

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, YEAR A
Advent I-Last Epiphany RCL
Church 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.)

The translation used for these study sheets is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); if you are using another translation, take note of significant differences.

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.)

During the seasons of Advent and Christmas, the readings from Hebrew Scripture (the “Old Testament”) are usually chosen to echo or enhance Gospel themes. So is the reading from an Epistle, though an Epistle may be read somewhat sequentially when it has particular relevance to the season.

Our Church year begins with Advent I, and this year our three-year Lectionary cycle brings us to Lectionary Year A, with Matthew as our primary Gospel. Scholars guess that it was written around 80-90 C.E.. Like Luke's Gospel, it contains much material from Mark; it also contains some material that appears in Luke, but not in Mark; and then it has some that appears nowhere else. If you have time, look for comparisons and contrasts as you go, and see if you can perceive any distinctly Matthean emphases.

Advent I: Nov. 27

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Ps 122

Romans 13: 8-14

Matthew 24: 37-44

For your information

The season of Advent, the beginning of our Church year, is full of anticipation and longing. We know what's coming, and yet it is always new, a mystery. As you read these lessons, chosen specifically for this season, consider the effect of moving from last week (Christ the King) to this one.

Isaiah 2: 1-5

For your information

The prophet Isaiah spoke to "Judah and Jerusalem," the southern part of the now divided nation of Israel, during a troubled time when the northern part was becoming part of the Assyrian empire and the same fate might lie ahead for the southern part as well.

Questions

1. What effect would Isaiah's prophecies have on a frightened, threatened people? Does present-day Israel seem to understand itself in these terms?
2. What seems to be the special meaning of "Jerusalem" for Jews here? Is there any city or other physical symbol that has the spiritual importance for us that Jerusalem did for them?
3. Do you see our country's present circumstances as being at all like those of Isaiah's Israel? Does the United States now see itself as this sort

of beacon? How would you compare or contrast our leaders' recent rhetoric with Isaiah's?

4. How does this passage fit Advent I?

Romans 13: 8-14

For your information

The letter to the Romans was written late in Paul's ministry, to a church which he had not founded (unlike most of the other letters), but hoped to visit soon. Most of its members were Gentiles, not Jews.

In accord with Jesus' own images, Paul affirms the coming of the "eschaton," that moment when the old age gives way to the new, and the time of God's rule ("kairos") is established. He assumes that this new time has already begun; all Christians are a part of it, and should act accordingly. But there is also a "not yet" in what he says; it's here but not completely, we're part of it but we still have a long way to go.

Questions

1. We struggle to understand what it means to love our neighbor, and occasionally Scripture gives us some specifics. What does each of the commandments quoted here have to do with love? What other specific commandments might you add to the list, from your own experience or from watching Jesus as he responds to people?

2. Vss. 11-14 call the Romans to decisive changes, that will match the new age. What do you think is the connection between their actually making those changes and the coming of God's kingdom--cause and effect, or what? Are there other vices--maybe some more subtle, harder to change--that should be added to Paul's list? How much power do we have to bring in God's kingdom or prevent it? Are we (at least partly) in it now?

3. What exactly would it mean for you to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ"? What sort of "light" can be "armor," and how?

4. How does this passage fit Advent I? If you have time

--Read Rom 13: 1-7. What do the assumptions and instructions have to do with what follows, if anything?

--Compare vs 8-10 with Mk 12: 31. See an earlier source in Lev 19: 18, where "neighbor" refers to fellow Jews; then compare that to Lk 10: 29-37, where the meaning is expanded.

Matthew 24: 37-44

Questions

1. What particular emphasis does this passage add to the sense of expectation and preparation in the two other passages for today? What lesson is to be drawn from the reference to Noah?

2. What does v. 36 tell us about the Son's knowledge? About Jesus' "humanity" or "divinity"? What do you think "the coming of the Son of man" means, exactly?

3. How would you compare or contrast this image of the decisive moment, the nature of the new age, with Paul's implicit image in Romans (see above)?

4. Do you see yourself as being watchful, all the time, and ready for the coming of the Son of man, or for some promised new age? If not, why not, and in what ways? Is it humanly possible to be attentive all the time? And if we are, does that keep us from being fully engaged with a troubled and needy world?

Advent II: Dec. 4

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Ps 72: 1-7, 18-19

Romans 15: 4-13

Matthew 3: 1-12

Isaiah 11: 1-10

For your information

Jesse was the father of King David. Here is the prophecy that the messiah will be his descendant. (See Mt. 1: 1-16.)

Questions

1. What are the "gifts of the spirit" according to this passage? Does each one of them describe Jesus, as you understand him? Would you add any others, based on his life and teaching?
2. Why would one's delight be in the fear of the Lord? Can fear be delightful?
3. What's wrong with judging by what your eyes see or your ears hear? Give examples. How will the Messiah make judgments instead?
4. What weapons will the messiah use to bring about justice? Do you think they're enough? Do they match Jesus' choice of weapons? What does this choice of weapons have to do with the particular sort of paradise envisioned in 11: 6-9?

If you have time

--Compare 11: 1 with the genealogy in Mt 1.

--Compare 11: 4 with Mt 5 and Lk 6.

--Compare the gifts of the spirit named here with those named in Gal 5: 22.

--Compare this vision of God's kingdom with the description of Israel in Is 1: 3, 5: 12-13, 6: 9-10.

Romans 15: 4-13

For your information

"The circumcised" refers to Jews; "Gentiles" are all non-Jews. The early Church was deeply divided over whether one had to be a Jew first in order to become a Christian; and it's possible that Jesus himself believed at first that his mission was only to Jews (see Mt 15: 21-28). The Church in Rome had many Gentiles in it, and Paul believed he had a special mission to Gentiles.

Questions

1. What does Paul see as the purpose of Hebrew Scripture--"what was written in former days"-- for those living in this new age? Do the passages he quotes indeed seem relevant and helpful in his context? How do you think that Christ's becoming "a servant to the circumcised... [would] confirm the promises given to the patriarchs"? What promises?
2. According to this passage, what is the relationship between Jesus' ministry to Jews and the conversion of Gentiles? How has he "welcomed" those to whom Paul writes, and what obligation do they have as a result?
3. Verse 13 is often used as a benediction. Why? What exactly does it promise? Has your experience of faith done that for you?

If you have time

--Look up the context of the other three OT passages quoted here: Ps 18: 49, Deut 32: 43, Ps 117: 1.

Matthew 3: 1-12

For your information

"Those days" are the time in which Jesus began his public ministry. The wilderness of Judea was east and southeast of Jerusalem.

"Repent" is much stronger than just "Say you're sorry." It means "Turn around," "Come back"-- i.e. to the way of God, which Israel has lost.

The quotation from Isaiah is an example of a slight mistranslation coming about in the process of turning Hebrew into Greek. In Hebrew, the prophet's message includes "in the wilderness;" that is, it's not that the prophet is "crying in the wilderness," but that we're to prepare a path "in the wilderness."

John's dress and behavior would have marked him at once as belonging in the great tradition of Israel's prophets. The voice of prophecy had long been absent from the land, as Israel was conquered, divided and humiliated. Note that Matthew explicitly sees him as a fulfillment of Isaiah's ancient promise--the first of many. (In fact, very soon there were many self-proclaimed prophets and messiahs in the area, perhaps because of John's popularity.)

Pharisees and Sadducees both considered themselves to carry a heavy responsibility for preserving the Jewish faith in a time of Roman occupation, and both considered it a point of pride and privilege to be "children of Abraham." But Sadducees were more centered on the Temple and its worship, Pharisees on the law.

Ordinarily Jews were not baptized. This ceremony was reserved for converts (of whom there were few; it wasn't a proselytizing religion), and for those who had made themselves gravely unclean and needed to be purified.

Questions

1. What do you think is the intended connection between repentance and the approach of the kingdom of heaven? Can good news make us repent?
2. Do you think the mistranslation makes any difference? Which version do you prefer, and why? (It's the Greek version that we have preserved

in our common language; one could say that the "mistake" was inspired!)

3. What impression does Matthew give us of John's following? Why is he so harsh toward the Pharisees and Sadducees, who after all have come far out of the city for baptism? Why would all these people seek baptism, which implies a serious need for cleansing?

4. What might be the Implications of John's radical claim, that being a child of Abraham doesn't count for much of anything anymore? Who would welcome that news, and who would not? Are we "children of Abraham" In some sense? Do we take pride, and find security, In claiming some other kind of heritage?

5. What is the difference between being baptized with water and being baptized with "the Holy Spirit and fire"?

6. How does John describe Jesus' work in v. 12? Is this good news? Is it what Jesus actually did? 7. How do these three lessons contribute to the season of Advent?

Advent III : Dec. 11

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Ps 146: 4-9 *or* Canticle 3 *or* 15 (this canticle is from Lk 1: 46-55, "The Magnificat")

James 5: 7-10 (and read 11-12)

Matthew 11: 2-11

Isaiah 35: 1-10

For your information

Here again is Isaiah, who has been warning of very bad times ahead for unfaithful Israel, but also promises joy at the end. Some scholars believe that this passage may originally have been part of the section that begins

with Chapter 40, and was written by Isaiah's heirs at a later time during Israel's captivity. (Cf. Is 40:3-5.)

Little is known about Edom; it was one of Israel's neighbors, but never strong enough to become a serious threat.

Questions

1. What specific promises does Isaiah make for Israel's redemption? Do they apply to everybody, or only to some? How can you tell?
2. Do you think that people are always glad to have their eyes opened and their ears unstopped (v. 5)? Why, or why not?
3. Isaiah's metaphor of the highway is lovely and evocative, but not very specific. How do you imagine such a highway coming about, specifically? What would keep "even fools" from straying off it?

James 5: 7-10

For your information

This is one of the "pastoral epistles," written for the guidance of early Christian communities as they continue to figure out what it means to follow Jesus. It seems to claim the authority of James, brother of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem, though it may have been written by a close associate rather than by James himself. Most of its material echoes teachings in Hebrew scripture, or Jesus' own teachings.

The farmers' need for "early rain" (Oct.-Nov.) and "late rain" (April-May) was particular to Palestine and South Syria.

Questions

1. Here is another passage full of promises, to be fulfilled after some time. Again, it's long on metaphor, short on specifics. Why? Do you find this pattern comforting, or does it leave you hungry for details? What

would Jesus or Paul or James say about that way of making promises?
What about our politicians? our corporate CEOs?

2. Do you see any hints here of particular problems in the early Church that the author is trying to correct? Do we have any of the same problems today?

3. What prophets (ancient or recent) do you know of who exemplify "suffering and patience"? What might this writer have to say about the widespread enthusiasm today for something generally called "spirituality," that has no specific content or tough demands? Is it possible for us to draw new people into a church that requires them to wait a long time for rewards? Or do we have something else to offer them right away?

If you have time

--Read all of this epistle, or at least ch. 5: 1-6, for a brief picture of some more issues that were of concern in early Christian communities. Which seem relevant today? Would James' letter be useful if read in our churches?

Matthew 11: 2-11

For your information

John is imprisoned some distance east of Jerusalem, and is awaiting execution. Thus he has not been able to witness much of Jesus' work since his baptism, though his disciples bring him stories about it.

Questions

1. What is at stake for John in his question in v. 3? What sort of answer might he and his disciples expect? Why?

2. How does Jesus respond to the question? Do you think John's disciples would be satisfied by his answer? Are you? How do you identify a true prophet?

3. In vv. 7-10, Jesus addresses some other messianic expectations that might have drawn John's followers to him. What does he think they are looking for? What mistakes is he trying to correct?

4. How do these three passages contribute to our Advent season of preparation?

If you have time

--See Malachi 3: 1-4 and 4: 5-6--the very end of Hebrew Scripture as we know it--for the prophecies about the Messiah and the "new Elijah" who will prepare for him. Read Mt 11: 11-15 for Jesus' comments on these prophecies.

--See Mt 11: 16-19 to learn more about why John the Baptist's many followers were bewildered and suspicious about Jesus' conduct. Do some people judge (and perhaps reject) prophets by the same standards today?

--See Lk 3: 19-20 for a fuller account of John's imprisonment.

Advent IV: Dec. 18

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Ps 80: 1-7, 16-18

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1: 18-25

Isaiah 7: 10-17

For your information

King Ahaz, son of King Uzziah and so in succession from King David, finds his already dreadful kingship threatened by ambitious enemies. God has sent Isaiah to Ahaz to reassure him and call him to faithfulness.

V. 14 contains one of the most familiar prophecies of the messiah's coming. Note that the Hebrew word which is often translated as "virgin" can mean "young woman" or "girl" as well. When this passage was translated into Greek for the many Greek-speaking Jews around the Mediterranean (3rd century B.C.E.), the translators had to make a choice, and chose the Greek word that means "virgin." That would have been the text known to many First Century, Greek-speaking Christians.

"Immanuel" means "God with us."

Questions

1. What picture does v. 12 give us of Ahaz' faith? What do you think is Isaiah's tone in v. 13? 2. What difference might it have made that the translators chose "virgin"?
3. How do you understand the nature of the predicted child--what will happen before his birth, and how his birth might change things?

If you have time

--See II Kings 16 for a more detailed account of Ahaz's corrupt reign.

--See Deut 6: 16 for Moses' explicit prohibition against putting God to the test. Jesus follows that prohibition by refusing to throw himself down from the temple (Mt 4: 7). Is there any reason why Isaiah is angry when Ahaz apparently follows the same rule?

Romans 1: 1-7

For your information

Again the reading is from Romans, the audience primarily Gentiles who have not yet met Paul.

Paul apparently reflects an early Church custom of calling Christians "saints"--i.e. holy ones, those committed to Christ.

Questions

1. Most of us begin letters simply, "Dear" Paul's opening is a bit more extensive! Why? What is contained in this introduction, written perhaps 20-25 years after the resurrection? What meaning have Christians (or Paul, at least) already made of Jesus' story? This passage is packed; take it phrase by phrase.

2. Paul refers to both himself and the Roman audience as "called," and to himself as "set apart." What do you think he means? Would you describe yourself that way? Who is, who isn't, and how can you tell? Is a "call" to a particular kind of life, a particular ministry, and if so, how can an individual figure out what it is?

Matthew 1: 18-25

For your information

Here is Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy. Scholars think it likely that he would have known the Hebrew version, and made the conscious choice of the Greek word for "virgin" rather than "young woman." According to Jewish practice at that time, a betrothed couple could live together.

It was a father's role to name a child. Names were of critical importance; they defined the child, and were a sort of prayer for him/her as well. "Jesus" means "He will save." "Emmanuel," or "God with us," was understood as a short formula for God's basic covenant with Israel: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

Questions

1. A "righteous" man, in the narrow understanding of the time, would be one who followed the prescriptions of the law, and was therefore "right"

with God. The law would have subjected Mary to public disgrace. Is some other kind of "righteousness" implicit in Joseph's conduct?

2. Many boys had been named "Jesus" before. Why do you think such an unoriginal name was given to this Jesus? Why was he not named "Emmanuel"?

3. This is the last Sunday in Advent. Can you trace any developing themes over these four Sundays, find any reason for their order? Why do you think this set of lessons is last?

If you have time

--Compare this passage with Lk 1: 26-2: 20. What matches? What doesn't? What do you make of the differences--and of the fact that neither Mark nor John (nor Paul) shows any awareness of any birth narrative at all?

--See I Kings 8: 27, for Solomon's question as he finished building the temple. Matthew seems here to be answering it in a new way.

--See Num 5: 11-31 for the penalty which, according to Hebrew law, Joseph might have demanded of Mary.

The Nativity of our Lord, Christmas Day: Dec. 25

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Ps 98

Hebrews 1: 1-4 (5-12) John 1 1-14

These passages are appointed for Christmas Day every year. As you read them, consider: What does each one tell us about the importance of the child who has been born? What has come into the world?

Christmas I (the first Sunday after Christmas): Jan. 1

Isaiah 61: 10-62: 3

Ps 147

Galatians 3: 23-25, 4: 4-7 John 1: 1-18

For your information

This is one of those rare Sundays when the same lessons are read every year. Why do you think the designers of the Lectionary wanted to insist on them that way?

Isaiah 61: 10-62: 3

For your information

This passage seems to be part of the later section beginning with ch. 40, and written by one of Isaiah's heirs.

Questions

1. Who is the "I" in this passage? the "you"?
2. According to v. 11, how is God's work like nature's? Do you believe, or actually see, that God works that way?
3. What will be the effect of Israel's redemption upon those who see it from outside? Do you find that the fate of a nation gets the attention of others in this way, even now?

If you have time

--Read 61: 1-4 for a sketch of Israel's condition at the time.

--Read 62: 4-5 for a lovely image of the new Israel, including a change in the name by which she is to be known. What exactly does this image suggest to you? Do others call our nation names, good or bad? What names do you think we're called now? What might change them?

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

For your information

There was big trouble in Galatia, where Paul had founded a number of churches. In particular, "Judaizers" were persuading many that being a Christian required being first (and forever) a Jew. Paul's task was to scold the Galatians sternly for abandoning what he considered a central principle of the gospel, while at the same time calling them to a happier vision.

The law referred to here is that laid out by Jewish scripture, particularly in the Torah, and inseparable from Israel's religious tradition. There are 613 "laws," covering nearly every imaginable aspect of one's life. The purpose is to turn every minute of one's life toward God.

The Greek word in v. 4 translated "disciplinarian" means a sort of glorified babysitter, one who makes sure the child gets to school and tries to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Questions

1. According to Paul, what function did the law serve before "faith" came? What does "faith" mean here? How has it released us from our "babysitter"? To what extent do you agree that we Christians no longer need the law? What has taken its place?

2. Paul certainly doesn't claim that we are grownups yet; we're still children. How does he transform the image of children to turn it from demeaning to welcoming? Where does our "enslavement" figure in this transformation? (Read 4: 1-3 for help with this.)

John 1: 1-18

For your information

John's Gospel begins very differently from the other three. There is no pretense of being in historical time at first; the context is eternity.

For a Jew, language was mysterious and powerful in a way that we can hardly imagine; and the Word of God was a living, creating force that called things into being and gave them life.

Questions

1. This passage is full of rhythmic repetition, and is more suggestive than clearly definitive. Jesus is not even mentioned by name yet. What effect do you think is intended here? What are we to understand about this man before we meet him?
2. What does "the world" mean here? Who welcomes Jesus, and who does not? As you recall the stories about him in other Gospels, would you say that the summary here matches those specific accounts, or not? How exactly did the world not know him? Is it common for people to be least understood in their own home towns? If so, why?
3. What is John the Baptist's function, according to this passage? Does it match the image of him that Matthew's Gospel gives us?
4. In v. 7, "him" (RCL), referring to John, can also mean "it," meaning "the light." What difference might it make?
5. This same passage is prescribed for Christmas Day, but without vs. 15-18. What, if anything, do those verses add?

If you have time

--Compare the beginning of this passage with the first lines of Genesis. Why do you think John begins this way?

[Christmas II—not observed this year]

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

Jeremiah is the prophet of Israel's exile, both foretelling It and enduring It with his people. This passage looks forward to a time, perhaps still far ahead, when God will bring the people home.

Questions

1. Who are the particular members of the diaspora (the scattering of Israel) whom Jeremiah names among those who will be brought home? Why do you think he chooses these to name?
2. We have seen other images of "redemption" In other parts of Scripture. (See, for Instance, Job 19: 23-27a.) What form does redemption take here? Does It seem like a compelling ideal to you, as It traditionally has for Jews? How would it be different from life as we presently know It? What does it mean to be "radiant over the goodness of the Lord"? to have a life "like a watered garden"?
3. What sort of God is speaking here? With what sort of relationship to Israel? Do you recognize this God?
4. Do you detect any irony In v. 14a, or do priests need to be "filled" too? 5. What does this passage have to do with Christmas?

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

For your Information

Scholars guess that the letter to the Ephesians was composed later than the true Pauline letters, and consists at least in part of material used In early liturgies.

Questions

1. Vv. 3-14 present another image of redemption. How is it like or unlike that in Jeremiah? (See especially v. 10.) How and why does it come about? Who seems to be included?

2. Vv. 3-14 describe what has already happened. Vv. 15-19a contain a prayer for what has not yet happened. What is it, and how is it related to what God has already accomplished?

3. How does this passage help to convey the meaning of Christmas?

Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

For your Information

The story of the flight into Egypt appears only in Matthew, who often underscores the connection between patterns in Hebrew Scripture and the life of Jesus.

The Aramaic word for Nazareth sounds like the Hebrew word for "branch," a fact which Israel would have seen as more than coincidence (see Is 11: 1).

Questions

1. What Old Testament story might be echoed in this episode? How might it enrich our understanding of this child's importance?

2. Matthew pays more attention to Joseph than the other Gospels do. How does he appear here?

3. Luke's Gospel gives an entirely different explanation of how Jesus came to grow up in Nazareth. (See Lk 2: 4, 39.) How do you account for this?

4. In addition to continuing the story of Jesus' early days, can you see any other ways in which this reading and the reading from Luke 2: 41-52 add to our understanding of what Christmas means?

Luke 2: 41-52

For your information

This story appears only in Luke, and is all that we're told about Jesus' adolescence.

Pious Jews were expected to make pilgrimages to the Jerusalem Temple for special festivals. Women were not obligated to go.

Those who taught in the Temple were authorities in the Jewish religion. It was customary, even a sacred duty, to discuss various interpretations of Holy Scripture.

Questions

1. Would these experts in the Jewish religion have welcomed a twelve-year-old who sat among them and asked challenging questions? Why, or why not?
2. What sort of adolescent does Jesus seem to be here? Is his behavior typical of his age, or extraordinary? Thoughtful, or arrogant? Is he a good son?

Matthew 2: 1-12 (see below)]

[Epiphany (These lessons are used when Epiphany, Jan. 6, falls on a Sunday.)

Isaiah 60: 1-6, 9

Ps 72: 1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3: 1-12

Matthew 2: 1-12

For your information

"Epiphany" means "a manifestation of God," or in this case, the manifestation of Christ to the world, especially to Gentiles (non-Jews).

In many parts of the world, Epiphany rather than Christmas is the important Christian celebration.

This is another of those unusual Sundays on which the same lessons are prescribed every year.

Isaiah 60: 1-6, 9

For your information

Here is more of "Second Isaiah's" prophecy about Israel's restoration. It appears in our service of Morning Prayer, as the Third Song of Isaiah. The Midianites were relatives of the Israelites; the people of Sheba were descendants of Noah; those of Ephah, Kedar and Nebaioth were Arabs. Tarshish was in the area of southern Spain.

Questions

1. Again we have a mixture of promises, some metaphorical, some perhaps at least somewhat literal. Which do you think is which? (See especially v. 6!)
2. What do you think this passage might mean to today's people of Israel? To us?

Ephesians 3: 1-12

For your information

Here Paul (or more likely, one of his disciples) explains the cause of his imprisonment. The "few words" in v. 3 are in ch. 1: 9-10.

Questions

1. What is the "mystery" that Paul sees as his special mission, and that got him imprisoned? (See especially v. 6.) Who would have found reason to imprison him for preaching that mystery? Why? Do people get similar treatment, for similar reasons, these days?

2. This responsibility seems to cause him nothing but trouble. Why do you think he calls it a "gift of God's grace"?

Matthew 2: 1-12

For your information

King Herod was the father of the Herod who took part in Jesus' arrest and crucifixion; he divided his territory among three sons. The "wise men" or Magi (not kings!) were members of a learned class in ancient Persia (NRSV), and would probably have had some knowledge of, and interest in, astrology.

Verse 6 quotes Micah 5: 2, which prophesies the messiah's birth in Bethlehem. Luke agrees with his birthplace, but has a different understanding of how his parents happened to be there. (See also Mt. 2: 23.)

Questions

1. Judging from the conversation between the wise men and King Herod, would you say that they were indeed wise, or not? What were the consequences of the information they gave to Herod (v. 16)? Was Herod wise, or what?

2. What do you think is the significance of the wise men's journey, their being summoned by a star? of their not being Israelites?

3. Why do you think these three lessons are always assigned for Epiphany? 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.]

First Sunday after Epiphany: Jan. 8 (Epiphany readings may replace these)

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Ps 29

Acts 10: 34-43

Matthew 3: 13-17

For your information

Again, the first two readings for this Sunday are always the same.

Isaiah 42: 1-9

For your information

This is the first of "Second Isaiah's" three so-called "[suffering] servant songs." At the time, the servant was almost certainly intended/ understood to be the nation of Israel, not a particular individual. Later, Jewish Christians rediscovered these passages and others as indications of the sort of messiah they should have expected, and got, in Jesus.

Questions

1. What is the character of this servant? What are his primary responsibilities? From what you know of the Gospels, how did Jesus match this description? Do you think that Israel, after many years of oppression and occupation by other nations, would imagine or want a messiah like this?
2. To what extent do you think that present-day Israel sees herself in these terms? the present-day United States?

Acts 10: 34-43)

For your information

The Book of Acts presents us with a somewhat tidied-up and stylized account of the early Church's formation after Jesus' ascension. This passage comes from a visit by Peter to Caesarea, to the home of a

Gentile centurion named Cornelius, a member of the occupying Roman military, who has been told in a vision to send for him.

Questions

1. Here Peter summarizes Christian experience and understanding for an audience of Gentiles. What information does he include in this very brief outline, and why? Why does he begin as he does? Would you want to add anything? Would this speech work today, say on Boston Common or in Harvard Square? Would you consider saying something like this to people at work or at a dinner party, who asked about your religious faith?

If you have time

--Read vv. 44-48 for the results of Peter's presentation. Why are the "circumcised believers" astounded?

--See Mk 15: 39 for another significant centurion. What do these two have in common?

Matthew 3: 13-17

Questions

1. What do you think are the implications of Jesus' coming to John for baptism? Why is John appalled? How does Jesus explain his action?

2. The NRSV's note says that vv. 16-17 represent "a surge of certainty and self-understanding that came to Jesus at his baptism." Does this explanation satisfy you? Do you think that anything else is being "made manifest" in this event?

3. To whom is God speaking in v. 17?

If you have time

Compare Mk 1: 9-11 and Lk 4: 1-13 for other accounts of Jesus' baptism. Any differences?

Second Sunday after Epiphany : Jan. 15

Isaiah 49: 1-7

Ps 40: 1-12

I Corinthians 1: 1-9

John 1: 29-42

Isaiah 49: 1-7

For your information

This passage is known as the second Servant Song of Isaiah. Much later, it was understood as a prophecy of the sort of messiah Israel should expect.

Questions

1. There has been some speculation that "Israel" in v. 3 was added late. Does the rest of the passage allow for Israel to be the speaker? Are there other possibilities? Could the early Church have seen a prophecy about Jesus here?
2. The servant expresses discouragement. Why then does God increase the size of his task enormously?
3. This passage emphasizes God's work in forming us--or at least, this servant--from conception for a particular vocation. Do you think God does that? What evidence do you have?
4. According to vv. 5-6, what is the difference between Israel's (or the servant's) old sense of Israel's calling and this new word? How do you think this vision has been played out (or not) since then?

5. What picture is given here of the servant's status among other nations? How then will the servant succeed? Might our nation think of itself this way?

If you have time

--See Matt 15: 21-28 and Acts 13: 46-48 for later echoes of this call to wider mission.

I Corinthians 1: 1-9

For your information

The two letters to the Corinthians were written at the height of Paul's work. Clearly some time has gone by since he established the church in Corinth.

Many questions and problems have arisen. Corinth was a lively seaport, where ships brought every spiritual fad floating around the Mediterranean. These two letters give us a fascinating glimpse of at least one new church trying to learn faithfulness against great odds. The illustrate Paul's practice of starting a church and then moving on, depending on the leaders he has left behind to inform him of the little congregation's well-being and of what encouragement and correction are needed there.

Questions

1. Again Paul has a full introduction before he gets down to details. How does he address the Corinthians? How does he prepare them for some tough talk? Have you heard similar introductions in our leaders' speeches?

John 1: 29-42

For your information

Here is John's version of John the Baptist's explanation of Jesus. John was Jesus' cousin, some six months older; they had probably played together as kids. According to Luke, John "knew" Jesus while still in the womb (Lk 1:41).

The term "Lamb of God" seems to have developed early, perhaps out of two images: Is 53: 7 (part of a servant song) and Ex 12 (the lambs slaughtered to mark the Israelites' doorposts).

“Cephas” (“Peter,” in Greek) means “rock.”

Questions

1. As usual, John elaborates on the stories told in other Gospels to help us understand who Jesus was, often reflecting an understanding that came much later. What does he want us to understand here? How does he adapt the narrative to convey such an understanding? What seems to you to be probably historical fact, and what is rather a deeper kind of truth?
2. How does John persuade his two disciples to follow Jesus? How do they persuade others? How are others gathered?
3. Why do you think Andrew and his companion ask Jesus where he is staying? Why does Jesus answer as he does? The verb translated “staying” in vv. 38 and 39, and “remained” in v. 32 is “menein,” the same verb that is translated “abide” in Jn 14: 17 and 15: 7, and elsewhere in this Gospel. Knowing this, can you hear more significance in this rather odd question than just its literal meaning?
4. What might be the implications of Jesus’ renaming Peter, especially with that name?

Third Sunday after Epiphany: Jan. 22

Isaiah 9: 1-4

Ps 27: 1, 5-13

I Corinthians 1: 10-18
Matthew 4: 12-23

Is. 9: 1-4

For your information

Zebulun and Naphtali (as well as Issachar) made up what was later Galilee; they were annexed by Assyria.

The poem in vss. 2-7 includes phrases borrowed from earlier writing that may have celebrated one of Israel's kings. It is now turned to another purpose.

Judges 7: 15-25 describes Gideon's great victory over the Midianites, with God's help.

Questions

What is the "great light" that the "you" of this passage has seen? What would this have meant to Jews of that time, and what does it mean to us after Christmas?

I Cor. 1: 10-18

For your information

Apollos was a Jew, originally baptized by John the Baptist. He became a fervent convert and missionary for Christ. "Cephas" is the Aramaic name for Peter, "the rock." "Chloe's people" are members of her household, family or slaves; evidently they have been bringing or sending Paul news of the Corinthian church. Paul kept track of his new churches this way, and those reports often provoked his letters.

Questions

1. What is Paul's hope for the Corinthian community, as expressed in v. 10?

2. What particular problem in Corinth has been reported to Paul? Have you ever experienced a quarrel with similar roots?
3. What basic theological mistake does Paul see behind the Corinthians' quarrel? Why is he glad that he baptized only a very few people there?
4. What does Paul see as his own central mission (v. 17)? Does he think he's well suited for it? Why or why not? What do you think of his reason?
5. What does this passage about a church squabble have to do with God's being made manifest?
6. V. 18 is newly included in the RC. What does it add to our understanding of Paul's message?

If you have time

—Read the story of Apollos and his conversion in Acts 18:24-28.

Matthew 4: 12-23

For your information

The lifelong responsibility of sons to fathers was of primary importance in Jewish families.

Questions

1. Jesus was baptized by John just outside Jerusalem, but now he finds it necessary to return to Galilee, where his home is. Why? What fulfillment of prophecy does Matthew see in this choice?
2. This passage marks the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry. How is it like John's? How does he describe its nature to his prospective disciples? What impression do you get of his initial effect on them? Why do you think they followed him? Would you have done so?

3. Why do you think these three lessons were chosen for the Epiphany season? Do you see any connections among them?

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: Jan. 29

Micah 6: 1-8

Ps 15

I Corinthians 1: 18-31

Matthew 5: 1-12

Micah 6: 1-8

For your information

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, and saw the same conditions: Israel's prosperity, accompanied by arrogance, corruption and social injustice. It was common to present a prophecy as a case in a court of law, God presenting evidence against Israel.

Aaron was Moses' brother and spokesman. Miriam was their sister, a prophet in her own right.

Balak was the king of Moab when the Israelites were approaching the land of Canaan. He was so frightened by their numbers and their apparent power that he sent messengers to Balaam, a Moabite seer, asking him to put a curse on them. But God came to Balaam and forbade him to do so, saying that the Israelites were blessed. Balaam brought that news to Balak, and became God's faithful spokesman. Shittim and Gilgal were towns on the way to Jericho; the Israelites got into some trouble there, because of what God considered to be overly friendly relations with pagans.

In v. 8, the essential word *hesed* can mean *fidelity, goodness, kindness*.

Questions

1. Who is to be the audience for this trial? Why? Do you ever sense that our own struggles with God are played out against such a background?
2. What evidence does God call to Israel's attention? What are "the saving acts of the Lord" which Israel is to be aware of? What "saving acts" have you heard about or seen?
3. What does Israel offer to do in response? What does God want instead? What sort of God is this?

If you have time

--Read Numbers 22-24 for the whole wonderful story of Balaam (including one of only two talking animals in Scripture).

I Cor 1: (18-25) 26-31

For your information

V. 19 quotes from Is 29: 14, in the Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture which was generally used at the time. The NRSV uses a more accurate translation of the original Hebrew.

This passage builds on I Cor 1: 17.

Questions

1. This passage sums up the radical--and scandalous--claim of the gospel, the "good news." Who would welcome it? Who would consider it bad news?
2. What does v. 22 say about what Jews look for? Greeks? How do you understand this? Does either description match us?
3. Some theologians say that "We preach Christ crucified" may be the kernel of very early Christian preaching, the basic formula ("kerygma").

What meaning is packed into that phrase? Why would it be "a stumbling block [Gr. 'skandalos'] to Jews and foolishness [folly] to Gentiles"?

4. What is "the wisdom of the world"? How do you understand "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength"? Can you give examples?

5. What does v. 26 say about the composition of the early Church, at least in Corinth? Can you guess why these people were drawn to it?

6. We have talked a lot about what it means to be God's chosen people. What do vs. 27-29 say about that?

Matthew 5: 1-12

For your information

The Beatitudes appear only in Matthew and Luke. Luke has Jesus standing on a level place (a plain), surrounded by multitudes, and speaking while looking up at the disciples. Matthew has him and his disciples leaving the crowd behind, and climbing a mountain for a more private teaching.

Questions

1. Do you see any significance in the different "stagings" of this event?
2. What connections can you find between this passage and the one from Micah?
3. Do you see any "foolishness" in this passage that matches Paul's description? Familiar as it is to us, can you see anything in it that might have seemed scandalous at the time? Or even now? To whom?
4. How do these readings reflect the season of Epiphany? What is being "shown forth" in them? If you have time

--Compare Luke's version (Lk 6: 17, 20-23). In addition to the geography, are there any differences in content?

[For your edification

WHO THE MEEK ARE NOT by Mary Karr

Not the bristle-bearded Igors bent under burlap sacks, not peasants knee-deep

In the rice-paddy muck,
nor the serfs whose quarter-moon sickles

Make the wheat fall in waves
they don't get to eat. My friend the Franciscan

nun says we misread
that word *meeek* in the Bible verse that blesses them.

To understand the meek
(she says) picture a great stallion at full gallop

in a meadow, who—
at his master's voice—seizes up to a stunned

but instant halt.
So with the strain of holding that great power

In check, the muscles
along the arched neck keep eddying,

And only the velvet ears
prick forward, awaiting the next order]

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: Feb. 5

Isaiah 58: 1-9a (9b-12)

Ps 112: 1-9 (10)

I Cor 2: 1-12 (13-16)

Matt 5: 13-20

Isaiah 58: 1-9a (9b-12)

For your information

Again, this passage is the work of one of Isaiah's successors, writing at a time when Israel could foresee an end to her Babylonian captivity as Cyrus, the Persian king, conquered the Babylonians.

The sound of the trumpet proclaimed a day of fasting.

Questions

1. If Israel is indeed a people who “seek me/and delight to know my ways,” what is the particular nature of her sins? Why do the people seem so sincerely bewildered, in v. 3?
2. What two kinds of “fasting” are described in vss. 4-7? In what sense is the second one “fasting” at all? What does this distinction have to say about the sort of spiritual practices that God desires from us?
3. What will be Israel's reward for doing as God asks? Can you see a connection between this kind of “fasting” and its effect on darkness and gloom? How will it earn Israel—and perhaps our own nation—the reputation described in v. 12b?

I Cor 2: 1-12 (13-16)

For your information

As a Pharisee, Paul would have been a man of learning, able to compose elaborate rhetoric if he chose.

At the time, certain Christians believed that they were superior to others in having a special wisdom, in being “spiritual” and endowed with a privileged insight into the nature of God. Some of their teachers were spell-binding speakers, attractive to the easily swayed Corinthians.

Questions

1. How does Paul describe the style of speech he has chosen? What reason does he give for it? How might it seem suitable for the sort of savior he proclaims?
2. What is Paul’s essential proclamation? Since he surely must have said more than just those words, what sort of speech would fit that description?
3. What sort of “wisdom” do he and his disciples speak? Why has it been “secret and hidden”? How do they, and we, have access to it? What is there about the source of it that “the rulers of this age” did not understand, and that would have made them intent on NOT crucifying Jesus?
4. Do you believe that you, and/or others you know, do in fact have access to this wisdom? What in your experience might suggest to you that you do? How is it possible to trust one’s insight through Christ, without becoming one of those arrogant “rulers of this age” who consider themselves superior and answerable to no one?

Matt 5: 13-20

For your information

This passage continues the Sermon on the Mount. Probably it is composed of many segments spoken by Jesus on different occasions.

Verses 17-20 contain material that is widely and sometimes fiercely debated. It seems to bind Jesus’ followers to every word of “the law [and] the prophets,” but Paul argues that Christ ‘s teaching has

superseded nearly all of that, and the developing Church has tended toward Paul's understanding. This passage appears only in Matthew, who particularly emphasized Christianity's continuity with Judaism; it may be added by his editors, who perhaps applied Jesus' words about fulfilling the law more literally than he intended.

“Jot” refers to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. “Tittle” is a small mark used to distinguish one Hebrew letter from another, similar one.

Questions

1. What sort of conduct does Jesus commend to his followers in vss. 13-16? What seems to be the principle here, and why? How, specifically, might we/you carry it out? How do Christians sometimes fail to do so?
2. Assuming that you agree that there is some contradiction between vss. 17-20 and Paul's teaching, which seems to describe Jesus' own behavior more accurately: complete obedience to “the law and the prophets,” or a more free-spirited reliance on the Holy Spirit? Could each be a useful corrective to the other?

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: Feb. 12

Deut 30: 15-20

or Sirach 15: 15-20

Ps 119: 1-8

I Cor 3: 1-9

Matt 5: 21-37

Deut 30: 15-20

For your information

This passage ends Moses' very long speech to the Israelites, as their wilderness journey ends. He concludes by telling them that he will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land with them.

Questions

1. It has been said that this passage sums up all of the Pentateuch's (first 5 books of our Bible) teaching about our relationship with God. Do you think this is true? What stories and other material would you mention as examples? Is anything left out?
2. What does it mean to you to "choose life" or to "choose death"? Can you think of examples in your own life when you have done one or the other?
3. What rewards are promised for choosing life? How might we receive these rewards?

Sirach 15: 15-20

Questions

1. What powers and what responsibilities does this writer of "wisdom literature" attribute to humankind? Do you feel as free to choose as he says you are? What would modern psychology make of this?
2. What do you think is meant by choosing life or death? (See questions on Matt, below)

I Cor 3: 1-9

For your information

This passage depends on the one before it, which distinguishes between those who know Christ through the Holy Spirit and those who do not.

Hebrew Scripture does not separate flesh from spirit, but the Greek culture which had swept the Mediterranean generally considered flesh

debased, spirit exalted. Paul is Jewish, but is speaking to those formed by Greek culture.

Questions

1. What does it mean to be “people of the flesh”? to be “infants in Christ”? How are they related, or even the same? What is the evidence that the Corinthians deserve this label? What might be the “milk” that Paul fed them, and the “solid food” for which they were not yet ready? Is Paul himself being condescending here? Do you think that this distinction is still useful in the Episcopal Church today?

2. What seems to be the particular squabble that infects the Corinthian church? Does it sound familiar to you? What point does Paul believe they’ve missed?

3. In Zimbabwe, a country plagued by (among other things) recurrent drought, there is a church named “Apollos the Irrigator.” From this passage, can you infer why?

4. What is the meaning for us of “You are God’s field, God’s building”? Do you understand yourself that way? How could you use this image?

Matt 5: 21-37

For your information

This section contains a series of antitheses, following the pattern: “You have heard...but I say to you.” Each one builds on rules or practices familiar to Jews, who seem to be Jesus’ audience, but enlarges the subject so that it is not just an extreme action—i.e. murder—that is prohibited, but something far more common and recognizable.

Under Jewish law, men could divorce their wives rather easily, though by Jesus’ time the grounds were becoming more restricted.

Questions

1. In the section concerning murder (vss. 21-26), what apparently much less serious offenses does Jesus condemn, and why? What is the wisdom behind this judgment? Can you see a connection between vss. 23-24 and our Passing of the Peace?
2. How do you understand the teaching on adultery? Does it condemn any sexual thoughts and feelings, or is there another emphasis?
3. The hyperbole of vss. 29-30 was a feature of prophetic speech in that time. What is the principle behind it? How might you apply it?
4. How is adultery connected to divorce (v. 32)? What seems to be Jesus' view of marriage as suggested here? Should the Episcopal Church prohibit remarriage of divorced persons on this basis, as it used to do?
5. What is the logic behind Jesus' command, "Do not swear at all"? Should we eliminate the oath of office for this reason? The vows of marriage?
6. Is there some way in which these "antitheses" are examples of Jesus' intention to "fulfill" the law? Can you see them as doing that?

[Seventh Sunday after Epiphany — not observed this year]

Lev 19: 1-2, 9-18

Ps 119: 33-40

I Cor 3: 10-11, 16-23

Matt 5: 38-48

Lev19: 1-2, 9-18

For your information

“Holy” in this context means “set apart,” as Israel was set apart by God through the covenant. The commands that follow spell out what this special relationship means in practice.

Questions

1. What does the practice prescribed in vss. 9-10 suggest about the connection between holiness and community?
2. Vss. 11-18 contain elements of the Ten Commandments, most of them concerning relationships with one's neighbor. Who is apparently included in the term "neighbor," in this context? What common principle holds all of these specific rules together? Why is "I am the Lord" repeated at the end of each of five sections?
3. V. 17 contains what might sound to us like a startling command: "[Y]ou shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself." What is the basis for this obligation? Does it make sense to you? Why, or why not? Does it work? Does Mt 7: 1-5 contradict it?
4. V. 18 contains a line that is often thought to have been original with Jesus. But here it is in Leviticus! Was there anything new about Jesus' use of the line, or is this just the same?

I Cor 3: 10-11, 16-23

For your information

Paul continues his warnings against the eloquent and highly sophisticated teachers who are his rivals for the attention of the Corinthians. He quotes Job 5: 13 and Ps. 94: 11 to make his case.

Questions

1. Vss. 10-11 build on v. 9. How does Paul describe his own role in the building? What do you believe to be your role? What is the foundation, and what difference does that make in how the building proceeds?
2. If we are not only potential builders but in fact are ourselves buildings, what sort of building are we? According to vss. 16-17, what difference does that make?

3. What is Paul's implicit understanding of "wise" and "foolish" in vss. 19-20? Do these definitions have any relevance to the church as you know it?

4. How does Paul sum up his scolding of the Corinthians for their partisan boasting, in vss. 21-23? How does the gospel message make their claims nonsensical?

Matt 5: 38-48

For your information

The legal codes of many ancient peoples, including Israel, included the principle, "An eye for an eye," as a moderate and even humane way of changing the more ancient practice of disproportionate, massive revenge.

Consider these points:

--For a right-handed person, striking someone on the right cheek would mean striking back-handed, a gesture of master to inferior or slave. But turning one's cheek—one's left cheek—to the striker would force him to use the flat of his hand, a gesture of equal to equal.

--In that time of grave economic inequality, Jewish law prohibited taking the debtor's cloak, the last garment covering his nakedness. No respectable man would do that.

--At that time, the country was occupied by Rome, but its position was shaky and delicate. Roman soldiers were permitted to require a Jew to carry their load for one mile, but not two, for fear of inciting a rebellion.

"Perfect" can mean "whole," "complete."

Questions

1. In view of the above information, is it possible to read vss. 39-41 as something other than the demand for Christian passivity that we've all thought it was?
2. Is it possible, reasonable, or healthy to obey v. 42?
3. What is the theological reason behind the command of v. 44? How does Jesus' example help us to understand what obedience looks like in action?

[Eighth Sunday after Epiphany—not observed this year]

Is 49: 8-16a

Ps 131

I Cor 4: 1-5

Matt 6: 24-34

Is 49: 8-16a

For your information

This section of “Isaiah” comes from a time when the exile was ending and the people of Israel were returning home. It was most likely composed by a disciple of the prophet, meditating on the words of his master and using many of his images and phrases to speak of Israel's future. He usually talks of “Zion” and “Jerusalem” instead of “Israel” and “Jacob.”

Syene is Aswan, and marked the southern edge of Egypt. Questions

1. Who is the “you” in v. 8? What could it mean that this “you” is “given as a covenant to the people”?
2. What will be the marks of the new age, as described here? What images seem to be literal, which figurative? How do they build on images you've heard before? How might they apply to us, if at all?

3. Why might Zion speak as described in v. 14? What is God's reply? How does it define the relationship God has with Israel? Does the same language have a place in our Christian understanding—i.e. does Jesus illustrate this relationship?

I Cor 4: 1-5

For your information

This passage follows the magnificent summary of 3: 21-23, and depends on its cosmic understanding.

Questions

1. How does Paul define himself and his disciples in v. 1? Does the "us" perhaps include anyone else? Does it apply to us?
2. What is Paul's attitude toward the judgments others make of him? Does this sound arrogant, or humble, or what? What might other people think of his attitude? How is it related to the theology of 3: 21-23? What issues might it imply in the little Corinthian church? In our church?

Matt 6: 24-34

For your information

The Sermon on the Mount continues, perhaps as a compilation of Jesus' sayings in various places. Many of these are found in the "Q source," a collection of Jesus' sayings known to Matthew and Luke but not to Mark.

In v. 24, the KJV "mammon" is a Semitic word for money or wealth.

Questions

1. V. 24 is often printed as a distinct paragraph, but it could be a caption for much else in this "sermon." Wealth is just one example of an "idol" which gets in the way of God. Can you think of others, or find others in the "sermon"?

2. “Worry” or “be anxious” in these verses has a tinge of “be preoccupied,” “be obsessed.” Can you link these concerns with the “idolatry” of v. 24?

3. One commentator says that vss. 25-34 suggests a fairly prosperous audience in Galilee, since Jesus would surely not have been so insensitive as to talk this way to the truly, desperately poor. Do you agree? How would prosperous people react to this advice? How does it sound in a time of great economic stress in our country? Does v. 33 somehow sum it up and put it in perspective? How would you apply it to your own life?

4. Does v. 34 give a sharply different twist to what precedes it, or does it follow naturally once you understand the rest? Is it helpful, unnerving, or what?

Last Epiphany: Feb. 19

Ex. 24: 12-18

Ps 2 *or* 99

II Peter 1: 16-21

Matthew 17: 1-9

For your information

The season of Epiphany varies greatly in length, depending on the date of Easter (and therefore the beginning of Lent) which is on "the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21." When Lent starts early, we skip several weeks of Epiphany lessons and go straight to "Last Epiphany."

Ex. 24: 12-18

For your information

This encounter between God and Moses is one of a series at Mt. Sinai. Moses alone is permitted to go all the way up the mountain, though his

lieutenants accompany him for part of the way. Joshua appears as the one who goes furthest, and he will emerge as one of the two faithful leaders who will be permitted to take the next generation of Israelites into the Promised Land.

Questions

1. What sort of relationship between God and humankind is portrayed here? Where does Moses fit in? Is this the God you know? Is this God consistent with other familiar images of God in Hebrew Scripture? Does Jesus have similar characteristics, or is he quite different?
2. Where else in our Scriptures can you recall the number forty? Any symbolic connections?

If you have time

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, has just persuaded him to delegate authority, so he won't burn out (Ex. 18:13 ff.) Here he does that, with Aaron and Hur. See Ex. 32 for the results. What lessons might we derive from this? Why do you suppose this lesson is prescribed for the Sunday at the end of Epiphany, and before Ash Wednesday?

II Peter 1: 16-21

For your information

This letter seems to have been written by someone in the stream of Peter's tradition but not by Peter himself; it shows signs of a later stage of development. It addresses the problem of theodicy: the relationship of God to humankind, especially concerning evil, judgment, rewards and punishments.

Questions

1. What evidence does the writer offer for Peter's authority in speaking of Jesus? What did he learn through the Transfiguration?

2. How can we reconcile v. 20 with our own efforts to understand scripture for ourselves and our time? If we are not to interpret scripture for ourselves, who will do it for us? Or is there a way that we can have some confidence in our own understanding?

Matthew 17: 1-9

For your information

This event is said to be "six days later," after Peter's identification of Jesus as the messiah, and Jesus' rebuke of him for refusing to understand that the messiah must suffer.

The last two verses of our Hebrew Scripture (Malachi 4: 4-5) speak of Moses as the source of Israel's law, on which her life was based, and of the prophet Elijah as the one whom God will send back to prepare the people for "the great and terrible day of the Lord." John the Baptist was thought by many to be Elijah returned, and so was Jesus himself (Mt 16: 14).

"Transfiguration" means taking on a heavenly appearance.

Matthew is using Mark's account here (see Mk 9: 2-8), as Luke does (Lk 9: 28-36). In Mark, God's words in v. 5 draw from Ps 2: 7 and Deut 18: 15; Matthew's version adds one more echo, from Is 42: 1.

Questions

1. What might be the significance of Jesus' choosing only Peter, James and John to go with him to the mountaintop? How well does Peter handle the situation? Have you ever been in a situation of even remotely similar mystery and awe? If so, how did you react?

2. Can you find any parallels between the details of this event and Moses' mountaintop experience in Ex 24? What are we to understand from this? What might be the effect of all those echoes from Hebrew Scripture?

3. Why do you think Jesus asks the three disciples to tell no one what they have seen? Some scholars think that v. 9 may have been added later, and that this entire scene may have been a post-resurrection addition reflecting an understanding of Jesus that came only much later. Do you think this is possible? probable? Why, or why not? Could it be seen as an inner spiritual event, rather than an objective, external one?

4. How do you think this passage serves both as a culmination for the Epiphany season, and as a “jumping-off place” for Lent?

If you have time

--Compare Matthew's version of the transfiguration with those in Mark and Luke, and consider the effect of any variations.

--Look up the three references to Hebrew Scripture in v. 5 as noted above, to see what each of them contributes to our understanding of who Jesus is.