

BIBLE STUDY SERIES

Lent I-Trinity Sunday, Year B 2021

Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)

Parish of the Good Shepherd, Waban

This series is for anyone who wants to follow Jesus, using Holy Scripture as a guide. It is built around the Anglican tradition of the Lectionary, which usually assigns three readings (and a psalm) for each Sunday, with special emphasis on the Gospel reading. **Each week, we study the lessons for the following Sunday.** If you are a beginner in the study of Scripture, there will be time to get your bearings through a brief introduction to some current scholarly approaches, and time for those simple, basic, essential questions which most people are afraid to ask.

Other background information will be given as needed. Two questions will be central to our discussion:

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What might this passage have meant to its original audience, in the context of their lives?

Given our very different context, what does it have to say to us?

Participants are asked to read all four passages ahead of time, and to consider the questions on the sheet for each meeting. Some of these are merely factual, to help you focus your attention. Others are matters of interpretation, or of application to your own experience. If your honest answer is, "I have no idea," that's fine.

There are also sections marked, "For your information," which offer useful footnotes. Every sheet also includes suggestions headed, "If you have time," for those who are able to explore more widely. (If your time is very limited, concentrate on the Gospel.)

Please bring your own Bible, if possible. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is recommended, and is the text referred to in the following questions. You might consider buying The New Oxford Annotated Bible, which is the NRSV with extensive footnotes, maps and explanatory essays.

(These question sheets use brackets—[]—to mark verses that were included in the old Lectionary but are not used in the Revised Common Lectionary. You will not hear them on Sunday, but they will add to your understanding.)

Our Sunday readings follow a three-year cycle, constructed around the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke. (These are called the "Synoptic Gospels," as if seen through a common eye.) Each year we read more or less straight through one of these, with variations for special seasons. (The Gospel of John, which transforms history into poetry, is used to heighten times of extraordinary celebration, such as Christmas and Easter.) The new Lectionary year begins on I Advent. This is Year B, and our Gospel is Mark. Since Mark's Gospel is shorter than the others, it is supplemented by readings from other Gospels.

The weekly reading from Hebrew Scripture (the "Old Testament") during the season of Lent uses passages chosen to echo or enhance some theme in the Gospel reading. In the Easter season, the Book of Acts replaces readings from Hebrew Scripture, as it describes the earliest formation of the Christian Church.

The "New Testament" reading usually comes from one of the Epistles, and like the Gospel readings it tends to go straight through one book at a time; but in special seasons, readings may be chosen to match the season's theme.

Mark's Gospel is generally believed to be the first one completed, using materials that have come from many sources, both written and oral. (The Gospels of Matthew and Luke show their dependence on Mark's Gospel by using most of its contents, and then adding other material apparently not known to "Mark.") Many scholars guess that it was composed around 70 C.E., the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans; and that like the other Gospels, it was written not by the disciple Mark but by one of his followers. It was common practice at that time to write under the name and authority of one's mentor.

Paul's letters were written even earlier, within twenty years or so of the crucifixion. They are addressed to very new and usually struggling congregations, most of which he himself had founded. They give us a lively record of the issues facing the emerging Church, and of Paul's work in making meaning out of an overwhelming experience. (Some letters attributed to Paul were probably written somewhat later by one or more of Paul's followers.)

If you have time

Read the material for the next week right after each session, to see what themes are continued. Read it several more times during the week, so that it can be absorbed into your life and your prayer.

Read the entire Gospel of Mark, to get a sense of what Mark seems to emphasize. Pick one or two early sections such as the opening words, the birth of Jesus, his baptism, etc., and read the account of them in the first three Gospels, to see what matches and what doesn't. What difference does it make?

Lent I: Feb. 21

Genesis 9: 8-17

Ps 25: 1-9

I Peter 3: 18-22

Mark 1: 9-15

For your information

This Sunday's lessons seem to be chosen to give us a sort of "foundation" for Lent: a basic understanding of who we are and where we've come from.

Genesis 9: 8-17

For your information

The concept of "covenant" comes from an ancient Assyrian practice. Owners of vast estates made a covenant with their serfs, from their position of greatly superior power and freedom. They promised care, protection and just treatment, in return for faithful service. Israel adapted this image to describe her relationship to God. This passage concerns the first such covenant; there will be several others, each with different terms.

Earlier stories in the Middle East saw the rainbow as the bow of the gods, from which lightning/arrows were shot.

Questions

1. What does God promise in this covenant? To whom?

2. How does the rainbow signify the change in relationship between humans and God? Between God and “every living creature of all flesh”?

If you have time

--Read Gen. 9: 1-7, to see what God asks of humanity in return.

I Peter 3: 18-22

For your information

Israel’s tradition was to take its history very seriously, as a way of understanding how God’s mind worked. Jews habitually looked for “types,” representative figures whose experiences might be seen as a pattern by which to understand later events. Here the writer uses the story of Noah as a way of explaining the work of Christ.

Questions

1. According to this passage, what exactly was the significance of the crucifixion? What connection does the writer make between that and God’s work with Noah?
2. What is said to be the meaning of water in these two events? Why is water to be used in baptism?
3. Why is this passage assigned for Lent I?

If you have time

--Read the “Thanksgiving over the Water” in our service of Holy Baptism (BCP, pp. 306-307).

Mark 1: 9-15

For your information

As noted above, Mark’s Gospel is thought to be the earliest; many of the stories which are told at length in Matthew and Luke are very brief in Mark, as if the other two writers had known Mark’s material and then followed the traditional Jewish process of “midrash,” explaining/developing/ enlarging the meaning by adding relevant material.

Questions

1. What is established in the few details of this passage? What familiar expansions of these events are missing here? Is anything lost?
2. Why do you think the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness? What is the effect of v. 12, with its forceful language —“immediately drove”--coming directly after v. 11? Does the Spirit do the same to us? What sort of wilderness is this? What sort of wilderness have you known? What are its perils?
3. What echoes do you hear in the use of the number 40? Why would Jews consider this pattern significant?

If you have time

--Compare Mark's version of these events with the expanded versions in Mt 3: 1-4: 11 and Lk 3: 1-22, 4: 1-13.

Lent II: Feb. 28

Genesis 17: 1-7, [8], 15-16

Ps 22: 22-30

Romans 4: 13-25

Mark 8: 31-38

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

For your information

See last week for the history of "covenant."

"God Almighty" was a pre-Mosaic name for God, meaning "God, the One of the Mountains."

"Abram" and "Abraham" are variants of the same name, but "Abraham" is close to the Hebrew word for "ancestor of a multitude," a similarity that would have been important to Israel. "Sarai" and "Sarah" both mean "princess."

Questions

1. What are the details of the covenant promises made by God to Abraham? What promises are made concerning Sarah?
2. How would a later generation hear these promises? What possibilities are there for interpreting them? How might they apply to present-day Israel? Do they have anything to do with us?

Romans 4: 13-25

For your information

The church in Rome was one of the churches which Paul did not found, and had not yet visited. Many of its members were Gentiles, i.e. non-Jews. Paul wrote at a time when the Crucifixion and Resurrection were very recent (perhaps 25 years before), and his work was to find words for what those events meant. A central issue was whether Gentiles (non-Jews) had to become Jews—including, for males, circumcision—in order to become Christians. As Judaism's original patriarch, Abraham is for Paul the paradigm by which such questions are answered. God's promises to Abraham (see last week) were made before he was circumcised.

In Genesis, there are several stories of Abraham's efforts to produce an heir, in pursuit of God's promise to be very fruitful. They all fail. But Genesis 15: 6 says of Abraham that even so, "he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." In this context, "righteousness" means a state of being in right relationship with God.

Questions

1. How does Paul use the example of Abraham as an argument against requiring Gentiles to become Jews (by circumcision, for males) before becoming Christians? If circumcision was not a necessary qualification for him, what was?

2. What does this understanding have to do with the relevance of Jewish law for Christians? What is the basis of the strong statement in v. 14? What is the meaning of v. 15?

3. What then does our inheritance depend on? How is Abraham a supreme example of it? What does it mean to “[hope] against hope”? How did Abraham do that? How can we do that? What does it have to do with the God revealed in Jesus Christ?

Mark 8: 31-38

For your information

Up to now, Peter has been a favored disciple, and is always trying to prove that he is the most devoted one. “Get behind me” in this context means something like “Go to the end of the line.”

“Son of man” at this time would have meant simply “a person,” though in this context it is beginning to take on connotations of a messianic figure.

Questions

1. Do you think Jesus is talking about himself in v. 31, or just about what sort of messiah to expect?
2. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus? Would you have wanted to do the same? Why does Jesus rebuke Peter? Is he being fair, or too harsh? What exactly is Peter’s offense?
3. According to Jesus’ words here, what is the nature of true discipleship? “Gospel” means “good news”; what good news is he talking about, and what would it mean to lose one’s life for it? What does it mean exactly, to “take up [one’s] cross”?
4. What does this reading contribute to our observation of Lent?

Lent : March 7

Exodus 20: 1-17

Ps 19

I Corinthians 1: 18-25

John 2: 13-22

Exodus 20: 1-17

For your information

In Hebrew Scripture, God always prefaces a conversation with “credentials,” some reference to God’s previous history with Israel, on which this new encounter is based.

Pagan religions worshipped idols that represented forces of nature. Israel was intent on separating herself from pagan practices.

Names were considered to have great power. Naming a child, or renaming an adult, was a defining act. Knowing and speaking someone's name was thought to be a means of asserting control. Israel's name for God, "Yahweh," was not to be spoken aloud, or even written out fully.

The word which has been translated "kill" means "murder" in this context.

Questions

1. These "Ten Commandments" are familiar, and some scholars consider them to be a summary of Israel's moral wisdom accumulated over time. Try to hear them as if they were fresh off the mountaintop. Is there a particular order to them? Is there a theme or principle that ties them together? Would some of them come as an unpleasant shock? Where do they intersect your life right now?

2. Are there other commandments that you would add? What do you make of the fact that so many are negative, "you shall **not**," rather than positive? Do you find them rigid and legalistic, or helpful and essential? How might they inform your Lent?

I Corinthians 1: 18-25

For your information

Members of the church in Corinth have been arguing about whose baptism is best, according to which of Paul's assistants did the baptizing. Paul has done almost none of them, believing that his purpose is instead to proclaim the gospel, as simply as possible, avoiding any attempt to flaunt his own eloquence.

The Greek word translated "foolishness" would not be used to describe a charming, endearing child. It is a word of contempt, suggesting debasement, degradation.

Questions

1. What is the paradox stated in v. 18? Why would the message about the cross be "foolishness to those who are perishing"? Who are "those who are perishing"?

2. How has God "made foolish the wisdom of the world"? How is our proclamation foolish?

3. It is sometimes suggested that "We proclaim Christ crucified" is the central definition of the earliest Christian proclamation. How might this be true? Why is it "a stumbling block [Gk *skandalos*] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles [people shaped by the dominant Greek culture]"? How do "the called" see it differently, and why?

John 2: 13-22

For your information

Observant Jews thronged to Jerusalem during Passover. There was only one temple, and it was the only place where sacrifices could be made to expiate one's sins. The temple had a series of walls within walls, each one representing a further step toward the center of holiness. It was customary for animals to be sold for sacrifice there, in an outer courtyard. The animals named here were prescribed as atonement for certain sins. Money changers served an important function: changing Roman coins into Jewish money, for use in purchasing sacred goods and for paying temple taxes.

Only John's Gospel places the Temple incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. For the other three, it comes at the end, and is the immediate cause of his arrest.

Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus acted so violently, in driving these people out of the temple? What made it worth the terrible danger of taking on the authorities that way?
2. What does Jesus mean in v. 19? What do the Jewish authorities understand him to mean? Do you think he actually said these words, or that a later interpretation added them as identifying the meaning of this event?
3. What might this example of Jesus' behavior contribute to your self-understanding in Lent?

Lent IV: March 14

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

Numbers 21: 4-9

For your information

The king of Edom has refused to allow the Israelites to pass through his land, but God has destroyed other enemies. Still they are deep in the wilderness.

Questions

1. What is the Israelites' complaint against God and Moses? Is it understandable? Excusable?
2. What is God's response? How does it affect the Israelites? What sort of God is this? What model does it give us for correcting the misbehavior of those under our leadership?
3. How does God moderate the punishment somewhat, in vss. 8-9? What does this show about God?
4. In your experience, what might parallel the image of the serpent lifted high to save?

Ephesians 2: 1-10

For your information

The letter to the Ephesians differs from many of Paul's letters in style and language, and may have been written by one or more of his later followers using materials from Paul. It demonstrates the increasingly exalted understanding of Christ's purpose and effect. "The power of the air" is Satan.

Jewish tradition does not separate body from spirit, and there is no pejorative sense to "flesh" in Hebrew. But Paul and his followers were missionaries to Greek-speaking Gentiles, whose cultural heritage saw flesh as base, spirit as our higher nature. This problem of translation sometimes led to misunderstandings and even distortions (including

severe asceticism) in some branches of Christianity, but Paul uses “flesh” to refer to those desires that draw us away from God.

Questions

1. According to this passage, what is the evidence that God is “rich in mercy”? How have we been “dead,” and how do the desires of “flesh and senses” contribute to that? How is that our “nature,” without Christ’s grace?
2. How are we now “alive”? What is the reason for this, and how has it happened?
3. What is the connection suggested here among faith, works, and salvation? What does it mean to be “created in Christ Jesus for good works”?

John 3: 14-21

For your information

The term “Son of Man” originally meant simply a person, but by the time this Gospel was written, it was taking on other connotations: the expected divine figure seen in the Book of Daniel, perhaps Jesus himself.

The name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves.”

Questions

1. What is the parallel between how Moses “lifted up the serpent in the wilderness” (see above) and the purpose of the “Son of Man”?
2. John 3:16 is often and widely quoted as the essence of the “Good news.” Do you see it that way? Since the same claim is made for I Cor 1: 23 (see last week), what similarities do you see? What differences?
3. What does it mean to “believe in the name of the only Son of God”?
4. How does this passage explain who is saved and who is not, who comes to the light and who is not? Is it our choice, or God’s plan?

Lent V: March 21

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Ps 51: 1-13 *or* 119: 9-16

Hebrews 5: [1-4] 5-10

John 12: 20-33

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

For your information

The prophet Jeremiah lived at a time when Judah (the southern half of Israel, after the northern half had been occupied by Assyria) was threatened by the Babylonian invasion (see ch. 32: 1-3), and then went into exile with

many of his people. He warned of what was to come, because of Judah's infidelities, then advised the Israelites to make the best of their plight, with confidence that God was with them there as well.

Questions

1. God has made several previous covenants, with Noah (see Lent I), Abraham, Moses. The Mosaic covenant was built upon the law, as set out in Exodus. What is the basis of this new covenant? How is it different from previous ones? What implications does it have for our own relationship with God?

2. How would a people in imminent danger of invasion hear these words? How might we hear them, as part of our Lent?

Hebrews 5: [1-4] 5-10

For your information

The letter to the Hebrews is another of the letters probably not written by Paul himself, but by a later disciple of his. It continues the process of interpreting the meaning of Christ's life and death, especially in relation to Israel's priests; much of its content is about why Christ's priesthood is superior to others. It was the role of the high priest to offer sacrifices on behalf of others, in the temple's innermost room, especially on Yom Kippur, the solemn Day of Atonement.

Melchizedek is a mysterious figure whom Abram met early in his journey (Gen 14: 18). He was a Canaanite priest/king, but is spoken of as "priest of God Most High." Because he blessed Abram, and received tribute from him, the author of Hebrews has apparently concluded that he was even greater than Abram.

Aaron was Moses' brother. Since Moses had a stammer, God appointed Aaron as Moses' spokesman. While Moses was on the mountain, Aaron kept the people together, not always in helpful ways.

Again, this passage demonstrates the Jewish practice of searching Scripture for evidence of the meaning of current events.

Questions

1. According to this passage, what are the responsibilities of a true priest? In what way did Christ match this description? Do you think this sort of "priestliness" might be possible for all of us, as suggested by the baptismal service, which welcomes the newly baptized to "share with us in Christ's eternal priesthood"?

2. What do verses 8-10 imply about how Christ became "the source of eternal salvation"? Do you understand him this way?

3. How does this passage contribute to our understanding of Lent?

If you have time

--Compare Ps 2: 7, the source of v. 5b; and Ps. 110: 4, the source of v. 6.

John 12: 20-33

For your information

This passage concerns Jerusalem at Passover; the city is thronged with pilgrims, and is a hotbed of religious and political tensions.

“Greeks” are Gentiles, who are part of the Greek culture that prevailed around the Mediterranean after Alexander’s conquests. Most of them would be curious outsiders, with little or no Jewish context for understanding Jesus’ teachings. But apparently some Gentiles came to worship at Jewish festivals, and Paul saw them as being drawn by God, ready for conversion.

The Gospel of John characteristically uses some of the same materials found in other Gospels, but transforms them into something like poetry, so as to convey the transcendent mystery of Christ.

Questions

1. Jesus’ “answer” is apparently addressed to his disciples. Does it have anything at all to do with the “Greeks” request?
2. Jesus has repeatedly said that “the hour” (appointed by God) has not yet come for full disclosure. Now it has. What combination of circumstances might make this the appropriate hour? What could it mean when he says that NOW is the judgment of the world, NOW the ruler of this world will be driven out--when evidence says otherwise?
3. In Jesus’ meditative words, what understanding of his identity and destiny does he show? How is his understanding distinguished from that of “the crowd”? How does it add to our sense of Lent?

Palm Sunday: March 28

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Ps 31: 9-16

Philippians 2: 5-11

Mark 14: 1-15: 47

For your information

The first two lessons are read on Palm Sunday every year.

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

For your information

This passage, known as the third “[Suffering] Servant Song,” was seized on by Christians as a clear prophecy of what sort of messiah they should have expected. Originally it may have been understood to refer to Israel as a whole, and to explain God’s purposes for Israel’s ongoing suffering.

Questions

1. How has God prepared the servant for his calling? Who were to be his audience, and what skills did he need?
2. What sort of reception has the servant received? Why would people treat him that way?

3. How will the servant be vindicated? How do you interpret the law court language of vss. 8-9? What will become of his adversaries?

4. Do you find this passage to match what you know about Jesus?

Philippians 2: 5-11

For your information

This passage is in the form of poetry, and is often printed that way; some scholars think that it might have been an ancient hymn which Paul or the early Christian community adapted to describe Christ. The name that is above every name is “Lord,” which has previously been a title given only to God.

Questions

1. This hymn is part of the early attempts to find words for who Jesus was and is. What does it say about where he came from, what he did, how he saved us? What is said to be the connection between the human and the divine Jesus? Note: Keep this question in mind as you watch Jesus throughout the Passion narrative.)

2. What does it mean to “empty [one]self”? Can we do that too? In what sense did Jesus “[take] the form of a slave”?

3. You have just seen something very close to verses 10-11 in Is. 45, but there it applied to God. What is the significance of having it now applied to Jesus?

Mark 14: 1-15: 47

For your information

At first, Jesus’ companions, captors, accusers, and judges are all Jews. He is brought into a Jewish court, which requires two witnesses for any accusation. He is accused of wizardry, on the basis of his claim that he would build a temple not made with hands.

The Jewish authorities then hand him over to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and other nearby territories. Judea was an occupied country, in which the Romans chose to let the Jews practice their religion without much interference, as long as they didn’t make trouble. They knew that religious passions could inspire rebellion, and at the edge of an increasingly shaky empire, wanted to keep things peaceful.

V. 15: 21 suggests that among those who first read this Gospel were some who had actually known the men named.

V. 34 suggests that the intended audience included many non-Jews, who needed translations of Aramaic phrases.

Elijah was expected to return just before the apocalyptic coming of God or the Messiah.

Wine mixed with myrrh is a sedative.

Questions

1. This story is told in short episodes. Take them one by one, stopping to imagine the scene, the atmosphere, the characters involved, the part each one plays in the mounting drama. Pay particular attention to Jesus, as he moves

through these scenes; how do you imagine him? How do others react to him, and why? Where do you see fear, cowardice, jealousy, apathy, confusion, anger, or other strong emotions?

2. Why does Jesus become silent, and why does his silence amaze Pilate?
3. Who bears responsibility for the outcome, and to what degree?
4. What is the significance of the fact that a centurion, a minor Roman officer and not a Jew, is the first to say who Jesus was?
5. In this story, where do you see Jesus' humanity? his divinity? How do the other readings for today compare with this account of Jesus?
6. Where do you find yourself in this story?

If you have time

Consider some scriptural foreshadowing of this scene: Prov. 31: wine as narcotic; Amos 8: 9, sun going down at noon; Ps. 69: 21: For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

Easter Day: April 4

Isaiah 25: 6-9
Ps 118: 1-2, 14-24
Acts 10: 34-43
or I Corinthians 15: 1-11
John 20: 1-18
or Mark 16: 1-8

Isaiah 25: 6-9

For your information

This passage comes from "First Isaiah," that is, from the prophet himself, during a time when Israel's unfaithfulness led the prophet to warn of dire consequences but the Babylonians' invasion and exile were still to come. Prophets of this period would have to struggle to find a new understanding of what it meant to be God's chosen people, if grave punishment could come upon Israel in spite of God's alleged favor.

Questions

1. What promises does the prophet make about what God will do? For whom will God do these things?
2. Note that even though it's Easter, these promises are still in the future tense. If these promises were to come true today, what would be different--or does the Resurrection mean that in some way they are already coming true?

If you have time

--Read Is. 24, for the punishments that will precede the fulfillment of the promises, and some of the offenses that deserve them. What seems to match the present day?

Acts 10: 34-43

For your information

The Book of Acts was written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. (See the introduction to each.) It is a carefully shaped narrative of the time soon after Christ's resurrection and ascension, as his followers tried to keep going without him. It takes pains to show us that whatever powers Jesus had were passed on to the emerging Church. Its leaders preached the gospel just as he had, and told the story of his life and death which illustrated it, and did many wonders just as he had.

Peter's speech is addressed to a Gentile crowd, the family and relatives of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who was told by an angel to send for him. Following this speech, the Holy Spirit falls upon them all, and they are the first Gentiles to be baptized. We have just read part of this passage, for Epiphany I; it's quite unusual to repeat a reading so soon.

Questions

1. What is the radical claim of verses 34-35? Why would it have amazed Peter's audience? his fellow Jews? Who would be amazed by it these days?
2. What are the high points of Jesus' story, which Peter includes in his brief summary? Why would he consider each one essential? Would you want to add anything else, if you were trying to explain or offer our faith to non-believers? What "good news" is based on the story itself, as opposed to a proclamation without a context?
3. What is there about this passage that fits Easter Day, our peak celebration?

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

For your information

When writing to the church in Corinth, Paul is always contending with what he believes to be the dangerous distortions of the Christian message. Apparently some have questioned the Resurrection.

"Cephas" is Peter, in Aramaic.

Questions

1. Here Paul sets out to "remind" Christians in Corinth of the truths "of first importance" which he passed on to them, and to "remind" them also that their salvation depends on holding them fast. How do you think he had received them?
2. What are these truths, exactly? What is at stake with each one? Why does Paul keep repeating that some are "in accordance with the scriptures" (cf. Isaiah 53:5) ? How would this have sounded to listeners at the time, especially for anyone who had not heard them before? Are they convincing in our time?
3. Why do you think Paul considers himself "one untimely born"? Why is he "the least of the apostles," perhaps not fit to bear that name? How has he tried to live up to it? Who then is responsible for the conversion of the Corinthians?

John 20: 1-18

For your information

This is just one account of the first experiences of Jesus' resurrection. Like the others, it is enhanced and probably changed by telling and retelling. The first day of the week is Sunday.

Tombs were closed by very heavy circular stones.

Questions

1. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb first on Sunday morning. How early is it? What does she see? What does she do then? Whom does she tell? Where do **they** go? What do they see? What do they guess, from this sight? What do they do then? Why?
2. Who stays at the tomb? What does this show about her? Whom does she see in the tomb? How do they address her? What is the tone of their question, and her answer?
3. When she turns and sees Jesus, how does he address her? What is the tone of his question? Who does she think he is, and why? How is she corrected? What is their manner toward each other?
4. Why does Jesus forbid her to hold on to him? Why does she want to? Are his words harsh, or comforting, or what? What does she do then? How is her experience at the tomb, and her behavior, different from that of Peter and the other disciple?

Mark 16: 1-8

For your information

The original text of Mark's Gospel seems to have ended here; at least, the subsequent verses are so different in language and style that they cannot have been part of the original, and the earliest manuscript does not include them.

Anointing a dead body would have been women's work; men would have considered it unclean, demeaning. Also, women were unimportant enough that their preparing the corpse of a dangerous man for burial would not have attracted much attention.

The tomb was one of many caves in a hillside, with a heavy wheel of stone as a door.

In Mk 14: 28, Jesus tells his disciple that after he is raised up, he will go ahead of them to Galilee.

Questions

1. What exactly was the women's experience as they came to the tomb? How did they react? Have you ever had an experience that affected you in a similar way?
2. What difference, if any, does it make that Jesus will meet the disciples in Galilee (Mk, Mt) instead of Jerusalem (Lk, Jn)?

3. What is the effect of ending the Gospel with v. 8? Does this give us our “Happy Easter,” or leave us hanging? If this was indeed the original ending, what might have been the author’s purpose, especially considering that he began his narrative by saying that it was all “the good news [gospel] of Jesus Christ”? Might his original readers have known the next part so well that he didn’t have to include it, or what?

If you have time

--Compare the “empty tomb” stories in the other three Gospels. What is the same? What is different? Witnesses to any overwhelming event often tell sharply different stories, but in this case do there seem to be different perspectives or purposes as well? Consider especially the portrayal of the witnesses; who are they, how do they respond, and what happens then?

For your information

The former Lectionary offered two choices for the Easter season: Hebrew Scripture/Acts/Gospel or Acts/ Epistle/Gospel. The Revised Common Lectionary has eliminated Hebrew Scripture entirely, and in Year B has substituted readings from some Epistles. Over the next several weeks of Easter season, consider what difference that makes, and why that choice might have been made.

Easter II: April 11

For your information

As the lessons appointed for the weeks after Christmas help us to absorb the meaning of Christ’s birth, so those for the weeks after Easter help us to absorb the meaning of his resurrection.

Acts 4: 32-35 [36-37]

Ps 133

I John 1: 1-2: 2

John 20: 19-31

Acts 4: 32-35 [36-37]

Questions

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1. This passage describes the sort of community that would be—and perhaps actually was--the result of following Jesus’ teachings. Vss. 32-35 speak of the sort of life that Christians led together. Do you believe that this description is literally true, or wishful thinking? If it is literally true, then why are we told of just one individual who lived that way? Do you think it should be a model for us? Is it sustainable over time?

I John 1: 1-2:2

For your information

Here is more of John’s writing that uses the themes of his Gospel in order to distill the good news. You may recognize one of the opening sentences for Morning Prayer, as well as one of the assurances of pardon used in Holy Eucharist Rite I.

Questions

1. Again, see if you can paraphrase, or at least summarize, each line or section of this passage. What does it mean that in God “there is no darkness at all”? Is that your experience of God?
2. There are several different ways of understanding what it means that Christ died for us. One of those appears in 2:2. What exactly might it mean, that Jesus Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins”? (Note that in the previous line, he is described as our “advocate” [i.e. “lawyer”] with the Father.)

Questions

1. Here is another “victory song,” this one in a letter written by the author of John’s Gospel. Its language is an almost ecstatic summary of that Gospel. What has been overcome? What has been won? Is it possible to paraphrase each line, tying it to prior events and more explicit readings, or do you find it to be a sort of poetic expression of joy beyond explanation?
2. What does the combination of water and blood suggest to you?

John 20: 19-31

Questions

1. This reading is always appointed for the Sunday after Easter. Why?
2. What do the locked doors show about the disciples’ state of mind? Why is Thomas not locked in with them?
3. What happens in Jesus’ first encounter with the disciples? What effect does it have on them?
4. Why does Thomas refuse to accept their story?
5. Why does Jesus come back? How does he behave toward Thomas? How does Thomas respond? Does Thomas seem to be a model of an ideal disciple, or an imperfect one, or what? Where do you find yourself in this story?

Easter III: April 18

Acts 3: 12-19

Ps 4

I John 3: 1-7

Luke 24: 36b-48

Acts 3: 12-19 (and read 20-26)

For your information

This speech by Peter immediately follows his very public healing of a man lame from birth, just outside the temple. It is explicitly directed to “the people” of Israel; his message sums up what the meaning of Jesus is for Abraham’s heirs, of whom he is one.

Questions

1. What elements of Israel's history does Peter gather together in this speech? How does he relate that history to Jesus, and especially to the crucifixion? How does he use the healing of the lame man as a turning point, to call Israel to repentance? How does he soften his indictment, in v. 17?

2. How does Peter form a bridge from Moses to himself? How does he seem to understand himself in this long history? How does he incorporate his listeners, and in v. 26, turn the recent terrible events into continuing evidence of God's special favor toward Israel? Have you ever had a similar experience, in which some serious offense that you committed became a means of blessing? Is Peter's message for Israel relevant to us?

I John 3: 1-7

Questions

1. In this passage, John speaks in the strong, categorical language that distinguishes his Gospel. Is it helpful or troubling for you to hear God and the devil, purity and sinfulness, those who are "from God" and those who are not, separated so absolutely? Why? What does it mean to be "born of God," and do you agree that it makes one unable to sin?

2. How do you understand vs. 1-3? If we are already children of God, what do we still have to learn about our potential and our future? What could it mean to be like God, and to see God as God is? How could that vision transform us?

Luke 24: 36b-48

For your information

This passage follows the encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and after that, the recognition of him as he shared a meal.

Questions

1. What elements in this Resurrection appearance are similar to, or different from, the story of Thomas, which we read last week? How does Jesus persuade the disciples that he is real, and not a ghost? What difference does it make that he eats a piece of broiled fish? What other stories about him feature food, and how?

2. What does Jesus tell the disciples to proclaim as his witnesses? What is the connection between Hebrew Scripture and this proclamation? Do you think that we are called to proclaim this good news in similar ways, or in other ways better suited to our context? Since we are not Jews, do you think that what Jews understood as the fulfillment of prophecy has any relevance to us?

Easter IV: April 25

For your information

Traditionally, this fourth Sunday of the Easter season is "Good Shepherd Sunday." Every year the readings are on that theme; there are enough of them to have different ones in each year of our three-year cycle. Since the original Israelites were nomadic herdsman, and many still lived that way, this image was central to their daily lives. But shepherds in general were thought to be untrustworthy, as gypsies sometimes are today.

Acts 4: 5-12
Ps 23
I John 3: [14-15] 16-24
John 10: 11-18

Acts 4: 5-12 (and read vss. 13-14)

For your information

This incident follows the healing of the lame man. Peter and John have been arrested outside the temple by temple authorities, because they have been proclaiming resurrection from the dead through Jesus. According to John's Gospel, the Jewish police brought Jesus before Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas after his arrest. The parallels remind us that being Jesus' disciple is still very dangerous, and raises the question of how the disciples were able to carry on their work at all.

Jesus' name is invoked not as a sort of magic spell, but to call on the power which he has passed on to his disciples. Peter always insists that he is not acting on his own; it is Christ acting through him.

Questions

1. What connection does Peter make between the healing of the lame man and Jesus= power to save? How does he use this occasion to testify further about the meaning of Jesus?
2. What is the effect of this testimony upon the Jewish leaders? What might this show about what has changed since the Crucifixion, and perhaps why?
3. What might be the importance of Luke's telling us that Peter and John were "uneducated and ordinary men"? What did that mean to him, an educated man? To the Jewish leaders? What does it mean to you?

If you have time

--Read Ps 118, especially v. 22, for the context of the quotation in v. 11, which is repeatedly applied to Jesus.

I John 3: [14-15] 16-24

For your information

The term translated "abide in" means literally "pitch one's tent among." It comes out of Israel's nomadic tradition, and its sense of God's perfect freedom in being committed to stay in the midst of Israel, no matter how the people may wander.

Questions

1. Here John redefines death and life according to the new Christian understanding. What is "death"? What is "life"? How do we pass from one to the other? In this "dictionary," what does it mean to be a murderer? Does the term seem appropriate to you?
2. How does v. 16 define what it means to love "in truth and action" (v. 18)? If this is the ultimate standard, how do we apply it day to day?

3. How are we to know whether we are “from the truth”? And if we’re not sure, or have troubled hearts, what can we feel confident about anyway?

If you have time

--Read Ephesians 2: 11-22 for a more detailed account of how the flock is made one.

John 10: 11-18

For your information

Statements beginning “I am...” would always be understood by Jews to be in God’s voice, as God had announced his name to Moses: “I am.” This pattern in John suggests his practice of shaping mystery into poetry, with cues to help us understand his point.

Questions

1. According to Jesus in this passage, what distinguishes a hired hand from a good shepherd? Could you apply such terms to a military leader? a business leader? What other categories of our experience might they fit? In what contexts might it be “good” to lay down one’s life for the sheep? Is there anyone who might do that for you? Or for whom you would do that?
2. What might Jesus mean by saying, “I know my own and my own know me”? How do they know each other? Do you count yourself among his “own”? How exactly do you imagine that this mutual recognition is like that of Jesus and God?
3. Who are the “other sheep,” and what does Jesus see as his task with them?
4. How does Christ “lay down [his] life in order to take it up again”? Could we also do this? Why is this pleasing to God? If Christ is from God from the beginning, what could it mean that that is the reason God “loves” him?
5. As you reflect on all these passages and your own experience, what difference does it make to you that our church is “The Parish of the Good Shepherd”?

Easter V: May 2

Acts 8: 26-40

Ps 22: 24-30

I John 4: 7-21

John 15: 1-8

Acts 8: 26-40

For your information

This passage follows the first Christian martyrdom, that of Stephen, and the conversion of Samaria, a large area between Galilee and Judea, by Philip. Eunuchs were generally excluded from the community of Israel, though Is. 56: 3-5 promises exceptions for faithful eunuchs.

The eunuch is reading Is. 53: 7-8, one of what we know as the “Suffering Servant Songs” which early Christians identified as prophecies of Christ within Hebrew Scripture. Since the eunuch is on the way home from Jerusalem, he has apparently encountered that teaching there.

Questions

1. “Ethiopia” probably refers to Nubians, a sophisticated culture of the time, whose people were both pagan and dark-skinned. What part might this episode play in the Book of Acts’ effort to show the growth of the church?
2. What similarities, if any, do you find between this story and Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism? between this story and the conversion and baptism of Cornelius (ch. 10)?

If you have time

--This quotation from Isaiah stops just short of vs. 9-11, which seem to point explicitly to the later Christian understanding of the meaning of Christ’s death. Why do you think Luke did not include that piece?

I John 4: 7-21

Questions

1. Here John continues his poetic meditation on the meaning of Christ. What is here that you have heard before, either in John’s writing or in the more historical narratives found in other Gospels?
2. It’s easy for us to turn God into a sort of super-human being, a lot bigger than us but otherwise analogous to us in many ways. Spend some time with that very simple statement, “God is love.” What does it suggest to you? How does it relate to our anthropomorphic God, and how might it correct some of the problems with that image? Does it seem to you to be a complete definition of God, or not?
3. Do you agree with v. 11 and v. 19, that God’s love of us is the reason and the means of our loving others?
4. Do you agree with v. 18, that “perfect love casts out fear”? If so, why? What fears do you find in yourself, that might have something to do with imperfections in your loving?

John 15: 1-8

For your information

Here is another extended “I am” image for Christ, one that would have been easily understood in a land where there were many vineyards.

The word translated “abide” comes from an ancient understanding in the nomadic culture of that land. It means “pitch one’s tent,” and implies the freedom to move on but the committed choice to stay instead.

Questions

1. In what ways is Christ like a vine? How has he been “pruned” so as to bear more fruit? How have we too been “cleansed”? Have you been conscious of this experience over your lifetime?

2. At the same time, it seems that we are branches of Christ's vine. How is this so? What does it mean for us? How does it help us to bear fruit? What will happen if we don't?

Easter VI: May 9

Acts 10: 44-48

Ps 98

I John 5: 1-6

John 15: 9-17

Acts 10: 44-48

For your information

This passage echoes the experience of Pentecost. Peter has just told a brief version of the story of Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection, beginning with the theme, "God shows no partiality." "Circumcised believers" are orthodox Jews; Gentiles are non-Jews.

Questions

1. What might the sudden force of the Holy Spirit have to do with Peter's narrative?
2. Why are the "circumcised believers" astounded that the Gentiles too have received the Holy Spirit? How does it show up in them? How is this proof of Peter's theme? What does it say about eligibility for baptism? About what is implied or conferred through baptism? Do our baptismal practices reflect this openness?

I John 5: 1-6

1. What does it mean to be "born of God"? In v. 1, who is the parent, who the child? What does it mean for us to love the children of God? How do we do this?
2. Why is obedience to God not burdensome? What "victory" does our faith bring us? How do you imagine we might see this happen?
3. The Spirit is, or testifies to the truth, which is evidently about Jesus' baptism and his blood. What does this highly condensed insight mean? What do we know because of these two things? What does this knowledge have to do with love?

John 15: 9-17

For your information

This passage continues Jesus' last address to his disciples.

The Greek word translated "servants" in the NRSV means "slaves" in Greek, but refers not to those considered almost less than human (as sometimes in our country before the Civil War), but to those serving a master to whom they were indebted, usually in a relationship of mutual respect and trust. "Friends" implies a more equal but not necessarily intimate relationship.

Questions

1. You have heard nearly all of these themes before, in I John or the Gospel of John. Which ones do you recognize?
2. What does it mean to call the disciples his “friends”? How are friends different from servants? What are the special privileges and responsibilities of Jesus’ friends? What specific images of Jesus’ friendship toward his disciples do we find in this and other Gospels? Do you think of yourself as his friend, or his servant?
3. How do you understand v. 16a? Does our choosing him depend on his choosing us first?

Easter VII: May 16

Acts 1: 15-17, [18-20] 21-26

Ps 1

I John 5: 9-13 [14-15]

John 17: 6-19

Acts 1: 15-17, [18-20] 21-26

For your information

This is one of two conflicting stories about Judas’ death. The other is in Mt. 27: 5.

The psalms quoted in v. 20 (and probably the scripture that “had to be fulfilled”) are Pss. 69: 26 and 109: 8.

The “lots” referred to here may be the Urim and Thummim, small objects used as oracular signs.

Questions

1. How does this passage fit the beginning of a book devoted to showing the development of the early Church? What important question[s] might it answer?
2. How might you explain the conflicting accounts of Judas’ death?
3. Does anything in this passage seem related to the Easter season?

I John 5: 9-13 [14-15]

Questions

1. You have seen legal, courtroom language used about God in Hebrew Scripture. Here it is again, as an important image of who Jesus is to God. How does he represent God’s “testimony”? about what? What does Christ’s story prove? (See also note to Easter 5, John 14.)
2. How do you understand v. 15, which seems to say that if we know that God hears our requests, we also know that they have already been granted? Do you think this is true?

John 17: 6-19

For your information

This passage is part of Jesus' final prayer, following his last address to his disciples at the Last Supper.

"They" refers to "those whom you gave me." In v. 12, "the one destined to be lost" reads in Greek "the son of destruction."

Questions

1. Who are "those whom you gave me"? Who do you think were/are given to Jesus by God?
2. What is "your name that you have given me"? How are Jesus and God one? Can Christians, or all people, be one in that same way?
3. Who is "the son of destruction"? Is he the same as "the evil one" in v. 15? Does his loss represent a failure on Jesus' part, since he claims to have saved everyone else?
4. How exactly would you define "the world" as John uses that term? How is Jesus no longer in it?
5. What might it mean to be sanctified? How has Jesus sanctified himself for our sakes?

Pentecost: May 23

Acts 2: 1-21

or Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Ps 104: 25-35, 37 (In some translations, v. 37 is Ps. 105: 1)

Romans 8: 22-27

John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15

Acts 2: 1-21

For your information

This passage is appointed for Pentecost every year.

For Jews, Pentecost was a harvest festival, the celebration of the "first fruits" of the harvest. It was also identified with the gift of the law, seven weeks after Passover, and was known as the "Feast of Weeks."

Questions

1. What details are we given about the events of that day? What do you think is the importance of each? Pentecost is often called "the birthday of the Church"; in what sense was the Church "born" on that day?
2. How do you understand the ability of the disciples to make themselves clear in any language?
3. Why do you think they were accused of being drunk? Do you hear similar accusation made against anyone these days? Who, and under what circumstances? Are there any other categories that might be used today to dismiss such people, so we don't have to take them seriously? Why?

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

For your information

Ezekiel was a prophet to his fellow exiles before and after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

In both Hebrew and Greek, the same word means “wind,” “spirit,” and “breath.” This passage plays with this ambiguity.

Questions

1. What is Ezekiel’s vision? How does he underscore its drama? What is the rational answer to God’s question? Why does Ezekiel not give that answer?
2. What is Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones? When he does that, what happens? What is still incomplete? How is it completed?
3. How does God explain the vision? How does it apply to Israel? What is the promise contained in this image?
4. Some consider this passage to be “indirectly an anticipation of the doctrine of resurrection.” (NRSV) Does it seem so to you?

Romans 8: 22-27

Questions

1. How has the whole creation been “groaning in labor pains” until now? Do you think that it still is?
2. How do those in Paul’s implied audience have “the first fruits of the Spirit”? Why are they too groaning? What are they waiting for? Are we waiting in the same way?
3. What sort of hope is appropriate for Christians? On what basis? Why is hope that is seen not really hope at all?
4. How does the Spirit help us in this time of waiting? What can the Spirit do that we can’t do for ourselves? How does the Spirit carry our needs to God, or, as this passage says, “intercede” for us??

John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15

For your information

This passage comes from Jesus’ last address to his disciples before his death.

The term used for the Spirit here means “advocate,” “counselor” in the legal sense, one who’s unconditionally on your side.

Questions

1. To what will the Spirit testify? Why will Jesus’ listeners be able and expected to testify as well?

2. Why has Jesus not explained these things before? Why is he doing so now? What new gift will his leaving them make possible?
3. What will the Spirit's effect on the world be? How will the Spirit prove the world wrong "about sin and righteousness and judgment"? What "proof" might the Spirit offer?
4. As you consider all of the passages appointed for Pentecost, what varied images of the Spirit do you find? Which of them have particular power for you?

Trinity Sunday: May 30

Isaiah 6: 1-8

Ps 29

Romans 8: 12-17

John 3: 1-17

Isaiah 6: 1-8

For your information

This passage fits the classic pattern of a "call narrative," in which the one called protests his unworthiness and God overcomes his objections.

King Uzziah died in 742 BCE.

Seraphs may be "griffin-like creatures" (NRSV).

Questions

1. What is Isaiah's vision of God? What details emphasize God's grandeur? What is Isaiah's reaction?
2. How does God respond to Isaiah's fears? What does this response make possible? What then is Isaiah's answer to God's question in v. 8?
3. Have you ever felt called in a similar way? Do you recognize this sense of unworthiness? How did/does God overcome it?

Romans 8: 12-17

For your information

tc \14 "For your information

It is generally agreed that the specific doctrine of the Trinity is not spelled out in Scripture, but was developed by Church Fathers later.

Questions

1. What does Paul seem to mean by "flesh" and "Spirit" here? What might it mean to "put to death the deeds of the body"?
2. According to this passage, how does the Spirit help us? Have you experienced the Spirit that way? or in other ways?

3. What elements of the Trinity are suggested in their early stages here? How would you use this passage to explain the Trinity to someone else?

John 3: 1-17

For your information

tc \14 "For your information

This passage follows one of John's favorite patterns. Jesus makes a statement, often in answer to a question; the listener completely misunderstands him, usually by taking him literally; and then Jesus corrects him, in mystical language.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is among Israel's elite, a scholar of Israel. Pharisees considered it an act of devotion to ask hard questions, and to search Scripture for meaning.

"Born from above" might be translated "born anew."

Numbers 21: 4-9 tells of a plague of poisonous serpents that God sent upon the complaining Israelites in the wilderness. God then instructed Moses to "make a [poisonous] serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

Questions

1. Why do you think Nicodemus comes by night? What are his intentions? Putting yourself in his place, how do you imagine this encounter? Have you ever been similarly baffled by words that were beyond you?
2. On the basis of Jesus' explanation, what do you understand it means to be born from above? Have you been? (See BCP, p. 307, line 6.)
3. How does Jesus' role parallel that of Moses' serpent on a staff?
4. V. 16 is often printed on bumper stickers and displayed on banners as a summary of the Good News. Do you think it indeed serves that purpose? How does v. 17 further explain its meaning?
5. V. 8 says, "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." What does this mean? Do such people also move freely and unpredictably, or what?
6. How does this passage add to our understanding of the Trinity?
- 7. Imagine the Trinity as vividly as you can. What does each of the three figures add to it that would be missing without him/her/it? What has formed your image of each one—your experiences, Scripture, or something else? Is it possible to imagine just a pair—God and Christ, or God and the Spirit—instead of three? What difference does it make?**