

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, YEAR B
Proper 18-Last Pentecost RCL
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 B, and our Gospel is Mark.

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 B, it follows the “Monarchical narratives,” the stories of Israel’s kings. 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.

Proper 18: Sept. 5

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Ps 125

James 2: 1-10 (11-13) 14-17

Mark 7: 31-37

For your information

The book of Proverbs is a “collection of collections,” sayings and poems. Some of them may predate the Exile, but most of them probably originated later, during a long, hard period when the Spirit was thought to be gone from Israel. They offer sound advice for living from day to day.

Questions

1. What particular concerns are addressed in these short selections? What assumptions about God seem to lie behind them? Would Jesus have spoken like this?

Isaiah 35: 4-7a

For your information

This passage represents the pre-exilic Isaiah, who has spoken dire warnings about the suffering ahead for Israel but always follows with assurance of ultimate redemption.

Questions

1. What can you infer about the people to whom these words are addressed? Might they also apply to the disciples at this point on the journey? to us?
2. What images from Israel's history does Isaiah renew here? How does he emphasize that salvation is God's work alone, not within our power?

James 2: 1-10 (11-13), 14-17

1. Peter's teaching, quoted in Acts 10:34, is the principle here. How have James' audience apparently violated it? Where do you see it violated in your daily life? in your church? In what ways do you think you show partiality?
2. According to vv. 6-7, what are some sensible reasons for not favoring the rich? Do you agree?
3. How might it be true that breaking this law of impartiality might undercut all other areas of lawfulness (v. 10)?
4. What sort of person seems to be the particular target of vss. 11-13? How does v. 13 sum up James' theme? How would you apply this principle in specific situations you know of?
5. Vv. 14-18 take us back into the debate about the relationship between faith and works. What is James' position here? Do you read it as contradicting Ephesians 2:4-10, or is it just refining that passage?

Mark 7: 24-37 (and read vs. 24-30)

For your information

Jesus is returning from a trip to the far north (Sidon and Tyre) to the more familiar region of the Sea of Galilee. He speaks in Aramaic, his own native language but apparently not that of Mark's audience.

A Syrophenician woman is not a Jew, but a Gentile/pagan.

Questions

1. Here are two more of Jesus' healing miracles. Are they much like the ones we've already seen, or do they show us something new?
2. Why does the Syrophenician woman come to Jesus?
- 3.. How would you describe their conversation? What is his first response? How does she challenge him? How does his response change? Why? What tone do you hear? Is this the Jesus you see in other stories about him?
4. Why do you think Jesus takes the deaf man "aside in private" to heal him, when apparently others have been healed in public?
5. Who is the "them" in v. 36? Why do they not do as Jesus orders them? Is their disobedience helpful or harmful?
6. Since vs. 24-30 are also about a healing miracle, why do you think they are left out? What do they add, if anything? Are they in any way a transition between what precedes and what follows?

If you have time

--Compare v. 28 with the "Prayer of Humble Access" (BCP, p. 337, bottom). Any thoughts?

Proper 19: Sept. 12

Proverbs 1: 20-33

Ps 19

James 3: 1-12

Mark 8: 27-38

Proverbs 1: 20-33

Questions

1. What is the character of this woman "Wisdom" who speaks in this passage? Who are her targets?
2. Why is she so angry at the "simple" and "foolish"? How are these traits different from those of "fools for Christ"? What are their apparent consequences? Where do you see such people in your own life? What kind of trouble do they get into, or cause? Did they cause trouble for Jesus?

3. How will she respond when the foolish call on her at last? Why? Is this a godlike, or Christlike, attitude?

Wisdom of Solomon 7: 26-8: 1

Questions

1. Here is another portrait of Wisdom, to match against the one above, in Proverbs. What are her particular qualities? Does she seem to be another way of imagining the Holy Spirit, or something else? If so, how does she help us to imagine the Holy Spirit's work more fully?

2. Why is Wisdom more beautiful than the sun, superior to the light, victorious over evil? How do you imagine her "[ordering] all things well"? Be as specific as possible.

Isaiah 50: 4-9

For your information

This passage is often referred to as the "third Servant Song" of Isaiah (see also 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 52:13-53:12). Early Christians found in these passages a clear prediction of the sort of messiah they should expect, and indeed met in Jesus.

Questions

1. What role does the servant understand that God has assigned him? Do you ever find yourself in this role?

2. What suffering does the servant undergo as a result? Why do you imagine that he is treated this way? Have you ever been treated like that for similar reasons, or seen it happen to others?

3. Why is the servant confident of ultimate vindication? What will happen to his enemies? How exactly do you envision the fulfillment of v. 9b?

4. What do you find here that reminds you of Jesus?

James 3: 1-12

Questions

1. According to James, what sort of person is qualified to become a teacher? Why are most people not qualified?

2. Why is the tongue so powerful? Is James' picture of it in vss. 5-10 overstated, or does it match your experience? What may be the problems in the Christian community to which he is reacting?

3. What should the tongues of Christians be like instead?

Mark 8: 27-38

For your information

Caesarea Philippi is about 30 miles due north of the Sea of Galilee.

The disciples have heard people identifying Jesus with other giant figures from Israel's past, ancient and recent, in accordance with Israel's tradition of finding a precedent for God's new actions in their history. (See also Mk 6: 14-16.)

Questions

1. What is there about Jesus that might strongly remind people of John the Baptist, Elijah (see Malachi 4:5-6) or other prophets?
2. What is the significance of Peter's words in v. 29? Why does Jesus order the disciples to tell no one?
3. We have already read Mk 8:31-38 this year, in Lent. Why do you think it's being repeated now? What is the dramatic effect of putting Peter's insight just before it?
4. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus, moments after calling him the Messiah?
5. How does Jesus define discipleship in vs. 34-38? How do his words apply to us? to you?

Proper 20: Sept. 19

Proverbs 31: 10-31

Ps 1

James 3: [13-15] 16-4:3 [4-6] 7-8a

Mark 9: 30-37

Proverbs 31: 10-31

Questions

1. A note in the NRSV says, "The description seems to stem from a male point of view." Do you agree? What traits of this "capable wife" do you find important and appealing for all women? for all **people**?
2. What is left out? Are there other ways in which a woman can show that she "fears the Lord"? Are there any dangerous limitations in this picture, or is it a joyful celebration of one kind of choice that generously provides for everyone's well-being? Could Jesus have spoken about women in this way?

Wisdom (of Solomon) 1: 16-2: 1 [6-11] 12-22

For your information

This book is often attributed to Solomon, who was reputed to be very wise; but it was probably written much later, during the period when Israel was defeated and exhausted and believed that her glory was gone--along with her passionate prophets. This and much of the other material in the Apocrypha reflect the need to get along as best one can, without much hope for great things.

“Breath” (2:2) in Hebrew is the same word as “wind” or “spirit.”

Questions

1. Considering what you know of Israel’s covenant-based history, what are the implications of making a covenant with death (1:16)?
2. How do the ungodly describe the human situation? Is this a common attitude?
3. What do they prescribe as the appropriate way to live? Does it in fact seem to follow from their premises about life?
4. How do these people view the righteous man? Why? What do they propose to do about him?
5. Why are we reading this passage now, near the end of our journey? What does it have to do with what lies ahead?

If you have time

--Compare the attitude expressed in this passage with the familiar passage of Ecclesiasticus 44: 9 ff.

James 3: [13-15] 16-4:3 [4-6] 7-8a

Questions

1. Here again we have a contrast between the righteous and the unrighteousness. What matches do you see between this passage and the lesson from Wisdom? How does James explain the causes of wickedness and disorder? How would you explain vs. 4:2b-3?
2. What is the nature of “wisdom from above”?
3. Why is “friendship with the world” “enmity with God”? Do you think this is true? What might be the connection between pleasure-seeking and oppression? (See v. 11.)
4. How is God’s jealousy (4:5) different from the “envy” spoken of in 3:16? Or is it?

5. As suggested in vv. 7-8a, what particular problem has the community been having? Why does it matter?

If you have time

--Compare this passage with Mt 27: 39-43.

Mark 9: 30-37

For your information

Capernaum is on the northwest tip of the Sea of Galilee.

Questions

1. According to vs. 30-32, what is the focus of Jesus' work with the disciples at this point? Why?
2. To what degree do the disciples seem to understand him? What is their chief concern? What is the point of his words about the child? How do they speak to what the disciples have been saying?
3. What does this passage have to do with the other readings for today?

Proper 21: Sept. 26

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10; 9: 20-22

Ps 124

James 5: 13-20

Mark 9: 38-50

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10; 9: 20-22

For your information

The book of Esther is part of Israel's historical record, but it concerns the heroism of Queen Esther, wife of the Persian King Ahasuerus, in saving Jews from a "planned anti-Semitic pogrom"(NRSV). Its suitability for the canon was long disputed, because almost nothing of Israel's God or its practices and institutions appears, and it's a violent story. But God may be inferred to be "in the wings," using non-Jewish means to care for the Jews.

Esther is the cousin and adopted daughter of Mordecai, a Jew. When the king sought a new queen, he made sure that Esther was presented, but forbade her to reveal her family origins. Ahasuerus fell in love with Esther, and made her his queen. He then appointed Haman to be his chief official. Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, and Haman—knowing that Mordecai

was a Jew—planned with the king to destroy all Jews. Hearing of this from Mordecai, Esther used guile to gain the king’s promise to grant her a petition.

The day of observance for Esther is still kept—the scroll telling her story is read on Purim—and is rare in not having its origins in the Mosaic tradition.

Questions

1. What is the context Esther has created to present her petition? What are her charges against Haman? What is his punishment? What does this have to do with us?

Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16 (and read 17-23), **24-29**

Questions

1. What stage in the journey have the Israelites reached, as shown in vs. 4-6? Do you recognize this attitude? What causes it? What is God’s opinion of it?
2. How is Moses feeling about his role now? Why? Have you ever felt like that?
3. What sort of relief does Moses ask God for? What does God give him instead? Is this a good solution? Does it apply to us?
4. What is God’s response, via Moses, to the people’s complaints (vs. 18-20)? Is this a good solution? What sort of God is this? Why do you think that God responds so differently to Moses and to the people?
5. Why is Joshua upset about Eldad’s and Medad’s behavior? How does Moses respond? What do we learn about him? Is he right? Is this how Jesus behaves?
6. Why are we reading this passage at this point in our journey?

James 5: 13-20

For your information

Here James continues to advise Christians on how to live in community over the long haul. The practice of anointing the sick—in the RC church, a sacrament called “extreme unction”—depends on this passage.

Questions

1. What does James claim to be the power of prayer for the suffering? What are the rites he prescribes? What kind of “healing” does he seem to expect as a result?

2. Do you see these practices in church communities today, in this form or some other? How do we use them in ours? Is your understanding the same as James'?

3. What do vv. 19-20 have to do with the passage on healing which has gone before?

Mark 9: 38-50

Questions

1. What is John's worry in v. 38? What is Jesus' response, and why? What similarity do you see to the passage from Numbers?

2. This passage contains some of Jesus' most spectacular hyperbole. What advice does he give? To what extent would you apply it? Does it seem to be connected with John's complaint, or not? How does it fit this point in the journey?

3. What does it mean to "have salt in yourselves"? Why was that important for Jesus' followers? Do you think you do?

If you have time

--Compare and contrast this passage to Mt 12:30, Lk 11:23.

Proper 22: Oct. 3

Job 1: 1; 2: 1-10 (and read 1:9)

Ps 26

Hebrews 1: 1-4; 2: 5-12

Mark 10: 2-16

Job 1: 1 (also v. 9); 2: 1-10

For your information

The book of Job may have been written around the time of the Exile, in the sixth c. BCE. It is in the form of a folktale.

Satan dares God to let him test Job's integrity by bringing terrible suffering upon him. God agrees. Job's animals, servants and children die, but Job does not curse God.

Questions

1. What sort of man do we know Job to be from v. 1? How does God confirm that description?

2. What image do we have of Satan in 2: 2? What further test does he propose? Why does God consent? What limits does God set?

3. What suffering does Satan inflict? How does Job respond? What does his wife advise? Why? What are we to think of Job, of Satan, of God? Do you agree with this picture?

4. Compare 1: 9 to 2: 3b. Same phrase, different context. How do they speak to each other?

If you have time

--Read Archibald MacLeish's play, "JB," for another perspective on this story.

Genesis 2: 18-24

For your information

The tradition of Israel held that naming, or calling by name, implied great authority over the one named. Giving a name to someone or something both defined (it) and, in the case of a child, was a sort of prayer for its life.

In v. 18, the word translated as "helper" in the NRSV implies "partner"--not subordination but equality.

The word translated "man" is not gender-specific; it's more like "human being." Not until vs. 21-25 is a distinction made between genders.

Questions

1. Compare 2:18 with 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25, 1:31. What is the implication of this dramatic contrast?

2. What relationship between God and "the man" is implied by God's delegating the power of naming?

3. How does this mythical account of human creation suggest God's will for the relationship between men and women? for the ideal bond of marriage? Is it possible to extend this image so that it includes other close human relationships, at least in part?

Hebrews 1: 1-4; 2: [1-4] 5-12

For your information

The book of Hebrews is not (just) a letter, but an essay/exhortation. It seems to come from the time when most Christians still thought of themselves as Jews, and there was much concern about whether they could remain Jews, or whether their devotion to the risen Christ created a conflict that made that impossible.

The phrase translated here as “a little lower than the angels,” the wording of the Greek translation of the OT in use at that time (the Septuagint), reads in Hebrew manuscripts “a little lower than God.”

The high priest was the one who made animal “sacrifices of atonement” in the central chamber of the Jerusalem Temple, at Yom Kippur, for the sake of the people.

Questions

1. How does the writer summarize Christ’s role as God’s new way of speaking to us (1: 1-4)? Is this how you think about him?
2. The quotation from Ps 8:4-6 is an expression of amazement at what God has made of human life. Do you hear any echoes of the reading from Genesis?
3. In what sense might it be true that God has subjected all things to human beings? How is it that we don’t yet see the evidence of that? Or do we? Are some things subjected to us too much?
4. How does the writer explain God’s work of salvation through Jesus? How did Jesus become like us, and why? How are we his “brothers and sisters”?
5. How does the author of Hebrews explain Jesus’ suffering and death? Is this the way you understand it?
6. In v. 2: 4, the usual translation, “by the grace of God,” appears in other manuscripts as “apart from God. Some scholars prefer that choice, because it’s perhaps troubling enough that early scribe might have changed it. What do you think?

Mark 10: 2-16

For your information

Jesus and the disciples have now left Galilee, his home and the place of his ministry so far, and have come into Judea. From now on, the journey clearly takes them closer to Jerusalem.

Pharisees were scholars of the law, and spent much of their time raising questions about it; they saw this as a religious duty. Challenging a bright young man with some of its subtleties would ordinarily have been a pleasure for them, with no negative intent.

It was easy for a man to divorce his wife. A wife was not permitted to divorce her husband.

Children were not idealized, as is sometimes true in our culture, but usually had little value until they matured.

Questions

1. Is there any indication that the Pharisees were up to no good in their questioning of Jesus? Why do you think they picked that particular question? How is it related to Gen 2, quoted here by Jesus? to the teachings of Moses?

2. How does Jesus respond to their question? What effect do you think this answer would have on the Pharisees?

3. What is the significance of vs. 10-12, when compared to v. 4? Why do you think Jesus says this part privately? In view of the strictness of this statement, do you think our church is wrong in permitting divorce as well as remarriage?

4. What is it about little children that Jesus considers not only valuable, but essential for the kingdom of God?

Proper 23: Oct. 10

Job 23: 1-9, 16-17

Ps 22: 1-15

Hebrews 4: 12-16

Mark 10: 17-31

Job 23: 1-9, 16-17

For your information

After more catastrophes, Job's friends have advised him to search his conscience for some unknown offense, or to confess even if there's nothing to confess. Job has refused their advice.

Questions

1. What is Job's state of mind in this passage? How is he thinking about God? What does he still trust about God? Why does he want to "vanish in darkness"? Have you ever felt that way?

Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15

For your information

Amos is a pre-exilic prophet, who has left his home in rural Judea to bring harsh warnings to the complacent leaders of the northern kingdom.

Questions

1. What is the evidence that Amos' audience is not "seek[ing] the Lord"? What does he say will happen to them? How does he expect them to respond to his words?

2. What “gate” do you think Amos is talking about? Why does he choose it as his site for prophecy? Do we have an equivalent? If so, how could we establish justice there?

Hebrews 4: 12-16

Questions

1. How does the writer describe the effect of the word of God, in vs. 12-13? Have you experienced it that way?
2. How does Jesus qualify as a “great high priest”? How has he moved from sacrificial victim (as in Isaiah) to priest? How does he compare with the high priests of Israel, and why?
3. What evidence do we have that Jesus “in every respect has been tested as we are”? Do you think that is true?
4. Why are we to “approach the throne of grace with boldness”? Shouldn’t we approach it humbly, even fearfully?

If you have time

--Compare v. 13 with the Collect for Purity (BCP, p. 323). How are they alike? How are they different? What does this collect say about the basis of our coming to the Eucharist?

Mark 10: 17-27 (28-31)

For your information

The “journey” spoken of here is bringing Jesus ever closer to Jerusalem.

Questions

1. How does this man approach Jesus? What does his manner show? Why does Jesus reject his language?
2. Why does Jesus recite most of the Ten Commandments to this man? What is his response? Do you believe him?
3. How does Jesus feel about this man? Why?
4. What does this man lack, in Jesus’ view? What does Jesus ask him to do to get it? What is the effect of this order on the man, and why?
5. Why does Jesus think it’s especially hard for a rich person to enter God=s kingdom? Do you agree? How does this apply to us?

6. Why are the disciples astounded? Why does this make them wonder who can be saved, since Jesus is only talking about the rich here?

7. Who can be saved? How? Do you see yourself in this number?

Proper 24: Oct. 17

Job 38: 1-7, (34-41)

Ps 104: 1-9, 25, 37b (v. 37b)

Hebrews 5: 1-10

Mark 10: 35-45

Job 38: 1-7, (34-41)

Questions

1. How does God present himself to Job? What is the point of God's questions? What powers do they display? Are they a sufficient answer to Job's anguish?

Isaiah 53: 4-12

For your information

This passage is part of the fourth "[Suffering] Servant Song," seen by pious Jews as a description of Israel's role and by early Christians as a prophecy about the sort of messiah they should have expected.

The practice of making offerings to atone for sins was a central part of Israel's ritual practice. Probably the most ancient sacrifices were of human beings, but the story of Abraham and Isaac seems at least in part to say that Israel's God would not require that; animals were enough. By Jesus' time, there was an elaborate system prescribing how many and what kind of animals should be offered; and the offering was customarily made by the high priest in the Temple's central chamber, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. It was that chamber's curtain, closing it to everyone except the high priest, that was said to be torn apart at the moment of Jesus' death (Mk 15:38).

Questions

1. What is the partial truth in the common understanding of the servant stated in v. 4b? What has not been understood until now, as explained in the rest of the passage?

2. Why was it necessary for the servant to take on this role? What part of his suffering was caused by human beings, and how? What part was caused by God? Does this understanding make sense to you?

3. How will God reward the servant? Does this seem to you like sufficient compensation for such suffering?

Hebrews 5: 1-10

For your information

The Canaanite priest Melchizedek appears briefly and mysteriously in Gen 14: 17-20. Jewish tradition elevated him above Abraham and Levi.

Questions

1. How does the writer describe the character and qualifications of a high priest?
2. How does Jesus meet and exceed these qualifications?

Mark 10: 35-45

Questions

1. It could be said that James and John are here “approach[ing] the throne of grace with boldness” (see Hebrews 4: 16, above)! Is that OK? Why, or why not?
2. What is their request? How does Jesus respond to it? What do you think is his tone in doing so? Why?
3. Are these men in fact able to drink from his cup? Or be baptized with his baptism? How will this happen? Why can he not grant their request to sit beside him?
4. Why are the other disciples angry about their request? How does Jesus respond to them? How is this an answer to all twelve? What does it say to us?

Proper 25: Oct. 24

Job 42: 1-6, 10-17

Ps 34: 1-8 (19-22)

Hebrews 7: 23-28

Mark 10: 46-52

Job 42: 1-6, 10-17

For your information

The Hebrew word often translated “evil” in 42: 11 may also be translated, “trouble,” “suffering,” “trials,” “adversities.”

Questions

1. In vss. 1-6, Job expresses his repentance for uttering “what I did not understand,” and says that he now despises himself for that. Given what he has suffered at God’s hands, do you think this is what God expects of us?
2. Vss. 10-17 describe the rich blessings of Job’s later years. Is this truly compensation for “all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him?”

Jeremiah 31: 7-9

1. Jer 30 makes clear that God has been punishing Israel for her numerous sins, but this passage is joyful proclamation of forgiveness and consolation to come! How does this match the passage from Job, or not? What does it say about God’s relationship with Israel? How does God see these people who will be regathered?

Hebrews 7: 23-28

Questions

1. This passage continues the writer’s argument for Christ’s superiority over all other high priests. What reasons does he give? (See Ps. 110: 1)

Mark 10: 46-52

For your information

Jericho is just 15 miles from Jerusalem--a day’s walk.

A blind man’s cloak was not only his last remnant of protection and decency but also the receptacle for whatever alms were given to him.

Questions

1. How does Bartimaeus greet Jesus? Why? Why do “many” reprove him? Why does he persist?
2. Why does Jesus require the blind man to come to him, rather than going over to him?
3. What is the significance of the blind man’s throwing off his cloak? of his springing up?
4. Why does Jesus ask what the blind man wants him to do? Isn’t it obvious?
5. Many of those whom Jesus heals are sent home, ordered to be silent. But this man follows him, becoming a disciple! Why?

6. What is the effect of having this event so close to Jerusalem, when we were nearly at the end of the journey?

****All Saints' Sunday (observed Nov. 7)**

[Note: When All Saints' Day—always Nov. 1—does not fall on a Sunday, its lessons preempt those for the following Sunday. Both sets are included here, so as not to miss part of the Lectionary sequence.]

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9 (in the Apocrypha)

Ps 24

or Isaiah 25: 6-9

Revelation 21: 1-6a

John 11: 32-44

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9

Questions

1. What promises are made to the righteous about God's care for them? What is the difference between what "the foolish" believe about their deaths and what is true?
2. How do you understand the "discipline" and "testing" that will prepare them to "shine forth"? What then will be the nature of their immortal life? Is this how you imagine it?

Isaiah 25: 6-9

For your information

Even as Isaiah continues to warn Israel about the punishment that God will bring for her sinfulness, he also points to ultimate grace.

Questions

1. What is the promise that God holds out for the future? To whom is it given?
2. What will be destroyed, as God makes an end to mourning and disgrace?

Revelation 21: 1-6a

For your information

End-time prophecies usually picture either a gradual movement of the creation toward perfection, through God's interventions, or a sudden, dramatic end of what has been 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. (cf, Is 54)

Compare Jn 5: 28-29 (Jesus predicts the dead coming forth).

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 11: 32-44

For your information

Mary and Martha of Bethany were apparently Jesus’ friends; he stayed with them on his travels. When their brother Lazarus fell ill, they sent word to Jesus, but he did not come immediately, saying it was for God’s glory.

It was believed that after death, the spirit stayed for three days. By the fourth day the spirit was gone.

Questions

1. What do we learn about Jesus from his reaction to Lazarus’ death? How would you answer the question in v. 37?

2. What details underscore the actual death of Lazarus? What does Jesus’ raising of this very dead man seem to show? Is this a sort of public relations trick to impress the crowds, or what? What does it mean for us?

Proper 26: Oct. 31

Ruth 1: 1-18

Ps 146

or Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

Ps 119: 1-8

Hebrews 9: 11-14

Mark 12: 28-34

Ruth 1: 1-18

For your information

The book of Ruth is a short story claiming to have been composed during the period “when the judges ruled”—i.e. before Israel had kings, when local authorities governed particular regions. Some legends linked the Moabites to the Israelites through Lot, but they worshipped different gods and were therefore scorned by proper Jews.

A widow was all but helpless in that society. Without a man to support and protect her, she was completely dependent on the charity of others. For a young widow, remarriage was an urgent necessity.

Bethlehem was the home of Jesse, father of King David. Bethlehem is sometimes called “the city of David.”

Questions

1. Why did Elimelech take his family to Moab? Whom did his sons marry? What was the series of deaths that devastated the family?
2. Why did Naomi decide to return home? Why did she tell her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to stay in their homeland?
3. Why did Ruth insist on going with her? In what ways might she be a model of faithfulness?
4. For a Christian, what reverberations might be set off by the emphasis on Bethlehem in this story?
- 5..Why do you think this story is included in Holy Scripture?

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

For your information

This passage is part of Moses’ addresses to “all Israel,” just before they enter the Promised Land without him.

Vs. 4-9 are known as the Shema (from the first word, “hear”), Israel=s central commandment.

Vs. 8-9 are taken literally by many observant Jews.

Questions

1. According to vs. 1-3, what is the importance of the words Moses is about to say?
2. What is the great commandment, in v. 5? How is it related to v. 4? What is Israel asked to do with it? Should we do the same?

Hebrews 9: 11-14

For your information

Before Christ, Jewish priests acted on behalf of the people, making animal sacrifices in the Temple. Only the High Priest could enter into the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This building was a more permanent replica of the tents which were carried with the Israelites and served as their places of worship.

Questions

1. What sort of “high priest” is Christ? What are “the good things that have come”?
2. In what way is the new “tent” “greater and more perfect”? What sacrifice is made there? How is it “once for all”?

Mark 12: 28-34

For your information

The scribe’s question was often asked of respected Jewish teachers. Jesus’ response juxtaposes two passages from Hebrew Scripture, Deut 6:4-5 and Lev 19:18.

Questions

1. Jesus is only quoting Hebrew Scripture in vs. 29-31, and yet his words are often seen as radical. Why?
2. As Temple authorities, the scribes were intent upon preserving the tradition, and so were often hostile to Jesus. Do you sense any hostility in this one? How does Jesus view him? Why?
3. Why does this exchange stop all questioning of Jesus?

[Note: When All Saints' Day—always Nov. 1—does not fall on a Sunday, its lessons preempt those for the following Sunday. Both sets are included here, so as not to miss part of the Lectionary sequence.]

****All Saints’ Sunday: Nov. 7**

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9 (in the Apocrypha)

Ps 24

or Isaiah 25: 6-9

Revelation 21: 1-6a

John 11: 32-44

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9

Questions

1. What promises are made to the righteous about God's care for them? What is the difference between what "the foolish" believe about their deaths and what is true?
2. How do you understand the "discipline" and "testing" that will prepare them to "shine forth"? What then will be the nature of their immortal life? Is this how you imagine it?

Isaiah 25: 6-9

For your information

Even as Isaiah continues to warn Israel about the punishment that God will bring for her sinfulness, he also points to ultimate grace.

Questions

1. What is the promise that God holds out for the future? To whom is it given?
2. What will be destroyed, as God makes an end to mourning and disgrace?

Revelation 21: 1-6a

For your information

End-time prophecies usually picture either a gradual movement of the creation toward perfection, through God's interventions, or a sudden, dramatic end of what has been 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. (cf, Is 54)

Compare Jn 5: 28-29 (Jesus predicts the dead coming forth).

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 11: 32-44

For your information

Mary and Martha of Bethany were apparently Jesus' friends; he stayed with them on his travels. When their brother Lazarus fell ill, they sent word to Jesus, but he did not come immediately, saying it was for God's glory.

It was believed that after death, the spirit stayed for three days. By the fourth day the spirit was gone.

Questions

1. What do we learn about Jesus from his reaction to Lazarus' death? How would you answer the question in v. 37?
2. What details underscore the actual death of Lazarus? What does Jesus' raising of this very dead man seem to show? Is this a sort of public relations trick to impress the crowds, or what? What does it mean for us?

[Proper 27: Nov. 7

Ruth 3: 1-5; 4: 13-17

Ps 127

or 1 Kings 17: 8-16

Ps 146

Hebrews 9: 24-28

Mark 12: 38-44

Ruth 3: 1-5; [3:6-4: 12] 13-17

For your information

Boaz is related to Naomi's late husband. Israelite law required that the poor be permitted to glean what remained around the edges of fields after the reapers were done.

It would have been of great importance to Naomi that Ruth should marry again and bear children to carry on the line through Naomi's relative Boaz.

Questions

1. What role does Naomi play in finding Ruth a new husband? What does she advise Ruth to do?
2. What are the results of Ruth's actions? What complicated business dealings are required before Ruth belongs to Boaz?
3. Is God evident anywhere in this? What do the women around Naomi think? What do we learn about the significance of Ruth's son by Boaz?

If you have time

--Compare v. 17 with Mt 1: 5.

1 Kings 17: 8-16 (and read vs. 17-24)

For your information

The book of Kings (I and II were originally one book) traces the history of Israel's rulers after the death of King David. Starting with Solomon, known for his wisdom but too fond of fancy buildings and foreign women, it describes a gradual or sometimes precipitous downward path, with Israel's original ambivalence about having kings shifting to a grim history of self-aggrandizement and corruption. Ahab is the brutal king of the (by now separate) northern kingdom. The office of king's prophet, so well fulfilled by Nathan, has been corrupted too; prophets say what kings want to hear, and the true prophets must come from outside the system. Elijah is the most distinguished of these, and becomes associated with the messiah to come.

Zarephath is on the Phoenician coast, out of Ahab's territory and perhaps beyond his reach.

Questions

1. The obligation of hospitality to strangers was very strong in that part of the world. Did the widow show hospitality to Elijah?
2. Why does the widow blame Elijah for her son's death? Why does Elijah initially blame God? Is either right?
3. What are we to learn about Elijah from this story? What aspects of it might remind us of stories about Jesus? Is there anything about it/him that seems different from Jesus?

Hebrews 9: 24-28 (and read vs. 1-23)

For your information

The "first covenant" spoken of here is not the first one described in Hebrew Scripture; those with Noah and Abraham precede it. It is the one with Moses, which includes a long prescription for building and decorating the tent (later a temple) where the Ark of the Covenant would rest.

Questions

1. What was the nature of the sacred building prescribed by the "first covenant"? What was the "first tent" for? What was the "second tent" for? Who could go there, and for what purpose?
2. How did Christ replace this building? In what way was his "greater and perfect tent" better?

3. According to this writer, what is the purpose of blood in creating a covenant? How then did Christ's death contribute to this new covenant? Do you agree that blood and death are necessary to such a radical new beginning? Do you accept the writer's analogy, that it will become effective only when its author dies?

4. What do you think the writer means by "sketches of the heavenly things" (v. 23)? What are "the heavenly things themselves"? Why do they need "better sacrifices"? How is Christ's sacrifice better? Do you understand his death this way?

If you have time

--See Ex 24:5-8 for the writer's reference concerning blood sacrifice and the first covenant.

Mark 12: 38-44

For your information

The best seats in the synagogue were in front, facing the congregation. The "places of honor at banquets" were couches, on which guests reclined. The scribes' close association with the Temple gave them the privileges that go with high prestige. The "treasury" is that of the Temple; since it was the symbolic center of Jewish society, big donors might expect to be honored.

These same scribes became the trustees of a widow's inheritance, since widows weren't thought capable of administering their own money. When scribes were corrupt, the widows were impoverished.

Questions

1. How does Jesus characterize the scribes? How do you account for the difference between this description and the image of the scribe in 12: 28-34?

2. What is Jesus' attitude toward the widow's small contribution? Should she be giving to the Temple at all? Who profits from her giving? How? What might Jesus' comments about scribes that precede this passage have to do with her gift?]

Proper 28: Nov. 14

I Samuel 1: 4-20

or I Samuel 2: 1-10

Ps.16

Hebrews 10: 11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Mark 13: 1-8

I Samuel 1: 4-20

For your information

Elkanah's wife Hannah has been barren for many years, a devastating loss for a woman.

A nazirite was one set apart, consecrated to God. Nazirites let their hair grow long and avoided strong drink, as a sign of their dedication. Samson was also a nazirite.

Questions

1. What is Hannah's condition when we meet her? What makes it worse? Does Elkanah love her less because of it?
2. What is Hannah's pledge to God if she bears a son?
3. What probably leads to Eli's misunderstanding of her appearance? How does he help her? What is the result?
4. What other women in Scripture were barren and then conceived? What became of their sons?

I Samuel 2: 1-10

For your information

After Samuel's birth, Hannah keeps her promise to dedicate him to God. This is her hymn on the occasion of bringing him to the temple at Shiloh.

Questions

1. What qualities does Hannah praise in the Lord? What in her experience has let her know God this way? Do you know God in these terms too?
2. What are the opposite poles of God's actions as Hannah sees them? Have you seen these in fact?
3. How might this hymn prepare us for the life that Samuel will lead, for his special calling?

Daniel 12: 1-3

For your information

The book of Daniel was written during the time of the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 BCE), who persecuted Jews. The author told a story of visions and eventual triumph over the oppressor, but set it in an earlier period to disguise its intent, as apocalyptic writers often did. This is the only apocalyptic book in the OT; there are three in the Apocrypha, and one, Revelation, in the NT. This passage is the first explicit reference to resurrection.

The “princes” spoken of here are angels, who were believed to have responsibility for particular territories, and sometimes came into conflict. Michael is the patron angel of the Jews; Gabriel, God’s chosen messenger to Daniel, apparently had to delegate him to hold off the patron angel of the kingdom of Persia before he could come to Daniel (Dan 10:13).

Questions

1. What are the specifics of the promised deliverance? How will it come about? When? What might the writer’s contemporaries make of the somewhat cryptic images in it? How might this promise apply to us?

Hebrews 10: 11-14 (15-18) 19-25

For your information

This passage continues the theme of Christ as the new High Priest.

The quotation is from Jeremiah 31: 33-34, in which “the full and final remission of sins” (NRSV) is promised.

Questions

1. What endless repetition has been required of priests? Why is it no longer required?
2. How does the passage from Jeremiah provide a frame for understanding Christ’s priesthood?
3. What has become of the barriers that kept nearly everyone out of the inner sanctuary? What sort of welcome may we expect now, and why?
4. Because of this gift, how are we to treat one another?

Mark 13: 1-8

For your information

The temple built by Solomon had been destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. Now a rebuilding project was underway but not yet completed. The rebellion of 69-70 would result in the destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple, by the Romans. At that time, Jewish Christians would flee the city, believing that Christ was their new sacred center, not Jerusalem. Many Jews who were not Christians would stay to try to defend the city, and see the Christians’ choice as a final betrayal, a reason to understand them as no longer Jews.

Questions

1. What is Jesus’ prophecy about the great stone buildings around them? What will be a threat to the disciples’ clarity during the confusing and dangerous times to come?

2. What does he predict will happen before the end? Why does he refer to these things as “birth pangs”? Do you agree that this is how important new things are born?

Last Pentecost, Christ the King, Proper 29: Nov. 21

II Samuel 23: 1-7

Ps 93

Revelation 1: [1-4a] 4b-8

John 18: 33-37

For your information

This last Sunday of the Pentecost season celebrates “Christ the King.” Next Sunday we will move into Advent, and await the birth of the child.

II Samuel 23: 1-7

For your information

David has lived to an advanced age, with great accomplishments and much honor.

Questions

1. How is David identified in v. 1? What parts of his history do you remember that match this description?
2. According to David, what has God done for him? To what does he compare a just ruler, of the sort he has tried to be? What is the basis of his trust in God for now and the future?
3. What is the fate of the godless? Do you know any people who are truly godless? Do you experience them that way?

Daniel 7: 9-10 [11-12] 13-14

For your information

Here is an earlier segment of the apocalyptic vision in the book of Daniel. Explicitly, it’s about the long-gone tyrannical kingdom of Babylon, but the writer would have intended the reader to apply it to the contemporary Greek empire.

Questions

1. What is the vision of God in vs. 9-10? Is this how you imagine God?

2. What becomes of the dreadful beast, in this vision? Who might be “the rest of the beasts”? What happens to them?

3. How might the people of Israel have understood vs. 13-14? What could these verses mean to Christians? Why are we reading this now, on “Christ the King” Sunday?

Revelation 1: 1-8

For your information

This passage begins an apocalyptic vision that anticipates the fulfillment of Christian promise. Most of it was probably written during the harsh reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, who required his subjects to call him “Lord and God.” Like other apocalyptic literature, it is thick with numbers and symbols and fantastic beasts, both to inspire and encourage its oppressed readers and to conceal its true subject.

The number seven is associated with wholeness, completeness. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet--the beginning and the end.

There are legends about the author, but no certainty about who he is except for his name.

Questions

1. What similarities do you find between this passage and the images in Daniel? What differences?

2. How is Jesus brought into the apocalyptic tradition here? What are the particularly Christian features of this vision? What sort of promise does it make? Do we think about kings, or ideal leaders, this way?

John 18: 33-37 (and read v. 38)

For your information

Pilate was a Roman governor, the highest official in a land at the far edge of an increasingly exhausted empire. The Jewish officials have now handed Jesus over to Roman authorities, though Pilate has seemed reluctant to accept responsibility for him. We will read this passage again on Good Friday.

Questions

1. Here is an encounter between two “kings.” It is marked by John’s typical pattern of question and (cryptic) response. How is Pilate characterized in this conversation? How does Jesus conduct himself? Do they have any common language? Does Pilate understand any of this at all?

2. As seen here, what is the nature of Pilate's authority and power? Of Jesus' authority and power? Is Jesus a threat to Pilate?

3. Why does Pilate end by asking, "What is truth?"? How would you answer him?

4. What is the effect of ending our church year with this passage?

5. In the previous Lectionary, the other Gospel option was Mk 11: 1-11---a different picture of Jesus' kingliness. Do you prefer it? Why do you think it was omitted, to focus our entire attention on the passage from John?