

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, Year C
Advent I-Last Epiphany
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 C, and our Gospel is Luke.

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 C, it features Israel’s major prophets. 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!

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.

Note: The lessons discussed on Tuesday nights are those for the FOLLOWING Sunday. The translation used for these study sheets is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). If you are using another translation, take note of interesting differences.

For your information

This week we begin the season of Advent, traditionally the start of the Church year. Last week we celebrated Christ the King. This week we look forward to something that’s coming. We think we know what it is, but two thousand years ago, nobody knew; and each year the meaning of that coming is new and strange for us too. We are invited to use the season of Advent to wonder, and to make ready, as much as we can.

Advent I: Nov.28

Jer 33: 14-16

Ps 25: 1-9

I Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Luke 21: 25-31

Jer 33: 14-16

For your information

Jeremiah lived during a time of great turbulence within Israel and beyond. His prophecies warn Israel of impending doom because of her unfaithfulness, and his prophecies were fulfilled when, in the midst of colliding empires, the Babylonians took many of Israel's people into exile. Still, Jeremiah trusted that God would bring about Israel's redemption. This passage is thought to be the work of a somewhat later disciple of Jeremiah.

The name "Israel" had long included the whole territory, as a geographical entity; but since 722 BCE, it had been split into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah, including Jerusalem), over issues of kingship and authority. By Jeremiah's time, the Northern Kingdom was occupied by Assyria.

"Justice" here implies bringing all into accord with God's will. "Righteousness" is the condition of being in right relationship with God.

Questions

What overarching promise has God made to Israel? When was it made? How has it been tested in earlier stories?

What was there about King David that might make him the progenitor of Israel's great kings? What might a nation look like with such a leader in place? Does our country have the same ideals for itself?

If you have time

--Compare II Sam 7: 16 and I Kings 9: 5 for God's promise about a Davidic line of kings.

1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

For your information

This letter is thought to be the earliest of Paul's letters, and therefore the earliest full document in the New Testament. It reflects Paul's practice of founding a church and then moving on, while checking up on each congregation by messenger and letter. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, on the Aegean Sea, and although far

from home, was a good early choice for mission because of its position on the major routes of both land and sea. Paul's companion Timothy has just returned from a visit to Thessalonica, and has brought good news, even though the Thessalonians are suffering from heavy opposition.

Questions

1. What is Paul's message to the Thessalonian Christians in this passage? What do you think Timothy has told him that calls forth this response? How does it reflect Paul's sense of what matters most?
2. This letter may have been written fewer than twenty years after the Resurrection. What evidence do you see of the movement from a story that people told to a faith that Paul and others proclaimed--i.e. what meaning is being made of the "event" of Jesus?

Luke 21: 25-31 (and read vs. 20-24, 32-33)

For your information

This passage is part of a long apocalyptic passage in Luke. Whether Jesus himself spoke these words, or whether Luke inserted them in the editing process to convey the implications of his story, they reflect Israel's long apocalyptic tradition. The innovation here is the combining of this tradition with that of the rejected prophet, who reappears as the Messiah.

Questions

1. What role do the Gentiles (non-Jews) play in this critical period?
2. What exactly are the faithful to do when they see signs that the apocalypse is coming?
3. What is the image of the Son of Man here? Does it match your understanding of Jesus, or not?
4. What is the prediction of v. 32? Is it correct? Does v. 33 modify it, or what? What do any of these predictions have to do with us?

Advent II: Dec. 5

Baruch 5: 1-9 (Apocrypha)

or Malachi 3: 1-4

Canticle 4 or 16 (Lk 1: 68-79)

Philippians 1: 3-11

Luke 3: 1-6

Baruch 5: 1-9

For your information

This book claims to be written by Jeremiah's secretary Baruch during Israel's exile, but is actually much later, probably during the last two centuries BCE. It is another example of eschatological writing, which foresees God's reign after a time of trial.

Questions

1. What promises are made to Israel here? How might they represent a people's growing understanding of what it means to be "chosen"? How do they apply to us?

If you have time

--Compare this passage with Isaiah 40, which was written at least 350 years earlier, just before the Babylonian empire was overthrown and Israel's exile ended. What would it have meant to Israelites, to have this familiar passage renewed in their time?

Malachi 3: 1-4

For your information

It is hard to identify Malachi; he wrote after the Temple had been rebuilt after the exile, so after 515 BCE. His writings seem to reflect a time of defeated hope; he brings a different message.

"Descendants of Levi" are a priestly caste, who inherited their priesthood because of their ancestry.

Questions

1. This passage has a special resonance for Christians, who often see it as a prophecy of Christ's coming. What details might lead to this interpretation? How would you apply it to what you know about Jesus? What would it have meant to people of Malachi's time, with no such knowledge?

2. What is Malachi's image of the coming messenger? Is he likely to be a welcome figure? Who will be his intended audience? Why? What, specifically, might he say?

Philippians 1: 1-11

For your information

Philippi is in Macedonia, quite near Thessalonica, and like it, a major stop on trade routes. The church there was the first to be established in Europe; the date of this letter is not clear, but there was already much opposition to the new faith, especially in the context of the Roman Empire.

Questions

- 1. How does Paul reassure the Philippians? What is his prayer for them?**
- 2. What does his message have to say to people who suffer oppression? to us?**

Luke 3: 1-6

Questions

- 1. Why do you think that Luke tells us the historical background of his story in such detail?**
- 2. Given that context, what is the dramatic effect of John's appearance?**
- 3. According to Luke, what was John's central message? What do you think is the connection between that and Isaiah's ancient familiar prophecy (Is 40: 3-5)?**

Advent III: Dec. 12

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Canticle 9 (which is also Is 12: 2-6)

Philippians 4: 4-7 (8-9)

Luke 3: 7-18

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

For your information

Zephaniah was a prophet at the time of King Josiah (640-609 BCE), who would become one of Israel's great reformers. The reforms probably haven't begun yet, since Zephaniah has much to say about Israel's faithlessness and the destruction that will result from it.

Questions

1. Here is another eschatological passage. What similarities do you find with those we've read in the past two weeks? What differences? What images of a joyful future particularly touch you? What do they have to do with us?

Do you think it would be effective for a prophet to do as Zephaniah does, and condemn Israel for all sorts of wrongs, only to promise that it will all turn out just fine? Wouldn't this make many people take his warnings less seriously?

If you have time

--Read the entire chapter. How does God promise to act?

Philippians 4: 4-7 (and read vs. 8-9, which the RCL has cut)

For your information

"The Lord is near" is a loose translation of the ancient acclamation: "Marana tha," "Our Lord, come!"

Questions

- 1. Why do you think Paul "doubles" his message in v. 4?**
- 2. Why is "gentleness" the virtue which he wants each Christian to make "known to everyone"?**
- 3. How is it possible for him to tell a group that is under oppression and persecution, "Do not worry about anything"? Would he say the same to us? How would we receive it?**
- 4. How does v. 7 sum up the rest? How would you summarize, or paraphrase, this section? Do you find it more powerful than the preceding one from Zephaniah, or less, or just different?**
- 5. What do vs. 8-9 add? Would you say these are distinctively Christian virtues, or not? Does Jesus seem to you to have lived this way? How do these words help us?**

Luke 3: 7-18

For your information

John the Baptist (Baptizer) would have been instantly recognized as a prophet in the old, familiar style. Such prophets were thought to be long gone from Israel--a sign of God's disfavor and the absence of the Spirit from God's people.

Having Abraham as one's "father" (ancestor) was a fundamental claim for Israel. God's promise in Genesis was made to Abraham and his descendants; it is the basis for the hope that has sustained Israel through all her trials.

Questions

- 1. How do you think the appearance of John would have affected the people of Israel? What would they have thought? How would we react to someone like this in our midst?**
- 2. How would his words in v. 8 have affected them? Why would he say this?**
- 3. What "tree" is he talking about in v. 9?**
- 4. Several groups ask him what they should do. How would you describe his answers--reasonable, unreasonable, demanding, or what? What do you think his listeners would have thought about them? What would he have asked you to do?**
- 5. Why do some wonder if he is the Messiah? What sort of Messiah does he predict, in vs. 16-17? Do you think Jesus turned out to be like that?**
- 6. V. 18 says that these proclamations of his are "the good news." Are they?**

Advent IV: Dec. 19

Micah 5: 2-4

Canticle 3 or 15 (Lk 1: 46-55)

or Ps 80: 1-7

Hebrews 10: 5-10

Luke 1: 39-45 (46-55)

Micah 5: 2-4

For your information

According to one tradition, Bethlehem was identified with Ephrathah, home of one of Israel's smaller clans, and was the burial place of Rachel, Jacob's wife, who died in childbirth.

Questions

- 1. What does this passage tell us about the “one who is to rule in Israel”? What will be his origins? the nature of his rule?**
- 2. Does this passage seem to you to point clearly to Jesus, or does it leave room for other interpretations?**

Hebrews 10: 5-10 (and read vs. 1-4)

For your information

The Letter to the Hebrews is particularly concerned with the nature of Christ’s priesthood, and its superiority to all that has gone before. Among other things, it is perhaps our most carefully argued early presentation of the doctrine of Christ’s atonement. The author gathers up many passages from Hebrew Scripture, which he believes point to who Jesus was and is. Verses 5-7 reflect Ps 40 in the Greek version that most Jews would have known; v. 8 echoes several passages, among them I Sam 15: 22 and Hos 6: 6.

Questions

- 1. According to this passage, what sort of sacrifices has Israel been accustomed to making?**
- 2. What sort of sacrifice did Christ offer instead? How does the author explain the purpose of Christ’s life and death? In v. 9, what is “the first” and “the second”?**

Luke 1: 39-49 (50-56)

Questions

- 1. Luke’s Gospel is the only one which contains this encounter between Elizabeth and Mary, and between (the unborn) John and Jesus. What does Luke want us to understand about the relationship between the two women? the relationship between their sons? How does this scene prepare us for what is to come?**
- 2. Vs. 46-55 are known as the “Magnificat” (the first word of the Latin translation). It echoes Hannah’s song at Samuel’s birth. What does it tell us, first, about how Mary understands what has happened to her?**
- 3. What does Mary then proclaim to be the implications of her experience for other people? Do her words apply to us? What does all this have to do with God’s promise to Abraham (vs. 54-55)? Do you think we’re included?**

4. What do you think is meant by v. 51, “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts”?

If you have time

--Compare the Magnificat to Hannah’s song (I Sam. 2: 1-10), which rejoices at God’s gift of a child to an infertile woman. How are they alike? What are Luke’s particular additions or emphases?

Christmas I (first Sunday after Christmas): Dec. 26

For your information

The brief post-Christmas, pre-Epiphany season is meant to help us begin to absorb the birth of the Holy Child. As you read these lessons, consider how they build on themes we’ve heard in Advent.

Isaiah 61: 10-62:3

Ps 147

Galatians 3: 23-25, 4: 4-7

John 1: 1-18

Isaiah 61: 10-62:3

For your information

This passage is from “Third Isaiah,” probably written by one of Isaiah’s disciples shortly before Israel’s restoration. The prophet here seems to identify himself with Israel, his expected joy with hers.

Questions

1. What exactly does the prophet foresee for Israel? What does each new image add?
2. This passage may remind you of Mary’s “Magnificat,” which we read last week. How are they alike, and how are they different? What do you think might be the effect on First Century Jews of hearing Mary talking like one of their most cherished prophets?
3. Why can’t the prophet keep silent (62: 1)? Have you ever felt the same way, for similar reasons?

Galatians 3: 23-25, 4: 4-7 (and read 3: 26-4:3)

For your information

The word translated “disciplinarian” combines the meanings of teacher and “babysitter.” In Greek culture, this person might have been charged with guarding/guiding a child and escorting him to school.

Questions

1. This reading develops the theme of childhood, in several different senses. How did “the law” imply that we were children in need of “babysitting”? Does civil law still serve that purpose? or the Ten Commandments?
2. What are we “heirs” of? According to 4: 1-2, what was the status of children at that time, and how did that limit their inheritance? How has our inheritance been similarly limited up to now?
3. How has Christ transformed our “childishness”? What guards/guides us now? How?
4. How do you think the circumstances of Jesus’ birth (4: 4) affects this transformation? How does this affect our relationship with God (v. 6)?

John 1: 1-18

For your information

John 1: 1 is apparently a deliberate echo of Gen 1: 1.

Questions

1. Why do you think John started his Gospel with the words that begin the Book of Genesis? What other echoes of Genesis do you hear in vs. 1-5? What does John want us to understand about who Jesus was/is? How is this like or unlike what you remember from other Gospels?
2. According to this passage, who responded to Jesus and who did not? What was the result, for those who did?
3. What was John the Baptist’s role in the story?

In v. 7, “him” (RCL), referring to John, can also mean “it,” meaning “the light.” What difference might it make?

5. Jesus' name is never mentioned in this entire introductory passage. Yet John speaks of those "who believed in his name"! Why does he do it this way?

Christmas II: Jan. 2

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

Ps 84

Ephesians 1: 3-6, 15-19a

Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

or **Luke 2: 41-52**

or **Matthew 2: 1-12**

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

For your information

Ephraim is one small tribe of Israel, and so stands in for Israel as a whole. Jacob's twelve sons were by tradition the forefathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, so he also is a symbol for all of Israel.

Questions

- 1. Who will be gathered in this great return? Can you see this promise as a foretaste of the present state of Israel? What does it suggest about the importance of the specific "Promised Land" to the people of Israel?**
- 2. What will be the particular gifts of this new life? What might it mean to have a life "like a watered garden"?**

Ephesians 1: 3-6, 15-19a (and read 7-14)

Questions

- 1. Here the writer (Paul or a disciple of his) develops the theme of what we have inherited through Christ. What are the blessings already given to us? What further blessings are promised?**
- 2. What are the writer's prayers for this apparently faithful community? What might it mean to have "the eyes of [our] hearts enlightened"? What vast power of God was made visible first in the Resurrection?**

3. Compare vs. 4-5 with v. 13. How does the writer think that we receive our inheritance, and why? Is there a contradiction between the first statement (“chose...before the foundation of the world”) and the second?

Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

For your information

The story of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, their amazing liberation, and their long journey back to the Promised Land was the basic pattern of Jewish self-understanding, the way God seemed to work. Here it seems that the newborn Jesus and his family are repeating that pattern. Verse 15 quotes Hosea 11: 1. Verse 23 plays on the similarity of sound between the Hebrew word for “branch” (see Is. 11: 1) and the Aramaic word for Nazareth; in Hebrew tradition, “puns” like this were understood as highly significant.

Questions

- 1. This story is told only in Matthew. What do you think Matthew wants us to understand about this child through this story? How does Joseph appear?**
- 2. Vs. 22-23 explain how Jesus came to grow up in Nazareth. Luke 2: 4 and 39 give a very different account. What do you make of this difference?**

Luke 2: 41-52

Questions

- 1. This is the only story we have about Jesus between infancy and adulthood. What exactly does it tell us about this unusual adolescent? Is it consistent with what you know of the adult Jesus? What other scenes in his life does it remind you of?**

Matthew 2: 1-12

For your information

This reading is traditional for Epiphany, the feast that celebrates the “manifestation” (showing forth) of the newborn God-child to the world. (See below, Epiphany I.) The traditional “wise men” were learned men, perhaps astrologers, from a pagan land rather than from Israel. They were called “kings” only much later, when the Age of Kings made that title politically attractive. Frankincense and myrrh are strongly fragrant herbs sometimes used for the dead.

V. 6 quotes Micah 5: 2. Bethlehem was King David's birthplace—"the city of David"--and the site of other memorable events in his life.

Questions

1. What is the importance of these travelers from a non-Jewish land? Why are not only Herod but "all Jerusalem" frightened by the news of their words? What does their homage to the child, and the particular gifts they give, suggest about who he is and what he will become?

2. How do you imagine the encounter between Herod and the wise men? Why don't they suspect anything?

[The feast of the Epiphany celebrates the "manifestation" (showing forth) of the God-child to the whole world. All the readings for this Season develop that theme: how God is visibly, actively present everywhere, and how the birth of Jesus reveals that to us. The season of Epiphany may have as many as nine Sundays, or fewer, depending on when Lent begins.]

Feast of the Epiphany: Jan. 6

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Ps 72: 1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3: 1-12

Matthew 2: 1-12

Isaiah 60: 1-6

For your information

This passage originally anticipated Jerusalem's glorious restoration after the Exile.

Questions

1. After a period of prosperity (for the rich, at least), the important people of Israel have been in bondage in a foreign land. What is promised them in their restoration? Does it sound just like "old times" when things were going well, or is there something else?

2. Some of the images are quite extravagant, especially "A multitude of camels shall cover you"! How do you understand them? Do these promises seem in some sense possible?

3. What can this passage mean for us? Can you imagine yourself, or perhaps our nation, full of light and drawing others to it?

4. Why do you think this passage is always read on Epiphany?

Ephesians 3: 1-12

For your information

Paul was in prison because he had offended Jewish orthodoxy and new Christians who had come from it by insisting that Gentiles (anyone not Jewish) were equal to Jews in Christ. He believed that he had a particular mission to the Gentiles.

Questions

- 1. What revelation has been given to Paul? (See Eph 1: 9-10.) Why do you think it “was not made known to humankind” before? Does it seem to have come to Paul out of nowhere, or does it have something to do with Jesus’ life and death?**
- 2. Why would this news be so offensive to Jews and Jewish Christians? Are there any more recent “revelations” that have been similarly offensive to a particular group with strong convictions?**
- 3. Why do you think this passage is always read on Epiphany?**

Matthew 2: 1-12

For your information

Herod was a Jewish king under Roman occupation. He had a reputation for harshness.

The “wise men” were men of stature in Persia, learned and skilled in reading signs. They represented the world beyond the boundaries familiar to Jews.

Questions

- 1. What is the significance of the wise men’s arrival? Why have they come? How did they know to come?**
- 2. Why is Herod frightened? What prophecy from Hebrew Scripture do his chief priests and scribes quote to identify the meaning of this child?**
- 3. Frankincense and myrrh are fragrant gum resins sometimes used in preparing a dead body. What might be the symbolic significance of these three gifts?**
- 4. The wise men seemed quite naïve in their first meeting with Herod. Were they really? Why did they go home “by another road”?**

If you have time

--See Num. 24: 17 and Jer. 23: 5 for prophecies that might have led Jews and others who knew Jewish scripture to expect this birth.]

[I Epiphany: Jan. 9—replaced by readings for Jan. 6]

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Ps 29

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22

Isaiah 43: 1-7

For your information

The prophet here is “Second Isaiah,” understood as being one of Isaiah’s immediate successors at a time when Israel was seeing an end to her suffering.

Questions

1. How does God describe God’s previous relationship to Israel? Why should it matter? What details does God keep adding to this history, and why? Are they just more historical facts, or does the list build in some way?
2. What is the significance of God’s having “called [Israel] by name”? When that phrase is repeated in v. 7, is it still only about Israel? Do you think that God has called you/us by name?
3. Does God seem to say here that many others have been given up so that Israel might thrive? Is this a reassuring message for you/us?
4. Vss. 5-7 describes God’s act of gathering God’s people together from afar. Why is this important? What is its power today?

Acts 8: 14-17 (and read vss. 4-13)

For your information

The Book of Acts gives us a (perhaps idealized) picture of the emergence of the early Church, with Jesus no longer present but the Holy Spirit empowering his followers to do what he had done. This passage reflects the earliest movement of Christianity from its Jewish origins to a Gentile population.

Questions

1. According to this account, what seem to be the preconditions for the ability of pagans to receive the Good News of Jesus? What is the relationship between Simon's practice of magic and the eagerness of his followers to hear Philip?

2. What seems to be the connection among accepting the word of God, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit? Is there a conflict, or a natural sequence?

3. How exactly do you understand each of these terms? How have they been related in your own experience? What is the connection/difference between magic and holy mystery, in this account and for you?

4. What is the apparent role of the apostles in this process? Between those in Jerusalem and those out on mission?

If you have time

--Compare the account of baptism in Acts 10: 44-48. Is the sequence the same?

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Questions

1. We read about John the Baptist in Advent. Here he is again, with his more dire prophecies omitted. What do these selections tell us about the implications of Jesus' coming? How does John help us to understand what it means to have God present in our midst?

2. Lk 3: 17 was not included in the previous Lectionary. What difference does it make? Do you understand this statement as separating some people from others, or some parts of each person from the rest?]

II Epiphany: Jan. 16

Isaiah 62: 1-5

Ps 36: 1-10

I Corinthians 12: 1-11

John 2: 1-11

Isaiah 62: 1-5

Questions

- 1. The “I” here is the prophet. What is his role in the showing forth of God? Is it our role too? If he speaks for the sake of “Zion” and “Jerusalem,” for whose sake might we speak?**
- 2. The “you” in this passage is Jerusalem/Zion/Israel for the prophet; who might be the “you” to whom we might proclaim this good news?**
- 3. We have just read vs. 1-3 of this passage, on Christmas I. What do the images of vs. 4-5 add to our sense of the intimacy of God’s presence among us?**

I Corinthians 12: 1-11

Questions

- 1. This passage is often quoted as a definitive list of spiritual gifts. Which ones have you recognized in others, especially within your own church community? Which do you find in yourself? Can you see how they might add up to a complete “body”? Is anything missing?**
- 2. What do you think is the connection between this list of gifts and the themes of the Epiphany season?**

John 2: 1-11

For your information

This story appears only in John’s Gospel. Weddings at that time were huge social events. People came from far away, and the celebration went on for three days. The host was expected to provide well for his guests; to run out of provisions was an enormous embarrassment. This is the third day, by which time the host might assume his guests to be mellowed by partying, and less discriminating about the quality of the wine.

Jesus and his disciples were criticized by some of John’s ascetic disciples for enjoying parties more than holy men should.

Questions

- 1. There is some scholarly debate about whether this is intended as a literal account, or as an extended metaphor to convey some important truths about Jesus. In either case, who are the characters in the drama? What does each one--especially Mary--contribute?**
- 2. Why does Jesus change his mind? What does this have to do with the themes of the Epiphany season? Can you see any reason for this one to be “Jesus’ first miracle”? Why do**

you think our marriage service mentions it? (See BCP, “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage,” p. 423.)

III Epiphany: Jan. 23

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Ps 19

I Corinthians 12: 12-27

Luke 4: 14-21

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

For your information

The Book of Nehemiah is closely connected to the Book of Ezra. Both come from a late stage in the period of the restoration of Israel after the exile. The Temple has been rebuilt, but the structure of the community still needs to be strengthened. Nehemiah was a governor of Judah, known for rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls and for other important reforms.

“The law of Moses” is contained in Exodus-Deuteronomy, and formed the foundation of Israel’s social structure.

Questions

1. This may seem to be an odd passage for inclusion in the Epiphany season! The priest Ezra reads from the Law of Moses in the square. There’s a long list of names. What does all this have to do with the manifestation of God among us?

2. Why did the people weep when they heard the law? Why were they told to rejoice instead?

I Corinthians 12: 12-27

Questions

1. According to v. 13, what effect does baptism have on our (often divisive) differences? What does it mean to “drink of the Spirit”?

2. Last week we read the preceding passage, which spoke of the various gifts of the Spirit. This week, it’s parts of the body. Are they related? That is, do you think that certain

spiritual gifts go with being an “eye,” an “ear,” a “foot”? What parts of the body can you identify in our congregation? What part do you think you are?

3. What are (literally) the “weaker,” “less respectable,” “inferior” parts of the human body? Metaphorically, what parts of the congregation might be imagined to correspond to them? How does God arrange things with respect to these parts? What does this show about God?

Luke 4: 14-21

For your information

Jesus has been away from his home town for awhile, though many people remember him well. Sabbath worship was apparently essential for him, wherever he was. Qualified visitors were often honored by being invited to read from Scripture in the synagogue. The custom was to stand to read, then sit to preach. The quotation is from Is 61: 1-2 and Is 58:6; it's a composite, and would not have appeared this way on a synagogue roll.

Questions

1. This passage immediately follows Luke's account of the temptations in the wilderness. What is the effect of this sequence? What is it about the preceding events that has prepared Jesus for this moment?

2. Why do you think Jesus chose his home town for this proclamation? Was it simply that being handed the scroll of Isaiah inspired him, or had he made a conscious decision about his subject? Would he have done better to choose another place, since his reputation was already spreading? What would be the effect of having someone you'd known since he was a kid making such a proclamation?

3. What does this reading add to the Epiphany season?

IV Epiphany: Jan. 30

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Ps 71: 1-6

I Corinthians 13: 1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

For your information

Jeremiah was a prophet in the 6th C. BCE, before and during Israel's exile in Babylon. His predictions were so distressing to those in power that he was harassed and even dumped down a well for awhile. This passage reflects the traditional pattern of a prophet's call: God's summons, the prophet's protests of inadequacy, God's reassurance.

The Hebrew word translated "knew" in v. 5 usually suggests a very intimate kind of knowing, even sometimes including sexual intimacy.

Questions

1. What do vs. 4-5 suggest about God's role in making Jeremiah who he is? Does this apply to us too, or only to special people like Jeremiah? Is this your understanding of God's role?
2. What is Jeremiah's objection? How does God answer him? Do you think that this promise applies to us when we speak out, too? (See Mt 10: 19-20.)
3. What is God's purpose for Jeremiah (vs. 9-10)? Is he to do these things literally? Can words alone accomplish these things? If so, how?
4. In what respect(s), if any, does this passage foreshadow Jesus?

I Corinthians 13: 1-13

Questions

1. This very familiar passage is prescribed for the Epiphany season in the RCL as it has not been before. It replaces a passage from I Cor 14 about speaking in tongues. Why do you think this change was made? What does this passage have to do with the Epiphany season?
2. Consider the passage phrase by phrase. What does each piece suggest to you about love as you know it? What images, what people and experiences, does it call to mind? Is it really possible to love, everybody, or ANYBODY, like that? What evidence do you have that you now "see in a mirror, dimly"? What might it be like to see "face to face"?
3. Review the sequence of readings from 1 Cor for these three weeks, all in response to the Corinthians' arguments about who among them is superior and why. He is answering the question, "What is the importance of each of us to the Christian community?" How does he develop his answer?

Luke 4: 21-30

Questions

1. This passage continues last week's story. What do the people in Nazareth say about Jesus at first? How does their reaction begin to change?

2. Why does Jesus anticipate a complaint from them before they even make it? What do the examples of Elijah and Elisha have to do with this [potential] complaint? Is Jesus being unnecessarily provocative?

Why are the townspeople angry enough to want to kill him? Do you think their reasons are similar to the reasons for the Crucifixion? How does Jesus escape?

V Epiphany: Feb. 6

Is 6: 1-8 (9-12)

Ps 138

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

Luke 5: 1-11

Is 6: 1-8 (9-12)

For your information

The prophet Isaiah began his work in 742 BCE, a date which he suggests precisely in this passage. This date was before Israel's sharp division, at a time when her fervent devotion to God was waning. Isaiah places his call in the Jerusalem temple.

Questions

1. What are the images of Isaiah's vision? What does he see as the particular anguish of his situation? How does God respond to his self-doubt? What is then his response?

2. What does God ask him to do? Why? What might be the purpose of this strange command?

3. What features of the traditional "call narrative" do you find in this story? (See IV Epiphany.) Does this pattern begin to seem familiar to you, both as the sign of a prophet in Scripture and perhaps also in your own experience? How do you deal with the question of whether the "call" is real, or only your imagination?

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

For your information

This passage is believed by some to be a summary of the earliest Christian teaching about Jesus. “Cephas” is the Aramaic name for Peter.

Questions

- 1. What exactly are the details of the story which Paul received and is handing on? Since we have much more information than this, why do you think each of these details is selected as essential?**
- 2. What do we learn here about Christ’s post-Resurrection appearances? Why was the one to Paul “last of all”? Why does Paul speak of himself as “one untimely born”? What does he seem to believe is his place among the apostles?**
- 3. Why does Paul insist on the historical facts which he sees as fundamental to the Christian faith? What difference do they make? Why are they central to our Creeds? Could we put them aside, perhaps, as dogma which cramps our understanding, and still be Christians?**
- 4. Paul rests his credibility on the fact that 500 people, many of whom are still alive and can give the same testimony, saw the resurrected Jesus. But we can’t talk to those people, and have no such experience ourselves. On what can we base our belief, and our credibility?**

Luke 5: 1-11

Questions

- 1. Why do you think this story is chosen for the Epiphany season, out of all Jesus’ miracles? What does it show about him and/or God?**
- 2. Why does this experience make Peter call himself “a sinful man”?**
- 3. Do you think that a very skilled fisherman might have the same astounding luck with a large catch? What part of the story might be metaphorical, or symbolic?**

VI Epiphany: Feb. 13

Jeremiah 17: 5-10

Ps 1

I Corinthians 15: 12-20

Luke 6: 17-26

Jeremiah 17: 5-10

Questions

1. What contrasts does Jeremiah draw between the fate of those who “trust in mere mortals” and the fate of those who “trust in the Lord”? In your experience, is he right? How, exactly?
2. What sort of “years of drought” might we experience? How does one keep on bearing fruit through such times?
3. Do you agree that “The heart is devious above all else”? What might have led Jeremiah to say so? Do you agree, that one of God’s primary activities is to “test the mind and search the heart”? (See Collect for Purity, BCP p. 323.) Do you consider this good news? Would Jeremiah’s more powerful contemporaries have thought so?

I Corinthians 15: 12-20

For your information

This letter was probably written about 20 years after the Crucifixion. This passage is one example of Paul’s efforts to turn the story of Jesus into the meaning of Jesus. To do so, he must insist on the literal truth of the Resurrection, about which there was much disagreement. (See Mt. 27: 62-66.)

Questions

1. What difference does the Resurrection make, according to Paul? Do you agree that without it, our faith is “in vain” and “futile”? Does the validity of our faith depend on our confidence that not just Christ but we too will have (or at least may have) life after death? Is it for you a central source of the “water” that nourishes your roots during droughts (see Jeremiah, above)?
2. Does Jesus’ Resurrection necessarily mean that we too may be resurrected, or does his being the Son of God make him a special case? Paul clearly means us to take Jesus’ Resurrection appearances quite literally (see I Cor 15: 3 ff) and offers living witnesses; if we have eternal life, might we be able to appear as well? If not, what’s the difference?

Luke 6: 17-26

For your information

This passage immediately follows Jesus’ selection of his twelve disciples. Matthew places this scene on a mountain, where Jesus addresses only his disciples.

Questions

1. Where does Luke locate this scene? Who is in the audience? What difference, if any, do these variations make?
2. How does this passage announce basic themes of Jesus' ministry? How would the very new disciples have been affected by it? What characteristics of God are manifested here?

If you have time

--Compare/contrast Luke's version of the Beatitudes with Matthew's (Mt 5: 1-12) What important differences in wording do you observe?

VII Epiphany: Feb. 20

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15

Ps 37: 1-12, 41-42

I Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50

Luke 6: 27-38, 42-50

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15 (and read vss. 1-2)

For your information

This fragment of Joseph's story shows him as a powerful lord in Egypt. The brothers who sold him into slavery have come, many years later, in a desperate search for food in a time of drought. At first they do not recognize Joseph. He hides a silver cup in their saddlebags, and sends a servant to accuse them of stealing and bring them back.

Questions

1. What does Joseph reveal about himself in his first words to his brothers?
2. How does he relieve them of their guilt? What does God have to do with it, according to him? Do you think God acts this way? Does God seem to be manifest in any other way, in this story?

I Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50

Questions

1. What distinctions does Paul make among different kinds of “bodies”—earthly and heavenly? How does a seed change “bodies,” according to him?

2. What analogy does Paul draw between these differences and what happens to us after we are resurrected? How does he explain the reasons for this change? Do you understand eternal life this way?

Luke 6: 27-38, 42-50

For your information

Note that this passage immediately follow the Beatitudes, in Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain.

Questions

1. These words sum up the radical behavior required by Christian love. What particular attitudes and actions are demanded of us here? Do you think any human being can behave this way? Do you think there are any exceptions, when following these commands literally would be unwise or even destructive?

2. What might this passage have to do with how God is made manifest among us?

[VIII Epiphany—omitted this year

Sirach 27: 4-7

***or* Isaiah 55: 10-13**

Ps 92: 1-4, 11-14

I Corinthians 15: 51-58

Luke 6: 39-49

Sirach 27: 4-7

For your information

Ben Sira gives us a description of his vocation in 39: 1-11. He wrote about 180-200 BCE, at a time when the glories of the Spirit were thought to be gone from Israel, and practical advice for faithful living was needed.

Questions

1. In the Epiphany season, we have seen how God is made manifest to us. This passage is about something else: how human beings show what they're made of. According to Ben Sira, how are we to discern a person's true nature? Are we "made manifest," as God is? Can you give examples?

Isaiah 55: 10-13

For your information

Isaiah's heir is offering joyful reassurance to Israel at the end of her exile.

Questions

1. According to this passage, what is the nature of God's word? How does it work? How exactly is it like rain and snow?

2. What does it mean, that God's word "shall not return to [God] empty"? What will fill it up? Do you see God's word at work this way?

I Corinthians 15: 51-58

For your information

This passage continues Paul's exultant assurance of eternal life to the Corinthians, whose faithfulness has sometimes wavered.

Questions

1. Paul asserts that he will "tell you a mystery." How does he know of this mystery?

2. What exactly does he foresee? Does his vision give you joy?

3. Do you hope to be changed? If so, how?

4. The primary source for v. 54 is Hosea 13: 14. How do you understand victory over death? Is this the core of Christ's promise?

Luke 6: 39-49

Questions

- 1. Many of the readings in this season are full of God's glory. This one is not. What apparently sober and practical challenges does Jesus raise in each segment of this reading?**
- 2. What, then, does all of this have to do with how God is made manifest? What does it have to do with us, and how we conduct our lives faithfully?]**

Last Epiphany: Feb. 27

Exodus 34: 29-35

Ps 99

II Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9: 28-36 (37-43a)

Exodus 34: 29-35

For your information

According to Exodus, this scene represents the second time that Moses has brought commandments inscribed on stone down from the mountaintop. The first time, he discovered the people dancing around a golden calf, and smashed the stone tablets in fury. But he has persuaded God not to destroy the Israelites entirely, and to try again.

Questions

- 1. Why do you think this passage is chosen for the climactic Sunday of the Epiphany season? What is it that is manifested here?**
- 2. Why did Moses' face shine? Why were the people afraid of him? Have you ever seen someone's face shine, for similar reasons? Were you afraid?**
- 3. What is the purpose of the veil?**

II Corinthians 3: 12-4:2 (and read the earlier part of Ch. 3)

For your information

Paul had a particularly hard task with the Corinthians, whose city was at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, and subject to every passing religious fad as well as the moral turbulence of any seaport. He saw them as highly susceptible not only to other religions but to other Christian teachers whom he considered to be often in error.

Questions

1. What differences does Paul see between the Moses story and the Corinthians' situation? What evidence does Paul assert in this chapter as his "letter of recommendation"? What is the proof of his merit?
2. What parallels does Paul see between the story of Moses on the mountain and the experience of the Corinthians? What are the "stone tablets" in their case? Why does he think Moses' face was veiled when he came down from the mountain? What was "the glory that was being set aside"? Do you see it that way?
3. What is the hope that Christians have, according to Paul? How has the veil been set aside? Why can they now "act with great boldness," as the Israelites could not?
4. Does it seem to you that our faces are truly unveiled? How is the glory of the Lord "reflected in a mirror"? Is this the same as "see[ing] through a glass, darkly" (I Cor 13: 12)? Do you believe that you/we are being transformed "from one degree of glory to another"? If so, why? What would this news mean to the Corinthians? to us?
5. Why do you think this passage was chosen—replacing I Cor 12: 27-13:13—for the peak of the Epiphany season?

Luke 9: 28-36 (37-43a)

For your information

This story of the Transfiguration is told in all three Gospels, and is always read on Last Epiphany. Moses was understood to be in some ways a "messiah" for Israel, setting a pattern which Jesus repeated and completely fulfilled. Elijah was perhaps the most Christ-like of the ancient prophets in the stories told about him, and according to Micah, would return just before the Messiah appeared.

Questions

1. Only Luke has Jesus praying at the time of these appearances. What do you think Luke wants us to understand through this detail?
2. What is your understanding of why Jesus became dazzlingly bright? Was this just like Moses, or somewhat different? We're not told that people's faces lit up when they met Jesus, though Jesus was God incarnate; what transforming effect, if any, did Jesus have on the people he met?
3. The disciples seem to have a habit of falling asleep (or almost) at crucial moments (see Gethsemane). Why?

4. Why does Peter want to build each of these people a “dwelling”? What does this offer show about him? Would you have the same impulse, perhaps? Are there other, similar ways in which people show the same sort of instinct?

5. What is the effect of the cloud? Is it similar to Moses’ veil?

6. What exactly is manifested in this scene? Do you think that this is the clearest, most powerful manifestation of God in any of the stories about Jesus before his death? Why, or why not?

7. The optional passage (37-43a) has been added in the RCL; it was not included in the former Lectionary. Why do you think it was added? Does it add to or detract from the glorious moment of the Transfiguration? Why is Jesus irritated? What is the effect of having this passage as possibly the last reading of the Epiphany season, the manifestations of God?

8. In what ways might this passage sum up the way[s] God is made manifest to us? How might it sum up our experience of epiphanies, large and small?