

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?**

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, Year C, RCL
Lent I-Pentecost
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.

Lent I: March 6

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Ps 91: 1-2, 9-16
Romans 10: 8b-13
Luke 4: 1-13

Deuteronomy 26: (1-4) 5-11

For your Information

Arameans were an ancient tribe of nomads who wandered and sometimes settled over much of the Middle East. Abraham's ancestors were Aramean, and his son Isaac sent **his** son Jacob to find a wife (Leah, then Rachel) among his Aramean relatives. Jacob, later named "Israel," is the "wandering Aramean" here.

This passage comes at the end of Moses' longest speech to his people just before his death. It concerns the formal liturgy which they are to perform after entering the Promised Land.

Levites (descendants of Levi, son of Jacob and Leah) are the third order of cultic officials, assistants to priests in worship.

Questions

1. What are the Israelites instructed to take to the priest from their first harvest? Why?
2. What are the people to say to the priest? Why? Why do you think the passage shifts from singular to plural several times?
3. Contemporary Jews still identify themselves ritually this way! And yet they were never in Egypt. Why do you think they do this? Do we ever identify ourselves by telling old stories? Is this an appropriate way to define who we are?
4. Why do you think this passage is assigned to introduce Lent?

Romans 10: 8b-13 (and read vss. 5-8a)

For your information

Unlike most of Paul's letters, this one was written to a church which he had not founded, nor even visited yet. Many of its members were Gentiles, i.e. not Jews. "Greek" is virtually a synonym for "Gentiles," as Paul understands it; most people around the Mediterranean had inherited the culture and the language of Alexander's empire.

Questions

1. What are the two kinds of "righteousness," as Paul defines them here? What is the connection between the first kind and the question quoted in v. 6? How is that approach different from the quotation in v. 8?
2. Why is it so important to believe/confess the two things named in v. 9? What implications do they have for our lives and conduct?
3. Who might have been surprised, or even taken aback, by v. 12? In the present day, would it be the rough equivalent of saying that "there is no distinction between Christian and Muslim"? Why, or why not?

4. Does v. 13 seem to you to represent justice, or something else? That verse also seems to suggest that everyone who does **not** call on the name of the Lord will **not** be saved. Do you think Jesus would have agreed with that? Do you?

Luke 4: 1-13

Questions

1. What does it mean to be “full of the Holy Spirit”? What does that have to do with Jesus’ baptism--i.e. was he not “full of the Holy Spirit” before? Have you ever been that way? How are we changed by being baptized?
2. Where has the number 40 appeared in Scripture before? Do you think there’s any connection with this passage? Where else does this number appear in our tradition?
3. What are the three temptations held out by the devil? How are they different--i.e. what sort of temptation does each one represent? Can you think of later times when Jesus encountered specific temptations in these categories and withstood them? When have you been tempted in these ways? How do they show up most powerfully in our culture?
4. In resisting these temptations, Jesus quotes Scripture as his authority. But so does the devil, in vs. 10 and 11! What do you make of this? Is Scripture a sound guide, or not?
5. How might this passage help us in living the season of Lent?

Lent II: March 13

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Ps 27

Philippians 3: 17-4:1

Luke 13: 31-35

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

For your information

God has already made promises to Abram (who has not yet been renamed Abraham), in Gen. 13: 14-17. These two promises will remain as Israel’s understanding of God’s assurance to them. But no children have been born to Abram and Sarah yet. Apparently there was a custom that slaves could inherit from a childless couple.

Vs. 13-16 are probably a later insertion to explain the Israelites’ 400-year oppression by Egypt.

Questions

1. How would you describe the nature of this conversation between God and Abram? What sort of relationship do they have?
2. Verse 5 seems to resolve one part of the promise, to Abram's satisfaction. Why? What do you think it means, that his willingness to believe is "reckoned...to him as righteousness"?
3. Why do you think he needs something more to support the other part? The ritual described in vs. 7-12 and 17 is obscure. What does it say to you about the sealing of a covenant promise? Do we have any rituals for sealing promises? If so, do you think they help us to keep the promises? Why?
4. What does this reading have to do with the beginning of Lent?

If you have time

--Read Romans 4: 1-13 to see how Paul uses this passage in arguing that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised before becoming Christians.

Philippians 3: 17-4:1

For your information

Philippi was one of the strategically placed cities for Paul, on a major trade route. All sorts of people came through, and were available for conversion, but also represented constant challenges to new Christians. The little church there was one of Paul's earliest, and seemed to be a particular source of joy to him.

Questions

1. How would you respond to someone who asked you to imitate him, as Paul does here? What would give Paul the confidence to do this? Can you imagine asking anyone to imitate you? Under what circumstances?
2. What sort of people are held up to the Philippians as "enemies of the cross"? Where do we see such people today? Are they still the chief "enemies of the cross," in your view?
3. The Philippians were technically Roman citizens, as Paul was. What then does Paul mean, that "our citizenship is in heaven"? What difference does it make?
4. What does it mean, that Christ will "transform the body of our humiliation" to conform to "the body of his glory"?
5. How might this passage help us in Lent?

Luke 13: 31-35 (and read vss. 22-30)

For your information

Herod is the Jewish governor or “king,” son of the Herod who was king at Jesus’ birth and later divided his kingdom among his three sons. His power is sharply limited by the fact that he “rules” by permission of the occupying Romans.

Questions

1. As usual, Jesus will not answer a question with a simple “Yes” or “No.” What do you think the asker had in mind when he asked the question? How does Jesus’ reply enlarge the subject? Who would be surprised, or offended, by it? Who is the “you” in v. 25 ff.? Who are the people in v. 29?
2. Why does “the owner of the house” claim not to know those who are knocking at his door? Is the owner Jesus? Does Jesus usually talk this way?
3. Why do you think the Pharisees choose to warn Jesus about Herod’s malicious intent? Why does Jesus respond as he does? What is the difference between his attitude and that of the Pharisees? Isn’t he only asking for trouble?
4. What is the significance of having this passage explicitly placed on the way to Jerusalem? How does Jerusalem provide a context for this material? How does Jesus speak about the city? Why? Why is it “impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem”? Why then does Jesus go there? What is he hinting at in v. 35?
5. Is there a “Jerusalem” in our time that draws and perhaps destroys prophets like that?

Lent III: March 20

Exodus 3: 1-15
Ps 63:1-8
I Corinthians 10: 1-13
Luke 13: 1-9

Exodus 3: 1-15

For your information

Moses has fled to the land of Midian because he killed an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew slave, and was afraid of punishment. He has married the daughter of a Midianite priest, a pagan.

Questions

1. How is God manifested to Moses? How would you describe the tone of their conversation?

2. How will Moses know that it was really God who sent him? How is Moses to answer the Israelites, when they doubt his claim to authority? Why do you think God is named that way?
3. What does this passage have to do with Lent?

I Corinthians 10: 1-13

For your information

This is one of Paul's most fully developed letters, fairly late in his ministry, and addressed to a gifted and diverse church community. Corinth was a major crossroads for Mediterranean travel, and like most ports had its seamy side, as well as a temple to Aphrodite on the hill. The church was sometimes challenged by arguments about doctrine and ethics, and was also an attractive target for other, competing Christian missionaries, so that Paul needed to spell out some implications of their new faith in letters to them.

Questions

1. What exactly is it that Paul wants his audience to be aware of, as he insists in vs. 1-2? Why? What does Moses have to do with them? Why does Paul insert Christ into a story that happened long before Jesus was born?
2. How are the painful experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness (vs. 7-10) relevant to the Corinthians? What do these details suggest about what was going on in the Corinthian church? Do these details have any relevance to us? Are we too in a wilderness?
3. What is Paul's point about God's habit of "testing"? Do you agree that God never lets us be tested beyond our strength?
4. How can this passage guide us in Lent?

If you have time

--Read Ex 32: 4-6, the source of v. 7; Num 25: 1-9, the source of v. 8; Num 21: 5-6, the source of v. 9; and Num 16: 13-14, 41-49, the source of v. 10.

Luke 13: 1-9

For your information

Apparently some pilgrims from Galilee were killed by order of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, while they were making sacrifices in the temple. We don't know why.

Questions

1. What assumptions about the reasons for extraordinary suffering does Jesus address here? Does he seem to think that there is any connection at all between doing wrong and suffering? Do you?

2. What is the point of the parable about the fig tree? Why does it not bear fruit? Why do **you** not bear fruit? Who is represented by the vineyard owner? by the gardener? Do you think this is a good prescription to live by? How would you apply it? What does it have to do with verses 1-5? What does it contribute to our Lent?

If you have time

--Compare Mt 21: 18-22, Mk 11: 12-14, 20-23, for other approaches to the fig tree. Do they both sound like Jesus to you, even though very different? How do you account for the differences? How would you apply each one?

Lent IV: March 27

Joshua 5: 9-12

Ps 32

2 Corinthians 5: 17-21

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Joshua 5: 9-12 (and read 4:19-5: 8)

For your information

The Book of Joshua is presented as history, but its literal history is richly enhanced by the process of story-telling. It gathers up all sorts of records and tales and corporate memories to present evidence of God's saving power. This practice would have seemed entirely appropriate to a people for whom "truth" was much more inclusive and profound than literal accuracy.

This excerpt begins the last segment of the sequence that became Israel's paradigm for the way God works: captivity, astonishing release, wandering in the wilderness, coming home. But even homecoming is fraught with temptations, and God's faithfulness is sorely tested by a people who keep finding fresh ways to go wrong.

Manna is the food provided by God to the wanderers in the desert, in such abundance that every day there was some left over. The Israelites tried to save the leftovers, but they spoiled, and God scolded them for not trusting that there would be a new supply tomorrow. Manna represented their total dependence on God for life.

Gilgal is only a mile or so from Jericho, and so stands at the very end of the long wilderness journey, just before the entrance to the Promised Land. It became an important shrine for Israel. Later, Saul was made king there, and David was reconciled there with his rebellious people. At that time, Jericho was famous as the first oasis one came to after crossing the desert; the fragrance of roses and orange blossoms could be detected before the city itself was seen.

Questions

1. What are the key parts of this ceremony at Gilgal? What does each segment represent? What guilt remains from Egypt?
2. Do we ever conduct ceremonies like this, to mark the end of one phase and the transition to another?
3. What would have been the significance of "keeping the Passover" at this particular moment in Israel's history?
4. What will take the place of manna from now on? What importance might that have for the relationship between God and God's people? Metaphorically, what takes the place of manna for us? How does it affect our life with God?

If you have time...

--Read the account of Israel's release from captivity (Exodus 14-16). How does it define what God expects of Israel, in return for freedom?

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

For your information

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was probably written rather late in his ministry, perhaps around 55. Some scholars believe it's two letters combined, the first a moving essay about the work of reconciliation, the second (ironically) a diatribe about some other missionaries who seem to be usurping Paul's authority.

Questions

1. What do you think Paul means by looking at someone "from a human point of view"? As opposed to what? Are you aware of this double vision in yourself? If so, how?
2. V. 17 is sometimes translated, "he/she is a new creation." The Greek text allows for either. What difference does it make? Which seems to fit the rest of the verse best, and what examples can you give of how either version is true?
3. According to v. 18, what is the central ministry that God has given us? What exactly do you think it means? On what prior event does it depend for an example and inspiration? Do you think this is a sufficient summary of our Christian calling?
4. What does it mean to be "ambassadors for Christ"? How is this role like that of ordinary ambassadors? How have you been one? How might you be one? What other examples have you seen?

5. V. 18 says that God “reconciled us to himself through Christ,” but v. 20 entreats us to be reconciled to God! Hasn’t that happened already?

6. Paraphrase v. 21; what does it mean to you?

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

For your information

The parable of the prodigal son is one of several that appear only in Luke.

Jewish culture would have understood the son’s demanding and spending his father’s property as equivalent to wishing his father dead. In order to give the younger son his share, the father had to sell off a large piece of his property and so reduce his own income.

Pork was forbidden food for Jews. Feeding swine was the most loathsome work imaginable.

At that time, no man of dignity would “run.”

Questions

1. Vss. 1-3 have been added to this reading in the RCL. What do they add to the story?
2. Why do you think the younger son ran away?
3. What details dramatize the various changes in the younger son's circumstances and attitude? What does it mean, that the younger son "came to himself"? Have you had that experience, or seen it happen to others? What seems to cause it? What are the results?
4. The younger son's speech to his father is spoken twice--before and after their meeting. What do you think is the dramatic effect of this repetition? How does it affect the father's response?
5. How does the father show forgiveness? Or is forgiveness even the point? How does the younger son respond?
6. The father’s words, “This son of mine was dead and is alive again,” might remind you of a very different biblical context. Is that relevant?
7. How does the elder brother react when he hears about the party? Why? Why does he call his brother, "this son of yours"? Is the father's response to him adequate, fair, loving, stern--or what?
8. We are not told what happened after the party, when all the guests were gone and the family was left to itself. What do you imagine? Have you experienced similar situations in your family?
9. Various commentators have said that this parable is misnamed, that it is really about the elder brother, or about the father. What do you think? Which character is most like you—if any?

10. Why do you think these readings were chosen for close to the end of Lent?

If you have time

--Read Luke 15: 1:10. What connections do you see?

--Compare this story with stories of forgiveness in Hebrew Scripture: Gen 9: 8-17, Ex 32:11-14, II Samuel 14: 25-18:33, Hosea, etc.

Lent V: April 3

Isaiah 43: 16-21

Ps 126

Philippians 3: 4b-14

Jn 12:1-8

Isaiah 43: 16-21

For your information

The book of the prophet Isaiah is thought to be in fact two or three books. The first seems to have been written between 742 and 701 BCE, during the period when Israel had split into two kingdoms, the northern one annexed to the Assyrian empire. The rest, beginning at ch. 40, seems to have been composed by Isaiah's followers, just before and after the liberation of Israel from Babylonian captivity by, of all people, an "infidel"--Cyrus the Persian. Isaiah is the first to proclaim that Israel's God is the God of all people everywhere, and can use anybody for divine purposes.

When speaking through a prophet, God often starts by reminding people of just who God is, in terms of what God has done for/with/to them before.

Questions

1. What particular details of Israel's history does God use to introduce this new pronouncement? Why?
2. What does God expect from Israel? What will God do in return? Have you sensed God doing any of these things for you?
3. Why does God ask Israel not to "remember the former things/ or consider the things of old"? Shouldn't we be learning from the past?
4. V. 21 seems to say that God made Israel (and us?) in order that we might praise God. What sort of God is this? Do you understand your purpose this way?

5. Why do you think this passage was chosen for Lent?

If you have time

--Read Is 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-11; 52: 13-53. 12. These sections are called the "[Suffering] Servant Songs." They have been incorporated into the Christian tradition as foretelling the nature of Israel's promised Messiah, but at the time they were probably meant to describe the nation of Israel as it struggled to understand the meaning of its exile.

Philippians 3: 4b-14

For your information

The church at Philippi was the first one that Paul established in Europe. From the start, it faced serious opposition. By this time, Paul himself was in prison, and so spoke with special authority about the suffering that Christ's disciples might undergo and the joy that made it worthwhile.

Questions

1. Vss. 4b-7 have been added to this reading in the RCL. What do they contribute to the passage that follows?

2 Paul says that "for [Christ's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things." What do you think he has lost? Have you ever lost important things for the sake of Christ, or for other reasons that are precious to you? Compare the phrase from the marriage service, "...forsaking all others...."

3. What might it mean to "gain Christ and be found in him"?

4. What is the difference between a righteousness that comes from the law and a righteousness found through faith in Christ? What does Paul see as the hoped-for results of this second kind of righteousness?

5. In v. 12, Paul distinguishes between what he is striving for and what has already happened. What is the connection in his mind between these two? What is the connection for you?

John 12: 1-8

For your information

We have met Martha and Mary before, in Lk 10: 38-42; Jesus apparently often stayed in their home. In the previous chapter, he raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Bethany is very close to Jerusalem.

[Spike]nard oil, from a plant grown in the mountains of northern India, would ordinarily be used to anoint the head, not the feet.

Questions

1. As in Luke's story, Martha is the one who serves. What is Mary's role? Does it seem to be consistent with her behavior in Luke? What would be analogous behavior from a present-day dinner host? How does Jesus interpret the meaning of this gesture?
2. What image does John's Gospel give us of Judas and his motives?
3. Why is this passage chosen for Lent?

If you have time

--Compare this passage with the one from the former Lectionary which it replaced, Lk 20: 9-19. What is the difference in their messages?

--Compare it with similar passages in Mk 14: 3-9, Mt 26: 6-13, Lk 7: 36-50

Palm Sunday: April 10

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Ps 31: 9-16

Philippians 2: 5-11

Luke 22: 14-23: 56 *or* Lk 23: 1-49

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

For your information

See Lent IV for notes on (Second) Isaiah. This passage is called "the Third Servant Song," containing images which Christians later understood as messianic prophecies.

Questions

1. How does the prophet (or servant—are they the same?) understand his particular calling, and the God-given gifts which sustain it? How has he been faithful to his calling? What can we infer about how his teachings have been received? Are prophets still received this way?
2. How does the prophet or servant see his own future? Why? How will it come about?
3. Why are we reading this passage now? How might it apply to Jesus?

Philippians 2: 5-11

For your information

See Lent V for notes on Philippians. The hymn of praise in vs. 6-11 is often printed in the form of a poem, and may have been adapted by Paul from a hymn created in early Christian liturgy, or even before.

Questions

1. What might it mean that "Christ Jesus" was "in the form of God"?
2. If he was already "in the form of God," what would remain for him to "grasp" or "exploit" if he chose? What did he do instead?
3. What might it mean to be "born in human likeness"? How does this hymn present the human condition? Do you see it that way?
4. According to this hymn, what was the result of Jesus' unconditional obedience? Could the same happen to us?
5. On nearly every other Sunday, both the lesson from Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament lesson are different in years A, B, and C. But Palm Sunday's two lessons are the same every year. Why are they that important?

If you have time

--Compare v. 8 with Mt 26: 39. Compare verses 6-9 with John 1: 14. Do any other phrases remind you of other Gospel passages?

Luke 22: 14-23:56 or Lk 23: 1-49

For your information

The traditional Passover meal recalls the night when God freed the Israelites in Egypt, striking dead the firstborns of the Egyptians but "passing over" the homes of the Israelites, who had been told to mark them with the blood of a lamb. It was one of Israel's sacred holidays, for which many pilgrims would come to Jerusalem.

The assembly that brought Jesus before Pilate consisted of Jewish elders, "both priests and scribes"--the dignitaries of the Temple, responsible for scrupulous care of its traditions. Palestine was occupied by Rome, which didn't want to incite rebellions and so generally left its subjects to their own peculiar practices as long as they didn't interfere with Roman authority. Pilate was a Roman prefect, responsible for keeping order in this distant part of an increasingly shaky empire--a dead-end job. Herod was a Jewish governor, son and partial heir of the Herod who was king at Jesus' birth. His limited authority in Galilee depended on Rome's approval. Jews could not sentence someone to crucifixion, but Romans could.

"Paradise" for a Jew of that time would suggest a restoration of the Garden of Eden.

The centurion is a Roman soldier, not a Jew. He is important enough to have 100 men under his command.

Questions

1. Vss. 14-38 have been added to this reading in the RCL. What do they add? What details do you find in vss. 14-20 that shape our ritual of Holy Eucharist? What "Old covenant" is replaced by the "new covenant in my blood," and how? What other pieces of this section give a context for the Crucifixion?
2. What precise charges do the Jewish leaders bring against Jesus? As far as you know, are they true?
3. Watch Pilate carefully as he tries to deal with this sticky problem. What is his first reaction? Why? What other approaches does he try? Why? Do you know political leaders like him?
4. Why is Herod eager to see Jesus? What is his attitude at first? How and why does it change? Why do you think Pilate and Herod become friends? Can you imagine a conversation between them?
5. What is the significance of the crowd's choosing Barabbas for release instead of Jesus? According to Luke, who seems to be most responsible for what happens to Jesus? Why?
6. According to Jesus, what does his approaching death signify for Jerusalem and Israel (vs. 28-31)?
7. Jesus' prayer (v. 34b) is unique to Luke. (See also Acts 7: 60). What does it illustrate about his understanding of forgiveness? What does his example ask of us?
8. Why do you think Luke distinguishes between "the people" and "the leaders" (v. 35)? Trace the attitudes of others: the soldiers, the first criminal, the second criminal, the centurion, the "crowds," the women. What might be the significance of Jesus' words to the second criminal (v. 43)?
9. Who do you think put the inscription, "This is the King of the Jews" over Jesus' head? Is it true? How is this phrase used in the drama?
10. The curtain of the Temple protected the central chamber, the Holy of Holies, where only the chief priest could go and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. What might be the symbolic importance of the curtain's being "torn in two"?
11. What is the significance of the centurion's words about Jesus (v. 47)? The text says that he "saw what had taken place;" what exactly do you think he saw?

12. What "things" do you think Jesus' old acquaintances saw as they watched? Why "from a distance," not closer?

13. Where do you find yourself in this story?

If you have time

--Read the entire Passion narrative again, Lk 22: 39-23: 56. Trace the details: Who betrays Jesus, and how? Who asserts his innocence? Any surprises?

--See Hosea 10:8 for the source of 23: 30. Compare Ps 31: 5 to Jesus' dying words. (A faithful Jew would have known these passages by heart, and used their words instinctively.)

Easter Sunday: April 17

Acts 10: 34-43

or Is 65:17-25

Ps 118: 1-2, 14-24

I Cor 15: 19-26

Jn 20: 1-18

Or Luke 24: 1-12

Acts 10: 34-43

For your information

This is another example of a reading that does not rotate in Years A, B, and C. It is repeated on Easter every year.

The Book of Acts, apparently written by the author of Luke, is a somewhat idealized account of the formation of the early Church. It includes missionary trips by Peter and Paul. It takes some liberties with chronology, and probably adapts some events to heighten the drama, but in that time such editing would have been considered quite appropriate, to serve a deeper truth.

This speech is made in Caesarea, at the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and therefore a Gentile. An angel has told him to send for Peter; a vision has told Peter to accept the invitation.

Questions

1. What is there in Peter's recent experience that has inspired him to say that "God shows no partiality"--an astounding statement for a Jew? Do you think God has favorites?

2. This speech summarizes Jesus' ministry. Can you recall the details of each event mentioned? Would you add anything?

3. Why does Peter believe he is one of those chosen by God as a witness? What is his obligation? Are we in any way "chosen as witnesses"? If so, what does that mean for us?

4. Why do you think this passage is read on Easter every year?

If you have time

--Compare v. 34 to Rom 2:11, for Paul's version.

--Read Acts 10: 17-33 and 44-48 for the full story, and a sense of the critically important argument to which Peter is speaking.

Isaiah 65: 17-25

For your information

This passage, from a late disciple of Isaiah, comes from a period just before the end of the exile, when the Babylonians were about to be conquered by Cyrus the Persian and the Israelites allowed to go home.

Questions

1. This passage announces a new creation. What exactly is new about it? What wonders does it promise? Are these extravagant promises believable? What would they have meant to a people in exile? What might they mean to us?

2. How does this creation match the creation described in Genesis—or not?

3. Why is this passage assigned to Easter Sunday?

I Cor 15: 19-26

1. What connection does Paul make between Adam and Christ? How are they alike and how are they different? Why does this matter? What does it mean to be “made alive in Christ”? What is the relationship described here between Christ’s work and God the Father?

2. Do you agree that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death”? What would that mean for us? What does it have to do with Easter?

John 20: 1-18

1. What exactly is the sequence of events described here? What part is played by Peter and “the other disciple”? Compare their response to Mary Magdalene’s.

2. What is the nature of the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus? How would you describe his manner toward her, and her growing awareness? What does this show us about him and about her? Why is she not permitted to touch him?

Luke 24: 1-12

For your information

The tomb would probably have been a cave in a hillside, with a wheel-shaped stone set on edge to close its opening.

Tending the body, cleaning it and using spices to mask its decay, was considered women's work, unsuitable for men.

Note in v. 6 that these women have apparently been with Jesus for a long time, even though usually unmentioned.

Questions

1. What possible explanations would the women have thought of for the empty tomb?
2. What might be the significance of having women in the role of the first "evangelists"--the tellers of the good news? What exactly do you think they said? Would you believe such messengers today?
3. Vss. 11-12 have been added to this passage in the RCL. What do we learn from them?

If you have time

--Compare Lk 8: 1-3, where these women appear earlier. What other examples can you think of in which Luke underscores the role of a woman?

--Compare Luke's account of the resurrection to those in Matthew, Mark and John. What matches? What doesn't? What difference does it make?

Easter II: April 24

For your information

The former Lectionary offered two choices for the Easter season: Hebrew Scripture/Acts/ Gospel or Acts/ Epistle/Gospel. The Revised Common Lectionary has eliminated Hebrew Scripture entirely, and in Year C has substituted readings from the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Acts was written by the author of Luke's Gospel, and might be seen as an answer to the question, "How can we get along without Jesus? What do we do now?"

The Book of Revelation was highly controversial at one time, and was the last to be included in the Christian canon. It is the NT's only sustained example of an apocalyptic vision—a vision of God's reign over creation as established not by gradual change, but by the total destruction of the old order and the creation of “a new heaven and a new earth.” Over the next several weeks of Easter season, consider what difference this choice makes, and why it might have been made.

Acts 5: 27-32

Ps 118: 14-29

or 150

Rev 1: 4-8

John 20: 19-31

Acts 5: 27-32 (and read vss. 17:26)

For your information

According to Acts, the importance of Pentecost--"the birthday of the Church"--was that the apostles were given Jesus' powers. From then on, they (and the Church) were able to do much of what he had done.

The Temple (in Jerusalem) was the holy center for the Jewish people, the place where faithful Jews came from all over Palestine for major religious occasions, especially the Day of Atonement. The Sadducees were a Jewish political-religious sect made up mostly of prominent priests and the very rich. They rejected the Pharisees' growing tradition of oral interpretation (now the Talmud), and insisted on the written law (Torah) alone. They rejected the notion of an afterlife, and strongly opposed the claim of Jesus' resurrection. They weren't widely popular, but they had considerable power around the Temple, and resisted anything that might upset their comfortable relationship with the Romans. This passage follows an account of the arrest and imprisonment of Peter and his companions by the high priest and the “whole body of the elders of Israel,” out of “jealousy,” and their inexplicable escape.

Questions

1. Why would the Sadducees have been "jealous" of the apostles?
2. What might be "the whole message about this life" that the angel commanded the apostles to proclaim?
3. Compare vs. 22-24 with Lk 24: 1-4. Any parallels? differences?
4. What does v. 21b show about the way Peter and the apostles were perceived by Jewish leaders? What does v. 26 show about the political situation at the time? Any analogies today?
5. What is the meaning of v. 28: "...you are determined to bring this man's blood on us"? Is the high priest right about that?

6. What does v. 29 say about how Peter understands authority? How can he tell the difference between human and divine authority? How can we?

7. Why was this reading chosen for the Sunday after Easter? How might vss. 30-32 reflect the earliest form of the Good News?

If you have time

--Read all of Chapter 5 for the context. What is the effect of placing this reading right after the story of Ananias?

Rev 1: 4-8

For your information

The Book of Revelation, an apocalyptic vision of mysteries that are ordinarily inaccessible to human beings, is unique in the NT but representative of a genre that occurs in Hebrew Scripture and other Jewish writing. Typically, the writer's vision is mediated by a heavenly figure or in this case by the risen Christ. It may involve secrets of the cosmos or of the future, whether political events or ultimate destiny.

Though tradition has sometimes identified John the author of Revelation with the author of the Fourth Gospel, the evidence for that is slim. All we know for sure is that he is an early Christian prophet, probably writing near the end of the First Century, well after the destruction of the Temple and after persecution of Christians had begun. "Babylon" is used throughout as a symbol for Rome, whose emperor was demanding to be addressed as "Lord and God," and to be worshipped.

Questions

1. How exactly does John understand his authority for this testimony? How does he understand the nature and vocation of his audience?
2. John here describes the one who is coming. Does this description match the messiah Israel had been hoping for? Does it match Jesus of Nazareth? Is this the Jesus you know, or hope to know, and pray to? Does it help us to understand the difference that Easter makes?

John 20: 19-31

For your information

The story of Thomas is one more example of a reading that is the same every year, no matter what Lectionary year it is. In spite of what you've seen recently, this rarely happens!

Scholars generally agree that the Gospel of John is quite different from the other three. Put side by side, they often match; John's seldom does. Its language is far more poetic, its rhetoric often stylized; Jesus' statements about himself beginning "I am..." would have been understood instantly by Jews as God talking (cf. Ex. 3:14). This does not mean that the Gospel is "fiction;" far from it. It represents the deepening understanding of who Jesus was and is, and a fervent effort to convey that to new generations.

Questions

1. When and where does this incident take place? Why are the disciples afraid of "the Jews"?
2. Why does Jesus "[show] them his hands and his side"?
3. What powers and responsibilities does Jesus give his disciples? Who bears these today?
4. Why do you think Thomas is not there at that moment? Where might he be instead? When he comes back, how does he react to their news? What does his reaction show about him?
5. What does Jesus' invitation (v. 27) show about him? Does Thomas accept?
6. Thomas' exclamation (v. 28) is the first time that anyone has called Jesus by this most exalted phrase. What do you make of hearing these words from him, of all people?
7. What do you think is Jesus' purpose in v. 29? If this Gospel is, as many think, partly poetic truth written for a later generation rather than literal history, who might be the intended audience here?
8. Why do you think this reading is always assigned for the Sunday after Easter?

If you have time

--Compare Jn. 14: 5 for another glimpse of Thomas.

Easter III: May 1

Acts 9: 1-6 (7-20)

Ps 30

Rev 5: 11-14

John 21: 1-19

Acts 9: 1-6 (7-20)

For your information

Damascus was a city in Syria, about 125 miles north of Jerusalem. Imperial law permitted the Jews to extradite accused lawbreakers from there to Jerusalem. Saul (Paul was his Greek name) was apparently a particularly zealous Pharisee, committed to defending the Jewish faith.

"The Way" seems to have been the first name adopted by Jesus' followers. Some believe that Jesus himself wanted to teach a way of life rooted in Judaism, not to start a new religion. There are those who argue that Paul himself "created" the Christian religion, by gathering many fragments into a coherent whole and articulating the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Questions

1. The story of Saul's conversion is one of the most dramatic in Scripture. What did he turn **from**? What did he turn **to**? How are these changes dramatized step by step in this account? We are told of external, physical changes; what do you think was happening inside of him at each stage?
2. Have you ever experienced "scales falling from your eyes"? If so, why do you think that happened? How did it change you? Do you think that true adult faith always begins with a dramatic conversion?
3. Vss. 19b-20 have been added in the RCL. What difference do they make?

If you have time

--Saul/Paul told this story many times, according to the author of Acts. Compare Acts 22: 4-16; 26: 9-18. See also Paul's own account, in Gal 1: 13-17. Any differences?

Rev 5: 11-14

Questions

1. This passage speaks of Jesus as "the Lamb that was slaughtered." See note on Palm Sunday, Lk 22, about the Passover in Jewish history; why exactly do you think this image was adopted for Jesus?
2. What are the vivid details of this ecstatic vision? Which ones carry power for you? Is this how you imagine the end time, or hope it might be? Who is included in this vision?
3. It is common these days to speak of the "post-Easter Jesus." How did Easter change the way that the "pre-Easter Jesus"—Jesus of Nazareth—was understood? What would it take to get from the human, suffering Jesus to the image here, in which he is exalted just like God? How does this passage help you to pray to him—or not?

John 21: 1-19

For your information

The Sea of Tiberias is in Galilee; the disciples are now back on home ground, and the fishermen have returned to their previous work.

The "disciple whom Jesus loved" is a somewhat mysterious figure who appears only in the Gospel of John--perhaps the disciple John himself.

Questions

1. Why do you think the disciples "did not know that it was Jesus"? Can you think of other times when they did not recognize him? Have you had experiences that are in any way comparable?
2. Why does Jesus call the disciples "children"? Does the name fit?
3. Why does Peter put on his clothes, and then jump into the sea? Has he ever behaved this way before? Have you?
4. What is the significance of Jesus' cooking breakfast for the disciples? Why is this the clincher in knowing who he is? Does this remind you of any other stories about him? any experiences of your own?
5. Vss. 15-19 have been added in the RCL. How do they add to the story? Why does Jesus ask the same question three times? What effect does it have on Peter? What is the connection between the question and Jesus' commands that follow? What does all of this have to do with the image of the helpless old man in v. 18?

If you have time

--Compare Lk 5: 1-11. What matches? What doesn't? What do you make of this?

--Compare Jesus' two other post-resurrection appearances in John's Gospel: 20:1-18, 20: 19-29. What does this one add?

--Read Jn 21: 15-17 to continue the story of Peter's response. What do we understand about him and about Jesus' charge to him through this conversation?

Easter IV: May 8

Acts 9: 36-43

Ps 23

Rev 7: 9-17

John 10: 22-30

Acts 9: 36-43

For your information

Joppa (Jaffa) is an ancient port city south of Tel Aviv.

The Book of Acts was written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. A major purpose of the Book of Acts is to show how the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost made it possible for the apostles, and eventually the emerging Church, to do all that Jesus did. The writer often matches events point for point.

Widows were often without protection in that culture, and so in particular need of charity. "Saints" were baptized Christians. Tanners were outcasts, because they were ritually unclean.

Questions

1. How does this story recall stories from Hebrew Scripture (I Kings 17: 17-24, II Kings 4: 32-37) and, more important, actions of Jesus himself (Mk 5: 35-43)? Are there any differences? Do you see any details that give this story its particular vividness?

Rev 7: 9-17

1. This ecstatic vision matches the one in ch. 5 in some important ways, but other details are different. How would you describe the heaven they present? What similarities and what differences do you see? Who is included in this vision? What is the effect of reading them two weeks in a row?

2. What is the answer given by the elder to his own question? What is "the great ordeal"? How can blood wash one clean, and again, what does this have to do with Passover and the slaughtered lamb?

3. Can you identify images in this passage which have been gathered together from ancient Jewish writing? What effect would these have had on Jewish converts or potential converts? On people who didn't know Hebrew Scripture at all?

John 10: 22-30

For your information

The festival of the Dedication of the Temple commemorated the rebuilding of the Temple in 164 BCE after it had been desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes. The portico of Solomon was a cloister on the east side of the Temple.

Questions

1. Why do "the Jews" accuse Jesus of keeping them in suspense? How does he respond to them? Do you find his answer helpful, reassuring, troubling, or what?

2. Can you think of other occasions when people expressed confusion about him? Do you ever feel that in some way God or Jesus is keeping you in suspense?

If you have time

--Note the reaction of "the Jews" in vs. 31-33. Why is it so strong? Do they have a point? Compare their reaction with the reactions of others to him and to Christianity later on. Do people still react strongly, even violently? If you have tried to make similar statements about him to other people, how have they reacted?

Easter V: May 15

Acts 11: 1-18

Ps 148

Rev 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

Acts 11: 1-18

For your information

The Book of Acts combines historical materials with a particular editorial purpose: to explain how the Church took shape after Jesus' death and resurrection. Here you see a part of Luke's (and Paul's?) answer to a central question: the relationship between Judaism (Jesus and nearly all of his early followers were Jews) and Christianity. The word "Gentile" refers to anyone not a Jew. Paul was a devout Jew, and had always believed that Israel had been chosen by God for special revelation. Yet he now saw many Jews rejecting his message, and many Gentiles responding to it. What could this mean?

Hebrew Scripture required that all Jewish males be circumcised (Gen 17: 9-14) and included strict rules about what foods were "clean," fit to eat for religious Jews, and which were "unclean," profane, not fit to eat.

The author of Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke, and often matches events after Jesus' death to those during his life, especially to show that the apostles and the Church now had the power to do what Jesus had done, through the Holy Spirit.

Questions

1. What is the implication of making "circumcised believers" one phrase? Who might be the modern day equivalents in the Christian community?

2. What are the details of Peter's vision that change his attitude? What is the principle which the voice says is behind this vision? Might it apply to other things besides food? Does it have any relevance to us today?

3. How does the story about the men from Caesarea reinforce Peter's vision? What is the critical point made here? What does it have to do with the ways of the Holy Spirit?

If you have time

--Compare Mark 7: 24-30, for an encounter between Jesus and a Gentile woman which has much to say about his attitude toward Gentiles.

--Read as much as you can of Paul's letter to the Romans, much of which is concerned with the question of whether non-Jews can become Christians, and if so, how. It marks Christianity's transformation from an exclusive sect into an all-embracing faith. In Romans 11: 13-24, Paul writes to the mostly Gentile Church in Rome about their becoming "grafted in" to the spaces left on the tree from which some Jewish branches have been broken off.

--Though the book of Acts presents a harmonious picture of Peter's change of attitude, and of the encounters between Peter (Cephas) and Paul on this subject, Paul himself has a rather different perspective! Read Gal. 2: 11-14 for his account of a confrontation between them around one aspect of the debate. (See Pentecost II.)

Rev 21: 1-6

For your information

End-time ("eschatological") prophecies usually picture **either** a gradual movement of the creation toward perfection, through God's transforming grace, **or** a sudden, dramatic end of what has been (much of it evil, and consigned to destruction) and beginning of something entirely new — "apocalyptic." The Book of Revelation is a clear example of the latter kind. The speaker in this passage, "the one who was seated on the throne," is the Lord God.

Questions

1. What is the character of this new age? How is it different from the one before? Does it have some of the characteristics you've heard before from Hebrew prophets, or does it seem unexpected in every way? Is it the sort of "new world" you hope for?

2. What does it mean that God is "the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end"? What does that tell us about our present time? How might it affect the way we live our lives? How might it have shaped Jesus' life?

John 13: 31-35

For your information

This passage occurs just after Judas' departure from the Last Supper, and may be meant to represent Jesus' understanding of what Judas' intended action will bring about. It begins Jesus' long last address to his disciples.

Questions

1. "Son of Man" was a common term in Palestine, meaning "a person." In John's Gospel, however, it seems to be taking on a different meaning. What do you think it means here? How are God and the Son of Man "glorified"?
2. Jesus gives his disciples a "new commandment" (v. 34)--which has given its name to "Maundy (commandment) Thursday." Has he given them others? If so, does this one replace them or add to them? Is it enough, all by itself?
3. How might v. 35 apply to us and Jesus' will for us? What might it have to do with evangelism?

If you have time

--Compare v. 35 with the third promise of the Baptismal Covenant (BCP, P. 303). Any connections?

Easter VI: May 22

Acts 16: 9-15

Ps 67

Rev 21: 10, 22-22: 5

John 14: 23-29

or John 5: 1-9

Acts 16: 9-15

For your information

This passage is the first in which the author's "we" appears. He is also the author of the Gospel of Luke, commonly thought to be "Luke the physician," apparently the most learned of the gospel writers. He may have joined Paul's mission group at this point.

Questions

1. What do vss. 9-10 tell us about the movements of this small group and how their route was determined?
2. What is the effect of all these geographical details? Of the detailed story about Lydia, just one woman, after the large crowds who were addressed in earlier stories? What do we learn about the very early days of Christianity and those drawn to it?

Rev 21: 10, 22-22: 5

For your information

For centuries, the Jerusalem Temple had been the center of Israel's religious life. God's presence there was palpable, and observant Jews came on holy days to worship and make sacrifices, and—on Yom Kippur—to be forgiven their sins. It had been repeatedly destroyed; its rebuilding was a cause for great celebration.

Questions

1. This vision is of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city. How is it different from the earthly Jerusalem? How are they related?
2. What is the significance of its having no temple? Would that be like our having no churches? What do we need them for now? Can you imagine our not needing them? What else is not needed there, and why?
3. Last week we read about Peter's vision that seemed to end, or at least greatly restrict, the common Jewish concept of "uncleanness." How does that compare with Rev 21: 27? 22: 3? Which understanding seems more "Christian" to you—or can they be reconciled?

John 14: 23-29

For your information

This passage continues Jesus' farewell address. Jesus' promise that he and the Father will "make our home with" those who love him echoes the ancient image of God as "pitching a tent" in the midst of the nomadic Israelites, and moving with them as they traveled.

The Holy Spirit is spoken of here as "the Advocate," a sort of lawyer-for-our-defense, who also teaches and counsels and keeps essential memories alive.

Questions

1. According to this passage, what is the connection between love and obedience? Can this connection be applied to human relationships?
2. What do you think is the difference between Jesus' way of giving and "the world's" way? What kind of peace does Jesus leave behind as he goes? Have you ever experienced this kind of peace?
3. How can Jesus be both "going away" and "coming to you" (v. 28)? Does this paradox ever occur in human relationships?
4. In v. 28, Jesus tells his disciples that they ought to be glad that he's leaving. Why? Could/should we apply the same principle to the death of someone we love?
5. What understanding of Jesus' true nature is implicit in v. 29?

If you have time

--Compare v. 23b to John 1:14. How is the mystical statement of the first chapter being fulfilled here?

John 5: 1-9

For your information

Any observant Jew would go to Jerusalem for festivals. Those in need of healing might hope for special generosity from pilgrims there.

Questions

1. This is a story from very early in Jesus' ministry. What is the effect of its occurring in Jerusalem, which we have just visited in Lent under very different circumstances?
2. What does it suggest, that Jesus "knew that he had been there a long time"? Why does Jesus ask him if he wants to be made well? Isn't the answer obvious? Having asked the question, why does Jesus do something quite different from what the man seems to want from him?
3. Often a reading ends in the middle of a verse, if the second half seems unnecessary to the story. Why do you think v. 9b is kept?

Easter VII: May 29

Acts 16: 16-34

Ps 97

Rev 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17: 20-26

Acts 16: 16-34

For your information

Again, by this time, Paul is traveling with Silas and others in Europe. The narrator now says, "We."

It was not lawful for Jews to try to convert Romans.

A Roman prison guard whose prisoner escaped might be put to death.

Questions

1. Why do you think Paul was so annoyed by the slave girl's daily outcries? Wasn't she telling the truth--a sort of free publicity agent?

2. What were the charges against Paul and Silas? What had they done that was seen as so dangerous? Can you think of anyone today who is seen as dangerous for similar reasons?

3. This is one of many accounts of conversions in the book of Acts. What exactly leads to the guard's conversion in this case? How is he changed? What difference do you think conversion makes, besides a simple change of beliefs?

4. The jailor becomes a believer "in God" (v. 34). Is this the same as a believer "in the Lord Jesus: (v. 31)?

If you have time

--Compare this conversion of a Gentile with the conversion of Cornelius (10: 1-48) and Lydia (16: 13-15). Any common threads? Any major differences? What picture do these give us of the role of Gentiles in the young Church?

Rev 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Questions

1. Who is speaking in this passage? What seems to be his position, his authority?

2. How does this passage form an epilogue for the book and for the Bible? What is summed up in its images that you have heard before and that distills the Good News? Is this the ultimate message of Easter? Is anything not here that you would want to hear?

John 17: 20-26

For your information

This passage concludes Jesus' farewell address to his disciples with a prayer, which is immediately followed by their going to Gethsemane together.

Questions

1. For whom is Jesus praying (v. 20)? What might this show about the author's special emphasis here?

2. How do you understand this "oneness" that Jesus is praying for? Who might become one, and what might that mean? On what is this unity based? How might we "become one," with God, with one another? Do you have any experience of this sense of unity?

3. What does v. 24b show about the writer's understanding of Jesus' relation to time and the creation? Is this how you understand him?

If you have time

--Compare the theme of this passage with parts of the marriage service, especially "the union between Christ and his Church" (BCP p. 423), and the third and ninth segments of the litany of prayers (BCP pp. 429-430). Can you see any connections?

The Day of Pentecost: June 5

Acts 2: 1-21
or Gen 11: 1-9
Ps 104: 25-35, 37
Rom 8: 14-17
John 14: 8-17 (25-27)

Acts 2: 1-21

For your information

The Jewish holiday of Pentecost was an agrarian festival celebrating the grain harvest, and by extension, the gift of the Promised Land. Later--but probably after Acts was written--it came to celebrate God's giving of the Law to Israel, seven weeks after Passover. ("Pentecost": "fiftieth.") Throngs of Jews came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage for the holiday.

Verses 9-11 represent one example of the author's care in drawing parallels between Jesus' ministry and that of the early Church. See Luke 6:17.

Questions

1. What seem to be the major effects of the Spirit, according to this passage? Again, is this how you understand or experience the Spirit? (Read vs. 12-13 for one awkward consequence of being seized by the Spirit!)
2. How does Peter's speech explain the meaning of what has just happened? What is the connection between Joel's prophecy and the effect of the Holy Spirit just described?

If you have time

--Here, "speaking in tongues" seems to mean speaking the language of anyone, from anywhere, as needed. Compare I Cor 14: 2-19, for Paul's quite different sense of "speaking in tongues," and its limitations. Do you have any experience of "speaking in tongues"? What is your understanding of it?

Gen 11: 1-9

For your information

The Mesopotamian city featured a temple tower (ziggurat) “whose summit was believed to be the gateway to heaven, the realm of the gods.” (NRSV)

Questions

1. Why do the migrants build their tower? Why do they feel the need of it?
2. To whom is the Lord speaking in v. 6? Why is the tower, and the fact of a single language, troubling to the Lord? What might this story be intended to explain?
3. Why do you think this passage is chosen as an alternative reading on Pentecost?

Rom 8: 14-17

1. According to this passage, what is the effect of the Holy Spirit on us? How does it define who we are before God? How does this relationship allow us to call to God, and what may we expect of God as a result?
2. What do Christ’s life and death have to do with this relationship?

John 14: 8-17 (25-27)

Questions

1. What is the longing expressed in Philip’s question? How does Jesus respond, and what emotion do you hear in his response? How does he explain the meaning that Philip has missed? What does he want the disciples to understand, and on what evidence?
2. What promise does he make about their future, and how will the Holy Spirit make it possible? What gifts does the Holy Spirit give?

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