to love ourselves just as we are (and what a beautiful invitation it is!).

Closing Prayer

God, who made resurrection possible, we give thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who showed us through eating that he was more than a ghost and thereby demonstrated the body's importance in our lives. Help us to love our own bodies and to celebrate the diversity of the bodies that you have gifted us. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Why do you think there are four different gospels included in the Bible? Which one is your favorite?

■ Into the Lesson

- How is your body important to you and to God? How might we worship in more embodied ways?

■ Into Discipleship

- What are some ways that we can celebrate the diversity of bodies? How can we love our own bodies despite societal messages that seem designed to make us feel unsatisfied with them?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “I’m Not the Same,” sung by Walter Hawkins and the Love Center Choir: <https://youtu.be/mT6rDY4U2AU?feature=shared>
- “Abide with Me,” sung by Ella Fitzgerald: https://youtu.be/pE36aL_1YO0?feature=shared
- “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”; words by Gerard Moultrie (1864); sung by Fernando Ortega: <https://youtu.be/8wl4u8lnDQs?feature=shared>

1 Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

2 King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
In the body and the blood;
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.

3 Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
That the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.



4 At His feet the six-winged seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to His presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry:
“Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”

Media Option

Poem: “Easter” by Marie Howe

Two of the fingers on his right hand
had been broken

so when he poured back into that hand it surprised
him—it hurt him at first.

And the whole body was too small. Imagine
the sky trying to fit into a tunnel carved into a hill.

He came into it two ways:
From the outside, as we step into a pair of pants.

And from the center—suddenly all at once.
Then he felt himself awake in the dark alone.

Activity Idea

Tell a ghost story or look one up on the Internet. Make a list of things that ghosts do. What can't they do? What do you see Jesus do in the story that took place? Talk

about the difference between resurrection and ghosts, looking for points of contrast.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Third Sunday of Easter

Week of April 14, 2024

Sunday, April 14

Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-48

Monday, April 15

Psalm 150; Jeremiah 30:1-11a; 1 John 3:10-16

Tuesday, April 16

Psalm 150; Hosea 5:15-6:6; 2 John 1:1-6

Wednesday, April 17

Psalm 150; Proverbs 9:1-6; Mark 16:9-18

Thursday, April 18

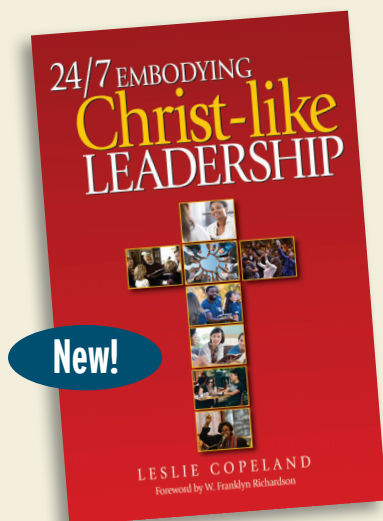
Psalm 23; Genesis 30:25-43; Acts 3:17-26

Friday, April 19

Psalm 23; Genesis 46:28-47:6; Acts 4:1-4

Saturday, April 20

Psalm 23; Genesis 48:8-19; Mark 6:30-34



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PEACEMAKING

care above conflict

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

—1 JOHN 3:16

Introduction

The First Epistle of John is a letter to a church at the beginning of its journey. As such, it tackles issues like leadership qualifications, how to discern the truth, and, most importantly, how to love one another. Just like its modern-day counterpart, the early Church struggled with conflict and how to follow God's still, small voice. In 1 John, we receive some simple instructions for how to handle that conflict: love one another as Christ loved us.

Lesson Objectives

- To learn more about how to practice love in community in the early Church.
- To discern the difference between love as a feeling and love as action.
- To better understand the role of conflict in our personal and communal lives.

1 John 3:16-24 NRSV

16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his

commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Into the Scripture

The First Epistle of John, commonly referred to as 1 John, is the first of three letters traditionally ascribed to John the Evangelist, commonly understood to be the same person as John the Apostle. Written in Greek, most scholars place the authorship of the letter at around 100 CE in Ephesus. It is a short book, featuring only five chapters, and it lacks some of the flourishes that Paul's writing includes.

Most of the books in the New Testament are letters written by Paul, but these letters are written by another author, and their style is certainly different. While Paul's letters generally offer a greeting to the church or churches that he is writing to and an introduction of his credentials, 1 John launches into the theological immediately: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our

hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). The "we" that is included in that text most likely refers to the other apostles, who were there to witness the life, death, and ministry of Jesus.

The worldview of the book of 1 John offers a clear delineation between "the world" and the "children of God." For

the author of 1 John, the early Church should not be shocked that they were hated by the world. Indeed, the world is set against the things of God, and it is dangerous for Christians to engage with it. At the same time, the author was certain that God's victory over the world is assured: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes

“

The book of 1 John offers
a clear delineation between
“the world” and the
“children of God.”

not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God abide forever" (1 John 2:15-17). This has much in common with other communities that were writing at the same time. For instance, the Qumran community writing in the second century BCE wote about a coming war between the sons of light and sons of darkness.

At its heart, 1 John is a practical book and dealt with real issues that were facing the early Church, most especially how to discern false teachers within the church. As the author explains, "I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you" (1 John 2:26). He writes later that churches should not believe every spirit: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Imagine being a part of the early Church, where there were no vetting mechanisms for pastoral ministry. The author provides real ways to assess whether someone should be in leadership.



Into the Lesson

Our text this week gives us solid instructions about how to live our lives in Christian community. Keep in mind that all churches at the time were relatively new and figuring out how to form community with first, second, and probably third-generation Christians present. Just like our churches today, there were tensions, conflicts, and thorny issues that required difficult conversations.

The author of the epistle offers us a concrete way to address difficulties in our churches, communities, and personal relationships—we ought to always remember what brought us together in the first place. For the author, this is clear: Jesus is the reason why the gathered community exists, and we must emulate Jesus' care for us individually by also caring for one another in the same manner. If we are going to say that we love Jesus, we are going to have to show that love to each other: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (verse 16). That is a high bar, but it is grounded in our faith. Just as Christ deemed us all deserving of his great sacrifice, we must also regard others as being worthy of our sacrifice.

Our text this week has a bold vision for what constitutes love: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (verse 18). Often, we can think of love as a feeling, but 1 John seems relatively uninterested in saccharine visions of love; the author challenges us to love in action, not words. That all sounds nice, but love is hard. Loving people different from us has not been something that human beings are historically very good at, and yet that is precisely what we are called to do as Christians.

Unfortunately, many people use the word *love* haphazardly, as if using the word itself can negate their actions. Consider those Christians who say that they "love" others, but the only thing you hear from them is hate or disgust. They say that they love those who are



sexually, racially, culturally, or politically different from them, but this is just idle talk, and you can easily tell this because their actions are not loving. In our personal lives as well, we know that some claim to be our friends and love us, but their actions do not speak that same love. Like it or not, we cannot take claims of love at face value.

At the same time, the author connects love and truth. Too often, we experience one without the other. We offer love by withholding the truth, or we tell the truth in a way that is intended to maximize pain. The trick is to speak the truth in love. By uniting the two, we can do what the author wishes for us to do in our lives: care for one another. That is the point of the author's letter—that we should care for one another as Christ cares for us, and Jesus never withheld the truth or delivered it in such a way as to cause shame or render judgment.

Into Discipleship

We have all navigated conflict in our personal and communal lives before. Most of us find it unpleasant and try to avoid that conflict, but conflict will arise whether or not we enjoy facing it. Conflict can be a positive force within churches because it demonstrates that everyone is engaged and cares about the community. However, the trouble arises when we personalize conflict, dividing our communities into multiple camps and deciding that those who disagree with our chosen position are bad people.

As a pastor, I have mediated and been at the center of plenty of conflict. In one case, I had a congregant



We must emulate Jesus' care for us individually
by also caring for one another.

make an abrupt change to landscaping that upset some members of the congregation. I had to get all the parties in the same room, and one thing was apparent: everyone felt hurt. The congregant who made the change felt hurt that his hard work was not valued, and those who disliked the change felt hurt that they were not consulted. The only way through that conflict was by following 1 John's instructions, and I helped them name their pain while, at the same time, recall why they were there and the common goals for a flourishing community that all parties shared. In the end, everyone was able to embrace and move on, knowing that they were able to speak their truth and reconcile in love.

At the same time, I have also lived through plenty of conflict when I have pursued bold action for justice. I regret none of those actions, although the conflict was painful. If we live in fear of conflict, we will miss out on what God may be calling us to do in the world. Conflict will rear its head, but it can be a sign of a healthy community that is wrestling with the right move. It can also be a sign of fear; fear of change and fear of failure are common causes of conflict. God calls us to move beyond fear and towards love repeatedly in the Bible. Is fear of conflict in your personal or church life holding you back?

Research into conflict suggests that there are five main conflict-management styles: collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising. Each of these styles has benefits and drawbacks, but understanding which style you are prone to may help you more successfully navigate conflict in the future. When was the last time that you experienced conflict? How did it feel—did you experience an upset stomach? How did



God calls us to move beyond fear and towards love repeatedly in the Bible.

you respond? Do you avoid thinking about conflict, or do you ruminate about it? Taking a minute to understand your relationship to conflict can help you decide how you want to navigate it ahead of time. Remember that there is likely plenty of common ground to be had in any conflict in which you are engaged.

Whatever happens, you can take great solace in the fact that early Christians also had their fair share of conflict. Consider Peter and Paul's conflicts that are relayed frequently in the Acts of the Apostles. What allowed the church to thrive and continue its ministry was the ability to navigate that conflict productively, keeping in mind what it shared in common—Jesus Christ.

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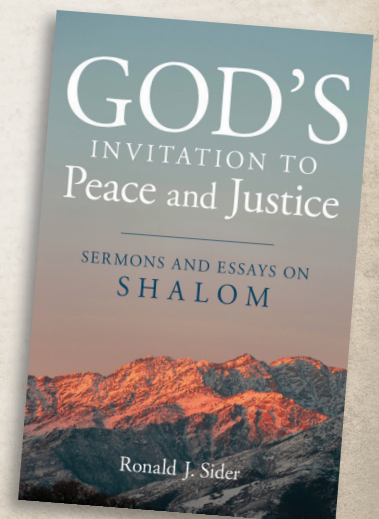
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Closing Prayer

God of conflict and reconciliation, help us to keep in mind what we have in common. Make us ever ready to reconcile and to seek solutions, keeping in mind that it is you who has called us to this work. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- What sort of guidelines do you have for your church community? By-laws? Rules? Handbooks?
- Imagine if all of those were missing, and this is all you had—would it be enough?

■ Into the Lesson

- How can you tell when someone says the word *love* but does not mean it?

■ Into Discipleship

- How do you handle conflict, and how does that impact your personal and communal life?



Resources

Songs to Consider

- “We Can Work It Out,” sung by The Beatles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgRrWPdzkao>
- “Lean on Me,” sung by Bill Withers: <https://youtu.be/fOZ-MySzAac?feature=shared>
- “One Love,” sung by Bob Marley: <https://youtu.be/CCK3luJOHho?feature=shared>

Media Options

- **Poem:** Selected from “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings” by Joy Harjo

When we made it back home, back over those curved roads

that wind through the city of peace, we stopped at the doorway of dusk as it opened to our homelands.

We gave thanks for the story, for all parts of the story because it was by the light of those challenges we knew ourselves—

We asked for forgiveness.

We laid down our burdens next to each other.

- **Poem:** “Any Human to Another” by Countee Cullen

The ills I sorrow at

Not me alone

Like an arrow,

Pierce to the marrow,

Through the fat

And past the bone.



Your grief and mine
Must intertwine
Like sea and river,
Be fused and mingle,
Diverse yet single,
Forever and forever.
Let no man be so proud
And confident,
To think he is allowed
A little tent
Pitched in a meadow
Of sun and shadow
All his little own.
Joy may be shy, unique,
Friendly to a few,
Sorrow may be scorned to speak
To any who
Were false or true.
Your every grief
Like a blade
Shining and unsheathed
Must strike me down.
Of bitter aloes wreathed,
My sorrow must be laid
On your head like a crown.

Activity Idea

Look up the different styles of conflict management on the Internet and see which style best describes how you engage with conflict. Share with the group, if you have

one, and map one another's styles on a sheet of paper. What strengths and weaknesses do you bring to a conflict? Are you satisfied with your conflict-management style?

Devotional Scriptures Year B Fourth Sunday of Easter Week of April 21, 2024

Sunday, April 21

Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Monday, April 22

Psalm 95; 1 Samuel 16:1-13; 1 Peter 5:1-5

Tuesday, April 23

Psalm 95; 1 Chronicles 11:1-9; Revelation 7:13-17

Wednesday, April 24

Psalm 95; Micah 7:8-20; Mark 14:26-31

Thursday, April 25

Psalm 22:25-31; Amos 8:1-7; Acts 8:1b-8

Friday, April 26

Psalm 22:25-31; Amos 8:11-13; Acts 8:9-25

Saturday, April 27

Psalm 22:25-31; Amos 9:7-15; Mark 4:30-32



We should care for one another as
Christ cares for us.

INCLUSION

the gospel is for everyone

He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

—ACTS 8:31

Introduction

The Ethiopian eunuch’s story is one prized by generations of Christians for good reason: in it we see an enthusiastic response to the call of the Spirit to be baptized. Looking closer, however, we can see facets of the story that might move us anew—the eunuch’s marginalized status and his willingness to ask for help in understanding Scripture. As we encounter the eunuch’s story, we will doubtlessly be moved towards greater inclusion and an openness to the Spirit’s call.

Lesson Objectives

- To learn more about the story of Acts.
- To understand the Ethiopian eunuch’s marginalization and the Gospel’s inclusion.
- To foster a spirit of humility and willingness to follow the Spirit’s call.

Acts 8:26-40 NRSV

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his

generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” 34 The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (37 No Scripture.) 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Into the Scripture

Picking up right where Luke left off, the Acts of the Apostles, generally referred to by the name Acts, was originally one work written by the same author as Luke. Like Luke, it is also addressed to Theophilus, and the author references his “former book” by which he means the gospel of Luke: “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (Acts 1:1-3a).



Acts covers much of the same period as Paul's letters, and there are several points where the two books discuss the same event. Generally, both accounts agree with one another, but there are often subtle differences that matter for how we understand Paul and the early Church. For instance, after his conversion, Paul was at pains to say that he did not meet with the original apostles (see Galatians 1:17). This is because he presents his message as having come directly from his conversion experience



Acts covers much of the same period as Paul's letters.

on the road to Damascus, as opposed to Jesus' original disciples. However, Acts portrays him as immediately hurrying to meet with the disciples (see Acts 9:19-31).

The star of this portion of Acts is Philip the Evangelist, not to be confused with Philip the Apostle, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. He first arrived on the scene in chapter 6, where he is one of seven deacons chosen to do ministry for the church in Jerusalem, often referred to as “the Seven” in Acts. Little is known about him beyond those facts, except that he had “four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy” (Acts 21:9).

When paired with Paul's letters, a full account of Christianity's spread to new peoples begins to emerge.

We see just such a scenario in the Ethiopian eunuch's situation. Eunuchs were well-placed bureaucrats and court officials, as one can easily see by the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot and his status as being "in charge of [the Queen's] entire treasury." Later Christian traditions would give him the name Simeon Bachos and state that he became a great preacher of the Gospel in his homeland. With this context in mind, the intention of the story is to demonstrate the Gospel's spread throughout the entire world, one heart and baptism at a time.

One further detail bears mentioning—the fact that Philip heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading the scroll of Isaiah aloud. The fact that he was reading it aloud fits with how reading was often done in late antiquity. While scholars are now certain that those in the Greek and Roman worlds did read silently, there are many accounts that seem to portray reading aloud as the most common way to read a text.

Into the Lesson

The Ethiopian eunuch is a figure of much mystery, but his presence in the narrative was included in order to communicate that the Gospel was for everyone. Indeed, the Ethiopian eunuch's presence placed issues of religion, race, and sexuality front and center and offered an unambiguous "yes!" to the question of whether the Gospel could cross religious and cultural boundaries. As Brittany E. Wilson argues, "The eunuch is an ambiguous figure who embodies the boundary-crossing nature of the gospel itself."¹

The religion of the eunuch is not mentioned in the text, and there has been fierce debate over whether he was Jewish, Gentile, or situated in an intermediate



category called "God-fearing," which denoted sympathy with and partial observance of Jewish Law without full conversion. The text tells us that the eunuch could read Hebrew, the language that the scroll of Isaiah was written in, and that he had been in Jerusalem to worship—but it offers precious little that could help us understand the riddle of his religious identity.

What we do know is that if he were a Jewish convert, for instance, then his status as a eunuch would have made it impossible for him to visit the Temple in Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 23:1). If he were a convert barred from Jewish worship, or a God fearer who was never fully integrated into the Jewish community, then the possibility of conversion to "the Way" (as Acts refers to early Christianity) offered a chance at religious inclusion that might not have been available to the eunuch previously (see Acts 9:2). It is no mistake that the eunuch was reading about "the suffering servant" in Isaiah's scroll—perhaps he had recently faced religious exclusion in Jerusalem.

Surprisingly for most readers, the Ethiopian eunuch was not from the land presently known as Ethiopia. Rather, he was from Kush, which can be determined from the fact that the ruler is called the Candace; instead of a name, this was the title of the independent queens of Kush. It is highly likely that the Ethiopian eunuch was



The Ethiopian eunuch's presence placed issues of religion, race, and sexuality front and center.

Black, and David Tuesday Adamo argues that the term rendered “Ethiopian” in the text ought to be translated as “African.”² Indeed, within Eastern Orthodoxy, the Ethiopian eunuch is known as Simeon the Black. Thus, his presence in the narrative of Acts is to state unambiguously that the Gospel is racially inclusive.

Finally, the Ethiopian eunuch has been a figure highly valued by LGBT+ Christians, who see in his acceptance and baptism the inclusion of all sexual orientations and gender identities. While we primarily understand eunuchs to refer to one particular state of being, the New Testament and Jesus himself used the term “eunuch” in a more metaphorical way, even to stand in for many of the identities that would be considered LGBT today. Indeed, Jesus was unambiguous in his support of eunuchs, understood broadly to be inheritors of the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 19:12); and Isaiah 54:4-5—only a few chapters away from the one that the eunuch was reading in the story—promises eunuchs who draw near to God “an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

The Ethiopian eunuch’s story is a rebuttal to those who dare to say that the Gospel message is only for those who look, believe, or think like them. It is a rebuke of those who refuse to practice inclusion. It tells us that whatever our religious trauma, race, sexual orientation, or gender identity, the Gospel message is for us. Indeed, it must be. Otherwise, how could it be “Good News”?

Into Discipleship

While the eunuch’s identity is of much interest, we should not neglect the power of his actions, the first of which might escape your notice: he admitted that he did not understand what he was reading, asked questions, and asked for help. Our world and our churches would be inestimably better if we were willing to admit that we do not know everything and that we need help. Unfortunately, in American society, we praise rugged individualists and not those who know their limitations and seek aid.

All of us can admit that there are parts of the Bible that we do not understand. During the eunuch’s time, knowledge about Scripture was highly specialized and difficult to access. Nowadays, you can find plenty of information about the background of a particular passage just by searching the Internet—but the problem

arises in sorting worthwhile information from the deluge of possibilities. In other words, there is still a place for vetted and trusted information—sources like *Journeys*, a scholar or pastor you have come to trust, or a reliable Bible commentary.

The eunuch was unafraid to seek the help of someone who was an experienced interpreter of Isaiah: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (verse 31). He then invited Philip to sit beside him. This demonstrates the importance of forming community and relationships in our spiritual walk, as it is truly a difficult task to pursue growing closer to God alone. *We were made and formed for community*—community that breaks down barriers and draws all people close to God. The barriers of racism, misogyny, or heterosexism prevent us from finding that community and must be challenged at every turn.

After having Scripture explained to him, the eunuch then did something bold, asking, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” This stands in stark contrast to the way that the early Church would develop standards for who could be baptized. For instance, Hippolytus of Rome laid out a comprehensive program for assessing whether or not someone was ready for baptism, involving questions about his or her profession and personal life, as well as a waiting period of three years before being baptized.

While that lengthy waiting period is not common in the church anymore, we would do well to heed the eunuch’s example. He clearly experienced a call from the Spirit to be baptized and he did not delay. Neither did Philip question him or bar him from community because of his status as a eunuch. Instead, the men responded organically to what God was calling them to do, a righteous example for many of us who tend to laboriously ponder a decision—like myself.

One of the ways that we can be encouraged to act boldly is by praying that we will have the courage to follow where God may lead. Of course, such a prayer may lead us to unexpected places, but I am sure that the Ethiopian eunuch did not expect to wind up in the water getting baptized when he left Jerusalem that day.

Notes

1. Wilson, B. (2014). ‘Neither Male nor Female’: The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40. *New Testament Studies*, 60(3), 403–422. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/new-testament-studies/article/abs/neither-male-nor-female-the-ethiopian-eunuch-in-acts-82640/6AF-2FBE57399BDC835FC11A56274936D>
2. David Tuesday Adamo. *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 89–91.

Closing Prayer

Living God, you break down every barrier through your wonderful love for us. Help us also to love across lines of difference, asking for help when we need it. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- How do you explain places where Acts and Paul's letters recount the same event in different ways?

■ Into the Lesson

- Have you ever faced religious exclusion? How did it feel to be excluded from community? How can you help others to feel fully included and loved in your community?

■ Into Discipleship

- What resources do you use when you have trouble understanding Scripture?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- "Wade in the Water," performed by Ramsey Lewis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skCYAnFcQu8>
- "Draw the Circle Wide," written by Mark Miller; sung by Bellevue Presbyterian Church: <https://youtu.be/47XfedM77gw?feature=shared>
- "There Is a Fountain," played by David Baroni: <https://youtu.be/aKPHZuo7wQ0?feature=shared>

1

There is a fountain filled with blood
 Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
 And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
 Lose all their guilty stains:
 Lose all their guilty stains,
 Lose all their guilty stains;
 And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
 Lose all their guilty stains.

2

The dying thief rejoiced to see
 That fountain in his day;
 And there may I, though vile as he,
 Wash all my sins away:

Wash all my sins away,
 Wash all my sins away;
 And there may I, though vile as he,
 Wash all my sins away.

3

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
 Shall never lose its power,
 Till all the ransomed ones of God
 Be saved, to sin no more:
 Be saved, to sin no more,
 Be saved, to sin no more;
 Till all the ransomed ones of God,
 Be saved to sin no more.

4

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
 Thy flowing wounds supply,
 Redeeming love has been my theme,
 And shall be till I die:
 And shall be till I die,
 And shall be till I die;
 Redeeming love has been my theme,
 And shall be till I die.

5

When this poor lisping, stammering tongue
 Lies silent in the grave,
 Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
 I'll sing Thy power to save:
 I'll sing Thy power to save,
 I'll sing Thy power to save;
 Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
 I'll sing Thy power to save.

- "I Am Coming to the Cross" (words by W. MacDonald, 1870): <https://youtu.be/F2dWYkcZm54?feature=shared>

1

I am coming to the cross;
 I am poor and weak and blind;
 I am counting all but dross;
 I shall full salvation find.
 (REFRAIN)
 I am trusting, Lord, in Thee,
 [O thou] Lamb of Calvary;
 Humbly at Thy cross I bow;
 Save me, Jesus, save me now.

2

Long my heart has sighed for Thee;
Long as evil reigned within;
Jesus sweetly speaks to me:
“I will cleanse you from all sin.” (REFRAIN)

3

Here I give my all to Thee:
Friends and time, and earthly store;
Soul and body Thine to be,
Wholly Thine forevermore. (REFRAIN)

4

In the promises I trust;
Now I feel the blood applied;
I am prostrate in the dust;
I with Christ am crucified. (REFRAIN)

5

Jesus comes! He fills my soul!
Perfected in Him I am;
I am every whit made whole:
Glory, glory to the Lamb! (REFRAIN)

Media Option

Poem: “Baptism” by Jill Bergkamp

A pane breaks into water as we enter death
and burial to imitate Christ. Faith is measured
this way, by one’s willingness to submit
to what one cannot comprehend. We rise up
as new creatures, but in what sense have we
shifted? In those seconds under water’s
smooth door, do our bodies lap over
this world’s edge to the next? Do the angels
who see us rejoice
to bear witness before we rise up, closing
the door between us? Our lives’ balance
on the wing of what we give up, yet desire.
A bird imitates, but is said to have no
perception. Yet some believe it was a bird

who plunged the primordial sea,
bringing mud to the surface to form the earth
we’re made from; their wings opening in the shape
of a cross, our fondest dreams of flight.

Activity Idea

Make a list of all the different resources that you use to better understand Scripture. These can be external resources (like books, podcasts, or websites), or practices like prayer. Next, rate these resources based on their reliability on a scale from 1 to 10—with 10 being very reliable and 1 being not-at-all reliable. What do you consider to be the most reliable resource?

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Fifth Sunday of Easter

Week of April 28, 2024

Sunday, April 28

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21;
John 15:1-8

Monday, April 29

Psalm 80; Isaiah 5:1-7; Galatians 5:16-26

Tuesday, April 30

Psalm 80; Isaiah 32:9-20; James 3:17-18

Wednesday, May 1

Psalm 80; Isaiah 65:17-25; John 14:18-31

Thursday, May 2

Psalm 98; Isaiah 49:5-6; Acts 10:1-34

Friday, May 3

Psalm 98; Isaiah 42:5-9; Acts 10:34-43

Saturday, May 4

Psalm 98; Deuteronomy 32:44-47; Mark 10:42-45

TESTIMONY

draw the circle wide

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

—ACTS 10:47

Introduction

I was always an eccentric child growing up. One of the ways my peculiarity manifested was in the consumption of French fries. Even now, my personal preference involves sorting my fries by length to group fries for optimal dunking in sauce. It is my opinion that this method provides a consistent bite every time with the correct ratio of fry-to-sauce. While I could eat French fries the traditional chaotic way, my soul is most at peace when I have the time and space to sort my fries. Simply put, it feels *right*. There may not be any moral statement about sorting fries in this lesson; however, we will challenge our vantage point of other divisions. Our text today will probe our tendency to sort, categorize, and create dichotomies.

Lesson Objectives

- To acknowledge how we gate-keep the Gospel.
- To reconnect with God’s heart for all.
- To watch for the Spirit’s guidance.

Acts 10:44-48 NRSV

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.
45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”
48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Into the Scripture

Where Are You?

Acts 10:1 tells us of a Roman centurion named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea. Caesarea is known as the town where Peter's mother-in-law lived and likely the hometown of fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Cornelius received a vision from God instructing him to invite Peter into his home. Acts 10:6 tells us that Simon Peter was staying with Simon the tanner. Cornelius followed through with the instructions in his vision by sending messengers to locate Peter.

While Cornelius received his vision and gave instructions to his messengers, Peter received his own vision from God. Peter's vision concluded with God's instructing Peter to go with the men who had arrived at the house. Upon arrival at Cornelius's house, Peter spoke to the household and watched the Holy Spirit pour out on them and empower them with the gift of tongues. Peter's beliefs about the audience of the Gospel message were deconstructed and rebuilt by the work of the Holy Spirit in this encounter.

The Story Behind the Story

Simon Peter was a fisher before he was a disciple of Christ. He and his brother Andrew worked alongside Zebedee's sons, James and John, in a successful fishing



business. As you read through the Gospels and Peter's letters in the New Testament, you will notice that Peter has a very *strong* personality; some would even call him bullish. Peter did nothing halfway. He was 200 percent behind any action he performed with conviction. Some examples include his

calling Jesus the "Christ," saying that he would die for Jesus, walking on water and then sinking, cutting off the soldier's ear at Jesus' arrest, and denying Jesus three times. Peter learned his lessons the hard way.

Prior to the events of our text for today, God gave Peter a vision to redefine clean and unclean foods. However, this vision was not really about food. God



God gave Peter a
vision to redefine clean
and unclean foods.

wanted Peter to expand his awareness of the Gospel audience and used Jewish dietary laws as an illustration tool. Peter struggled with how God's message changed Peter's understanding of the dietary laws and challenged his Jewish identity. Ultimately, God declared that God decides what is clean or unclean, not humans.

Guilty by Association

In Acts 10:28, we receive a glimpse into Peter's prejudice: Peter told Cornelius that Jews were forbidden to associate with or visit outsiders. The fascinating fact, however, is that you will not find laws forbidding Jews from socializing with Gentiles in the Torah; there are many laws within the Torah about caring for the foreigner, traveler, and refugee dwelling among you. The laws connected to other groups of people are based on preventing idol worship. These laws include banning marriage with other groups and instructions to push the Canaanites out of the Promised Land (again, fear of idol worship).

The reader can make assumptions about Jewish cultural norms in practice based on Peter's words. The laws in the Torah protecting Israel from the risks of idolatry had grown into a cultural prejudice for Gentiles. To associate with Gentiles was to be guilty of idolatry. The Jews had created their own religious and cultural bubble; this was even obvious in the structure of the Temple courtyards. Gentiles could only get so close to the Holy of Holies where God dwelt. Was this division the way God designed things to be? Did God choose one people group to be better than everyone else?

Into the Lesson

The Struggles of Infallibility

As a true Baptist, my natural inclination is to defend the veracity of the Bible: if Peter said there was a law, then there **MUST** have been a law. The problem with closing my fists around the Scriptures tightly to protect it leads to my missing the Spirit's teaching me something new. God's truth is still true even when it does not fit our expectations.

Recently, I have trained myself to pause and investigate my biases when I feel that my defenses are building about my interpretation of Scripture. Peter's language in Acts 10:28 fits the words of Jesus in both Matthew 10:5-6 and Matthew 15:21-28. These texts portray Jesus with what appears to be a segregated mission—only to the Lost Sheep of Israel. This is another area where I am forced to pause and let the Spirit inform my understanding.

Assuming most *Journeys* readers are not ethnically Jewish, does this exclusionary mission bother anyone else? We would not be included in the Gospel hope if the trajectory of God's mission stayed only for Jews. Fortunately for us, there are other Gospel texts revealing a larger audience. Whenever we study Scripture, it is key to interpret a text on three levels: (1) the verse itself; (2) the verse within its book; and (3) the verse within Scripture. If our interpretation of a passage does not stay consistent on all three levels, then we need to reexamine our reading. This is how we discover the infallibility of God's Word.

A God of Mercy, a God of Justice

Over the centuries, the Church has exhibited a tendency to overemphasize one attribute of God, while underemphasizing others depending on our personal goals. An



example of this behavior would be our emphasizing the God of mercy when *we* fail and demanding the God of justice when *others* fail—or our emphasizing a hierarchy of sin when we want to judge others while calling “sin a sin” when we are on the active end of repentance. Fortunately for all of creation, we do not get to pick the attributes of God's character to fit our agenda. Just as we interpret Scripture on three levels, we must also see God's character consistent in the big picture and little picture, the Old Testament and New Testament, single verse and the entirety of Scripture.

Looking at Scripture as a whole, we see a God who desires all of creation. In Genesis 1, after God finished creating everything, He proclaimed the whole of creation very good and commissioned humans with the responsibility to help creation flourish. In Genesis 12, Abraham was promised to be blessed to be a blessing to the world. Isaac was blessed in Genesis 26 and told that his family would bless the world. God blessed Jacob in Genesis 28 and again was told that his family would bless the world. Zechariah 8 speaks of a day when many nations and peoples will seek the Lord. This sentiment is repeated in Jeremiah 16 and Ezekiel 37. In 1 Kings 8:41-43, prophets speak of foreigners' coming to Israel to call on God.



Whenever we study Scripture, it is key to
interpret a text on three levels.

The prophecy of Jonah speaks of God's desire to save the enemy nation of Nineveh. Jesus called out the hypocrisy of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees—and stated that God could make descendants of Abraham from rocks. Paul refers to the prophet Isaiah's words as hope for the Gentiles and spoke to Timothy about God's desire for all to be saved. First Peter 2:9 speaks of the chosen people of God not by race, gender, or nation, but by God's decree.

Post-Ascension Orthopraxy

The disciples began ministering, teaching, sharing the Gospel, baptizing, and sometimes healing following the Great Commission. However, the push to serve the Gentiles was a struggle for this predominantly Jewish team. We learn through Acts 15 and Paul's letters of the tension between Jewish and Gentile believers in the practical application of their faith in Jesus. Paul's Jewish opposition, also known as the Judaizers, twisted Jesus' message to require submission to the Torah. We learn in some of Paul's other letters and the book of Acts about the Judaizers' overemphasizing the importance of circumcision or strict adherence to the Law for salvation (see Acts 15; Galatians 2; Titus 1:10-13; Philippians 3:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:17-21; 9:20; Romans 2:17-29). In Galatians 2, we learn that Paul and Peter had a public dispute—where Paul accused Peter of hypocritically ignoring some Gentile believers at a mixed-company meal. Learning to break out of our own expectations of faith in practice (orthopraxy) can be an ongoing struggle.

Into Discipleship

Reality Check

If we are honest with ourselves, we need a reality check as a Church. The Church is not fulfilling our commission in Genesis 1 to nurture and help all of creation flourish. Our Gospel has become "fire insurance"—fear of hell rather than a conviction to take part in the great love of Jesus. Our reputation has become one of demonstrating exclusion rather than inclusion.

People know Christians more for what we are against than for how we live. When did the Gospel become infiltrated by politics over God's love? The news is full of Christians protesting their own convictions. Why are we not preaching the overwhelming love of God?



People know Christians
more for what we are
against than for how
we live.

Self-reflection: Imagine you have just arrived in Eternity. The first person you see shocks you so much you want to speak to "management." Who is that person?

Activity: Use Galatians 3:26-29 (CEB) to take time to ponder on our habit of creating dichotomies of "us versus them." Without using the traditional words of this passage, fill out the blanks to push yourself like God pushed Peter. Who is God including that you want to exclude?

Galatians 3:26-29:

26 You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. **27** All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **28** There is neither _____ nor _____; there is neither _____ nor _____; nor is there _____ and _____, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29** Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise.*

Resist the Qualifiers

You may be resistant to the results of the activity above. It is uncomfortable to think about God's loving everyone the same amount. God's overwhelming love is wonderful when focused on the people we love or the people we



agree with, but this truth is painful when God's love includes people with whom we disagree. Perhaps as you were doing the activity you wanted to protest by quoting verse 27 and saying, "But they have to be baptized in order to qualify."

My response to that protest would be the promise that Jesus made to the thief on the Cross: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." The thief never had the chance to be baptized, yet he received a promise of eternity. What about the God-fearing Jews from before Jesus' time like Abraham, Moses, David, or the prophets? They were not baptized into a trinitarian baptism. Were they saved? If God claimed them, then could He not claim people we do not like or understand?

Fortunately for everyone, God decides how to hand

out tickets for eternity, not us. I am grateful that I do not carry the burden of that responsibility. God does not want the destruction of humanity or the destruction of creation. God wants to redeem and restore all things to God's purpose and God's glory.

Paul says that we are not the ones who make the decision of who is worthy of God's hope. We are created beings made in the image of God and ambassadors of Christ. We represent God's Word; we do not get to decide the recipients of God's love. Our role is to spread the hope far and wide. The Spirit of God does the rest. This reality led to a humbling for Peter as he watched the Holy Spirit enter Gentiles, the very group he previously believed to be outside of God's grace. Whom is God asking you to open your heart to include?

#InThisTogether: Ministry in Times of Crisis

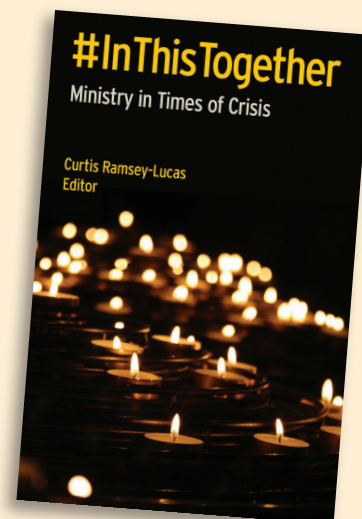
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Closing Prayer

God of all creation, we thank you for loving us all unconditionally and welcoming us into the household of faith. Help each of us mirror your hospitality as we seek to grow in our understanding and commitment to live as Jesus lived. Help us all seek unity as we walk in your light. May your love run from heart to heart and breast to breast as we come together as the body of Christ. Amen.

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- **Christian Bubble Discussion:** Are you in a Christian bubble?
- Who are your five closest relationships? Describe them to the class.
- How are you similar to them? How are you different?
- How often do you talk to people who think, vote, love, worship, eat, etc., differently from yourself?

■ Into the Lesson

- Who are your “unclean” that God wants you to see with fresh eyes?

■ Into Discipleship

- **Intergenerational Ministry:** How are your ministries divided in your congregation? By age and gender or stage of life?
- How could mixing groups together benefit the church?
- ***Activity Fill-ins:** Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “Yes We Can Can,” sung by the Pointer Sisters: <https://youtu.be/F2U1OUxXSMM?feature=shared>
- “You’ve Got a Friend,” sung by James Taylor and Carole King: <https://youtu.be/nEFfzHiEKHY?feature=shared>
- “One Tribe,” sung by Black Eyed Peas: <https://youtu.be/IisSJsaA0o?feature=shared>

Media Options

- Learn more about the book of Acts from the Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/acts/>.
- Learn more about historical perspectives of Jews concerning Gentiles: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/gentile>.



Activity Ideas

■ International Ministries' DISASTER RELIEF, NEWS (10/2023): "IM Requests Prayers for Peace in Israel and Gaza; Offers Relief Support to Partners in the Region":

"As the conflict in the Middle East escalates, International Ministries (IM) urgently requests prayers for peace across Israel, Gaza, and the surrounding area. Together, along with the European Baptist Federation and Baptist World Alliance, we mourn with those who have lost loved ones, and we lift up prayers for peace and justice. Even during suffering and conflict, God's light and faithfulness remain. We urge our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to be peacemakers who reject any restrictions on human rights based on geography, ethnicity, or faith. As the hands and feet of Jesus, we unequivocally denounce terrorism and all acts of violence that target innocent civilians. . . .

"Let us stand together with those suffering in this time of complexity and violence. Our partners in the region have shared the following calls for prayer:

- Pray for lasting peace, hope, security, and freedom for the entire region.
- Pray for God's comfort to be with those who are grieving lost loved ones.
- Pray for healing for those who have been wounded during the conflict.
- Pray for the safety and liberation of those who are being held hostage.
- Pray for wisdom and discernment during the facilitation of a peace mediation process.
- Pray for wisdom and discernment for the leaders.
- Pray for unity in God's church.
- Pray for God to use Christians as witnesses of his love.
- Pray that Christians around the world will give generously to local partners who will holistically minister to people in this region."

Read more at <https://internationalministries.org/im-requests-prayers-for-peace-in-israel-and-gaza-offers-relief-support-to-partners-in-the-region/>.

■ Engage in *Us Versus Them* activities to analyze how we process preferences and differences:

- *Edible*: Hand out "fun-sized" colored candies (i.e., M&M's®, Smarties®, Reese's Pieces, Skittles®, Runts, fruit snacks).
- Invite the group to create a system for eating their candies. Give them a chance to explain.
- *Alternative to food*: Get a jar of assorted buttons and have the group determine a system for sorting the buttons.
- *Guess Who or 20 Questions*: How do we differentiate each other?
- Stick to famous figures (biblical is possible but may be quite hard).

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Sixth Sunday of Easter

Week of May 5, 2024

Sunday, May 5

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Monday, May 6

Psalm 93; Deuteronomy 7:1-11; 1 Timothy 6:11-12

Tuesday, May 7

Psalm 93; Deuteronomy 11:1-17; 1 Timothy 6:13-16

Wednesday, May 8

Psalm 93; Deuteronomy 11:18-21; Mark 16:19-20

Thursday, May 9

Ascension of the Lord: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Friday, May 10

Psalm 47; Exodus 24:15-18; Revelation 1:9-18

Saturday, May 11

Psalm 47; Deuteronomy 34:1-7; John 16:4-11

HARVEST

faithful fruit-ition

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

—PSALM 1:3

Introduction

In 2007, Sarah McLachlan teamed up with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) on a campaign to end animal cruelty by pairing her song “Angel” with videos of sad animals. The guilt that washed over viewers was palpable. Apparently guilt works. In the first two years of airing, the commercial raised \$30 million. However, the commercial became an iconic Internet joke that lost the gravity of its message. After a while, the audience stopped taking the commercial seriously, which resulted in parodies and spoofs being created including by the adult cartoon “South Park.” The most recent spoof involved Sarah McLachlan herself in a Super Bowl commercial. Sincerity and humility are key components for the veracity of a message to be maintained. We will question Psalm 1’s veracity as we investigate God’s justice.

Lesson Objectives

- To have accountability for our actions.
- To develop compassion for our neighbor.
- To stop creating villainized dichotomies.

Psalm 1 NRSV

1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation

of the righteous; 6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Into the Scripture

Frame the Art

The book of Psalms is a compilation of poetry covering a large span of time by many authors used for a variety of purposes—including lament, prayer, and worship. *The Bible Project* suggests that Psalm 1 is an introductory psalm creating a framework for the rest of the book. Psalm 1 sets a structure for readers to develop honest communication and provides an invitation to commune with God through prayer, worship, or lament. We know many of the authors of Psalms, including David, Solomon, the sons of Korah, Heman, Ethan, and Moses. However, we do not know the author of Psalm 1. Many readers default attributions to David, but we simply do not know. Regardless of its authorship, the message of Psalm 1 rings true.

Main Message

The author uses Psalm 1 to present two lifestyle choices to our reader: (1) delight in God's guidance, or (2) rejection of God's guidance. One option leads to flourishing, while the other option leads to ruin. Psalm 1 is a perfect introduction to the book of Psalms, as it sets up a compelling argument to engage with its wisdom. Those who dwell in God's wisdom experience delight, study this scroll, and enjoy God's wisdom.

Translation Struggle

My English-speaking mind struggles with the translation

of the first word in verse 1. The use of "happy" does not create a hunger for wisdom. In modern colloquialism, *happy* is a superficial emotion. *Happiness* is contextual and fleeting—always changing with the times. Happiness falls flat of the emotion evoked when trusting

“

Blessed is the one who
embodies God's created
order.

in God's wisdom. A more common translation of this Hebrew word is *blessed*. "Blessed" implies a rich satisfaction. "Blessed" is a permanent state of being.

Following God's instruction is not a fleeting satisfaction, but results in a permanent status change. The one who follows God's instruction is labeled *blessed*. Literally, *blessed* is the one who follows the Torah. *Blessed* is the one who follows the instructions of God. *Blessed* is the one who lives the Law of Moses. *Blessed* is the one who embodies God's created order.

Abide with Me

The blessed person meditates on God's law. They are in God's presence night and day. These words echo back to Deuteronomy 6:4-9, also called Shema Yisrael. The Shema is where God instructs Israel to memorize His words by binding them to their foreheads, arms, doorposts, or hearts and always repeating them, especially in front of their kids. God's Word is supposed to surround us.

The Root of Blessing

In verse 3, the "blessed" are trees bearing fruit because they are rooted in good soil. As the "blessed" seek their nourishment in the fertile soil of God's instruction,



their blessed state comes to fruition. In the Gospels, we see Jesus emphasize the importance of bearing fruit as he interacted with a fig tree and used a parable of a fig tree to teach his disciples. Paul also uses the language of “fruit” to talk about our spiritual transformation. It is imperative that we remind ourselves that fruit is not our salvation, but fruit is evidence of our transformation. Like baptism, our spiritual fruit is evidence of God’s working inside of us. Tim Mackie and Jon Collins of *The Bible Project* discuss this distinction by saying this: “Behavior is the fruit of the transformation, not the tree itself. This isn’t to downplay moral change—lives lived differently and society transformed is exactly the impact the power of Jesus is bringing about in his people. The consequence of this transformation is inevitably moral beauty, but the idea of the ‘image of God’ is so much richer than just doing the right thing” (<https://bibleproject.com/articles/new-human/>).

The root of our blessing is Jesus. The *fruit* of our blessing comes from the transformation of our nourishing roots.

Into the Lesson

A Not-So-Prosperous Gospel

The author creates a dichotomy of blessed versus wicked, a message frequently heard by televangelists. This rivalry appears logical; the blessed receive good and the wicked receive ruin. This message has earned the title “Prosperity Gospel”: *Be faithful to God and receive health and wealth. If you are not faithful, you will experience hardships. I need a second private jet and a third mansion—I received this blessing for my faithfulness.* However, upon a quick look at the news and our communities, we will realize that good people do not always flourish, and bad



people do not always receive consequences. The rich continue to get richer while the poor get poorer. The state of the world directly contradicts all famous prosperity gospel preachers. Behaving faithfully and committing to a life of following Jesus does not mean that we will be free from struggle, harm, or pain. We live in a world still affected by the consequences of sin. Until Jesus returns and conquers evil once and for all, even the most righteous followers will suffer on occasion.

Is the psalmist supporting the “Prosperity Gospel” message? Or is the psalmist projecting a vision of perfection when we follow God’s design? In a world free from sin, good triumphs. This psalm builds a craving inside of us for the words to be true. The words of the Lord’s Prayer ring in my ear: *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

“Us” Versus “Them”

The author contrasts the “blessed” one with the “wicked.” This second category is not simply any person who does wrong or sins a solitary sin. After all, Paul clarifies that we are all sinners. The psalmist is highlighting a different thought process. ***The wicked ones reject God, God’s law, and God’s people.*** They do not want to be associated with anything connected to God. As a result, the blessed will experience a prosperous



Good people do not always flourish, and bad people do not always receive consequences.

future dwelling in the Torah, while the wicked will end in ruin separated from God.

Whenever a dichotomy is presented in Scripture, our human hearts tend to place ourselves on the “good” side: *Clearly, I am not a wicked one. It’s obvious I’m one who cares about God’s Word.* We have a natural tendency to give ourselves a moral pass for any of our failings while judging our enemies and neighbors to a harsher degree. We become the haughty Pharisee in Jesus’ parable about humility and prayer rather than the humble tax collector. Unlike our lesson last week, we must not put a name with *wicked*, or assume that *they* are the wicked . . . while *I* am innocent. What if it is about me? What if Jesus is calling me to change MY life? Do I have a log in my eye that requires my attention?

Spiritual Disconnect

In the Gospels, Jesus pushes at the limitations of our assumptions by calling the Pharisees hypocrites because their words and actions do not match. They speak the words of God and fervently observe most of the laws of the Torah but live selfish, greedy, or power-hungry lives in pursuit of religious clout. In reality, these ultra-religious people are the ones separated from the heart of God’s law. It is ironic that the ones who have memorized God’s law do not know how to practically apply it to their lives outside of legalism and pride.

God did not design the law to be a burden but, rather, a fence which gives our world structure. Jesus spoke to religious leaders about this design when his disciples were challenged about the Sabbath laws. Jesus reveals that the intention of the Law was not to remove pleasure from our lives, but to enable us to live flourishing, fruitful, enriched lives in community with God and with others. We create a spiritual disconnect when we elevate the Law to a place of righteous hierarchy that earns us favor with God rather than a gift to foster community enrichment.

A Cause for Pause

The psalmist’s explanation for suffering invites us to slow down and reflect. Whenever a passage is difficult to process, it is imperative that we stop and ask the Spirit to guide our understanding. Take time to investigate other passages for clarifications. As we read Scripture in its entirety, we put the words of Jesus and Paul next

to the words of the psalmist. Together, these texts interpret each other. Paul’s words expand on the words from Psalm 1. Because I know God from Genesis to Revelation, I know that God desires all people. Someday, every nation will praise His name. God does not desire the destruction of His creation, but the end of evil. We cannot demand justice on our neighbors’ actions while begging for mercy for ourselves. God’s design is for all to know His love and transformation.

Into Discipleship

The Heart of God

Paul made it clear to the Romans that God’s mercy does not mean that we get to *sin it up!* God’s people are called to be a royal priesthood of transformed people. While we recognize our roots: Jesus’ mercy poured out on us, we respond with fruit: transformed lives. Even though God’s mercy abounds, accountability still plays a key role in our lives.

On the surface, Psalm 1 suggests an explanation for suffering: the wicked experience suffering consequently while the righteous receive blessings as a reward. As readers, we want to shift the pain and explain why we are suffering. Who is accountable for my pain? It is human to desire for evil to receive justice. Some would argue that it is the Spirit of God dwelling in us, craving justice. If we think this, then we must be clear that we are not trying to cover the situation with a blanket of vengeance. Even that is in God’s hands.



Jesus reveals that the
intention of the Law was to
enable us to live flourishing,
fruitful, enriched lives.



A Word of Caution

I encourage caution as God's ambassadors that we do not become a christened version of the Justice League. It is very easy to lose sight of God's love when we have our tunnel vision scoped in on justice. Westboro Baptist Church is known for their protests spreading "God's hate." They protest believing that they are God's righteous representatives of judgment and condemnation, calling America to repent by speaking of things considered abominations to God. Hate is present even in their church website, which pairs God's name with "hate" and a slur against homosexuals.

Westboro has provoked counter-protesters who, ironically, are mostly atheists spreading messages of love. Jesus was told to stop his disciples from praising God through him and Jesus responded, "If they are quiet the rocks will cry out." It feels satirical that their message has become a caricature of hypocrisy rather than one compelling transformation. No one is going to be brought to Jesus using hate.

Accountability

Unfortunately, Westboro is not hearing the words of their opponents. Instead, they feel more justified in their

cause, calling the counter-protesters the persecution that Peter prophesied. Their "suffering" by the counter-protestors is the "persecution" predicted for doing the right thing. Rather than dissuading the group, the counter-protestors have justified doubling Westboro's efforts rather than softening their hearts of stone.

This is the same self-righteous attitude that justified Saul of Tarsus to arrest Christians before his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. Saul was so wrapped up in his self-righteousness that he could only think of murder. Read that again: Saul was so focused on his own self-righteousness that he justified breaking one of the Ten Commandments for his cause.

Call to Action

It is time that the church is held accountable for our actions of division and words of hatred. We need to pray for the Spirit to bring revival into our lives. If we are doing our Christian duty, then our fruit will be fighting systems that continue to oppress the vulnerable. The state of the world operates in the opposite of the psalmist's words, but we can live counter-culturally, allowing the light of God to shine through us as a witness to God's way and will.

Closing Prayer

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.
 O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love.
 For it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 [Amen.]



Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- The imagery of a tall, vibrant tree with strong roots that sink far down into the ground can metaphorically represent our spiritual wherewithal. Name those aspects of discipleship and walking in God that help us grow strong roots.
- At times, vines and fungi can plague the well-being of a tree. The sickness is seen in the appearance of the tree. How do we as “trees” protect ourselves from destructive forces that seek to parasitically latch on to us and suck the life out of us spiritually?

■ Into the Lesson

- How do you juxtapose Jesus’ teaching that both the sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust with Psalm 1?
- Who in your life has spiritually represented the strong tree growing by the rivers of water? What has it been about their Christian witness that leads you to give them this honor?

■ Into Discipleship

- Jesus said that we would know a tree by its fruit. Can you name a supposedly Christian witness whose fruit does not match up to the teachings and love of God? Explain why you see that person in that vein.
- What is the danger in our trying to decide who is authentically Christian? Is the Church called to resist evil by pointing out Christian hypocrisy? Do we cause damage to the witness of the Church if we do not?



Resources

Songs to Consider

- “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love,” performed by Fr. Peter Scholtes: <https://youtu.be/LZg8Ho-lNqk?feature=shared>
- “For the One,” sung by Jenn Johnson: <https://youtu.be/iKFb4rNsA20?feature=shared>
- “Make My Life a Prayer to You,” sung by Keith Green: <https://youtu.be/Jd9MaBu3gAg?feature=shared>

Media Options

- **The Bible Project:**
 - **Book Overview:** <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/psalms/>
 - **Visual Commentary:** <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/psalm-1/>
 - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/book-of-psalms/>
 - <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-psalms/>
- **The Expositor’s Bible Commentary:** Psalms (5) by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland
- **Psalms for Everyone, Part 1:** Psalms 1–72 (The Old Testament for Everyone) by John Goldingay
- **Mother Teresa’s “[Do It] Anyway,”** *[Reportedly inscribed on the wall of Mother Teresa’s children’s home in Calcutta and attributed to her. However, an article in the New York Times has since reported (March 8, 2002) that the original version of this poem was written by Kent M. Keith.]* <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/views/teresa.htm>

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered;

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives;

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;

Give the best you’ve got anyway.

You see,

in the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Seventh Sunday of Easter

Week of May 12, 2024

Sunday, May 12

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Monday, May 13

Psalm 115; Exodus 28:29-38; Philippians 1:3-11

Tuesday, May 14

Psalm 115; Numbers 8:5-22; Titus 1:1-9

Wednesday, May 15

Psalm 115; Ezra 9:5-15; John 16:16-24

Thursday, May 16

Psalm 33:12-22; Genesis 2:4b-7; 1 Corinthians 15:42b-49

Friday, May 17

Psalm 33:12-22; Job 37:1-13; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57

Saturday, May 18

Psalm 33:12-22; Exodus 15:6-11; John 7:37-39

REVIVAL

the power of unity

“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD.

—EZEKIEL 37:14

Introduction

As a product of the 1980s, I have a particular nostalgia for kids' shows of the late 1980s and early 1990s. No matter the show, when an enemy was too great to defeat, the heroes activated a particular trope to save the day: joining together in teamwork. You may recognize this story device from the Care Bear Stare or the Power Rangers' Dino Megazord. Captain Planet, however, is a perfect example of this trope. When the Planeteers could not defeat their foe, they would join their powers together and summon Captain Planet. Though the show only lasted three years, the lessons from this show stuck with my generation. A 501-c3 was even established, *Captain Planet Foundation*, in honor of this show's goal of taking care of the planet. When we have lost all hope, we turn to powers greater than ourselves for a solution. For the kids of the 1980s, we turned to superheroes. As Christ's followers, we turn to God. In our text today, God is going to restore hope in the prophet Ezekiel in unthinkable ways.

Lesson Objectives

- To acknowledge our sensations of hopelessness at the continued historic devastations unfolding each day.
- To remember that our God created all things out of nothing; his power and sovereignty know no bounds.
- To pursue God's plans of restoration work.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 NRSV

1 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” 4 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of

the LORD. 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.” 7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11 Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD.

Into the Scripture

The book of Ezekiel is known as a prophetic book. Prophecies are not about employing fortune tellers to read our palms; rather, prophecies are God’s way of speaking to God’s people about a specific message through a specific spokesperson. I like to think of prophecies as proclamations and promises. This prophetic book is narrated in the first person; therefore, the reader assumes the author to be Ezekiel. Though this book is called a prophecy, Ezekiel first and foremost was preparing to be a priest of Israel.

In the very first verse of the first chapter of Ezekiel, we learn that he has just turned thirty, which meant he was officially old enough to be installed fully as a priest. However, Ezekiel was not in Jerusalem; he was in Babylon, therefore being hindered from this installation. Because of Ezekiel’s prominent status as a priest (read: scholar), he was one of the first people that Babylon removed from Judah. Babylon’s intention was to weaken



Ezekiel was one of the first people that Babylon removed from Judah.

the potential for revolt by the Jewish people by taking people of wealth, education, and power into the court to serve the Babylonian king.

Division of God's People

The twelve tribes of Israel first moved into the land of Canaan together and established one joint kingdom with regions of land sectioned off for each tribe per God's instructions. Every tribe had their inheritance, and God was their king. It was not long before the people demanded a physical, earthly king that they could see to lead them.

Saul was their first king. However, Saul was not obedient to God's instructions and God selected a new king to succeed the throne. David, a shepherd-boy—son of Jesse—was anointed as God's chosen king for Israel. After Saul died, David inherited the kingdom. David was a flawed king who stayed devoted to God and never worshiped idols. God promised David's line a permanent place on the throne. David's son Solomon became king after David's death.

When it was time for Solomon's son to inherit the throne, Israel disagreed on who should succeed Solomon. Proper succession would mean that Rehoboam was next in line, but a rebellion led by Jeroboam, son of Nebat and of the tribe of Ephraim, split the kingdom in two. Ten tribes formed the Northern Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam I, while two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom of Judah—with Rehoboam as king.

Israel or Judah?

Verse 11 mentions the whole house of Israel; however, around 720 BC, Assyria invaded Israel and the Northern Kingdom was destroyed. Judah's fall to Babylonian rule occurred around 605 BC, but Jerusalem would not fall until 587 BC. Since Assyria destroyed the Northern



Kingdom of Israel nearly seventy years before Ezekiel's prophecy, Ezekiel directed his words and sign-acts to the Southern Kingdom of Judah even though his audience was already under Babylon's control.

One would assume that the audience of Ezekiel's words would be the kingdom of Judah, since they were the only ones left. However, Ezekiel refers to his audience, God's people, multiple times as Israel. Along with Ezekiel's prophecies of judgment and consequences, Ezekiel also shares a prophecy of the rejoining of the two kingdoms. Through a sign-act of binding two sticks together, Ezekiel points to a promise that this severed household would be reunited.

Restoration

The vision of the valley of dry bones came in the middle of God's promises for restoration. The priestly prophet's experience breaks all traditional expectations of God's presence with God's people. Ezekiel saw dry withered bones, devoid of marrow, returned to life. Sinews, tendons, muscles, and skin brought each body back together again. At the culmination, God told Ezekiel to prophesy breath to fill their lungs and these bodies to live again. Just like God's creation of humanity in Genesis 1–2, *God's breath animates God's creation*. What humans thought was hopeless, the Sovereign God restored.



Ezekiel directed his words and sign-acts to the
Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Into the Lesson

No Marrow

Things seemed hopeless for the twelve tribes of Israel: The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria and now the Southern Kingdom of Judah had been invaded by Babylon. By the time of the events of this passage, Ezekiel received word that Jerusalem had fallen. Hope appeared to be lost and it seemed that God had abandoned God's people. Both kingdoms connected to Abraham's tree had been destroyed. How could they possibly rebuild?

It is no wonder God uses the language of dry bones to portray the promises that He would fulfill to the twelve tribes of Israel. The bones were devoid of marrow and showed no signs of life. The Promised Land had been taken away from God's people. God's people had either been killed or taken captive and God Himself had left the Temple. Where could Israel go from there?

Theological Crisis

For the seasoned Christian, the valley of dry bones is a familiar story of God's restoration. While this story can fill us with hope for our future, it should exceedingly tell us about God's character. Since the time of wandering in the desert during the Exodus from Egypt, God had dwelt with God's people. During the wandering, God resided in the Tabernacle. God commissioned David's son, King Solomon, to build a permanent structure when Israel finally settled in the Promised Land. The Holy of Holies was where the Ark of the Covenant was located. God's presence dwelt in the Holy of Holies at the center of the Temple. Heaven and earth collided at the Temple mount. Solomon's Temple was the pinnacle of religious significance to Judah. To various degrees, God's people could approach the presence of God in this sacred space.

Babylon's invasion and control of Judah brought major theological questions. In chapter 1, Ezekiel was at the edge of the Chebar River in Babylon. He was removed from the Temple and God's presence. How would Ezekiel, a priest, attend to his duties as a priest if he was away from the presence of God? Then, in Ezekiel 10, we learn that God's presence left the Temple because of the evil performed by His people. Now the people were cut off from God's presence! What will God's people do if they cannot reach out to God? What does this crisis say about God's sovereignty and power?

The Real Message of Hope

Our perspective is limited by the scope of our minds. Hopelessness can easily bubble up as we view the state of our world. How can these dry bones live? Ezekiel felt this same sense of hopelessness by the banks of the Chebar River. Perhaps without even realizing it, we place expectations on and parameters around God's capabilities. Our limited understanding struggles to comprehend concepts like eternity, perfect love, or redemption. Fortunately for us, God is vastly larger than what the brain can grasp. God knows no limits. Ezekiel discovered our limitless God when God surprised him through a vision by showing up in Babylon in chapter 1.

Perhaps unknowingly, we make grand theological statements about God's sovereignty and power when we remark on the hopelessness of the state of our world. When we see the world as hopeless, we are saying that God is not big enough, powerful enough, or good enough to cancel out the evil and pain in our world. God created everything we know out of nothing. Humanity was made from dust combined with the image and breath of God. If God can do that, then nothing is hopeless. God is still on the throne.

Ezekiel was removed from the Temple, but God was not outside of Ezekiel's reach. When God's people thought all hope was lost, God's sovereignty was revealed. Ezekiel's narrative of Judah's exile reminds us of the vastness of God's sovereignty and power. While the promise of God's restoring God's people to life is a message to celebrate, the greater message is to have trust in God's sovereignty.



We place expectations on
and parameters around
God's capabilities.



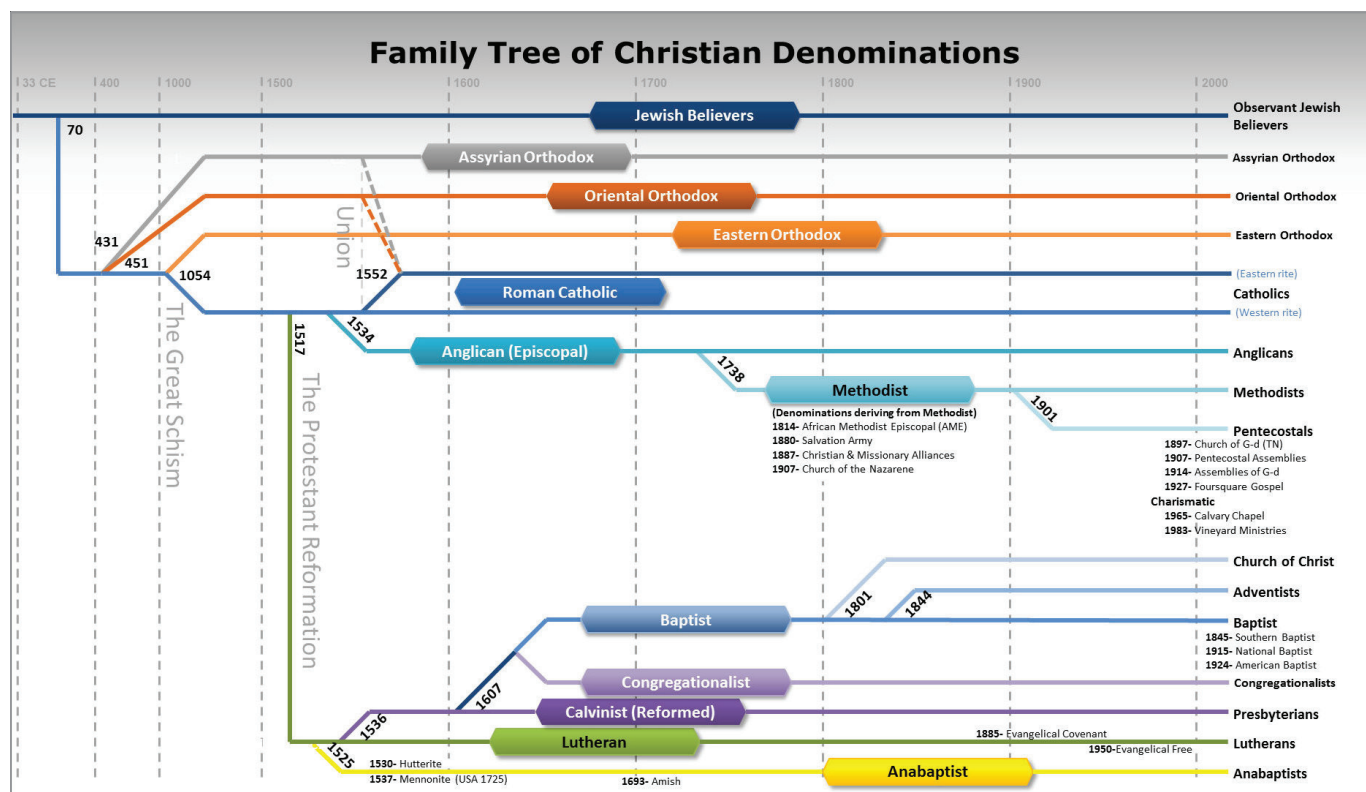
Into Discipleship

A World of Devastation

As I am writing this lesson in October of 2023, Israel, Palestine, and the extremist group Hamas are amid war. At the same time, Ukraine and Russia are still bombing each other. On top of war, natural disasters like the fire in Maui, earthquake in Afghanistan, and countless hurricanes have devastated communities. Turning on the news almost guarantees a cloud of sorrow to follow your

day—especially when the news is full of consequences for our choices. Politics, war, natural disasters, protests, and poverty . . . the suffering does not end. How do we find hope when our news outlets profit off our despair?

Aside from the devastation and heartbreak in our world, a quick glance at the Christian family tree will tell us that the Church is in a state of unhealth. Much like the division between Israel and Judah, we have a habit of dividing and stepping away from God's unified design. We went from one Christian family to thousands of denominations with



Family Tree of Christian Denominations - Copyright © 2012 The Psalm 119 Foundation.

hundreds of subsets within each denomination (and none of them do well gathering together).

A perfect example of division would be to try to get a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Methodist, and a Baptist together to share communion. It cannot happen. Our theological differences have severed our ability to break bread together. Even within individual denominations, we continue to see splits: the United Methodist churches have split over the topic of LGBTQ. The Southern Baptist Convention is at a crossroads of schisms and spiritual refugees fleeing in search of new faith homes over the topic of women in ministry. Division is still rampant in God's family. Can these dry bones live?

State of the World

Activity: Read Matthew 11:28-30 and take time to share prayer requests as a group, both about personal requests and global requests. Write these down and pray for each specific request. Ideally, have someone else pray for the request of their neighbor. (If you are on your own, write down the requests from your heart and meditate on each one.) Ask God to help you see hope and inspire action.

Hope in God's Breath

This week, we celebrate Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the early Church. The word we use for God's Spirit in both Greek (πνεῦμα *pneuma*) and Hebrew (רוח *ruach*) could also be translated as "breath or wind." Just as we cannot restrain wind, we cannot restrain God's Spirit. God's breath revived the Israelites when previously they were dry bones devoid of hope.

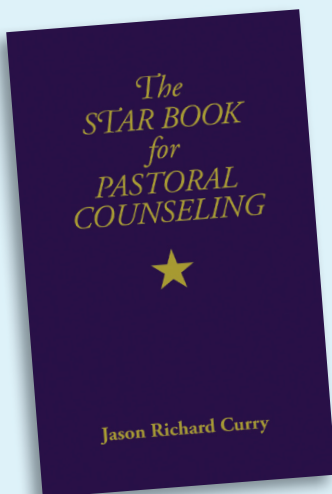


We have a habit of
dividing and stepping
away from God's
unified design.

Today, we acknowledge the same lesson that Ezekiel learned: God's presence is not bound by the physical walls of the Temple. In the same way, the Church's work is not limited by walls or borders. God's sovereignty knows no bounds, and God's Spirit follows no man-made borders or alliances. This reality is the epitome of good news!

Reunion Work

Activity: Read Romans 8:37-38 and discuss the ways that the Church has placed boundaries and/or requirements on or divisions between people and the Gospel. How are we limiting God with our limited minds?



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Closing Prayer

“Oceans (Where Feet May Fail),” performed by Hillsong UNITED: https://youtu.be/y9nwe9_xzw?feature=shared

Have the group members alternate praying the stanzas.

You call me out upon the waters
The great unknown where feet may fail
And there I find You in the mystery
In oceans deep my faith will stand

And I will call upon Your Name
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise
My soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine

Your grace abounds in deepest waters
Your sovereign hand will be my guide
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me
You’ve never failed and You won’t start now

(So) I will call upon Your Name
And keep my eyes above the waves

When oceans rise
My soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine, oh

(And You are mine, oh)

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call me
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Saviour

[Above stanza recited six times]

I will call upon Your Name
Keep my eyes above the waves
My soul will rest in Your embrace
I am Yours and You are mine
Amen.

Source: LyricFind (<https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/>)

Songwriters: Joel Houston / Matt Crocker / Salomon Ligthelm
Oceans (Where Feet May Fail) lyrics © Capitol CMG Publishing

Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture

- Are there any similarities today of the destruction of the West Bank with the Assyrian and Babylonian sieges of long ago?
- How is our situation and political polarization in the U.S. like the political division that split Israel into two kingdoms?



■ Into the Lesson

- The decline and shrinkage of some aging congregations is both challenging and inevitable. Should all congregations seek to thrive and grow?
- Or are there times when small, aging congregations should be allowed to gracefully and with dignity enter “spiritual hospice,” anticipating that after they die, God can do a new thing in their place?

■ Into Discipleship

- Are there any “dry bones” situations in your church or community?
- What are the first steps that the church can take in allowing God to renew hope in those situations?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “He Will Hold Me Fast,” sung by Kristyn and Keith Getty: <https://youtu.be/936BapRFHaQ?feature=shared>
- “In Christ Alone (My Hope Is Found),” sung by Adrienne Liesching: <https://youtu.be/rn9-UNer6MQ?feature=shared>
- “Come Alive (Dry Bones),” sung by Lauren Daigle: <https://youtu.be/0P4YdXz3LAI?feature=shared>

Media Options

Ezekiel Resources

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ezekiel/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-ezekiel/>
- <https://www.amazon.com/Can-These-Bones-Live-Ecclesiology/dp/1587430819/>

Activity Idea

Read Luke 12:49-56 and John 17:9-19 and discuss the following: Where is the balance between accountability and unnecessary division? Are there circumstances where division is the “right” choice? Have we made excuses for our division when God is asking for unity?

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Day of Pentecost

Week of May 19, 2024

Sunday, May 19

Acts 2:1-21 or Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27 or Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Monday, May 20

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Joel 2:18-29; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Tuesday, May 21

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Genesis 11:1-9; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Wednesday, May 22

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 20:19-23

Thursday, May 23

Psalm 29; Isaiah 1:1-4, 16-20; Romans 8:1-8

Friday, May 24

Psalm 29; Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 8:9-11

Saturday, May 25

Psalm 29; Isaiah 5:15-24; John 15:18-20, 26-27



Nothing is hopeless. God is still on the throne.

TEACHABILITY

the earnest student

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

—JOHN 3:8

Introduction

For six years I served as a youth pastor before my time as a senior pastor. Let me just say this: student ministries are not for the faint of heart; the teen years are wonderful and difficult. Students are learning autonomy and independence by testing authority figures in a variety of ways. My least-favorite time as a youth pastor was game time. I am not athletic in the slightest and do not care about enforcing hard rules. I wanted kids to have fun. My attitude drove the athletic students nuts; they wanted dependable rules to be enforced so a definitive winner could be identified. Our bouts of disagreements over enforcing rules resulted in my coining this phrase: *When you are so determined to be right that you cease to show love, you are no longer right.* This phrase was our boundary—I will enforce the rules of the game, but you must show grace to the referee. In our text this week, a Pharisee is learning a hard lesson through a conversation with Jesus. Will this lesson change his life?

Lesson Objectives

- To revisit this famous passage with a broader mind.
- To identify with the spiritual journey of Nicodemus.
- To adopt a teachable spirit with a willingness to dwell in the unknown.

John 3:1-17 NRSV

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus

answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Into the Scripture

The gospel of John does not explicitly name the author; however, we see a “John” omitted in Jesus’ disciples and replaced with “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Assumptions lead us to conclude that the author is John the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples. While it could be easy to assume that John is arrogant by replacing his name with a declaration of possessing Jesus’ love, I invite you to consider this title as an expression of humility. Consider it as if the author is saying, *“I am not worthy to be mentioned; if you must know me, know me by the love of Jesus.”* Many scholars assume that this gospel was written by the same author as the epistles 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John.

Context of the Gospel

John’s gospel is different from the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. His approach to sharing the story of Jesus is unique; as a result, many of John’s stories are distinct to his gospel. Our author cares deeply about emphasizing that Jesus was not some random human

whom God elected to serve God’s divine purpose—BUT the Eternal God made flesh. God the Son entered history as Jesus of Nazareth. Our Messiah is not a man who was adopted into God’s plans . . . he is God in the flesh. Therefore, John’s gospel will emphasize the miraculous and spiritual side of Jesus in a way different from the



God the Son entered
history as Jesus of
Nazareth.

Synoptic Gospels. A great example of this includes Jesus' habit to speak in confusing ways that listeners struggle to understand.

Context of Scripture

At the beginning of John's gospel, he introduces Jesus not with a story of a Virgin Birth but with the story of the beginning of creation. It was important to John that his readers understand this: Jesus was present at the beginning of creation and Jesus participated in creating the world. Jesus is not creation, Jesus is God. After pointing to creation, John skips forward to John the Baptist in the wilderness and adult Jesus' calling disciples—even calling disciples from John the Baptist's own pool of disciples. Immediately after Jesus gathered disciples, they attended a wedding where Jesus performed his first miracle. This new band of disciples joined Jesus in Jerusalem for Passover, and they witnessed Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. (The Synoptic authors place this action near the end of their gospels.) Jesus started his ministry with a BANG! There is no question that Jesus meant business. The reader can assume that Jesus' reputation spread immediately. It is no surprise that a Pharisee named Nicodemus chose to visit Jesus and inquired about this eccentric man.

Scholarly Siblings

Christians over the centuries have mistakenly painted Pharisees as an enemy to Jesus when, in reality, they were closer to spiritual scholarly siblings. Pharisees held a more flexible view of the Torah (the Law of Moses) by claiming that the Torah needed to be interpreted. Many of their interpretations were passed on as oral traditions



that would eventually be called the Talmud.¹ Pharisees believed in an afterlife and a promised resurrection. In contrast, the Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife or resurrection. The Sadducees were literalists in their approach to the Torah, rejected the oral traditions, and clung to a caste-style system within the priesthood. Their elitist mindset created a strong division between these two Jewish factions. As you can see, Jesus' approach to teaching and interpreting Scripture fit closer to the teachings of the Pharisees than those of the Sadducees. When you reread the Gospels, look for ways that Jesus was trying to teach and correct the Pharisees. Even the text with Nicodemus gives an essence of hope.

Into the Lesson

Undercover

Nicodemus chose the cover of night as the time to approach Jesus. Was this a hint of secrecy because of his prominent position in Jewish leadership?² Or perhaps Nicodemus simply hoped that the crowds would all be home and asleep, providing him a chance to actually talk to Jesus.³ Regardless of the motivation, Nicodemus approached Jesus with respect, identifying him by the titles of “Rabbi” and “teacher” and proclaiming that Jesus comes from God. Nicodemus had no problem proclaiming that Jesus had done miraculous things (which can only be explained through God).



Jesus was present at the beginning of creation
and Jesus participated in creating the world.

A Perplexing Response

Jesus responded to Nicodemus's greeting by making a bold statement. In verse 3, Jesus said that one must be born again to see God's kingdom. What a pivot in conversation, Jesus! Jesus did not follow the expected customs of conversation with Nicodemus. He dove right into the deep stuff. He had the attention of a Pharisee who WANTED to learn. Time was of the essence. It appears that Jesus "code-switched" to a rabbinic style of language that Nicodemus would understand best.⁴ *Israel* means "to wrestle." Jews, even of Jesus' time, were very familiar with wrestling with teachings through discussion. I picture the conversation going something like this:

N – "Hello."

J – "You gotta be reborn or you won't see God."

N – "Nice to see you, too. Okay, Rabbi, let's dive in."

Although my neck hurts from the whiplash in topic changes, I am grateful that Jesus skipped the small talk and dug into the deeper topics.

Challenging Invitation

Jesus invited Nicodemus into a challenging thought exercise focused on rebirth. Nicodemus did not call Jesus a heretic but responded with questions.

N – "Rabbi, I don't understand. Help me."

Nicodemus was stuck in a literal interpretation of Jesus' words that hindered his ability to understand the significance of his statement. Do not mistake Jesus' continuation of speaking with perplexing language as a judgment on Nicodemus; Jesus was speaking as a rabbi about being born again (we could also translate this as "born anew" or "born from above") by differentiating a birth from water and from Spirit and challenging Nicodemus to consider a new perspective.

Scholars debate the distinction between water and Spirit. Is "water" referring to a woman's waters broken during labor, or the waters used to baptize like John? Is this rebirth distinction a difference between the physical and the spiritual? The way the reader interprets this passage leads us down a theological interpretation landslide to distinct Christian denominations.

Baptists have concluded that a believer's baptism is an act of spiritual renewal. Where Jews of Jesus' time



Baptism is an
outward sign of an
inward grace.

used baptism as a ritual for people and items set aside for sacred work in the priesthood, we invite all people to the waters who confess belief in Jesus. In essence, Baptists have merged the spiritual baptism with the physical waters of baptism. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. In baptism, the spiritual reality merges with the physical act for a profound statement of grace. We believe baptism does not provide salvation but points to what has already become true through belief in Jesus.

A Pharisee Transformed

Three different times in John's gospel is Nicodemus mentioned. Each time, there is an inclination that transformation was happening in this Pharisee's heart. In John 7, we learn that Nicodemus was part of the group identified as "chief priests and Pharisees." Tradition interprets John 7 to read that Nicodemus was part of the Sanhedrin—the chief priests debating arresting Jesus for his bold statements to the crowds. One Pharisee exclaimed that *no Pharisees believe in Jesus*. However, Nicodemus spoke up indirectly in Jesus' defense. In this discussion, Nicodemus said that the Law requires a hearing before placing judgment on an individual. In response, these Pharisees scolded Nicodemus and asked if he came from Galilee, too.

A man who once was hiding conversations by starlight was growing braver in defense of the Messiah. After the Crucifixion, in John 19, we hear Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea claim Jesus' body from Pilate and give him a proper Jewish burial. Joseph had kept



his faith in Jesus quiet because of his fear of the Jewish leaders. John 12 suggests that many leaders believed in Jesus but did not talk about it for fear of receiving consequences at the hands of the Pharisees at-large. By placing these three passages together (John 3, 7, and 19), we can safely assume that the conversation that Nicodemus had with Jesus changed his faith and life.

Into Discipleship

Unrighteously Right

Although my youth pastor days are behind me, I still cling to that lesson I taught countless times. *When you are so determined to be right that you cease to show love, you are no longer right.* During Jesus' ministry, his strongest adversaries were not outsiders but people from within his faith tradition. They were so determined to be right that they ceased to live by the Torah. They were so filled with arrogance and hate that they were unresponsive to the Spirit's work in Jesus. Nicodemus stood apart from his fellow Pharisees because of his open heart. Nicodemus was willing to seek out Jesus and talk with him without feeling like Jesus threatened the foundation of his faith.

Modes of Baptism

Traditionally, Baptists teach that baptism by immersion is the preferred method. Some churches and sects of

Baptists hold more strictly to the expectation of believers' baptism by immersion than others do. We are Baptists. There are bound to be differences of interpretation between two congregations.

However, when I was going through the process of ordination, a question was focused on because of a lack-of-belief statement about the modes of baptism. One particular voice wanted me to say that only baptism by immersion is valid. Though I had held that belief for most of my life, the Spirit prompted me to prevent there being doors closed to new believers with such a rigid statement. Instead, I discovered a quote from church tradition that emphasized my sentiments.

Over the course of a decade, God had been working on my own heart (and He still is) to soften my rigid lines. The concept of baptism is one that God and I continue to discuss. How do we make room for disabled believers to be baptized? How do we make room for those with mental illnesses or sensory problems to be baptized? How do we make space for grace to pour out when we cling to rigid rules in our spiritual practice?

Allow me to quote what I added to my ordination paper:

"Baptists practice believer's baptism by immersion most frequently, however we know it is not the mode that saves us. I will practice the mode of immersion unless, through the process of pastoral care, it is determined that the believer

requires a different mode. I refer to the writings in the Didache, which are attributed by the early church to the Apostles. In Didache 7:1-5 it states:

“But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize {in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit} in living (running) water. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then pour water on the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The addition was accepted, and my ordination moved forward with no further questions on the topic.

We Are the Baddies

Years later, I still ponder that exchange and wonder why we, Christians, can feel so passionately about drawing lines in the sand. As we reflect on the story of Nicodemus, we must acknowledge an unfortunate truth: unfortunately, in this tale, we are more likely to behave like the Pharisees than like Nicodemus. We have a human tendency to die on the hill of our belief. Churches have split over the color of carpet and the location of fire extinguishers. Why do we choose to die on these hills?

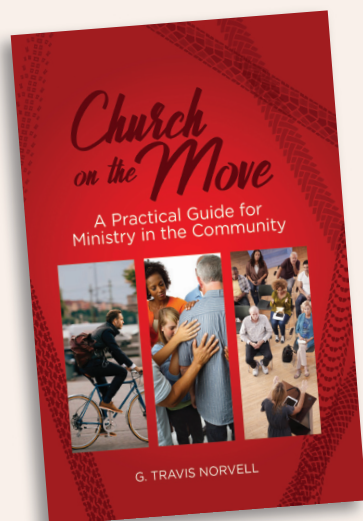
Discussion: Before engaging in a class discussion, ask God to open your eyes to consider things from a new angle, filled with mercy and compassion. Consider the last church business meeting you attended. Did everyone behave with Christlike conduct? What were the topics of major discussion? Was there any tension within the meeting and how was the tension resolved? How does our behavior during business meetings build a testimony of our faith?

Open Mind, Full Heart

Nicodemus was transformed by that midnight conversation with Jesus. One conversation changed the trajectory of Nicodemus’s faith. His humility and teachability enabled God’s Spirit to open his eyes to new possibilities. We can cling to the traditions of our spiritual family tree without becoming closed off to the work of the Spirit.

Notes

1. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/pharisees-sadducees-and-essenes>
2. Refer to John 7.
3. Luke 5 tells the story of a paralyzed man needing to get to Jesus through a roof because of the crowds; also in that chapter, Jesus taught from a boat because of the crowds. In Mark 5, a bleeding woman touched Jesus’ hem and his disciples were perplexed when Jesus asked “Who touched me?” because of the thick crowd.
4. *Code-switching* means “the use of one dialect, register, accent, or language variety over another, depending on social or cultural context, to project a specific identity.” (*dictionary.com*)



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Closing Prayer

“May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.”

“The ancient Jewish blessing, *‘May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi . . .’*” The source of this saying is the Mishnah, *Avot* 1:4. (The Mishnah is a collection of rabbinic thought from 200 BC to 200 AD that still forms the core of Jewish belief today.) The quotation is from Yose ben Yoezer (yo-EHZ-er). He was one of the earliest members of the rabbinic movement, who lived about two centuries before Jesus.’ Lois Tverberg, ‘Covered in the Dust of Your Rabbi: An Urban Legend?’ *Our Rabbi Jesus* (January 27, 2012). Retrieved 4/6/20: <https://ourrabbijesus.com/covered-in-the-dust-of-your-rabbi-an-urban-legend/>.” (All of the above text is found at <https://spectrummagazine.org/culture/covered-dust/>.)



Reflection Questions

■ Into the Scripture:

- The writing style of John is very different from that used in the Synoptic Gospels. Which is your favorite gospel and why?

■ Into the Lesson:

- Have the participants briefly share their baptism stories.
- How many have been baptized in your church in the last five years? Does your congregation celebrate that number or find discouragement? How concerned should congregations be about how often they share the witness of baptism?

■ Into Discipleship:

- What are ways that we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds?
- As Christians, is it okay to plateau spiritually after years of faithful discipleship, or should we always challenge ourselves to grow deeper spiritually no matter our age?

Resources

Songs to Consider

- “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” sung by Mahalia Jackson: https://youtu.be/1kbHHQrT_Ho?feature=shared
- “Been Through the Water,” sung by Kyle Matthews: <https://youtu.be/37qlUc-oCy0?feature=shared>
- “Knowing You,” sung by Minister GUC: <https://youtu.be/FXB49aSI74?feature=shared>



Media Options

Consider these resources on John:

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/john/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/theme-god-e20-jesus-identity-johns-gospel/>

Activity Ideas

Digging deeper: There's an interesting discussion focused on this question: Was Jesus really a rabbi?

- <https://thebiblenerds.com/was-jesus-a-jewish-rabbi-it-really-does-matter/>
- <https://engediresourcecenter.com/2019/09/09/jesus-rabbinic-teaching-style/>
- <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/why-was-jesus-called-rabbi/113641.htm>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/rabbi.html>

Devotional Scriptures

Year B Trinity Sunday

Week of May 26, 2024

Sunday, May 26

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Monday, May 27

Psalm 20; Numbers 9:15-23; Revelation 4:1-8

Tuesday, May 28

Psalm 20; Exodus 25:1-22; 1 Corinthians 2:1-10

Wednesday, May 29

Psalm 20; Numbers 6:22-27; Mark 4:21-25

Thursday, May 30

Semi-continuous: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 1:1-18; Acts 25:1-12

Complementary: Psalm 81:1-10; Exodus 31:12-18; Acts 25:1-12

Friday, May 31

Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth: 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Psalm 113; Romans 12:9-16b; Luke 1:39-57

Semi-continuous: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 1:19-27; Romans 8:31-39

Complementary: Psalm 81:1-10; Leviticus 23:1-8; Romans 8:31-39

Saturday, June 1

Semi-continuous: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; John 7:19-24

Complementary: Psalm 81:1-10; Leviticus 24:5-9; John 7:19-24

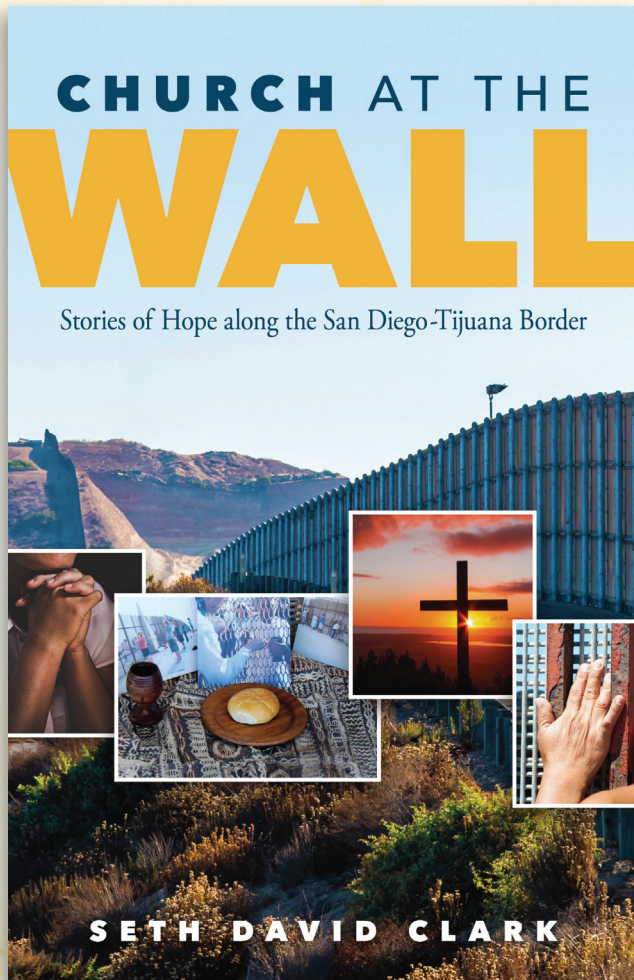


Baptism does not provide salvation but points
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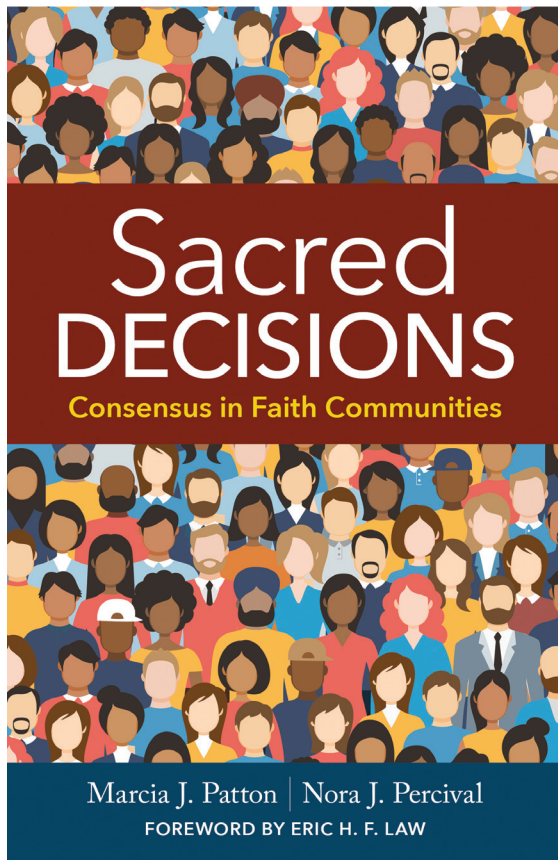

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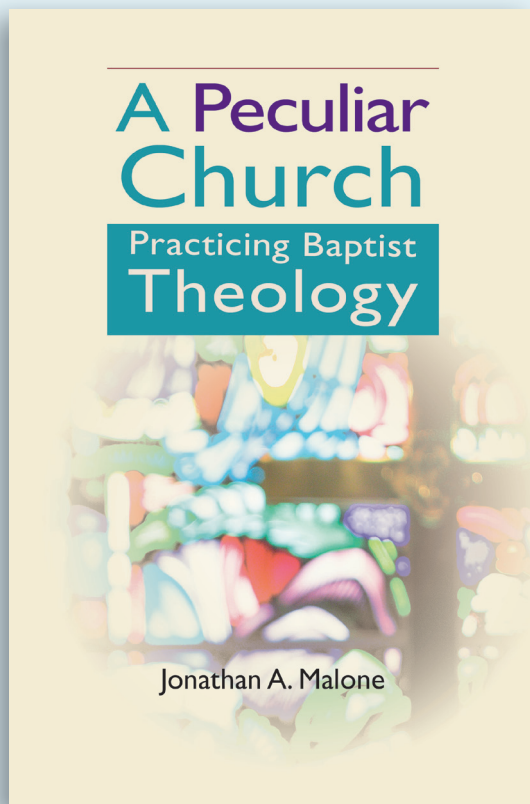
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