

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, YEAR A, RCL, 2020
Trinity Sunday through Proper 18
Parish of the Good Shepherd, Waban

(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 A, and our Gospel is Matthew.

The weekly reading from Hebrew Scripture (the “Old Testament”) during the post-Pentecost season usually offers two options. The first respects the integrity of Hebrew Scripture by moving through books sequentially; in Year A, it features stories from Genesis through Judges. This is the option we’ll be using for this season. (The second option, the one carried over from the previous Lectionary, uses passages chosen to echo or enhance some theme in the Gospel reading, though sometimes it’s a challenge to guess what the editors had in mind!)

Each of these options for Hebrew Scripture has its own psalm, chosen to match the theme of the week.. The psalms would have been read aloud by the congregation in the synagogue service, and understood as a corporate prayer, personally relevant for at least some individual members. No questions about the psalms are included here.

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. There is usually no deliberate connection between its contents and the other readings, but it is startling how often they seem made for each other anyway. In special seasons, selected passages from the Book of Acts or Revelation may be used instead.

Trinity Sunday: June 7

Genesis 1: 1 -2:4a

Ps 8

II Corinthians 13: [5-10] 11-13

Matthew 28: 16-20

Genesis 1: 1-2: 4a

For your information

Our creation story is in some respects similar to the creation myths of other religions at that time. Israel tended to assume that since her God had been revealed to be the God of all people, then their stories were fundamentally about that same God, though they might need some editing to remove errors. For instance, the sun, moon and stars had been believed to be powerful deities in their own right; here they are created by God, like everything else. (The plural "us" in v. 26 may be a remnant of that multi-god cosmology.) There are occasional references in Hebrew Scripture to other old accounts of creation, including a cosmic combat in which God had to overcome other powers. But Israel's God is entirely separate from the creation that God has made, and there is no story about God's origins, as there is in the other religions. This God is in every way supreme.

The Jewish day begins at sunset; thus evening precedes morning.

Questions

1. Can you see any significance in the order of creation? What parts of creation come forth directly from God? What parts are "brought forth" (given birth) by the earth? What difference might be intended?
2. According to 1:28, what is humankind's mandate?
3. Why do you think we are repeatedly told that God sees everything that God makes as "good" or "very good"?

If you have time

--See Gen. 2:18 for what God says is **not** good. What basic understanding of who we are is suggested in this exceptional statement?

--Compare the beginning of Genesis with the beginning of John's Gospel. What might have been John's purpose in starting this way?

II Corinthians 13: [5-10] 11-13

For your information

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians reflects his concern, even jealousy, that other (and perhaps more attractive) Christian teachers are threatening the loyalty of some of his converts. He has made a "painful visit" to Corinth, then put off another because of fear that it would be too uncomfortable. But Titus has brought word of recent improvements in the situation.

Questions

1. What is Paul's hope for the Corinthian church? What "test" does he want them to take, and what exactly might this mean? How is it related to his own success or failure?

2. What sense of Paul does this passage give you--not just his theology, but his human qualities? What sort of leader do you see here? What does he seem to believe his role to be among these people?

3. Vs. 11-12 give a succinct program for the Corinthians to follow. What does he want them to do? Is this advice suitable for any congregation?

Matthew 28: 16-20

For your information

This passage is known as "the Great Commission," and is sometimes understood as outlining the essential work of the Church. Some scholars believe that it was added to Matthew's narrative later, as the developing Church came to define its mission; but it reflects the assurance in Mt. 18: 20.

This passage contains the baptismal "formula," naming what we now understand as the three "persons" of the Trinity, but the full doctrine of the Trinity was not worked out until the councils of the fourth Century CE--Nicaea and Constantinople. "In the name of" implies "in the possession and protection of" (NOAB).

Questions

1. Do you think it makes any difference that Jesus delivers these words in Galilee rather than in Jerusalem?

2. The sweeping force of this commission has propelled missionaries into every part of the earth, with mixed results. Do you think that the Church should be doing all of this in the present day, given what we affirm about the integrity of other faiths, the pluralism of our country, and the inclusiveness of God? Why, or why not? Can you think of other scriptural passages which define Christian (or God's) mission as well or better, as you see it?

Proper 6: June 14

Genesis 18: 1-15, (21: 1-7)

Ps 116: 1, 10-17

Romans 5: 1-8 [9-11]

Matthew 9: 35-10: 8 (9-23)

Genesis 18: 1-15, (21: 1-7)

For your information

Abraham and Sarah have had no children, in spite of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply," and in spite of God's words, "I will make of you a great nation." Abraham has tried

several ways to establish an heir— adoption, a child by a concubine— but has been thwarted every time.

Mamre is an ancient sacred place north of Hebron.

In that part of the ancient world, hospitality to the stranger was an absolute obligation. Travelers depended on it for survival, but it also carried a sense that the stranger might be from God.

The three strangers merge into one; they are God's messengers or sometimes simply God.

Questions

1. What are the elements of Abraham's hospitality? Does it seem to meet a high standard? Do you welcome guests that way? Why, or why not?
2. What news do the three strangers bring? How do Abraham and Sarah react to it? What is holy and what is human about this conversation? What sort of God is this? What sort of faithfulness?
3. What promise to Abraham is God about to fulfill?

Romans 5: 1-8

For your information

Paul has already established who the "us" is: all people everywhere. Now he explains what has happened for all people, including sinners who are actually "enemies" of God, because of the Crucifixion. He has insisted that because Abram/Abraham was seen by God as a paradigm of faith even without being circumcised, it is not necessary to become a Jew (i.e. through circumcision and other observances) before becoming a Christian and receiving God's grace.

Justification, in Paul's theology, is something that happens in the present time: we are brought into right relationship with God, or reconciled, in God's eyes. The ultimate result of that, salvation, is still to come.

Questions

1. What is it that gives us the peace of v. 1-2? About what may we "boast" (i. E. have confidence)?
2. Why are we to "boast" in our sufferings? What does suffering produce for us, and how do you see this pattern in Jesus? Do you think it works this way?
3. What is the source of our hope, in vss. 4-5?
4. According to vs. 6-7, what is the difference between Christ's willingness to die for us and our willingness to die for another person?

5. In v. 8, what seems to be the connection between Christ and God? Is this a God who needs to be appeased by a human sacrifice, or what?

6. In vs. 10-11, what is the difference between the effect of Christ's death and that of his life? How exactly do you imagine this? What does it mean for us to "boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ"?

Matthew 9: 35-10: 8 (9-23)

For your information

This passage occurs quite early in Jesus' active ministry, while he is defining what his ministry is to be. Gentiles are non-Jews. Samaritans are those living in Samaria, an area between Galilee (Jesus' home and the site of most of his work) and Jerusalem. The history of Samaria is not entirely clear, but though Samaritans were probably related to Israelites, their religion had taken some significant deviations long before, so that pious Jews despised them.

"All the cities and villages" in v. 35 must mean predominantly Jewish ones; Gentile towns would not have synagogues.

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their wickedness, particularly their abusive treatment of strangers (who turned out to be God's messengers). Hospitality was a primary obligation in a land where travelers depended on it for survival. (It has long been claimed that these cities' sin was homosexual acts--thus the word "sodomy"--but Jesus' words here seem to indicate that this interpretation is a misreading. See Gen. 18: 4-11.)

Questions

1. In 9: 35, what is the initial shape of Jesus' ministry? Does this description continue to fit his work as you know it? How might v. 36 eventually widen or deepen the work described in v. 35?

2. What authority does Jesus give the twelve apostles in v. 10: 1? What instructions does he give them for their work? What are its boundaries to be? Why are they to carry no means of payment for food and lodging? With whom are they to stay? What are they to do if they are not well received?

3. To what extent do you think this commission applies to us? Do you find Jesus' clear limits on the extent of the apostles' ministry, and on the time to be spent with those who won't hear, realistic or harsh or what? How do you set limits on your own willingness to serve?

4. How are Jesus' apostles like sheep, in his eyes? Who are the wolves? What are they likely to do to Jesus' followers? Why?

5. What does it mean to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves"? How do they balance and correct each other? Which of these do you know in yourself, and which needs work?

6. How might that combination of wisdom and innocence be applied before the authorities persecuting Christians? What can they be confident about? How should they act? How might any of this apply to us?

Proper 7: June 21

Gen 21: 8-21

Ps 86: 1-10, 16-1

Romans 6: 1b-11

Matthew 10: 24-39

Genesis 21: 8-21

For your information

The name “Isaac” means “laughter,” or “the laughing one.” See Gen 18 for the reason.

The boy Ishmael was the result of Abraham’s efforts to have a son and heir by the Egyptian slave woman Hagar, at Sarah’s suggestion. His name means, “May God hear/heed.” Melville’s “Moby Dick” begins, “Call me Ishmael;” its narrator adopts the name to describe his own condition. Muslims trace their ancestry to Abraham through Ishmael (NRSV).

Questions

1. If Sarah encouraged Abraham to have a son by Hagar, why does she want to cast them out? How does Abraham feel about that?
2. How does God handle this thorny situation? What promise does he make? How is it carried out? Might you find the familiar wilderness/promised land pattern here?
3. Hagar and Ishmael have recently received much attention from some theologians, especially those attentive to women in Scripture. What symbolic importance do you think they might have for us?

Romans 6: 1b-11

For your information

Paul is constantly contending with the distortion of the Gospel message in the new churches. Apparently this passage is provoked by the blithe assumption on the part of some Christians in Rome that their sinning gives God a chance to display the wonder of grace, so they should do more of it.

Questions

What is Paul's response to the Romans' theological error? What is the fundamental truth that makes their interpretation impossible?

What does baptism mean as Paul speaks of it here? Do we think of it as being "baptized into (Christ's) death, " as well as his life, and if so, what does that mean? Do you think of yourself as "walk(ing) in newness of life"?

Take this reading phrase by phrase, considering its meaning for you: Is this how you understand your baptism, or how we reflect it in our baptismal practices? For example: "whoever has died is freed from sin;" The death he died, he died to sin, once for all;" "but the life he lives, he lives to God."

Matthew 10: [16-23] 24-39

For your information

Here Jesus continues to prepare his apostles for their mission. ("Apostle": one who is sent, a term commonly used for the Twelve. "Disciple": a pupil, one who is taught; sometimes used interchangeably with "apostle," but Jesus had many disciples besides the Twelve.) Beelzebul was Israel's figure of evil. Jesus was sometimes accused of being Beelzebul.

Questions

1. What might be the associations of calling the apostles "sheep"? Who are the "wolves"? What exactly does it mean to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves"? Was Jesus like that? Do you know others who are? Do you think this describes you? What problems can you see with being only one or the other of these? Is this "serpent" like the one in the Garden?
2. In vs. 17-18, what does Jesus see as the motive behind arresting his disciples? How are they to behave when this happens?
3. Jesus presents a grim picture in vs. 21-22 of the effect of his ministry and message. Is he right? Have you personally seen similar results when his good news is spoken?
4. Why do you think Jesus finds it necessary to remind the disciples of the principle in 24-25a? Paraphrase 25b.
5. What is the reassurance in vs. 26-27? Is uncovering secrets and bringing them to light always a good thing? What secrets might Jesus have in mind, and who would want them to stay covered? Who are the people who bring secrets to light these days? Do you do this yourself? How are such people received? What might we be called to "proclaim from the housetops"?
6. What is the ultimate promise made in vs. 28-33? What should the disciples ultimately fear, and what is the ultimate certainty?

7. Does this speech seem to you to be an appropriate and effective way of preparing the apostles for their work? Does it match the events that follow? Should our congregation be warned this way, every time we recite the Baptismal Covenant?

Proper 8: June 28

Genesis 22: 1-14

Ps 13

Romans 6: 12-23

Matthew 10: 40-42

Genesis 22: 1-14

For your information

The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the most central ones in Scripture, both for Jews and for Christians. God has promised Abraham that he will be the progenitor of “nations,” but he and Sarah have been unable to conceive a child. At last, Isaac is born, the only child of their very old age. And then God orders Abraham to sacrifice him. Or so it seems.

Pagan religions sometimes required human sacrifice to appease angry or malicious gods.

Questions

1. We are told that “God tested Abraham.” As you read this story, do you recognize a God who “tests” people this way? Is this the work of a loving God?
2. What are God’s first instructions to Abraham? What details heighten the emotional force of it? What does God’s tone seem to be?
3. How does Abraham’s response match his first response to God’s command, in Gen 12? What does it show about him?
4. Why does Abraham tell his companions to stay behind as he and Isaac go forward? Again, what details of this deliberate journey heighten its power? What is the relationship between father and son? At what point does Isaac realize what is happening? What might be his reaction, since we hear nothing of it? How old do you suppose he is?
5. What is Abraham thinking as he raises the knife? How does God stop the sacrifice? What does that show about God? About Abraham? Would you have made a sacrifice of gratitude to God, as Abraham did, and drawn the conclusion that he did?
6. Did anybody ask Sarah?

7. Some Christians have seen this story as a prefiguring of God's willingness to sacrifice His only son, Jesus. Kierkegaard saw it as evidence that God's will may be absolutely beyond our reason or comprehension, and may cost us everything else. How do you see it?

Romans 6: 12-23

For your information

This passage continues the argument of the previous Sunday's reading, and depends on its claims.

Questions

1. What does it mean to have sin "exercise dominion over [our] mortal bodies"? How can sin do that? How might we "present [our] members to sin as instruments of wickedness"? How would it be different to be "instruments of righteousness"? What is the difference between being "slaves of sin" and being "slaves of righteousness," and what does either of these have to do with freedom in Christ?
2. In v. 19, Paul seems to say that his speaking "in human terms" is an adaptation to the "limitations" of his audience. What are these "human terms" as seen in this reading? What are the limitations? How would he speak differently if his audience weren't limited in this way? Do we also need to be addressed in "human terms" in order to understand Christ's message?
3. How are "slaves of sin" "free to righteousness" (v. 20)? What does one get from enslavement to sin? From enslavement to God? What is the ultimate goal?
4. What does "eternal life" mean to you? Is it the ultimate purpose for you? Why, or why not?

Matthew 10: [34-39] 40-42

For your information

"In the name of a prophet": "out of respect for the office and work of a prophet" (NOAB). Traditionally, prophets had an honored role in calling both rulers and people to account; the best kings, especially David, chose men of great wisdom for the role, and listened closely to what they said.

Jesus sometimes called his disciples "little ones."

Questions

1. Jesus warns of deep divisions and enmities even within families because of him. Why then do we think of him as the Prince of Peace?
2. What obvious close family relationship is missing from Jesus' list? Any guess as to why?

3. What does Jesus require of his disciples, specifically, in vs. 37-39? How do these requirements affect you? Which seem easy, which hard, which impossible?

Proper 9: July 5

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-

Ps 45: 11-18

Romans 7: [14] 15-25a, [25b-8: 6]

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67

For your information

This story takes place when Sarah has died and Abraham is dying, and their son Isaac is not yet married. Abraham sends his servant to find Isaac a wife from Abraham's homeland, Haran, instead of from the pagan Canaanite culture which surrounds them. As he looks for guidance while stopping at a well, he encounters Rebekah, the daughter of Abraham's nephew's son. He decorates her with a nose-ring and bracelets, and she runs off to tell her brother Laban.

Questions

1. How does the servant explain his purpose to Laban? What effect might this narrative have on a young man? (Much of what he says repeats almost exactly what we have been told earlier in the chapter.) Does this narrative seem to speak of divine intervention, or not?
2. How does Rebekah respond to the servant's invitation? What sense are we given of her age, her character?
3. Her meeting with Isaac and their marriage are spoken of only very briefly. What do we learn? Is it all we need to know? How does it contribute to the saga of Israel's ancestors?

Romans 7: [14] 15-25, [25b-8:6]

For your information

"Flesh" here means for Paul "not merely...our physical nature, but...our whole self, ruled by sin and selfishness" (NOAB). But Paul had a language problem; the Greek word "sarx," the only one available to him for this context, meant "flesh" in the literal sense of "body," and in Greek thought carried negative connotations. Here is the germ of what became a spirit-body split in some branches of Christian theology--a split which Paul, as a Jew, would never have embraced.

Paul states that the (Jewish) law is "spiritual"--i.e. of God.

Questions

1. In vs. 14-20, Paul describes his enslavement to sin. What distinction does he make between "I" and the agent or source of his sinfulness? Do you think this distinction is legitimate? Have you experienced it?
2. After several chapters spent discussing the (Jewish) law, Paul here uses "law" in a new, ironic sense. What does "law" mean in v. 21? What "law" has he discovered? What two "laws" does he find to be at war in him? Do you feel this same tension in yourself?

If you have time

--Read 7: 4-13, and see if you can summarize Paul's argument about the relationship between sin and the law, and between his "flesh" and his "spirit." What impression do you get of his self-understanding and character in this passage?

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

For your information

"These things" may refer to the series of references in the preceding verses. John the Baptist had hard truths to tell, and was not heard. Chorazin and Bethsaida, Tyre and Sidon, Capernaum and Sodom stand under judgment, for various "deeds of power."

Rabbis often used the metaphor of a yoke to describe the law.

Questions

1. What is Jesus' opinion of his generation? What does the children's chant suggest to you? What does it have to do with what is said about John the Baptist, or about the Son of Man/Jesus? How does he suggest that their opinions may be corrected?
2. For what does Jesus thank God in v. 25? Why? Who are "the intelligent"? Who are "babes"? What relationship between him and God is suggested in vs. 25-28?
3. Whom is he addressing in v. 28 ff.? The same people as the "babes," or someone else? How does he think his "yoke" is different from that of the law? Do you agree? What sort of "rest" can he offer?
4. What is the effect of putting this passage shortly after the calling of the Twelve, and just after John the Baptist has questioned Jesus' authority, and the crowds have apparently doubted John as well?

If you have time

--Read all of chapters 10 and 11 for a full sense of how this ministry is starting out. How would you describe the atmosphere so far? Does Jesus seem confident, disappointed, comforting, angry, joyful, defensive, or what?

Proper 10: July 12

Genesis 25: 19-34

Ps 119: 105-112

Romans 8: 1-11 [12-17]

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Genesis 25: 19-34

For your information

God's purpose, to "be fruitful and multiply," continues to present challenges in this story. We'd expect exceptional fertility among these patriarchs and their wives, but that is not what happens

The Hebrew word for "red" is like that for the nation of Edom.

Ordinarily the first-born son would be seen as the family head, and would receive a double portion of the inheritance.

Questions

Rebekah's barrenness becomes a central focus. How is it overcome? Where have we met barren women in Scripture before? What has happened in each case? Why does this pattern seem to recur so often?

What is the nature of Rebekah's pregnancy, and what does God have to say about it? How do the twins appear at birth, and how does this begin to confirm God's words?

As they mature, how do Jacob and Esau differ in their way of life? How does v. 28 foreshadow trouble to come?

Why does Esau sell his birthright? What do we learn about each from this exchange? As Jacob becomes Isaac's successor as a patriarch of Israel, what sort of patriarch is he? Does God have a hand in this?

Romans 8: 1-11 [12-17]

For your information

Here Paul continues his explanation of the relationship between flesh and spirit, between sin and the Spirit of God given in baptism.

Questions

1. This section sums up what has gone before; its prose is dense because it assumes the reader's understanding of previous material. Can you summarize the argument behind the astounding statement of v. 1?
2. How has the flesh "weakened" the law? Do you see that happening in our own time? How has God done what the law cannot do?
3. Can you paraphrase vss. 5-11, using what Paul has already told us as background?
4. . V. 12 leads into a new image: that of our "adoption" by God. How do we become God's children? What evidence proves that we are? Who else is besides us? What are the consequences of being God's children? What is the cost of claiming our inheritance?

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

For your information

A parable is a story which points to meanings **beyond** itself; it is intended to provoke the listener into fresh thinking, and to keep on unsettling things, suggesting new insights. An allegory, on the other hand, points to meanings **instead of** itself; each figure in the story has an exact, obvious equivalent, and there are no ambiguities.

Questions

1. Among the "great crowds" who are now coming to hear Jesus are many farmers. In that very dry land, seed is scarce and precious; wrenching a crop from the soil requires great care. How would this parable sound to such people?
2. The second part of the reading is presented as an explanation of the parable to Jesus' disciples. In fact, it turns the parable into an allegory. Why do you think Jesus did this? Or did he? Might someone else have added this editorial commentary, and if so, why? Finally, what do **you** think the parable is "about"?

Proper 11: July 19

Genesis 28: 10-19a

Ps 139: 1-11, 22-23

Romans 8: [12-17] 18-25

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Genesis 28: 10-19a

For your information

By dressing in a goatskin, Jacob has managed to receive his blind father Isaac's blessing, instead of his hairy elder brother Esau. The blessing was irrevocable; he has become his father's primary heir.

"Beth-el" means "house of God."

Questions

1. What is the significance of the ladder (more accurately, a stairway or ramp), on which angels go up and down?
2. How does God present identification? Why is each detail important? What promise does God make to Jacob, and where have you heard it before? Is it surprising that God endorses this scoundrel? Do you see any evidence that Jacob might change?

Romans 8: 12-25

For your information

The Greek word "ktisis" (translated "creation") in this context means material creation, not including human beings (Jerome Commentary).

Questions

1. What does Paul believe to be the fundamental nature of the created world (vs. 19-23)? Can you see any parallels between this description and his analysis of himself (7: 15-24)?
2. The meaning of v. 20, "the one who subjected it," is disputed. Most scholars think it refers to God, some to Adam. What do you think? Why would the agent of this subjection hope for it to be lifted?
3. Who is suffering the "labor pains" in vs. 22-23? What might be the evidence that this is happening? What is to be brought forth?
4. (Paul too can mix metaphors!) What can it mean for us to be groaning in labor while waiting for adoption? Do you ever feel such groaning or laboring in yourself?
5. Why is hope that is seen not hope? Can you give an example?

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

For your information

This is the first of Matthew's "kingdom parables." Four more will immediately follow, with still more to come later. Some believe that this one is an expansion of Mk. 4: 26-29. The repeated use of the word "gather" suggests a reference to the Christian community as a whole.

Some scholars point out that there was a weed in that area which looked like wheat at first, but withered earlier.

Questions

1. This parable builds on the one before, but this time the field has been prepared. Who might be the master and the servants? the enemy sowing weeds? Is it true that weeding uproots the good crop?
2. What is the difference between the master and the servants? Do you think the master's instructions are wise? How would you apply them?

Proper 12: July 26

Genesis 29: 15-28

Ps 105: 1-11, 45b *or* 128

Romans 8: 26-39

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Genesis 29: 15-28

For your information

Laban is Rachel's father and Jacob's uncle. When Jacob establishes his identity, he is welcomed as a family member, and his suit is looked on with favor.

A bride would wear a veil at her wedding.

Questions

1. Scoundrel meets scoundrel! What are the original terms of Jacob's bargain with Laban? How does the story move from smooth, congenial beginning to sudden reversal? Who is guilty, who is victim, and how is the problem resolved?
2. Where is God in this narrative? Knowing that Jacob will become a patriarch of Israel, what are we to make of this chapter in his history?

Romans 8: 26-39

For your information

As usual with Paul, "saints" refers to baptized Christians.

A part of this passage was later used as the basis for the doctrine of predestination: every individual assigned a place in salvation or damnation from the start. But "Those whom he foreknew" may refer not to individuals but to the entire Christian community.

Vss. 35-39 are often read at funerals. V. 36 quotes Ps 44: 22.

Questions

1. According to vs. 26-27, what is the Spirit's role in our prayer? Have you felt the Spirit acting in this way as you pray? Have you asked it to?
2. What is the assurance given in v. 28? Do you in fact know this? How does Paul account for its being true in vs. 29-30? Do you accept this interpretation of how God's call works? How might Paul's understanding be read as good news? What implicit question might it answer?
3. Vs. 31-34 are among the most passionate and joyful words of Paul's proclamation. What does he promise us? What is his evidence that this is how the cosmos works?
4. What inferences can you make about the lives of these Christians in Rome, based on this passage? Do Paul's categories of danger apply as well to us today? Have you ever felt your own safety in the love of Christ threatened in any of these ways?
6. When and why might you need these assurances? How, specifically, would you understand what they promise? Is anything left out?

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

For your information

Scribes were a professional class of "doctors of the law," "copyists, editors, and guardians of the textual purity of scripture." (Interpreters' Dictionary) They were closely associated with the Pharisees and priests of Jewish orthodoxy.

Questions

1. This reading consists of a series of very short "kingdom parables," all of which use images that would have been familiar to Jesus' audience. Is each image **literally** possible? Or are there any which don't quite make sense literally? What pushes the listener beyond the literal meanings? How would you apply each one to your own experience? Do you find them exciting, or troubling, or what? What would the Pharisees think?
2. How would you describe the kingdom of heaven on the basis of these parables? Is this how you imagine it? Keep notes, so that when you find more kingdom parables later, you can use them to build on these.

What does Jesus see as the particular advantage of scribes who have been “trained for the kingdom of heaven”? What might this suggest about Jesus’ attitude toward Jewish law?

[The Feast of the Transfiguration

The readings for this feast replace the propers for this Sunday when the feast falls on a Sunday.

Exodus 34: 29-35Ps 99

2 Peter 1: 13-21

Lk 9: 28-36

Exodus 34: 29-35

For your information

This passage comes after Moses’ first trip to the mountaintop, where he received an first pair of stone tablets, but then shattered them when he discovered his people’s worship of the golden calf. His intervention kept God from destroying the people immediately.

Questions

1. Why exactly is Moses’ face lit up? Why was it necessary for him to veil his face? When did he remove the veil?
2. Have you ever seen people whose faces seem to be lit up? If so, was it for the same reason? Are you drawn to them, or unnerved? Why? Do exceptional people sometimes have to “veil their faces” to keep from intimidating those around them?
3. Have you ever felt yourself transformed by a powerful, even holy experience?

2 Peter 1: 13-21

For your information

Scholars tend to agree that this letter was not written by Peter, but much later, perhaps near the turn of the century, in part because it gathers together many claims and debates about Peter that had not come into focus until late. It appears to be an affirmation of Peter’s authority in the emerging Church.

Questions

1. What does “Peter” assert is his responsibility, as long as he is alive to carry it out? Why is it important that he be the one to do this?

2. This letter distinguishes between myth and truth. How would you define each? On what grounds does "Peter" insist that the Transfiguration is not a myth? Why should it matter? What does this event communicate to us, according to him?

3. The anthropologist Mircea Eliade defines a myth as any story that we recognize as carrying our deepest truths, whether it actually happened or not. Are there any biblical stories that you think might not be historically accurate, but that still carry important truths for us? Should they be part of our sacred Scriptures? Why, or why not?

Lk 9: 28-36

1. What is the context for this event? Where does it come within Jesus' ministry? What are the surroundings? Who is with Jesus? What are they doing?

2. Read Malachi : 4-6, the ending of the OT. What connection do you see between that passage and this one? What difference does it make?

3. What is the effect of the "glory" on the disciples? What is Peter's response? Why? Why don't the disciples tell anyone about such an important experience?

4. Where have you heard the words of v. 35 before? How are these events related?

Proper 13: August 2

Genesis 32: 22-3

Ps 17: 1-7, 16

Romans 9: 1-5

Matthew 14: 13-21

Genesis 32: 22-31

For your information

This passage contains three etiologies (accounts of origins): the name "Israel," the names "Penuel/Peniel," and a food taboo. It contains what seem to be several elements of ancient folktales, which have been combined and adapted into a story to honor God. Commentators have more questions about its meaning than answers.

Naming someone, or knowing and calling someone's name, was thought to carry great power over that person. "Israel" means "the one who strives with God," or, "God strives."

Questions

1. Who is the "man"? Why does he appear only at night? Who is in control, who is the victim, who is the winner? What is won?

2. Why does Jacob ask the stranger's name? How does he answer, and why? What is Jacob asking for at the end?

Romans 9: 1-5

For your information

Out of context, this reading is confusing. It represents one piece of Paul's continuing effort to explain how Gentiles can become Christians without first becoming Jews.

Questions

1. What is the cause of Paul's anguish? How does he describe the proper heritage of the Israelites? What is his authority in believing that the traditions of his own Jewish people are lacking?

Matthew 14: 13-21

For your information

This story immediately follows the news of John the Baptist's execution in prison. It was customary for women and children to sit apart from men.

Questions

1. V. 13 includes only the barest of suggestions. What do they tell us about Jesus? about the crowds? about what it was like to be in his position?

2. V. 14 is also minimal. What does it show us about Jesus?

3. How do the disciples respond to the crowd's hunger? Why does Jesus tell them to feed the crowd, instead of just doing it himself?

4. What familiar pattern do you hear in v. 19? What do you think is the purpose here?

5. Some have said that this episode marks a new stage in Jesus' ministry, that begins only after John's death? Do you agree? If so, why? What do you think happens here? Have you ever taken part in a similar event?

If you have time

--See Mt. 15: 32-38 for a second "loaves and fishes" story in the same Gospel. Any differences? What do you make of this duplication?

--Compare Mt 14: 19 to Lk 24: 30. What identical pattern do you find? What might be its significance?

Proper 14: August 9

Genesis 37: 1-4, [5-11] 12-28

Ps 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b

Romans 10: 5-15

Matthew 14: 22-33

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

For your information

This section continues the story of Jacob, who is now established as a patriarch after his father Isaac's death. (He is called "Israel," as the leader and symbol of his people—see 35: 10.) Isaac's own father, Abraham, had been commanded by God to move from his homeland to the pagan land of Canaan, and the family had always been to some degree aliens there, monotheists in a polytheistic culture.

Jacob had six sons by his first wife, Leah; two (Joseph and Benjamin) by his cherished second wife Rachel, and four by their maids, who also became his wives.

"Here I am" is the traditional obedient response of one called by God."

Shechem was "a thriving Canaanite city" (NRSV) at the time. Dothan is just north of there, on the trade route from Syria to Egypt. Joseph is getting further and further from the safety of home.

"Reuben" in v. 21 may be an unintended substitute for Judah, who is later referred to as Joseph's protector; and the slight contradictions in vss. 25-28 may also represent two imperfectly melded versions of the story.

Pits were dug as small reservoirs for water. It was believed that spilled blood would cry out and make the crime known.

Questions

1. How do the first four verses set up the drama that is to follow? What do they show about Joseph? About Jacob? What might be the significance of giving Joseph a "long robe with sleeves," as opposed to the shorter garment worn by laborers?
2. What are the implications of Joseph's dreams? Why does he tell his brothers and his father? How are their reactions alike, and different?
3. What are the undertones of calling Joseph "the dreamer"? How might v. 15 confirm that?

4. What are the brothers' intentions toward Joseph? Are they understandable? Why does Reuben/Judah protest? What do they do instead? What is their next step, and why?

Romans 10: 5-15

For your information

This passage continues Paul's efforts to distinguish the Christian from the Jewish way, and to persuade Jews that it is not necessary to become Jews in order to become Christians. In Lev 18: 5 Moses quotes God as saying, "You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord." There were 613 of these "statutes and ordinances." Paul has already made clear that keeping them all is nearly impossible.

Questions

1. What is the reflexive impulse of new Christians in vss. 6-7? What is the reason that their questions no longer apply? How does Paul comfort them? Why is the Christian way to salvation so much easier than what Moses demands?
2. What does it mean, that "the word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart"? Do you find it to be so? How is this different from the old understanding?
3. "[T]here is no distinction between Jew and Greek" is repeated by Paul several times, and may be part of an early baptismal formula" (...male nor female, slave nor free"). But it would have been shocking to orthodox Jews. Why? How does Paul justify it?

Matthew 14: 22-33

Questions

1. Why does Jesus send the disciples across the lake ahead of him?
2. In the Gospels, natural events often have metaphorical overtones. How might v. 24 suggest a wider "storm" than the one on the lake?
3. Why are the disciples terrified when they see Jesus?
4. How is Peter's behavior distinctive here? Can you think of other times when he acts this way? Why does he walk on water at first, then sink? Can you find parallels to this event in your own experience?
5. Why does this event convince the disciples that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you think that we are intended to read it literally or figuratively? Why?

Proper 15: August 16

Genesis 45: 1-15

Ps 133

Romans 11: 1-2a,[13-15] 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

Genesis 45: 1-15

For your information

After being sold as a slave in Egypt by Ishmaelite traders, Joseph has risen to become “governor over all the land.” The entire region is suffering from famine, but Egypt still has grain. Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to buy grain, leaving behind young Benjamin for his safety; they do not recognize Joseph. He sells them grain, but treats them harshly, accuses them of being spies, and requires them to leave one brother, Simeon, as a hostage, and insists that if they return, they must bring Benjamin if they want Simeon released; but privately, he weeps. When they return home, they find their money hidden in their sacks. They go back to Egypt, fearfully, and are given a feast, but this time Joseph has a silver cup hidden in Benjamin’s sack, and sends his steward out to stop them on the road home, accuse them of theft, and demand Benjamin as a slave. Judah begs Joseph to take him instead, because their aged father could not bear the loss of his youngest son.

In times of famine, aliens were sometimes permitted to settle in Egypt.

Questions

1. Vss. 1-3 recount Joseph’s self-revelation to his brothers. How does it happen? How does Joseph appear in this scene? Why does he reveal himself at this time?
2. How does Joseph explain God’s plan to his brothers? How have they unintentionally taken part in it? How does this episode reflect God’s methods in carrying out the promise made to Abraham? What is the family to do now?

Romans 11: 1-2a, [13-15] 29-32

For your information

Here Paul continues his account of how Gentiles—Jews, in particular—can become part of a faith that seemed intended for Jews alone. He is addressing the Gentiles who made up much of the church in Rome.

“The tribe of Benjamin” refers us back to God’s means of fulfilling the promise of the covenant through the Joseph-Benjamin story (see above).

Questions

After explaining at length the sharp differences between Judaism and Christianity, what ringing assurance does Paul give to Jews in vss. 1-2a? On what grounds? What does it have to do with Paul?

2. How does Paul describe his own calling? What use does he make of it? Why? In what way might the "rejection" of the Jews be "the reconciliation of the world"? Do you think that the somewhat convoluted argument of vs. 13-15 makes sense? Do people really react that way?

3. Vss. 29-32 sum up what Paul expects to be the consequences of God's actions. How have the Gentiles been "imprisoned...in disobedience"? the Jews? How have the Gentiles received mercy because of the Jews' disobedience? How has mercy shown to the Gentiles led to mercy for the Jews? Does this circuitous plan for salvation of all seem brilliant to you, or unnecessarily complicated on God's part? Is Paul profound or absurd?

If you have time

--Read the omitted section (vss. 13-28) for Paul's image of the original root that supports both Jew and Gentile, and the grafting of Gentiles into it.

Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

For your information

Vss. 10-20 follow from the Pharisees' challenge to Jesus about his disciples' habit of breaking old traditions, by not washing their hands before eating. As usual, he enlarges the subject.

The story in vss. 21-28 is one of the most perplexing in the Gospels. Commentators have come up with several different explanations of it. Ignore the footnotes and see what you think.

Jesus is now in Phoenicia. The Canaanite woman is a Gentile, yet addresses Jesus with the title of the Jewish Messiah.

Questions

1. How does Jesus build on the hand-washing issue in v. 11? How does he explain his meaning? How would you apply it? Why do the Pharisees take offense at it, as his disciples report? What is Jesus' response to that news? Would you find that reassuring?

2. How does Jesus respond to the Canaanite (Syro-Phoenician) woman's plea at first? What reason does he give? What is the disciples' opinion?

3. What is the meaning of Jesus' comment in v. 26? What do you think of it? What is her response? Why does Jesus see it as evidence of faith? Faith in what? Why does he finally comply? Do you think of Jesus as someone who changed his mind, even learned from others?

4.. Does this story sound to you like a literal account? If so, what does it show about Jesus? If not, what is its symbolic meaning?

If you have time

--Compare Mt. 20: 29-34 for another story about Jesus' healing when others tried to silence the petitioner. What matches? What doesn't?

--See the "Prayer of Humble Access" (BCP p. 337) for its words about crumbs under the table. What would the Canaanite woman say to this?

Proper 16: August 23

Exodus 1: 8-2: 10

Ps 124

Romans 12: 1-8

Matthew 16: 13-20

Exodus 1: 8-2: 10

For your information

This reading continues the story of Jacob and his family in Egypt, from last week's Genesis reading.

The "house of Levi" is one of the priestly tribes of Israel; some of its members were apparently in Egypt, along with Jacob's family. Moses' sister is Miriam, who will take a larger role later.

Questions

1. How does v. 7 sum up the next step in the fulfillment of God's promise that Israel would "be fruitful and multiply"?
2. Why does Egypt's Pharaoh become hostile toward the Israelites? What does he do about it?
3. How are Pharaoh's purposes thwarted? Does God seem to have a hand in this? How do you know?
4. What are the various roles of women in this story? Is there anything consistent about their behavior?

Romans 12: 1-8

For your information

This reading continues from last week; the audience is still the Roman church, primarily Gentiles, but Paul is now moving on to speak to the whole united community. "Bodies" means simply "selves."

Questions

1. What sort of "sacrifice" does this new sacrifice replace? What will one who makes this sacrifice be able to do?
2. What is the reason Paul gives for tempering one's pride? How does he see the role of individuals in the Church?
3. Vs. 6-8 list the seven various gifts given by grace. How do you understand each one? Do you think this list is complete? If not, what would you add? Do you think that Paul wants us to specialize, deliberately, rather than trying to be all of these things? Can you think of people in our congregation who clearly fit into these categories? Where do you fit?

Matthew 16: 13-20

For your information

"Son of Man" at that time simply meant "a person," "I."

Simon's new name is a play on words. In Palestinian Aramaic, the language Jesus usually spoke, the same word (kepha) was used for both "rock" and the name "Cephas," derived from it. The Greek text reflects this by calling him "Peter," from "petra"--"rock."

According to Micah, the prophet Elijah would reappear before "the great and terrible day of the Lord." John the Baptist was also understood as one appointed to prepare for "the wrath to come." Jeremiah warned Israel of the coming conquest by the Babylonians.

Questions

1. This passage represents a burning question for all the disciples: Who exactly is this man to whom they have committed their lives? What is the dramatic effect of placing this episode at this point in the story, rather than at the beginning, or perhaps at the Last Supper?
2. Why do you think Jesus asks these questions? What is the difference between his first question and the second? Do you think Jesus himself is searching for who he is?
3. Jesus' extended comments to Peter about the authority that will be given to him appears only in this Gospel. One conclusion could be that this piece was added later, to support the Church's growing understanding of itself. What do you think? Does it seem to match the way Jesus usually talked, or not? Does it fit the way you understand the Church?

4. Why do you think Jesus tells his disciples to keep the conversation a secret? Is it usual for him to keep significant things secret? What does he proclaim freely?

Proper 17: August 30

Exodus 3: 1-15

Ps 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45c

Romans 12: 9-21

Matthew 16: 21-28

Exodus 3: 1-15

For your information

Now an adult, Moses has seen an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and has killed him. He has fled to the land of Midian, where he has married the daughter of Jethro, a pagan priest. Horeb seems to be interchangeable with Mt. Sinai, and is traditionally located in the eastern Sinai Peninsula.

The land of Canaan was inhabited by many pagan tribes, as well as the Israelites who remained there.

Questions

1. How does Moses respond to the sight of the burning bush? To God's call from the bush? Where have you heard this response before?
2. How does God present credentials? What would this information mean to Moses? Why does Moses hide his face at this time, and not before? Who else hides his face in God's presence?
3. What has moved God to intervene? What plan does God announce? What purpose does God have for Moses? How does Moses respond, and why?
4. Why is it important to Moses to have a name for God? What name does God give him, and what do you think it means? How might it be related to the credentials which God first gave him, and now repeats?

Romans 12: 9-21

Questions

1. Here is a brief summary of what it means to live in Christian community. Does it seem complete to you? Can you find examples to support each segment in Jesus' life and ministry? Which are the easy or obvious parts, and which are the hard ones, especially in our context, or in your own experience? Would you add anything?

2. Most of the instructions are short and simple, but v. 18 is more careful and qualified. Why do you think that's so?

3. V. 20 quotes from Prov. 25: 21-22, with a surprising ending. What does it mean to you? Does it sound like Jesus?

Matthew 16: 21-28

Questions

1. What turning point in the story is signaled in v. 21? Why does Peter react so strongly to Jesus' words? Why does he do it privately? Can you sympathize with his reaction? Does he deserve the reproof he gets?

2. How do vs. 24-26 apply to that moment in the story? To us today? Dramatically, how does it prepare us for the events that will follow?

3. How is this passage related to the first reading?

4. V. 28 was not included in the 1979 Lectionary. Why do you think it was excluded then? Why add it now? What do you make of it, since on the face of it, it's simply wrong?

If you have time

--Compare Mk 8: 27-33; Lk 9: 18-22.

Proper 18: Sept. 6

Exodus 12: 1-14

Ps 149

Romans 13: 8-14

Matthew 18: 15-20

Exodus 12: 1-14

For your information

In the "priestly tradition," a post-exilic editorial strain in Hebrew Scripture, the "beginning of months" is Nisan, March-April. (Before the exile, it was in the fall.) This editor assumes that Israel is already one "whole congregation" with tribal princes as leaders—not actually the case until much later.

Aaron is Moses' articulate brother, appointed by God to speak for Moses, who has a speech impediment.

God has brought a series of plagues upon the Egyptians, and in each case, Pharaoh has promised to let the people go, but never has done so.

This story and what follows became for Israel the central pattern of how God's mind works, how human history is shaped.

Questions

1. What are God's instructions to the people of Israel? Why is the bread unleavened? Why is this occasion called "the Passover"? What sort of God does it show?
2. Why do you think that Jesus is referred to in our Eucharistic service as "Christ our Passover"? How was he "sacrificed for us" in a way that is relevant here?

Romans 13: 8-14 (and read vss. 1-7)

For your information

Paul would have been well aware that the Jews in Rome were particularly challenged by central Roman authority. Persecutions hadn't begun yet, but the emperor Claudius had (temporarily) expelled Christians from Rome (Acts 18: 2), perhaps because of strife within the Jewish community.

Questions

1. What do you make of Paul's argument in vss. 1-7 that all civil authorities are to be obeyed? On what assumptions does he base this? Do you agree with them? What is his justification for any punishment that comes from disobedience? Do you think that he is responding to their context, or do his words apply to everybody, anywhere? How would you apply these principles to events in the present day—or not? Does Jesus seem to agree?
2. How does Paul define the basic Christian obligation? What do we owe, and why? How can we discharge that debt?
3. As he sees it, what is the particular urgency of meeting that debt now? How might that explain the unequivocal character of v.14?

Matthew 18: 15-20

For your information

This passage presents a careful procedure for dealing with a member of the community whose actions are out of line. Deuteronomic tradition required two or more witnesses to an offense; the standard here begins with just one, then adds others if necessary.

Questions

1. Some scholars assert that this is an insertion by Matthew, to deal with a later phase in the development of Christian communities. Do you think so? How does it compare to the teachings of Jesus which have preceded it? to the sort of instruction that Paul gives in the reading from Romans?

2. Whether or not Jesus actually said these words, does it sound like his kind of justice? Do you consider it appropriate for a Christian community? Does ours do this? Should we?

3. You have just heard v. 18 addressed to Peter, in Mt. 16: 19. A similar line appears in Jn. 20: 23. What are the implications of the context here? Who can do the binding and loosing? What is the power of "two or three...gathered in my name"? Do you understand the church this way? Does our congregation exercise this power? Should it?