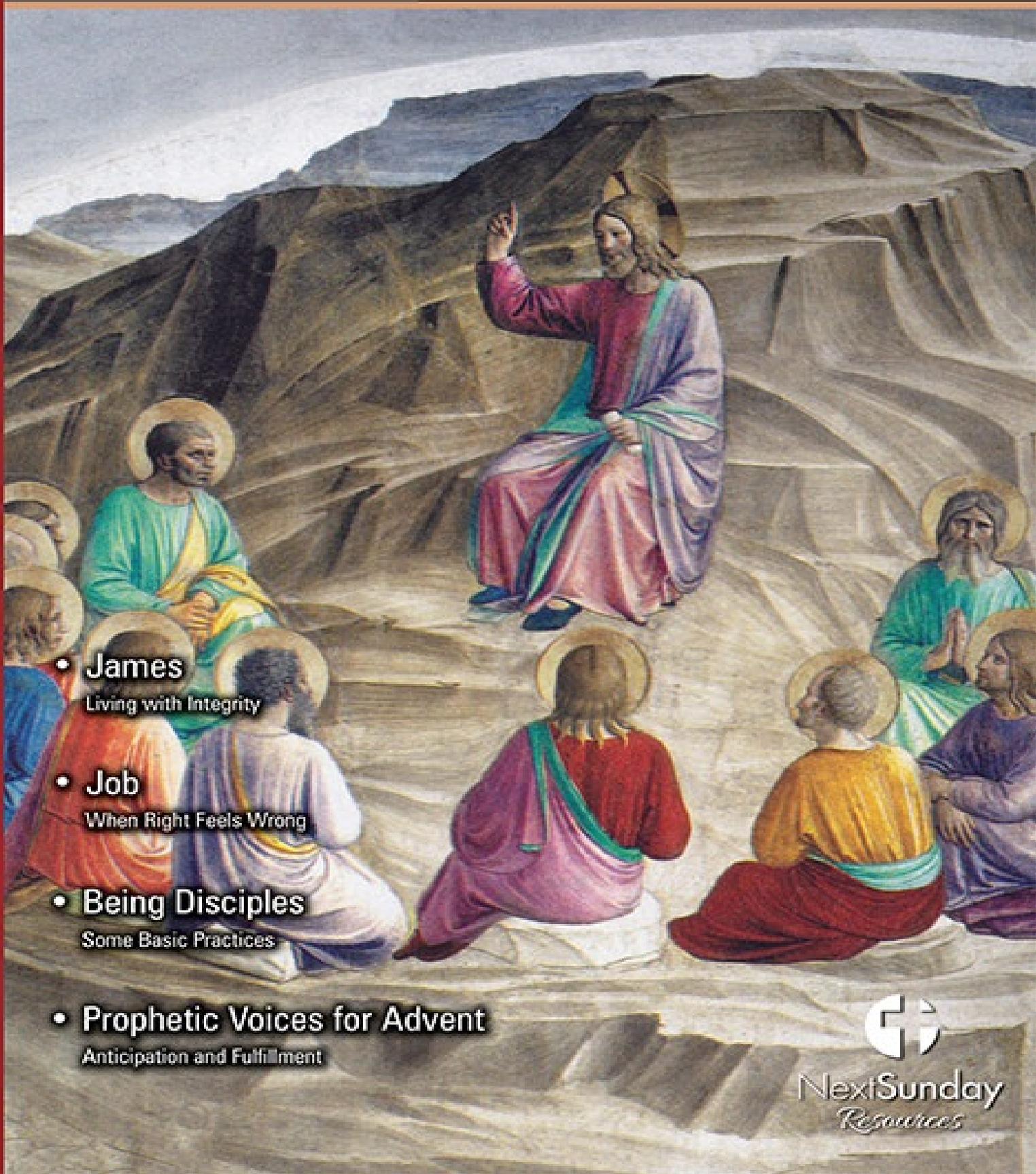


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LECTIONARY-BASED BIBLE STUDY

COMMENTARY

September—December 2018



COMMENTARY

- **James**
Living with Integrity
- **Job**
When Right Feels Wrong
- **Being Disciples**
Some Basic Practices
- **Prophetic Voices for Advent**
Anticipation and Fulfillment



Next Sunday
Resources



Commentary
by Brian L. Harbour

September–December 2018

We hope you enjoy Brian Harbour’s comments. Our goal is to provide you, the *Connections Series Bible Study* subscriber, a variety of perspectives on the Scripture text for any given week. The *Connections Teaching Guide* and the *Connections Study Guide* contain excellent Bible commentary and are designed with adult learners in mind. Brian Harbour’s commentary adds even more depth of study to the *Connections Series Bible Study* family of Christian education resources. His pastoral experience, professional and educational preparation, and love for the church and Scriptures make his contribution relevant and warmly personable. This volume represents Brian Harbour’s unique reflections, insight, and commentary on the Scripture texts. We are pleased to provide this resource to you.

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About the Author



Dr. Brian L. Harbour retired after forty-one years of service as a pastor. He received his PhD in theology from Baylor University in 1973 and has served churches in Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Arkansas, and Texas. He served as pastor of First Baptist Richardson, Texas, for seventeen years.

He served for nine years as a regent of Baylor University and for twelve years as a member of the system board of the Baylor Health Care System in Dallas. He also taught as an adjunct professor at George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University for ten years.

Brian brings a lifelong love of the Scriptures, the church, and Christian education to the *Connections Series Bible Study Commentary*. A prolific author, he has written fifteen books, including *Contextualizing the Gospel: A Homiletic Commentary on 1 Corinthians*.

In his retirement years, he has served several churches as interim pastor. He served as a visiting professor at Baylor University in the Department of Religion for seven years. He also teaches American history as an adjunct professor at Dallas Baptist University. He is the founding president of SeminaryPLUS, a non-profit organization that provides encouragement and resources to pastors and church leaders.

Brian and his wife, Jan, are the parents of four adult children. They also have five grandchildren.

Doers of the Word

September 2, 2018

James 1:17-27

When I think back through my lifetime as a pastor and try to come up with someone who exemplified what it means to be a Christian, I think of Price Morton, who was a member of the Woodland Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He was faithful to the church and his belief system was rock solid, but that is not what set him apart from others. Price Morton was a man of action. If someone complimented him on his tie, Price would take off the tie and give it to that person. If someone were stranded on the road, Price would get in his car and go help them. If I told him I needed something, it would be on my front porch the next day. Price Morton never met a person he did not help. I asked him once if it bothered him to help people who did not deserve his effort. He told me, “Preacher, I would rather help a hundred people who did not need it than fail to help one who did.” Price Morton was a doer of the word. Price exemplifies the kind of living, acting faith James talks about in our text for this week’s lesson.

Becoming Christians

James 1:17-18

James first addresses the question of how we become Christians. He makes it clear that we do not earn our salvation by our own actions. Instead, God offers salvation as a gift. James writes, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above” (1:17). This statement tells us something about God. James reminds us that God is a beneficent God. God is not out to get us but rather is out to help us. Like a loving father who gives good gifts to his children, God is a loving Father who gives us what we need to become who God created us to be. This statement also tells us something about ourselves. James reminds us that everything God gives to us is meant to be helpful to us. If we think something is bad in our lives, either God did not send it or we have misunderstood it. Everything God gives to us is good. God is a beneficent God.

James describes this God who gives good gifts to us as “the Father of lights” (1:17). “Lights” probably refers to the sun, moon, and stars. To say God is the “Father” of these lights is to say that God created them and put them in place. The psalmist echoes this idea when he declares, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

(Ps 8:3-4). God is the creator of our universe, the Father of the heavenly lights. God is a majestic God.

James also attributes to this beneficent, majestic God a consistency of purpose. The Phillips translation expresses the final part of verse 17 in these words: “there is never the slightest variation or shadow of inconsistency” in God. As brilliant as the sun is, its brightness varies. In the evening, as the earth turns, we can no longer see the sunlight at all. We see change, variation, and inconsistency in the lights of the sky. In contrast, God displays no such variation. God is not good some of the time and evil at other times. God is not loving sometimes and hateful at other times. God is not honest on some occasions and deceptive on other occasions. God is always loving, always beneficent, always truthful. God is consistent.

Every good and perfect gift comes from this beneficent, majestic, consistent God, but the greatest gift God gives us is spiritual rebirth that comes through God’s holy word (1:18). To explain the dimensions of this new life God gives us, James couples a metaphor about birth with a metaphor about the first fruits of the harvest. When James declares that God “gave us birth,” he has in mind the spiritual birth about which Jesus spoke when he told Nicodemus, “You must be born from above” (Jn 3:7). When James identifies Christians as “a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (1:18), he echoes Paul’s later description in 1 Corinthians 15:20: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

How do we experience this new birth? How do we become the first fruits of all God created? In other words, how do we become Christians? James explains: “he gave us birth by the word of truth” (1:18). The word of truth is the good news about Jesus Christ. God gives us the gift of salvation through God’s Son Jesus Christ.

Living as Christians

James 1:19-26

James then turns his attention to living as a Christian as he identifies some specific ways in which Christians demonstrate their faith. To begin with, James asserts that Christians demonstrate their faith by controlling their anger (1:19). James does not have in mind here the kind of righteous indignation Jesus reflected when he drove the money changers from the temple (Mk 11:15-18). Instead, he has in mind the kind of anger that emanates from personal hurt and seeks personal revenge. That kind of anger, James concludes, “does not produce

God's righteousness" (1:20). By our anger toward others we short-circuit the kingdom message concerning God's love because we do not reflect that love in our lives.

James offers two suggestions on how Christians can control their anger (1:19). We must "be quick to listen." We should give others the opportunity to explain what they mean with their words. We must be good listeners. We must also be "slow to speak." The adage to "count to ten" before we respond to others echoes James's suggestion. Patient listening and a cautious response will prevent the kind of premature expression of our anger that damages our witness and deters God's kingdom work.

Christians also demonstrate their faith by turning away from wickedness (1:21). To "rid yourselves" means to lay something aside as we would take off a dirty shirt. "Sordidness" refers to the vices of the unbelieving world. How can we lay aside these vices? James exhorts us to "welcome with meekness the implanted word." That means more than just hearing the word. It also includes allowing that word to shape our daily actions. Being "hearers of the word" is not enough. We must also be doers of the word. If we are hearers of the word only, we deceive ourselves (1:22). James illustrates this point with an ambiguous image of someone looking at their face in a mirror and then forgetting what they look like (1:23-24). James's meaning here is not clear. Perhaps he means that to look intently at God's word and then refuse to put it into practice makes no more sense than studying one's own face in a mirror and then immediately forgetting what it looks like. James affirms that Christians are not blessed simply by studying God's word. We are not even blessed by just knowing God's word. We are blessed by doing God's word (1:25).

In addition, Christians demonstrate their faith by controlling their tongues (1:26). James will return to this theme later in his epistle. James's emphasis on this subject suggests that uncontrolled speech presented a serious problem in the first-century church. James unequivocally addresses this problem in one of the clearest statements in the New Testament: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless" (1:26). Six different English words convey the meaning of the Greek word translated "worthless" in our text: vain, empty, useless, futile, fruitless, and powerless. All these English words express the same thought: a religion that does not control the tongue counts for nothing. To put it another way, the tongue is a barometer that reveals the level of our Christian maturity.

Pure Religion

James 1:27

James follows these suggestions on how Christians demonstrate their faith with one of the clearest summaries of the Christian life found in the New Testament. He defines the kind of religion he has in mind as a “religion that is pure and undefiled before God.” A religion that is “pure” is free from self-deceit and hypocrisy in relation to others. A religion that is “undefiled before God” is free from anything that puts God in a bad light. We might refer to it as a religion that is the real deal.

Notice that James includes in his description of real religion both the vertical dimension and the horizontal dimension. Through most of Christian history, the church has opted for an either/or position. At times, the church emphasized the vertical dimension, James’s challenge to “keep oneself unstained by the world.” This emphasis on the vertical dimension inspired monasticism that flowered during the middle ages, and it inspires the pattern of isolation and disengagement from the world that characterizes much of the church’s response to the world today. At other times, the church emphasized the horizontal dimension, James’s challenge “to care for the orphans and the widows in their distress.” The emphasis on the horizontal dimension inspired the Social Gospel that emerged during the final years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and it inspires many of the expressions of Christian ministry today. Those who emphasize the horizontal dimension reject Christians who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good and opt instead for a religion that rolls up its sleeves and gets involved in sharing a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name. So which emphasis is correct? James says that real religion includes both dimensions.

What does James mean when he talks about looking after the orphans and the widows? In the first-century world, “orphans and widows” included all those who were most vulnerable and least able to take care of themselves. The word “care” is the word from which we get our word “bishop” or “pastor.” James asserts that Christians who genuinely live their faith fulfill the role of pastor by taking care of those around us who are the most vulnerable and least able to take care of themselves.

What does James mean when he talks about keeping yourself free from the pollution of the world? “The world” refers not to the people who live on this earth but to the realm of evil at work around us. An incident reminded me recently what it means to be “stained.” I looked down at my shirt, noticed a big

black spot at the bottom of my pocket, and discovered that I had put my pen in my pocket without putting the cap on it and the ink stained my shirt. James asserts that Christians who genuinely live their faith resist the pull of the evil powers of the world and refuse to allow these powers to stain their lives.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from James about genuine Christian living? James reminds us, first, that the Christian life begins with what God does for us, not with what we do for God. We do not earn salvation; we receive it. It is a gift from God.

In addition, James reminds us that Christians who simply talk about their faith but never demonstrate it in their actions do not reflect genuine Christianity. Genuine Christianity includes both our words and our deeds.

Finally, James reminds us that Christians who give all their attention to the vertical dimension of their Christianity by developing their relationship with God, but who never give any attention to the horizontal dimension of Christianity by developing their relationship with others through Christian ministry, do not reflect genuine Christianity. Genuine Christianity includes both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions.

Acts of Mercy

September 9, 2018

James 2:1-10, 14-17

The word translated “favoritism” in the opening verse of our text (2:1), which the Revised Standard Version translates “partiality” and the New English Bible translates “snobbery,” is the Greek word that means to lift your face and look at another person. Initially, this word carried a positive connotation, for it meant to look on a person with favor. Eventually, the word took on a negative connotation, for it came to mean looking on another person with favor because of that person’s social status or prestige or wealth. In the New International Version of the Bible and the New American Standard Bible, the translators couch the word in a command, having James declare in the opening verse of our text, “Do not show favoritism.” In the New Revised Standard Version, the translator couches the word in a question, having James ask, “Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” All the translations underscore the same message: Christians should avoid partiality or favoritism.

James presents a theme found throughout the Bible. Deuteronomy 1:17 commands, “You must not be partial in judging; hear out the small and the great alike,” and in Leviticus 19:15, the biblical writer instructs, “You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.” Paul explains to the Galatian Christians why the Christian should avoid partiality. He writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Therefore, James draws from a clear biblical precedent when he warns his readers against partiality.

Our Favoritism Dishonors God

James 2:1

James begins his discussion by identifying with his readers. They are all “brothers and sisters” who “believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1). James implies that this relationship with Jesus prohibits “acts of favoritism” in their relationships with each other. Jesus, of course, absolutely refuses to show favoritism toward any person based on gender, race, or position. On one occasion, the Pharisees hurl an accusation at Jesus that they intend to be a criticism but is in fact a compliment. They complain to Jesus: “You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are” (Mt 22:16,

NIV). Jesus does not determine his response to others based on their position or status, and neither should we.

Neither does God show partiality, according to Romans 2:11. Paul reaches a similar conclusion to that of James when dealing with the master-slave relationship in his Ephesian letter. He challenges the masters to treat their slaves properly because, Paul tells the masters, “both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality” (Eph 6:9). Perhaps the most concise testimony affirming the absence of partiality in God comes from Peter after his encounter with Cornelius. Peter begins his speech to Cornelius and his family with this newly discovered truth: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35).

Neither God the Father nor Jesus the Son display partiality in their relationships with human beings. James concludes that neither should those who believe in God and identify themselves as Jesus’ followers. If Christians do not respect every person in the same way but instead determine our response to them based on “race, face, or place,” we reject the example of Jesus and dishonor God.

Our Favoritism Denigrates Others

James 2:2-7

Showing partiality toward other people based on their position or status not only dishonors God. This partiality also dishonors those toward whom we direct it, for it leads us to evaluate them not on the reality of who they are but through the lens of our predetermined opinion of them based on their position or place in society. James illustrates this point by describing a practical scene from their weekly experience at worship. He pictures two visitors who come to worship with the Christians. One visitor wears “gold rings” and is dressed “in fine clothes” (2:2). A gold ring signified both wealth and status in the first-century world. The phrase “fine clothes” suggests colorful clothing that stands out from the cheaper clothes in drab colors worn by most of the worshipers. The other visitor reflects a life of poverty with “dirty clothes.” These two visitors represent the highest and the lowest positions on the social scale. Based on the principle James announces in the opening verse of our text, Christians should welcome these two visitors with equal warmth and enthusiasm. The Christians should make both visitors feel at home. They should recognize each visitor as a person

of importance. In other words, the Christians should demonstrate no favoritism toward one or the other.

Yet the Christians do the very thing James warns them not to do. They “take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes” but hardly give any attention to the visitor who is poor (2:3). They offer the wealthy visitor the finest seat and attend to his every need. In contrast, they direct the poor visitor to sit on the floor and completely disregard his needs. James responds to this disparate treatment displayed toward these two kinds of visitors with an accusing question. He declares, “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (2:4). By prejudging others, we denigrate their value and thus rob them of their dignity in the eyes of God.

To indicate the folly of giving favor to those who are rich and withholding it from those who are poor, James urges his readers to take a closer look at both groups. First he focuses on the poor. “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom?” James asks them (2:5). James does not spiritualize poverty, nor does he suggest that the poor have an inside track on the kingdom of God. Instead, he reflects the practical reality that those who are not dependent on their wealth or on their own ability to meet their needs are often more receptive to God’s provision. Do not automatically discriminate against the poor, James exhorts, for they are the ones most likely to respond to the gospel.

Then James focuses on the rich. “Is it not the rich who oppress you?” James asks his readers (2:6). He does not demonize all wealthy people by suggesting that no one can have money and faith at the same time. He rather reminds the first-century Christians that rich people, like the visitor to whom they show deference, have not shown deference to the church. Instead, they stand in the forefront of those who persecute the church (2:6). Do not automatically pander to the wealthy, James demands, for they are the ones most likely to persecute the church. Christians should give equal respect to both rich and poor, for God created both groups and welcomes both groups into the family of faith.

Our Favoritism Disregards the Law

James 2:8-10

James adds another dimension to his diatribe against partiality by focusing on God’s law. When the lawyer asks Jesus to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus cites both the need to love God and the need to love one another. He then concludes, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt

22:37-40). James focuses on the second dimension of Jesus' vision of the law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8). Why does James call the command to love your neighbor "the royal law"? Perhaps James calls it that because it is the pronouncement of the king, God's Son and our Savior. Perhaps James calls the law of love "the royal law" because it rules over all other laws. Or maybe James calls it "the royal law" because when we follow it, it makes us feel like a queen or king. To love someone in such a way that our love envelops them and enriches their lives brings a sweeter reward than anything else we can do.

If loving one another enables a person to fulfill the law of God, then showing partiality causes a person to break the law of God. "If you show partiality," James writes, "you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (2:9). James adds that whoever breaks one point in the law is guilty of breaking all the law (2:10). Perhaps this is a response to those among James's readers who think he is making too big of a deal out of something insignificant. After all, showing partiality is not like murdering someone or committing adultery. What harm can a little partiality do? In response, James reminds his readers that each element in God's law is important and all the laws are interrelated. Breaking a commandment is not like selecting a card off the top of a deck, leaving the rest of the cards unaffected. Instead, breaking a commandment is like pulling a card out of the bottom of a house of cards, with one strategically positioned on another. When one card is removed from a house of cards, the whole house falls. Likewise, if a person stumbles at just one part of the law, that person is guilty of breaking all of it.

The Antidote: Acts of Mercy

James 2:14-17

James concludes our text by proposing an antidote for partiality: acts of mercy toward all who are in need. He demonstrates his point with a practical example. James identifies a person who is naked and hungry. How should we respond? We can direct kind statements toward the person or we can hope someone else helps the person. Yet, if we do not act with mercy toward these who are in need, they will remain naked and hungry (2:14-16).

Faith does not simply recognize the needs of others or feel pity for them in their time of need. Faith prompts a person to meet their need. Notice that James does not use words such as "vain" or "empty" to describe a faith that does not act. Instead, he uses the word "dead" (2:17). In other words, faith without works

is not just faith without value or results. It is not faith at all. Instead of trying to determine the value of those who are in need, James instructs us to act in a way that will enable us to meet their needs.

Conclusion

We can learn some important lessons from James's instruction to the first-century church. To begin with, James reminds us of the value of every person. That value comes not from what the person accomplishes or what the person accumulates but from who the person is. God created us all in God's image, so we are equally important in God's eyes. Because of that, we should treat all people with respect.

James also reminds us of the measure of true faith. The measure of true faith is not what we believe or what we say, but rather what we do. James provides the quintessential expression of that truth in 2:18 where he writes, "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." A declared faith that does not express itself in loving action toward others is not real faith.

Finally, James reminds us of the centrality of love. He identifies the expression of love as "the royal law" (2:8). James affirms Jesus' sentiment expressed in his conversation with his disciples on the last night of his life. In that conversation, Jesus exalts love as the signature mark of the Christian life: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). In the Christian life, nothing is more important than love.

What Words Reveal

September 16, 2018

James 3:1-12

Early in my ministry, I served as pastor of a church in a small Texas community. The owner of the local beauty parlor belonged to another church in the community. She constantly pronounced pious claims about her own spirituality. Yet, with the same tongue that asserted her elevated religious stature, she constantly sent forth malicious gossip about many of the citizens of the little community. With the same tongue, she both praised the Lord and cursed other people.

James addresses a similar situation in our text for this lesson. He earlier asserted that claims to faith with our words are meaningless if we do not support these claims with our actions (Jas 2:14-17). However, just because our words can be meaningless at times does not mean they are harmless. James selects several metaphors to illustrate the harmful impact our words can make on others, the mixed message these words can present concerning our spirituality, and, therefore, the importance of controlling our tongue.

The Bit and the Rudder: The Power of the Tongue to Direct

James 3:1-5a

Before elaborating on those metaphors, James addresses a special word to teachers (3:1). Communities in every generation have extended a special respect to teachers. Because of the unique trust we place in our teachers, James implies that teachers will be held to a higher level of accountability for the words they speak than those who are not teachers. Yet, with his comment that “all of us make many mistakes” (3:2), James acknowledges that all of us are responsible for what we say. Therefore, although specifically addressing the teachers of his day, James admonishes everyone to control their tongues. He uses seven metaphors to present his warning: the bit in a horse’s mouth, the rudder of a ship, fire, a poisonous animal, a spring, a fig tree, and the ocean.

The first pair of metaphors illustrates how something small can be used to direct something much larger. James first refers to the bit in a horse’s mouth (3:3). A horse is a powerful animal, much greater in size and weight than the human being riding the horse. In contrast, the bit is a small and seemingly

insignificant composition of leather or metal. Yet a person can use this insignificant composition to control the movement of an animal as large and powerful as a horse.

James presents a second metaphor: the rudder on the back of a ship (3:4). A horse is a large animal to direct with the bit. A ship is even bigger. A horse is strong, but the wind that blows against the ship is even stronger. How foolish to think that a person can control the direction of something as big as a ship and counter something as powerful as the wind. Yet James reminds us that a ship can be “guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs” (3:4).

James then applies the truth of these two metaphors to the tongue (3:5a). The human tongue is only a small part of the human body. Most human tongues are four inches long and weigh less than three ounces. How insignificant in size and weight when compared to the human body. Yet, in the same way we control the movement and the direction of a horse with a tiny bit placed in its mouth, we express the intentions of our bodies and determine the impact we make on others with this tiny part of the human body. And in the same way we determine the position and movement of a ship with a tiny piece of wood or metal attached to the ship, we determine the movement of our lives within the human community with the tiny tongue.

Because the bit determines the direction of the horse and the rudder determines the direction of the ship, they must be under the control of a strong hand. The same is true of the human tongue. The tongue may be small, but it has great power and can bring about great consequences. For example, the tongues of a bride and groom speak the words “I do,” initiating a lifelong relationship of marriage. The tongues of a jury speak the words “guilty,” committing a person to a lifetime of incarceration. The tongue may be small, but it has great power. Or, in James’s words, the tongue “boasts of great exploits” (3:5a).

In this first set of metaphors, James presents two unspoken conclusions. First, because the tongue, like a horse and like a huge ship, is so powerful, it needs to be under the control of a strong hand. Second, how well we control our tongues reflects the genuineness of our faith. James expressed the negative version of this second conclusion earlier when he wrote, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (Jas 1:26).

Fire and a Poisonous Animal: The Power of the Tongue to Destroy

James 3:5b-8

James presents two more metaphors, this time to illustrate the destructiveness of the tongue. James compares the damage caused by an uncontrolled tongue to the devastation caused by fire (3:5b-6). Few entities have the destructive power of a fire out of control. As I write this lesson, intense fires wreak havoc in the state of California. These California wildfires have left behind tens of thousands of acres of scorched earth, destroyed nearly nine thousand structures, and taken the lives of forty-four people. The authorities have not yet determined what started these wildfires, but they will probably trace the beginning of the fire to something seemingly small and insignificant. A simple campfire can quickly expand into a conflagration that consumes an entire forest, and the fire of a single candle can develop into a raging blaze that can burn down a house.

In the same way, James affirms the far-reaching destruction our tongues can precipitate. The tongue, James says, “stains the whole body” and “sets on fire the cycle of nature” (3:6). Again, we can clearly discern James’s conclusion. Because the destructiveness of the tongue replicates the destructiveness of fire, we must diligently control it. Yet, even though we control other things, we find it difficult to control our tongues (3:7).

James offers another metaphor to affirm the destructiveness of the tongue when he refers to it as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8). The psalmist uses a similar metaphor when he writes, “They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers” (Ps 140:3). With his metaphor of a poisonous snake, James again recognizes the small size of the tongue by contrasting it with large animals like beasts and sea creatures. These tiny snakes with their tiny tongues can send poison into the human bloodstream that can cause instant death. In the same way, when we speak unkind and untrue words with our tongues, a tiny part of our body, we can poison relationships, destroy reputations, and kill the spirits of those about whom we speak.

The point of James’s presentation seems to be his exhortation to his contemporaries to control their tongues. In fact, he implies earlier in his epistle that Christians who do not “bridle” their tongues are not really “religious” (Jas 1:26). Yet notice his somewhat discouraging warning that “no one can tame the tongue” (3:8). What does he mean by that statement? Perhaps James means that no one can tame the tongue on their own, with their own power unaided by the power of God. Or perhaps he is simply reminding his contemporaries how difficult it is to control the tongue.

The Spring, the Fig Tree, and the Ocean: The Power of the Tongue to Display Our Spiritual Status

James 3:9-12

James presents three final metaphors to explain an oddity that often occurs: a person whose tongue sends out mixed messages, praising God at one moment and cursing others in the next (3:9). New Testament writers refer to these people as “double-minded” (Jas 1:7) or “double-tongued” (1 Tim 3:8). James condemns this double-tongued approach by asserting, “This ought not to be so” (3:10).

Why do so many people embrace this “double-tongued” pattern? James addresses the dilemma with three final metaphors. First, he refers to a spring of water coming out of the ground. He raises this question: “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?” (3:11). He then refers to a fig tree growing out of the ground. He raises the question, “Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs?” (3:12). Finally, he reflects on the salt water found in the ocean. He presents an inescapable truth: “No more can salt water yield fresh” (3:12).

Since James does not spell out his conclusion concerning these metaphors, let us surmise what he is saying. James obviously expects a negative answer to the first two questions concerning the spring and the fig tree, and he expects unanimous affirmation of his third statement concerning salt water. Water coming out of the ground must be either fresh or brackish; it cannot be both. A tree must produce either olives or figs; it cannot produce both. Water must be either salty or fresh; it cannot be both. So what determines the quality of the water coming out of a spring, the kind of fruit produced by a tree, and the quality of the ocean water? James does not explicitly answer the question, but we can infer the answer from his discussion. In each of these three examples, the ultimate product will be determined by the source. A fig tree produces figs because of the nature of the tree. A fountain produces sweet water because of the purity of its source. The ocean produces salty water because that is the kind of water that fills our oceans. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 15:18: “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.” The tongue is morally neutral. Whether the tongue blesses or curses will be determined by the condition of our hearts. Only as we put our lives under the control of God and ask God to change us from the inside out can we control our tongues.

Conclusion

James teaches us some important lessons about the tongue. To begin with, James reminds us what our tongue reveals about us. His metaphor of the fig tree graphically affirms that truth. As the fruit of a tree clarifies what kind of tree it is, our words will ultimately clarify what kind of people we are. As Shakespeare wrote, “What his heart thinks his tongue speaks.”

James also reminds us how our tongues affect other people. We have often heard the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Most of us know that this is not true. We have seen people lose their zest for life because of criticism directed at them. On many occasions, we have discouraged others instead of encouraging them by something we say. Words are not harmless. Instead, they can be weapons of discouragement and destruction.

Finally, James suggests that how we use our tongues reflects the quality of our relationship with God. As in so many other places in his epistle, Jesus’ influence on James is clearly revealed. James does not explicitly cite Jesus as a source, but he obviously uses the Jesus tradition as a primary resource in dealing with the issues of faith in his day. This is true of our text for this lesson. James’s discussion in James 3:9-12 clearly reflects Jesus’ earlier discussion in Matthew 12:33-37 where Jesus concludes, “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Mt 12:37). Our words will indicate the quality of our relationship with God.

Real Wisdom

September 23, 2018

James 3:13–4:3, 7-8a

To understand our text, we need to remember the context of the passage. James does not write to the first-century Christians to tell them how to become people of faith. Instead, he writes to the first-century Christians to tell them what it means to live as people of faith. James places this truth at the heart of the life of faith: being a Christian is not just what we say but also what we do. In chapter 2, James put it like this: “I by my works will show you my faith” (v. 18).

James applies this truth to the tongue at the beginning of chapter 3, concluding that we give evidence of our faith by how we control our tongues. In the last part of chapter 3, he applies the truth about faith to the subject of wisdom, concluding that we demonstrate our faith by reflecting real wisdom in our lives. But what is real wisdom? James identifies two kinds of wisdom and explores the consequences of each kind.

Worldly Wisdom

James 3:13-16

James opens our text with a question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (3:13). He answers that question by describing two different kinds of wisdom: worldly wisdom and spiritual wisdom. He focuses first on worldly wisdom by asserting that it is reflected in two ways: in “bitter envy” and in “selfish ambition” (3:14).

“Bitter envy” is our discontent at the good fortune of others. The best way to measure our level of envy is to ask the question, “What do we do when others succeed?” How will we respond if our next-door neighbors report to us that they inherited \$2 million from a rich uncle? Will we be genuinely happy for them? Will we say, “I hope your new wealth will give you the comfort and enjoyment you deserve”? Or will we mumble to ourselves, “Why are they the lucky ones? When will God do something good for us?” The latter response exemplifies envy. Envy motivated Cain to kill Abel, caused Joseph’s brothers to sell him into slavery, and goaded Saul into his attempts to kill David. Envy is our discontent at the good fortune of others. According to James, envy is one of the manifestations of the world’s wisdom.

“Selfish ambition” is another manifestation of it. This is evident in our desire to gain attention and applause for ourselves. The best way to measure our level

of selfish ambition is to ask the question, “What do we do for those who can do nothing for us in return?” How will we respond to a person who asks for money to buy food for her family? Will we give her anything? Or will we ask, “What’s in it for me?” The latter response demonstrates selfish ambition. Cain displayed selfish ambition when he refused to be his brother’s keeper. James and John displayed selfish ambition when they coveted the prime positions at Jesus’ right and left hands. The Pharisee displayed selfish ambition when he drew the public’s attention to his offering in the temple. Selfish ambition is our desire to gain attention and applause for ourselves. According to James, selfish ambition is another manifestation of the world’s wisdom.

James describes this worldly kind of wisdom with three adjectives (3:15). To begin with, he calls it “earthly.” Worldly wisdom identifies with the things of this earth rather than with the things of God. James also refers to this kind of wisdom as “unspiritual.” This Greek word, in its adjectival form, appears in only three other places in the New Testament, and in each occurrence it implies the opposite of “spiritual” (1 Cor 2:14; 1 Cor 15:44, Jude 19). Worldly wisdom relates to the physical dimension of life, to the temporary and material rather than to the eternal and the spiritual. In addition, James calls this wisdom “devilish.” With this adjective, James traces worldly wisdom to its true source. Its source is not human but demonic. Therefore, it stands in opposition to the truth of God.

What does “worldly wisdom” produce? James says it leads to “disorder” (3:16). In his Corinthian letters, Paul uses the same word to describe the confusion arising from the divisions between various leaders in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 14:33; 2 Cor 12:20). Worldly wisdom also produces “wickedness of every kind” (3:16). Self-love and self-fulfillment drive worldly wisdom. When this kind of wisdom controls the lives of Christians, they focus on their own needs instead of focusing on the needs of others. This creates dysfunction in the church.

Spiritual Wisdom

James 3:17-18

James then focuses on another kind of wisdom that he calls “the wisdom from above,” and he identifies seven characteristics of this spiritual wisdom (3:17). Spiritual wisdom is “pure.” Although the word usually recalls moral purity, it has a broader meaning here. “Pure” suggests a purity of motive, a singleness of

purpose. Worldly wisdom is opportunistic and inconsistent. In contrast, spiritual wisdom is single-minded and focused, committed to Christ.

Spiritual wisdom is also “peaceable.” This word suggests an inner sense of well-being, but it also carries a social dimension. This inner sense of well-being inspires us to live with others in such a way that avoids strife. Worldly wisdom is argumentative and contentious. In contrast, spiritual wisdom is accepting and conciliatory.

Further, spiritual wisdom is “gentle.” This word means to go beyond the letter of the law and to treat others better than they deserve to be treated. Worldly wisdom is rigid and exacting. In contrast, spiritual wisdom is reasonable and understanding.

In addition, spiritual wisdom is “willing to yield.” Writers in the period when the book of James was written often used this term in the military arena to describe how a good soldier responds to his commander; they used it in the legal realm to describe how a good citizen responds to the laws of the land. Worldly wisdom is contentious and demands special privileges. In contrast, spiritual wisdom does not ask for personal privileges but submits to the expectations of authorities.

James adds that spiritual wisdom is “full of mercy and good fruits.” Mercy is the active manifestation of love touching the lives of others. The expression of mercy thus brings beneficial results in their lives. Worldly wisdom is selective and discreet. In contrast, spiritual wisdom is generous and all embracing.

Spiritual wisdom is also “without a trace of partiality.” Moffatt translates the Greek word here as “unambiguous.” The word appears nowhere else in the New Testament and thus has been translated variously by different people. The best translation seems to be “without wavering.” The word describes a devotion to the truth of Christ that does not waver. Worldly wisdom is indecisive and constantly changing its focus. In contrast, spiritual wisdom is decisive and positive.

Finally, spiritual wisdom is “without a trace of...hypocrisy.” Real wisdom removes our pretense in our relationship with others. Worldly wisdom is pretentious and insincere. In contrast, spiritual wisdom is straightforward and genuine.

What does this spiritual wisdom produce? James affirms that the manifestation of spiritual wisdom produces “a harvest of righteousness” (3:18). The seed is spiritual wisdom; the fruit is righteousness. This suggests two truths about righteousness. Righteousness does not cause our faith. Instead, it is a result

of our faith. In addition, righteousness comes at the end of a process. Faith produces spiritual wisdom, and then spiritual wisdom produces righteousness.

Turning from Worldly Wisdom to Spiritual Wisdom

James 4:1-3, 7-8a

James's discussion about two kinds of wisdom confronts Christians with a choice. On one hand, we can allow worldly wisdom to dominate our lives. On the other hand, we can embrace spiritual wisdom. Evidently, many of those to whom James writes continue to live under the influence of worldly wisdom because of the conflict that disrupts their relationships with each other (4:1-2a). Why do we have conflict within the church? James suggests that many Christians adopt a worldly attitude that gives priority to seeking the things of this world. Consequently, their needs are not met, and they end up in conflict with other Christians. Why are their needs not met? James identifies two problems. To begin with, they refuse to ask God to meet their needs, which God will graciously do (4:2b). And then, when they do ask God to meet their needs, they do so with an improper motive, "in order to spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:3).

In these statements, James reveals an important truth about God and an important truth about Christians. James reminds us that God is gracious and willing to pour out God's provisions into our lives. God has a treasure house of blessings available to us, and prayer is the key that unlocks the door. James also reminds us that we often approach God with the wrong motives. We allow a worldly attitude to dominate our thoughts. We go to the right source with the right request but for the wrong reason.

How can we overcome the pull of this worldly wisdom and allow this spiritual wisdom to direct our lives? James offers three strategies. The first strategy is to "submit yourselves therefore to God" (4:7a). "Submit" is a military word that means to get into our proper rank under our commanding officer. God is like a masterful general who develops a game plan that will lead to a victorious life. Our responsibility is to submit to God's strategy instead of implementing our own strategies and fighting our own battles.

The second strategy is to "resist the devil" (4:7b). "Resist" means to stand against or to set ourselves against an enemy. The devil is the Christian's enemy. The Bible refers to this powerful force who stands against God as Satan (Lk 10:18), the prince of this world (Jn 12:31), the tempter (Mt 4:3), the god of this

world (2 Cor 4:4), or, as in our text, the devil. The devil resists the work of God and seeks to destroy the people of God. Our challenge is to resist him every day in every dimension of our lives.

Strategy number three is to “draw near to God” (4:8a). This means to go beyond a simple submission to God and develop an intimacy with God that unveils before us God’s purpose and releases within us God’s power. “Draw near” is the technical term used to describe the action of Jewish priests who approach God in the time of worship. This word, therefore, pictures a deliberate, habitual movement into God’s presence. Drawing near to God will generate within us an ever-deepening intimacy with God that will release spiritual wisdom within us.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from James’s instructions in our text? James reminds us that the Christian life involves choices. The difference between Christians who make a significant impact for God and Christians who do not is evident in their choices. Christians who make wise choices in their attitudes, actions, and relationships reap positive consequences. Christians who make unwise choices in their attitudes, actions, and relationships reap negative consequences.

James also reminds us that the Christian life calls for consistency. Because every choice has a consequence, we must make wise choices consistently. What gets most Christians in trouble is the exception. Often, one unwise choice brings consequences that put us in the position to make other unwise choices, and the downward spiral begins.

Finally, James reminds us that the Christian life calls for courage. Someone once said, “People do not want to make good decisions; they want to make painless decisions.” However, wise decisions are not always easy to make, are not always understood by others, and always include pain of some kind. Yet wise decisions are the key to an effective Christian life.

Prayers of Faith

September 30, 2018

James 5:13-20

Dan Kimball authored a book with a strange title: *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*. The book is based on what he calls “insights from emerging generations.” The bulk of it covers conceptions of the church by emerging generations that keep them away from the church, but Kimball concludes with practical suggestions on how Christian leaders can respond to these critical views and draw them back in. He captures the essence of these suggestions in a single sentence: “I don’t believe people are looking for churches that are all together. They are looking for churches that care about Jesus and will care about them” (Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* [Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2007] 250).

This was the secret of the early church. These first Christians certainly were not “all together,” to use Kimball’s term. Their organizational patterns were in flux, they often argued with each other, and at times they majored on minor things. But they did care about people. In our text for this week’s lesson, James identifies two ways in which the first-century church demonstrated their compassion for others: the ministry of prayer and the ministry of restoration.

The Ministry of Prayer

James 5:13-18

James describes two contrasting situations in verse 13. In one situation, a Christian is “suffering.” This word describes a person burdened by an unexpected blow. Paul uses the same word to describe hardship suffered as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim 2:3, 9). In the other situation, a Christian is “cheerful.” This word describes a person surprised by an unexpected blessing. Luke uses the same word to describe the attitude of those who know God is going to deliver them (Acts 27:22, 25). In both times of burden and times of blessing, James urges us to turn to God. We turn to God in supplication amid our troubles because we know God can and will help us. We turn to God in praise amid our blessings because we know God is the one who has helped us. In every circumstance of our lives, turning to God is the appropriate response.

James identifies yet another circumstance in which we often find ourselves (5:14). “Are any among you sick?” he asks. As in times of concern and in times of celebration, James reminds us that the appropriate response when sickness

strikes is to turn to God in prayer. Christians often distort or misunderstand James's exhortation to pray for the sick. Faith healers claim this verse as their foundational text. Yet these faith healers overlook key elements of James's exhortation. It is not the faith healer but a group of spiritual leaders who pray for the sick person. It is not the power of the healer but the confession of sins and prayer that bring about healing. And it is not just prayer that is administered but also oil, one of the most commonly used medicines in the ancient world.

How should Christians respond to illness? James offers a twofold answer (5:14). We should respond with prayer and with oil, that is, with intercession and medication. The oil in this instance is probably not sacramental but medicinal. In other words, it is not administered as a token or symbol but as a medication. Today, of course, this part of the healing process has been taken over by the medical profession. The other part, praying for the sick, is still the church's responsibility.

What happens when we pray for the sick? James offers this confident promise in verse 15: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." James's exhortation does not affirm faith healers. Instead, he calls the church to do what Peter instructs the church to do for those who are suffering: "to tend the flock of God that is in your charge" (1 Pet 5:2). James reminds Christians that we must be concerned about every aspect of a person's life, the physical as well as the spiritual.

In the final part of verse 15, James introduces the idea that sin may be the cause of some illnesses. In cases where sin is a root cause of the illness, the sick person also needs forgiveness. After the person confesses his or her sin, James admonishes the church to pray for this person (5:16).

Why does James focus so sharply on prayer? He answers that question in the final part of verse 16 when he declares, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:16b). James affirms the power of prayer, but he reminds us that it is "the prayer of the righteous" that is powerful and effective. With this statement, James does not suggest that only saints can pray. Prayer is the privilege of every Christian. Every child of God has the right and the responsibility to talk with God. Yet James does imply a correlation between the condition of our lives and the effect of our prayers. Notice also that James uses a word for "prayer" that pictures someone passionately appealing to God. James thus reminds his audience that powerful prayer comes out of a righteous life and a passionate heart.

To illustrate this kind of prayer, James recalls the prophet Elijah. He reminds us that Elijah was not a super saint. Instead, James admits, “Elijah was a human being like us” (5:17). Yet Elijah’s prayers accomplished things. Elijah’s prayers were “powerful and effective” (5:16). James offers one example of Elijah’s effective and powerful prayers from a story in 1 Kings 17–18. Elijah prayed that the rain would cease in Israel, and for more than three years Israel suffered through a time of drought. Then, three years later Elijah prayed that God would return the rain. When God did not answer his initial prayer, Elijah continued to pray and after each prayer, he ordered his servant to look to the sea to ascertain if clouds were forming. Six times the servant obeyed Elijah’s command but saw no hint of a cloud. Elijah then prayed a seventh time. This time, the servant reported back to Elijah: “Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea” (1 Kings 18:44). Elijah announced that folks should get their umbrellas ready because the rain is coming (5:18). In this story, Elijah demonstrates the kind of passionate and persistent prayer that is powerful and effective before God. James wants the church to practice the same kind of passionate and persistent prayer to demonstrate their concern for those both inside and outside the church.

The Ministry of Restoration

James 5:19-20

James then turns his attention to the ministry of restoration, acknowledging a problem that still occurs today: individuals who slip away from the church (5:19). James is addressing Christians who have lost confidence in the truth of the gospel. These are “backsliders,” the walking wounded of the church who either deliberately or unconsciously drift away from the Father’s house. Instead of being at home with their Father, they, like the prodigal son, dwell in the far country. James raises the question, how do we respond to these backsliders?

We see one possible reaction in the response of the religious leaders toward the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11). Like them, we can condemn those who have strayed. In most churches today, we can find such guardians of the faith, detectors of heresy, and censors of the sins of the saints. The man in the temple in Jesus’ story who, seeing the tax collector at the altar, lifts his head high and proclaims, “I am so thankful I am not like this other man—a sinner, unclean” (Lk 18:9-14, author’s paraphrase), is such a person. The church member who continually points to the sinfulness of the younger generation is

too. How do we respond to those who have drifted away from God? We could condemn them.

But James imagines another response. He describes a situation in which, instead of condemning those who have strayed from the church, we reach out in love and bring them back in. Instead of responding with condemnation, we can respond with compassion. Instead of saying, “Good riddance,” we can bring them back into the family of God. Jesus responded this way to the woman caught in adultery. After disbursing the crowd, Jesus turned to the woman and asked, “Has no one condemned you?” Seeing her critics gone, she quietly responded, “No one, sir.” Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (Jn 8:10-11). This is always Jesus’ method, and this ought also be the method of those who call themselves by his name. The church should be in the business of restoration rather than condemnation.

Why should Christians participate in the ministry of restoration instead of the ministry of condemnation? James offers two answers to that question. On one hand, when we bring someone back to God, we “save the sinner’s soul from death” (5:20). What is the death from which we want to save them? Perhaps James is using the term in a symbolic way. If individuals continue along the pathway of disobedience and rejection, they will not be able to experience the fullness of the abundant life Jesus wants them to have. Following this pathway will lead to the death of their influence, their usefulness, and their joy. James wants to save those who have strayed from the truth, helping them avoid that kind of death. In addition, when we bring someone back to God, we “cover a multitude of sins” (5:20). When we reach out to those who have strayed from God and embrace them with our love, we are encouraging them to come back to the Father from whom they will experience forgiveness and cleansing and a new beginning. In that way, we will “cover a multitude of sins.”

Conclusion

In this lesson, James teaches us some lessons about prayer. James first points to the priority of prayer in the Christian life. He implies that in every situation, we should start with prayer. Unfortunately, many of us in the church see prayer as a final resort. We often turn to prayer only when every other alternative has been tried. In contrast, James suggests that prayer is not the final resort but the first resort. In every situation, we should begin with prayer. It is a top priority. James also reflects on the practice of prayer. Prayer is not just a magic wand we can pick up and swirl around every time we have a special need, immediately

conjuring up an answer. Prayer must instead be a habitual practice to which we give ourselves. Finally, James affirms the power of prayer. Prayer brings relief to those who suffer. Prayer provides a tool for celebrating our victories. Prayer heals those who are sick. Prayer brings forgiveness to those who have sinned. Prayer changes things.

James also teaches us some lessons about the ministry of restoration. He reminds us of the need for the ministry of restoration by affirming something that happens in both the early church and in today's church. Christians often backslide. Christians often become discouraged in their faith. Therefore, the ministry of restoration is always relevant. James also lays out the strategy for the ministry of restoration. Instead of condemning those who stray from the church, we need to reach out to them in love. Instead of giving up on them, we need to go after them. Finally, James explains the results of the ministry of restoration. If we love these backsliders back into the church, it will enrich not only their lives but also the church's life.

Job's Situation

October 7, 2018

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

What do we want to do with our lives? Clarence Jordan (1912–1969) asked himself that question. He answered it by devoting his life to helping the poor. Armed with a university degree in agriculture and a doctor's degree in theology, Clarence, along with his wife and one other couple, settled on some land near Americus, Georgia, in 1942 and founded the Koinonia Farm. They devoted themselves to the equality of all persons, to the common ownership of possessions, and to ecological preservation. They welcomed to the farm people of all races. This action aroused violent opposition from their neighbors. To the locals, Koinonia's practice of common ownership of possessions smacked of communism and evoked further opposition. In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan began an organized campaign to drive them off. The Klan invaded the farm, torched the crops, and burned all the buildings. Clarence recognized the voices of some of the Klansmen, including a local reporter. The next day, this reporter visited the farm to taunt Clarence further. He told him, "You've put fourteen years into this farm, and there's nothing left of it at all. Just how successful do you think you've been?" Clarence quietly replied, "Sir, I don't think you understand us. What we are about is not success but faithfulness." When Clarence died of a heart attack fifteen years later, he was still carrying out his ministry to the poor on Koinonia Farm (Tim Hansel, *Holy Sweat* [Waco TX: Word, 1987] 188–89).

I thought of his story as I began my preparation for these four lessons on Job. Like Clarence Jordan, Job had a pure heart. Like Clarence Jordan, Job remained faithful to God despite the suffering he endured and the opposition he faced. Even though all the things taken from Job at the beginning of the book are returned to him at the end of the book, Job's story is not about his success but about his faithfulness. In this lesson, we will set the stage for Job's experiences that we will explore in the remaining lessons for the month.

Job's Righteousness

Job 1:1

The opening verse introduces us to a man "whose name was Job" (1:1). This raises four questions. First, who is Job? Some scholars suggest that the story is parabolic, while others conclude that Job is an historical figure. Either way, Job exemplifies a righteous sufferer in our faith tradition.

When did Job live? Some scholars say Job lived in the patriarchal period, while others suggest his story was set in that time even though the book was composed later. For one thing, the book of Job makes no references to the religious and cultural institutions of Israel, suggesting that it was written before Moses established them years later. In addition, we find some parallels between words used in Job and words used in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). Finally, Job's wealth and family, described in the book, seem to parallel the life and manner of the patriarchs (Job 1:3; 42:12).

Where did Job live? The opening verse locates Job in "the land of Uz" (1:1). We find two references to Uz in the Bible. In Lamentations 4:21, the biblical writer connects Uz with Edom, which is located on the southeast border of Palestine. Jeremiah 25:20 lists a group of countries that will come under God's judgment. In identifying these countries, he mentions Uz just after Egypt and just before the land of the Philistines and the land of Edom. As he continues naming the countries, he moves up to the area north of Palestine. This suggests that Uz is located somewhere to the south of Palestine, near Egypt and Philistia and Edom. We also note that Job's friends are from Edom. For example, Eliphaz is from Teman (Job 2:11), one of the key cities of Edom. All these factors point to a location on or near the border of Edom, south of the Sea of Galilee.

What was Job like? The biblical writer utilizes two adjectives to describe Job's character (1:1). The first one is "blameless." This word does not suggest that he possesses sinless perfection, for he will clearly reveal his faults in the ensuing encounters with his contemporaries and with God. The word suggests instead that Job is complete or, we might say, well rounded. He has developed his moral character in all its parts. The second adjective is "upright." This Hebrew word pictures a path that is level and even. Used to describe Job, the word suggests that he keeps his life under control as a person of integrity.

The biblical writer uses two verbs to designate Job's actions (1:1). On the one hand, Job "feared God." To fear God does not mean to tremble in God's presence or to cower before the Almighty. We might use the words "respect" or "reverence" to flesh out the meaning of this action. Job recognizes God for who God is and responds accordingly. On the other hand, Job "turned away from evil." This second action grows out of the first action. Because he recognizes God for who God is, because he stands in awe before the holy and sovereign God, Job will not do anything to displease God. Consequently, he turns away from anything that detracts from his devotion and obedience to God. The writer

of Proverbs captures this idea when he writes, “The wise fear the LORD and shun evil” (Prov 14:16, NIV).

Satan’s Challenge

Job 2:1-6

Job’s character and righteous actions do not go unnoticed, either by God or by Satan. This becomes clear when the heavenly beings “present themselves before the LORD” (Job 1:6). In this gathering of heavenly beings, God points to Job as an example of integrity and faithfulness (1:8). Satan immediately questions the genuineness of Job’s righteousness. What is the motivation behind it? Satan implies that this righteousness finds its source not in Job’s integrity but in God’s generosity (1:9-10). Satan then hurls this challenge at God: “Stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (1:11). God accepts Satan’s challenge. God gives Satan permission to take what Job has, but not to inflict any damage on him personally (1:12). Satan destroys all Job’s possessions, his servants, and his children (1:13-19). Job mourns his losses (1:20-21). Yet, despite these tragic disasters in his life, Job does not lose his faith in God. The biblical writer concludes, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing” (1:22).

However, the debate between God and Satan continues when God once more gathers his “heavenly beings” around him (2:1). Again, God exults in Job’s righteousness, except this time God needles Satan with the reminder that Job’s continued righteousness is not a response to the blessings of God after all. Instead, Job maintains his righteousness in defiance of his undeserved suffering (2:2-3). God claims victory in the debate over Job’s righteousness.

Yet Satan remains unconvinced. Using a common proverb of the day, “Skin for skin,” Satan proposes that Job has survived the suffering only because it did not touch him physically (2:4). The loss of his family and possessions, as tragic as it is, does not touch Job’s physical well-being. That remains intact, and thus Job’s righteousness still has an anchor in the blessings that come from God. Satan asserts that if Job’s suffering were to affect his physical well-being, it would shake the foundations of Job’s faith (2:4-5). So once again, God accepts Satan’s challenge, giving him permission to wreak physical havoc on Job. God places only one limitation on Satan: he cannot take Job’s life (2:6).

Job’s Faithfulness

Job 2:7-10

The scene changes as Satan leaves the heavenly council room and heads for Uz, where he intends to prove his point by wracking Job's body with "loathsome sores...from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (2:7). To get relief from the itching and perhaps to remove some of the scabs from his sores, Job scrapes his body with pieces of broken pottery (2:8). This affliction renders Job unclean and compels him to leave the city and live with the outcasts, where he "sat among the ashes" (2:8). These ashes are probably the remains from the burning of trash and refuse, not the ashes of repentance. Job's social isolation now joins his physical anguish to place Job in a miserable position.

As if to pour gasoline on the fire, Job's wife attacks him with an insult tinged by despair (2:9). Because we have only the content of her words and not the tone of voice in which she delivered them or the spirit in which she expressed them, we cannot be certain of their meaning. Does she question Job's claim of righteousness, convinced that his unparalleled suffering must be the result of some deviousness in his life? In this case, her words can be translated, "Are you still claiming to be righteous?" Or does she speak out of personal despair that compels her to condemn Job's continued faithfulness? In this case, her words can be translated, "Are you still so determined to affirm your righteousness that you will keep on suffering such intense pain? Just give up. Let it go." Or does her comment reflect her wonder at his amazing endurance? In this case, her words can be translated, "Are you still able to maintain your righteousness while suffering such pain? What an amazing, but useless, example." Whatever their exact meaning, we can be certain that her words are not encouraging. Instead, her words cover Job like an avalanche of stones, adding to his despair.

Even so, Job will not allow himself to be sidetracked from his righteous pathway by family loss, personal affliction, social isolation, or marital conflict. Instead of yielding to his wife's suggestion, he condemns her for speaking "as any foolish woman would speak" (2:10). Job uses the word "foolish" to address not her lack of intelligence but her lack of moral strength. Her lack of moral strength sharply contrasts with Job's continued integrity. The statement that "Job did not sin with his lips" (2:10) acknowledges that Job maintains his righteousness throughout his ordeal and thus counters Satan's charge before God that suffering will provoke Job to curse God (2:5). Satan is wrong. Job does not succumb to his suffering or to the dismaying comments of his wife.

Conclusion

What can we learn from this experience in the life of Job? To begin with, Job exhibits the true meaning of faith and thus confronts us with a question. Does our faith exist “because of” the good things we experience or does it persist “in spite of” the bad? In one form or another, each new generation must face that question. Job demonstrates that genuine faith is an “in spite of” kind of faith instead of a “because of” kind of faith.

Job’s experience also probes us to consider the relationship between suffering and righteousness. Does God bless only the righteous? And is suffering evidence of sin? Job demonstrates that the absence of suffering does not reflect the presence of righteousness, nor does the presence of suffering necessarily reflect the absence of righteousness. The Old Testament story of Joseph proves this. Joseph went from one catastrophe to another (Gen 37–39), even though “the LORD was with” him (39:2a).

Finally, Job’s experience alerts us to the presence and purpose of Satan in this world. Satan has one purpose: to drive a wedge between God and us that discourages our service to God and blocks off the blessings of God. Peter reinforces this truth in his epistle when he writes, “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). Therefore, we must be careful not to allow the malevolent machinations of Satan to drive a wedge between God and us.

Job's Contention

October 14, 2018

Job 23:1-17

I remember a *Dennis the Menace* cartoon that shows the feisty little boy down on his knees at the side of his bed. His hands are folded, and his head is bowed in prayer. He explains something he was involved in earlier in the day and then says, "It wasn't really my fault." After a brief pause he adds, "But I guess you hear that all the time."

Job takes that same position in his dialogues with three so-called friends that make up the major part of the book of Job. The three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, visit Job to console him in his sorrow following the devastating losses in his life (2:11-13). He loses his wealth, his home, his family, and his health. However, when Job's soliloquy of sorrow (3:1-26) implies that these tragedies are undeserved occurrences in his life, the three friends feel compelled to correct what they regard as Job's erroneous theology. The book then presents three cycles of dialogues between Job and his friends. In cycle one (chs. 4–14), the discussion centers on the nature of God, including God's holiness, righteousness, and wisdom. In cycle two (chs. 15–21), their discussion focuses on the fate of the wicked. In cycle three (chs. 22–31), the three friends highlight the sinfulness of Job, asserting that the tragedies in Job's life come because of his wrongdoing. Through all three cycles, Job adamantly proclaims, "It isn't really my fault." His contention of innocence clearly emerges in our text for this lesson.

Job's Desire

Job 23:1-6

Our text is part of the third cycle of dialogues (Job 22–31). Eliphaz speaks in Job 22, accusing Job of great wickedness (22:4) and reproaching him for following "the old way that the wicked have trod" (22:15). He expresses this desire for Job: remove unrighteousness from your life and turn again to God and you will be restored (22:23, 26). Instead of humbly submitting to Eliphaz's claim, Job points an accusing finger at God (23:1-2). Our text asserts that Job's complaint against God is "bitter." Why does Job respond to God like this? He feels bitter toward God because, instead of recognizing Job's pain, God has added to the pain. Job believes that he is innocent and that God has mistreated him. Therefore, Job does not want to quietly submit to God, as Eliphaz desires.

Instead, Job desires an audience with God so that he can question God about his unfair treatment.

Unfortunately, Job has not been able to confront God with his complaint because he cannot find God (23:3). Job's question about God's elusiveness seems to mock Eliphaz's urgent appeal for Job to return to God. Job suggests that he cannot even find God, so how can he return to him? When he does find God, Job does not want to praise God's justice. Instead, he wants to accuse God of injustice. Job boldly asserts, "I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments" (23:4). Like a well-prepared defense attorney, Job will lay out the evidence that confirms his innocence, and then he will prove "with arguments" that God has mistreated him by overwhelming his life with undeserved disaster and suffering.

Job's statement in verse 5 does not suggest an eager desire to hear what God has to say in response to his arguments. In other words, he does not hope to learn from God. Instead, he wants to put God on the spot. Job will present his incontrovertible arguments affirming his innocence and confirming God's mistreatment of him and then will ask, "What do you have to say about that?" He does not want to hear the truth from God. He wants to present to God what he thinks is the truth. At this point, the thought of coming into the presence of the sovereign God and contending with him does not intimidate Job. On the contrary, he believes that God will listen to his presentation, if he can just stand before God and present the truth about his life to God (23:6).

Job's Declaration

Job 23:7-12

What is the truth about his life that Job wants to present to God? Before laying out his case, Job confirms three thoughts. To begin with, Job believes that God will honor and listen to "an upright person" (23:7). To be upright means to be straight or to be morally correct. Since Job believes himself to be an upright person, he expects God to honor and listen to him.

In addition, Job reveals his passionate attempt to find God so that he can present his case (23:8-9). This desire to come into the presence of God is more than a passing fancy. It is a matter of life and death. Job believes that he must come before God if he is to have any relief and comfort in life. Consequently, Job leaves no place unexplored in his attempt to find God. Even though God continues to elude him, Job continues his search.

Finally, Job confidently asserts that when he does come into the presence of God and present his case, he will convince God of his uprightness. “When he has tested me,” Job declares, “I shall come out like gold” (23:10). Earlier, Job admitted that it would be pointless to present his case before God. “If I summoned him and he answered me,” Job complained earlier, “I do not believe that he would listen to my voice” (Job 9:16). Now, however, he has become convinced that as an upright person, he can present his case to God, the great Judge, and receive a complete acquittal from God. At that point, Job believes, his troubles will be over.

Job now tries a trial run of his declaration before God, if he ever gets the opportunity to present it. Job uses several phrases that he will apparently include to affirm his uprightness before God. He says first, “My foot has held fast to his steps” (23:11a). This phrase suggests two things. It suggests that Job has followed in the steps of God, which sounds like the description of a follower of Jesus as one who follows “in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21). This phrase also suggests Job’s closeness to God. Following in God’s steps shows that he closely follows God. When Jesus calls the tax collector Levi saying, “Follow me,” he means more than just to follow in his steps (Mk 2:14). He means to accompany him, to be his companion, and to walk close to him. Job will tell God that he not only follows the path God has laid out but also longs for fellowship with God.

Job also claims, “I have kept his way and have not turned aside” (23:11b). “His way” suggests more than a pathway. It suggests a way of life. The law of Israel outlines this way of life. Job claims that he has followed that way of life consistently. He has not turned aside. Eliphaz accused Job of following the pathway of evil people (Job 22:15). Job counters by claiming that he has faithfully followed the way of God.

Job also affirms, “I have not departed from the commandment of his lips” (23:12a). Instead, Job asserts, “I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth” (23:12b). The NASB translation gives a clearer picture of Job’s claim in this verse: “I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (23:12). The Hebrews of that day carried their treasures close to their bodies wrapped in a piece of cloth, “in my bosom,” as the NRSV translates this verse. This treasure might include jewels or money or food or anything else they considered to be valuable. When Job explains that he treasures God’s word, he testifies to its value to him. When Eliphaz instructs Job on what to do to once more gain God’s favor, he exhorts

him to “lay up his [God’s] words in your heart” (Job 22:22). Job claims that he is doing just that.

Job believes that he has an ironclad case. Plenty of evidence supports his claim of righteousness. Consequently, he can hardly wait to march into the presence of God and lay out his case before the Lord.

Job’s Dread

Job 23:13-17

But when Job contemplates coming into the presence of the holy, sovereign God, his bravado wavers. He recognizes that God is not like any other judge before whom people lay out their cases. Instead, God “stands alone” (23:13). If we use just the right words in trying to influence people to abandon their position and to instead support our position, we might be able to persuade them. Yet, Job speculates, “who can dissuade” God? (23:13a). As Job contemplates this God before whom he wants to stand, he is suddenly overwhelmed with God’s sovereignty (“What he desires, that he does”), God’s purpose (“he will complete what he appoints for me”), and God’s mystery (“many such things are in his mind”) (23:13b-14). These realizations lead to the panic that overcomes Job in the final verses of our text.

Several words reinforce this final picture of Job (23:15-17). Job recognizes that he will be “terrified” when he comes into the presence of the holy, sovereign God. To be “terrified” means to be troubled or uncertain. Job also feels a sense of “dread” as he thinks about coming into the presence of the holy, sovereign God. To be in “dread” means to be amazed or awed at being in the presence of God. This sense of terror and awe will drain Job of his courage. Now, instead of demanding an audience with God, Job wants to escape. “If only I could vanish in darkness,” Job begs, “and thick darkness would cover my face” (23:17). Job will get his chance to lay his case before God, but the experience will not be at all what he expects, as we will see in next week’s lesson. He has every reason to be terrified and full of dread!

Conclusion

What reminders does our text give us? To begin with, our text reminds us of the folly of Job’s position in which he claims innocence in the presence of God. All of us have sinned and stand guilty before God. John provides the definitive statement on this in his epistle: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8).

Our text also reminds us of the folly of Job's friends in their claim to know what is in Job's heart. We cannot accurately judge other people. We can observe their actions, but we cannot discern their motives behind these actions or comprehend the spirit in which they carry out these actions. Jesus reminds us, "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (Mt 15:18). We cannot see what is in other people's hearts, so we should not judge them.

Finally, our text reminds us of the folly of trying to enforce our desires on others. Job's friends had a life plan worked out for Job that they tried to force on him. They expected Job to implement that life plan by acknowledging his sins, just as they wanted him to do, and then they believed he would receive the blessings of God. God had another plan for Job. God did not want Job to fall into the pattern of life his friends prescribed for him. God had something better in mind for Job. God wanted him to witness the majesty of creation and to be so transformed by this vision that he would never be the same person again. We will examine God's revelation to Job in next week's lesson.

God's Response

October 21, 2018

Job 38:1-7, 28-41

Theologian Alister McGrath tells a story about a supposed conversation between the famous religious thinker Augustine and a small boy. As Augustine strolls beside the ocean one day, he sees a young boy pouring seawater into a hole in the ground. After observing the boy for a time, Augustine asks him what he is doing. The boy responds, "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into this hole." Augustine chides him for his foolishness: "You can't possibly fit the sea into that little hole. You are wasting your time." Apparently recognizing the theologian, the boy retorts, "You are wasting your time too, trying to write a book about God" (Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding Jesus* [Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987] 30–31).

Job will be confronted by a similar realization in our text for this lesson. The basis for his rebuttal of the accusations of his friends and for his accusations about God's unjust treatment of him grow out of his mistaken notion that he understands everything about who God is and how God is supposed to act. He desires an audience with God so that he can demand an explanation for why God does not treat Job the way he thinks God should treat him. Job will discover that it is no easier to understand God than it is to pour the entire Mediterranean Sea into a hole in the sand. He will also discover that he must discard his "playbook" on God as he comes face to face with a God who is beyond his comprehension.

God's Question

Job 38:1-2

Recall what precedes the encounter in our text. Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, have been engaged in a series of dialogue cycles. In the first cycle (Job 4–14), his friends affirm that Job's suffering indicates sin in his life. In response, Job passionately defends his integrity. In the second cycle (chs. 15–21), Job's friends discuss the fate of a wicked person. While still protesting his innocence, Job begins to turn to God as his only hope of vindication. In the third cycle (chs. 22–31), Job's friends continue to focus on Job's sinfulness. Job again asserts his innocence, confronting God with a demand to show him the wickedness in his life. After the continuous protests from Job about God's mistreatment of him and after the extended debate

between Job and his “friends,” God finally allows Job to speak with God directly.

Notice that God does not sit down with Job for a casual give-and-take conversation as Job has anticipated. Earlier Job proposes a format for their dialogue when he suggests, “Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me” (13:22). God has other plans. God comes to Job “out of the whirlwind” and renders Job speechless (38:1). The prophets often use the image of God coming out of a whirlwind when they describe the terror of God’s judgment against the wicked (Am 1:14) or when they reveal the dangers for God’s own people when God comes to them in judgment (Hos 8:7). Job expects a casual conversation with God in which he can lay out his carefully prepared message of protest. Instead, God comes to him in a whirlwind that sweeps Job off his feet.

Instead of Job questioning God, God questions Job. God’s question to Job can be paraphrased, “Who do you think you are?” (38:2). In other words, God rebukes Job’s presumptuousness. Job believes that he knows the truth about how the universe should operate. God instead reproves Job because he “darkens counsel” (38:2). Instead of uncovering the truth, as Job desires to do, he obscures the truth. Job believes his words to be filled with wisdom and insight. God, on the other hand, reprimands Job because he speaks “words without knowledge” (38:2). God informs Job that if he wants to understand the truth about the universe, he needs to close his mouth and open his eyes so God can show him things he cannot grasp in his own wisdom.

God’s Superior Knowledge and Experience

Job 38:3-7

We might be disappointed that God’s response to Job does not provide an explanation for his suffering. The God of the Bible does not have to answer to humanity. Humanity must acquiesce to the sovereign, omnipotent God. Yet God’s confrontation with Job has a silver lining. By speaking to him, God at least assures Job that his sins have not cut him off from God. And God’s confrontation with Job adds another positive note in Job’s desire for the truth about the universe. Instead of listening to individuals who have no better grasp of the workings of the universe than he does, Job now hears from the one who does comprehend the intricacies of the universe.

After censoring Job for clouding the issue with his unwarranted accusations and faulty understanding, God exhorts Job to “gird up your loins like a man”

(38:3). In the ancient world, a person gathered up his robe and tucked it under his belt to prepare for exertion or activity. For example, after Elijah called down the rain from heaven after the dramatic encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the Bible says that “he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel” (1 Kings 18:46). Just as Elijah prepared his attire for his trip, God challenges Job to prepare his mind for what he will reveal to him.

I remember the first time I traveled in an airplane. It was a small two-engine plane and my travel route took me from Dallas, Texas, to Kansas City, Missouri. From the exalted viewpoint of the plane, I gained a new perspective on the relationship between houses, trees, farmlands, rivers, and other bodies of water. Something like that happens to Job in this passage. God takes Job on a guided tour of the universe, giving him a new perspective on the relationship between the events and the people in the world.

As God provides this panoramic view, he reminds Job of his limitations. God reminds Job that he is not the architect who designed the universe (38:4). God reminds Job further that he is not the foreman who determines the scope of creation (38:5). God also reminds Job that he is not the bricklayer who set the cornerstone of the universe (38:6). Nor is he the cosmic director who conducts the angelic choir (38:7). Job is a human being. He is not the Creator.

God places this litany about Job’s limitations in relationship to the universe next to the glorious manifestation of his own limitless control over the universe. While Job is not architect, foreman, bricklayer, or cosmic music director, God is all those things and more. In a description so detailed and dazzling that it rivals the majestic creation accounts of Genesis 1–2, the writer of Job presents a majestic narrative of creation that exalts God as the sovereign Creator of all things.

God’s Creative Work

Job 38:28-41

In the last part of our text, God confronts Job with a series of questions that force him to consider the majesty of creation and the impossibility of comprehending or controlling the universe. God questions Job about the provision of and control of rain and ice (38:28-30). Does Job produce the water that covers the earth with refreshing rain and moistens the ground with the morning dew? Does he provide the natural refrigeration to turn this water into ice, or does he even understand how water that flows can “become hard like stone” (38:30) or how bodies of

water can become frozen? The answer to all these questions is obviously no. Job controls neither spring's rains nor winter's hail and frost.

God then turns Job's attention to the celestial bodies (38:31-33). "Pleiades" (38:31) refers to a cluster of stars. "Orion" (38:31), "Mazzaroth" (38:32), and the "Bear" (38:32) are names of constellations. So God focuses on the configuration of stars that move in the heavens and asks Job if he knows the laws that govern their movement or if he understands the impact they have on the earth (38:33). God reminds Job that the Lord, not Job, created the heavenly bodies. Consequently, Job has no right to question God about their movements or their functions.

Next, God reminds Job of God's control of the universe (38:35-38). God can raise God's voice and the heavens pour rain upon the earth (38:34). Can Job do that? God can initiate the flash of lightning in the sky (38:35). Can Job do that? God can make sense out of the movement of the clouds in the sky (38:36-37a). Can Job do that? God can control the rain that the earth needs in order to be productive and useful to human beings (38:37b-38). Can Job do that? Job has accused God of mismanaging creation. God reminds Job that he does not have enough knowledge of the universe to be able to make such a judgment.

In the last part of our text, God's questions to Job focus on animal life (38:39-41). We see God's reference to an animal of tremendous power and to the lowly raven. In both examples, God focuses on their provision of food. In the natural order of life, God has provided for both the lion and the raven the food they need to survive and the strength and ability to acquire the food they need. Can Job do that? Again, the answer is no.

In Job 39, the questioning continues. Finally, God wears Job down and elicits from him a confession of his own weakness and his woeful ignorance when it comes to understanding the universe. "I am of small account," Job confesses. He then adds, "I lay my hand on my mouth" (40:4). Like so many before him and after him, Job is silenced by the majesty and glory of God.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from Job's dialogue with God? To begin with, Job's humbling encounter with God reminds us of our own limitations as human beings. Most of us experience certain elevating moments in life that convince us of our importance. We might even think so highly of ourselves that we become convinced that the world cannot carry on without us. When I was young, my teachers would often tell me, "If you think you are irreplaceable, just stick your

arm in a tub of water and then take it out and see how long it takes to fill up the space your arm occupied.” This dialogue with God is Job’s “stick your arm in the water and pull it out” reminder of his own insignificance.

Job’s dialogue with God also reminds us of God’s majesty. Through God’s guided tour of the universe and litany of relentless questions about its operation, God reminds Job of the vast universe that God created and controls. The psalmist captures this idea when he writes, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1).

In addition, Job’s dialogue with God reminds us of God’s mystery. The driving motive for Job’s desire to have a dialogue with God is to understand the sufferings he has experienced. Job wants explanations. Instead, God gives him questions. Job wants to know why he has suffered so much. Instead, God assures him that he does not have the capacity to comprehend any answer God can give him about his suffering. Job must simply trust God. The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it like this: “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl 3:11).

Job's Confession

October 28, 2018

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

The man entered the confessional at the local Catholic church with the priest sitting on the other side of the curtain. The penitent immediately began rattling off a list of his sins. For over an hour he kept up his litany of wrong deeds. Finally, the priest interrupted him with this comment: “Sir, you aren’t confessing; you’re bragging.”

In the dialogue between Job and his friends, Job does not confess his sins. Instead, he boasts about his righteousness, denying that there are any sins in his life bad enough to warrant the suffering he experiences. To Eliphaz’s accusation that Job has sinned, Job responds, “Make me understand how I have gone wrong” (Job 6:24). When Bildad echoes the accusation charging Job with sin, Job claims that he is “innocent” and “blameless” (9:20). When Zophar asserts that Job’s guilt deserves punishment, Job argues that he is “a just and blameless man” (12:4). When he examines his life in response to the accusations of these three friends, Job concludes, “My heart does not reproach me for any of my days” (27:6). In those conversations, Job is not confessing; he is bragging. All of that changes, however, when Job comes face to face with the omnipotent creator God.

We pointed out in last week’s lesson that in his dialogue with Job, God never explains Job’s suffering or answers Job’s questions concerning the operation of the universe. Instead, God challenges Job with a question that can be summarized this way: “Who do you think you are?” God reminds Job that the creation occurred before he ever came into existence and therefore is beyond his comprehension (Job 38:4). Only God was there at the beginning of life. God then asserts that death is a veil beyond which Job’s understanding cannot reach (38:17). Only God’s vision can penetrate beyond the curtain of death. God further explains to Job that creation contains mysteries that are beyond his comprehension (38:16-18). Only God can understand the deep mysteries of life. God’s monologue in chapters 39–41 continues the same theme. Job will finally confess his unworthiness to question the actions of God. Only then will he experience God’s forgiveness and once more bask in God’s generous provisions.

The Repentant Job

Job 42:1-6

Our text begins with the significant word “then” (42:1). Only after Job relentlessly challenges the accusations of his friends, rails about his innocence, disparages the way the universe operates, is engulfed by despair and tempted to take his own life, accuses God of being insensitive to his needs, is taken by God on a guided tour of the universe and overwhelmed by God’s majesty, and assured by God that his suffering has not separated him from God—only “then” does Job submit to the Lord. Only then does Job transition from bragging to confessing.

In this climactic chapter of the book, Job affirms two truths. First, he acknowledges God’s unlimited splendor: “I know that you can do all things” (42:2). And then he acknowledges his own limitations: “Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3). This recognition grows out of his personal encounter with God. Previously, Job contemplated God; now he sees God with his own eyes (42:5).

And what a magnificent revelation God gives to Job. God reminds Job that the Lord existed before creation, stands over creation, and oversees and controls all creation. This is the God of the Bible, the God before whom Israel trembled when God shook the earth (Ex 20:18), the God who stopped the sun on behalf of Joshua (Josh 10), the God whom Isaiah extolled in God’s promise to Israel (Isa 40:28-31), the God who brought life to the dead bones in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek 37), and the God who delivered the exiles from Babylonian captivity (Isa 11:12). As Job stands before that God, he concludes, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2).

In Job’s response, he finally repents before God (42:6). However, the context implies that Job does not repent of the ethical sins attributed to him by his companions. Instead, he repents of his self-righteousness that caused him to be defensive before God and prevented him from coming to a clear understanding of God’s presence, God’s power, and God’s provision. Because of Job’s response, he finally experiences peace. This is not specifically stated in the text but is clearly implied in the context. Job finds peace with God not because he receives answers to his questions but because he realizes that God cares for him and that he can trust God to do what is right.

In the transition passage between the first part of our text (Job 42:1-6) and the last part (42:10-17), God addresses the three critics who harassed Job about his need to confess his sins to God (42:7-9). God condemns them because, he tells them, “you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7). They suggest that righteous people are blessed in this life and evil people are afflicted in this world. Because they believe that formula, they can only explain

Job's suffering by assuming he has committed some egregious sin. Job holds to a more complex formula that acknowledges suffering for both the righteous and the evil in this world but ultimate blessings for the righteous in the world to come (Job 19:25-26). God affirms that Job is correct. He orders the friends to bring a sacrifice, after which Job prays for them (42:8-9).

The Restored Job

Job 42:10-17

As the book concludes, God restores Job's prosperity and well-being twofold (42:10). Notice the scope of God's blessings to Job. To begin with, God brings Job support through his family. In Satan's first attempt to undermine Job's faith, he sent a strong wind that collapsed the house in which Job's sons and daughters had gathered for a feast. All of them were killed in the disaster (Job 1:18-19). After Satan's second attempt to undermine Job's faith, Job's wife bitterly demanded that he curse God and die (Job 2:9). However, up to this point, we see no mention of Job's brothers and sisters. Where have they been? Did they isolate themselves from Job for fear that some catastrophe might also fall upon them? Did they implore Job to curse God and die, as his wife did? The biblical writer gives us no clue. Whatever their previous attitude toward their brother Job, at this point they rally around him. They do three things to express their support. First, they go to his house to share a meal with him. Next, they comfort him. Finally, they provide a tangible expression of their support by giving him "a piece of money and a gold ring" (42:11).

Then, God restores to Job the material blessings that enriched his life before the disasters engineered by Satan (42:12). God gives Job sheep and camels and oxen and donkeys. His possession of animals precisely doubles the amount he had earlier, just as the biblical writer asserts in Job 42:10. These animals reflect Job's new prosperity.

Further, God replaces Job's lost family with a new family (42:13-14). We do not know the names of his sons, but the biblical writer reveals the names Job gives to his daughters. "Jemimah" means daylight and suggests a new day of joy after Job's night of calamity. "Kezai" is an aromatic herb and stands in contrast to the offensive odor emanating from the ulcers that had covered Job's body. "Keren-happuch" represents a paint with which women dyed their eyelids, describing a beauty that contrasts with the description of Job in 16:16 where he confessed, "My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids." The names of his three daughters signify Job's restored prosperity.

The biblical writer provides two further insights into Job's new life of joy and fulfillment. On the one hand, we see the extraordinary beauty of the women in his new family (42:15). The word translated "beautiful" connotes both beauty on the outside and beauty on the inside. We also observe the prosperity Job's children will enjoy as he gives them "an inheritance along with their brothers" (42:15). When someone has no inheritance, they are left to the consequences of fate. The first appearance of the word "inheritance" in the Bible comes from Rachel and Leah when they flee with Jacob from Laban. "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house?" they exclaim (Gen 31:14). Job's children do not have to ask that question, for their father provides generously for them.

God also blesses Job with long life. The biblical writer tells us that Job lives "one hundred and forty years" (42:16). Job thus enjoys many years of joy after the difficulties inflicted by Satan. In addition, he has the delight of seeing four generations of his children before his death. Job therefore ends his life not only blessed but blessed to a greater degree than he was before his experiences of suffering. His life finally ends when he is "old and full of days" (42:17). The word translated "full" suggests someone who is satisfied and content. Picture someone after they have devoured a meal at their favorite restaurant. They sit back and sigh with contentment. That is the picture painted by this word. Job looks back over his life, even the tragic times of suffering, and sighs with contentment.

This happy ending to the book of Job bothers some people. To them it seems to reaffirm the theology of retribution that asserts that the wicked are punished but the good are rewarded, the very theology Job counters throughout his arguments. The issue is not really that simple. Yes, Job regains his riches, but only after going through an almost unbearable time of suffering. Yes, Job gets a new family, but does this really replace his former family who were all destroyed? Even with the happy ending, the overall message of Job remains. Life is a mystery in which sufferings and blessings cannot be directly attributed to either our goodness or our evil. We need to do what is right and leave the consequences to God.

Conclusion

What can we learn from this closing episode in Job's life? Job's experience affirms the mystery of God. Both Job and his critics try to squeeze God into their own theological structure. Job believes God should bless him because of his

righteous life. Job's enemies are convinced that God punishes Job because he does not live a righteous life. Both are wrong. Job silences his enemies with his arguments. Job, in turn, finds himself silenced by his encounter with God, forcing him to realize that he can never comprehend God's ways.

Job's experience also affirms the complexity of life. Both Job and his critics believe they have the correct formula for life. For Job's critics, good behavior brings blessings and bad behavior brings suffering. Job rejects that formula because it does not seem to be true in his life, and yet he too calls on God to reveal to him the simple formula that will explain his suffering. Both Job and his critics discover that life is so complex it cannot be captured with any simple formula. Only God can comprehend the movement of life as he pushes history forward according to his plan.

Job also reminds us of the difficulty of understanding suffering. The Deuteronomic formula concerning suffering, "if you follow my commands I will bless you, but if you disobey my commands I will punish you" (Deut 30:16-18; author's paraphrase), is only one explanation of suffering in the Old Testament. Sometimes we do cause our own suffering as the Deuteronomic formula suggests. On other occasions, other people cause our suffering. But we often cannot discern the cause of our suffering. It belongs to the mystery of life.

Obedience

November 4, 2018

Mark 12:28-34

Curiosity is a desire to know more about other people or other things. Curiosity enables researchers to make scientific breakthroughs. It stimulates explorers to discover new territory. It drives students to uncover previously unknown ideas. Curiosity is one of the most effective tools for learning, and asking questions is one manifestation of it. A Chinese proverb suggests, “He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; he who does not ask a question remains a fool forever.”

In the context in which Mark places our text, Jesus’ audience confronts him with a series of questions. Some Pharisees and Herodians question Jesus about paying taxes (Mk 12:13-17). Some Sadducees question Jesus about the resurrection (Mk 12:18-23). One of the scribes questions him about the greatest commandment (Mk 12:28-34). This suggests that the religious leaders of that day are eager to learn from Jesus. However, a closer look at this passage disabuses us of that idea. Mark 12:13 reveals that these religious leaders question Jesus not to learn from him but “to trap him in what he said.” Competition, not curiosity, inspires their questioning. Jesus understands their motivation. Nevertheless, instead of ignoring these questions or refusing to answer them, Jesus embraces their questions as an opportunity to teach them, despite their motive. Our text focuses on Jesus’ response to one of these questions, the question about the greatest commandment.

The Question

Mark 12:28

Mark identifies the questioner as “one of the scribes” (12:28). When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the exile, the law of God took on greater significance than ever, for they believed that the exile happened in part because the Hebrew people had failed to obey God’s law. Only by their obedience to the law would they be able to reestablish themselves as the people of God. However, to obey the law, they needed to clearly understand what the law said. Consequently, an independent class of biblical scholars arose, alongside the priests, who made the study of the law their profession. By New Testament times, these scribes formed a clearly defined class that dedicated itself to the study of and interpretation of the law. In the opening verse of our text, the man who approaches Jesus with the question is one of these guardians of the law.

Notice that Mark attributes to this scribe a favorable evaluation of Jesus, for he tells us the scribe concludes that Jesus “answered them well” (12:28). How can we sync this apparently favorable attitude of the scribe toward Jesus with the earlier revelation that the religious leaders are questioning Jesus “to trap him in what he said” (Mk 2:13)? Is this scribe not a part of the religious leaders who want to trap Jesus, or does he fake his favor toward Jesus? Perhaps the scribe is favorable toward Jesus, and the other religious leaders have decided to capitalize on that fact. In other words, maybe the religious leaders have purposefully sent this scribe with the favorable attitude so that Jesus will not suspect their ulterior motive, hoping he will inadvertently say something that will give them an opportunity to humiliate him. In any case, the biblical writer tells us that the scribe confronts Jesus with a question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (12:28).

The question seems straightforward because, after all, the scribes spent most of their time debating this very question. They continually compared the weight of the various laws that make up God’s commandments. Remember that the Jews did not limit the commandments to the Ten Commandments. In Jesus’ day, the teachers of the law identified 613 commandments, 248 of them positive and 365 negative. They spent most of their time debating the same question the scribe addresses to Jesus. Perhaps the scribe asks this question to see how Jesus’ answer compares with the conclusions reached by his colleagues in their discussions about the law. However, because the scribes hold different positions in answer to that question, whatever answer Jesus gives will put him in opposition to at least some of the scribes, so the question, even if it is motivated by good intentions, may provide an opportunity to trap Jesus into a self-incriminating statement.

Jesus’ Answer

Mark 12:29-31

Nevertheless, Jesus does not hesitate to offer an answer. In his answer, he identifies not one but two commandments. The first commandment is rooted in what the Jews refer to as the Shema, which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The first word of this passage in Deuteronomy, in the original Hebrew, is *shema*. Consequently, the entire passage came to be known as the Shema. Services in the Jewish synagogues begin with a recitation of the Shema. Jewish phylacteries, small containers that hold written summaries of the essential elements of Jewish faith, contain a form of the Shema. The mezuzah, a rectangular piece of

inscribed parchment enclosed in a metal or wooden case and attached to the upper section of a Jewish dwelling's right-hand doorpost, contains a form of the Shema. This declaration about God in the Deuteronomy passage, which Jesus quotes in our text, was very important to first-century Jews.

Jesus quotes the first part of the Shema: "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (12:29), which establishes the monotheistic conviction that stands at the heart of Jewish faith. He then refers to the second part of the Shema, "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (12:30), which affirms the devotion we must direct toward God. Nothing, Jesus declares, is more important than loving God. Yet, even though nothing is more important than loving God, Jesus informs the scribe that another law is like this first law. He then quotes from Leviticus 19:18 the commandment to love our neighbor. Jesus concludes, "There is no other commandment greater than these" (12:31).

Why are these the greatest commandments? We can give two answers to that question. On the one hand, these are the greatest commandments because they summarize the essence of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, the stipulations that regulate the covenant between God and his people, reflect two dimensions: a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. The first set of commandments informs us concerning our relationship to God. This is the vertical dimension. These commandments prohibit any action that distracts us from loving God. The second group of commandments enlightens us concerning our relationship with other people. This is the horizontal dimension. These commandments prohibit any action that keeps us from loving our neighbors. Since the two commandments Jesus combines in his answer to the scribe encompass all the Ten Commandments, he can conclude that "there is no other commandment greater than these."

Or perhaps Jesus concludes that these are the greatest commandments because of the priority of love in the Christian life. Paul sounds the same note in his first Corinthian letter. He singles out faith, hope, and love for special attention but then concludes that "the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). Faith appropriates the salvation that is available in Christ, and hope anticipates the future inheritance that comes to those who have faith; love, though, fleshes out that faith and enables us to embrace in the present the first experience of that future inheritance promised to us through Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, Paul affirms the superiority of love.

The Response

Mark 12:32-34

The scribe's response surprises us (12:32-33). When we remember that the religious leaders intend not to validate Jesus but to incriminate him, the scribe's response appears remarkable. He acknowledges that Jesus is "right," a word that can carry the meaning of excellent or beautiful. In today's slang, we could interpret the scribe's response as, "You've got it!" With enthusiasm, the teacher of the law approves Jesus' answer. The scribe also admits that having a loving relationship carries more weight in God's eyes than presenting an appropriate sacrifice to God (12:33). Such affirmations from this representative of Jesus' enemies are surprising.

Jesus evidently believes the man's answer is sincere. He sees that the scribe "answered wisely" (12:34). Consequently, Jesus commends him for his insight. Remember that the scribe is an expert in the law, yet Jesus suggests that he just now grasps the heart of God's law. He finally realizes that love is the key: love for God and love for one another. God loves people and wants them to reflect that same kind of love toward God and toward others. The scribe finally grasps this truth.

Yet Jesus urges him to go further (12:34). Even though the scribe seems to grasp the essence of a relationship with God as explained by Jesus, Jesus does not say, "You have just become a part of the kingdom." Instead, he offers this more cautious response: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34). Understanding is not enough. Clearly perceiving who Jesus is and what he wants us to do is not enough. What is the final ingredient that enables a person to move from being "near" the kingdom to being "in" the kingdom? The final ingredient is an act of the will. By a deliberate act of the will, people must decide to act on what they know, to make a commitment based on what they understand. Mark leaves open to speculation whether or not the scribe took this next step.

Notice the conclusion of our text for this lesson: "After that no one dared to ask him any question" (12:34). This encounter reminds us again that the wise men of that day are no match for the wisdom of Jesus. The scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians approach Jesus one after another with an attempt to confuse him and undermine his influence. Instead, they make fools of themselves, and Jesus' influence remains intact.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from the dialogue in our text? To begin with, Jesus reminds us of the supremacy of love. When asked about the most important responsibility in the life of a believer, Jesus answers with the word “love.” The most important factor in our relationship with God is not our doctrinal integrity or our ceremonial purity. The key is our attitude toward God and toward those who are around us. Do we love God with all our hearts? Do we love others with whom we share the journey of life? Love rules in the Christian life.

Jesus also reminds us that the Christian faith is two-dimensional. The Christian faith includes the vertical dimension of our relationship with God and the horizontal dimension of our relationships with each other. To cloister ourselves off from the world so that we can bask in the presence of God is not enough. Neither is rolling up our sleeves and spending all our energy loving the world. We must find a balance that includes both. Our love for God will be suspect unless it motivates us to become involved with the world. Our love for the world will become impotent unless it is grounded in a strong love for God.

Finally, Jesus reminds us that we will fulfill our responsibility to love God only if we include every faculty of our being. We must love God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and with all our strength. The original expression in the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 calls us to love God with all our hearts, souls, and might. Jesus adds the word “mind” perhaps as a reminder that we do not have to sacrifice our intellect in our relationship with God. We can love God with our minds as well as with our hearts, our souls, and our strength. Fulfilling God’s command to love involves every dimension of our personality and calls forth from us the very best we have.

Generosity

November 11, 2018

Mark 12:35-44

Some questions are difficult to answer. For instance, “Where does God come from?” is a question from children that often stumps parents. One pastor said that his son went to church with him one day, and when they got into his office, the son asked this question: “Dad, how much does our church weigh?” That too is a difficult question. My favorite is the little boy who asked his dad this question: “If a doctor gets sick, and the doctor doctors him, does the doctor doing the doctoring of the doctor doctor the doctor the way the doctor being doctored wants to be doctored, or does the doctor doctor the way he wants to doctor?” Some questions are difficult to answer.

Jesus’ critics discover that truth. In the passage preceding our text, the religious leaders confront Jesus with a series of difficult questions they think Jesus cannot answer without undermining his influence among the people. However, Jesus easily handles these questions. Then, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, Jesus turns the tables on his enemies and presents them with a perplexing question of his own. With this question, Jesus accomplishes what they failed to accomplish with their questioning. He puts them on the horns of a dilemma and renders them speechless. While embarrassing the religious leaders, Jesus delights the crowds who observe the dialogue. Let us begin by exploring this dialogue.

The Crowds: Delighted by Jesus

Mark 12:35-37

Mark sets the scene for this text in the temple. Jesus has been teaching his disciples, proclaiming parables, interacting with the crowd, and responding to the questions of the scribes and the Pharisees. Now, Jesus has a question of his own to present to the religious leaders: “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?” (12:35). In the parallel account of this encounter, Matthew provides the background for Jesus’ question. In Matthew’s account, Jesus asks the Pharisees, “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They answer, “The son of David” (Mt 22:42). This leads to Jesus’ question in our text. Apparently, the religious leaders do not respond to his question, so Jesus expands it by quoting from Psalm 110. The quoted passage refers to David and to the Holy Spirit and to the Lord. So what does all of this mean?

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God (12:36). Mark uses the word “Lord” to identify two different entities (12:36). He takes the first “Lord” to be a reference to God and the second “Lord” to be a reference to the Messiah. Therefore, the Spirit inspires David to declare that the Lord (that is, God) exalts the Lord (that is, the Messiah) to a position of authority at his right hand. This quotation affirms that the Messiah, who is a descendant of David, is much more than that, a fact that even David himself recognized. All of this stands behind Jesus’ question to the religious leaders: “David himself calls him [the Messiah] Lord; so how can he be his son?” (12:37a). Jesus asks this question against the backdrop of the claims that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is also a descendant of David. In fact, “Son of David” is one of the more popular names for Jesus among the citizens of Jerusalem (Mt 15:22; 21:9; 21:15; Mk 10:47-48). Jesus’ question places the religious leaders in a dilemma. If they affirm that the son of David can indeed be the Messiah, and because the people understand Jesus to be the “Son of David,” the religious leaders may inadvertently be giving credence to Jesus’ status as the Messiah. The people might even think the religious leaders are affirming Jesus as the Messiah. Consequently, they remain silent.

Why does this stalemate between Jesus and the religious leaders delight the crowd (12:37b)? Perhaps seeing the religious leaders stumped by a question they either will not or cannot answer delights them. When those who claim to know so much are rendered speechless, the crowd cannot help smiling. Or maybe some in the crowd have already accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and the inability of the religious leaders to counter Jesus’ claims validates their decision. In either case, Jesus silences the religious leaders with his question.

The Religious Leaders: Condemned by Jesus

Mark 12:38-40

The inability of the religious leaders to respond to Jesus’ question prompts him to condemn them for their pretense and lack of compassion. Do not understand this to be a description of every scribe in Jesus’ day. Some genuinely loved God and sincerely committed themselves to doing God’s work. Some of these religious leaders would join the Christian movement or at least defend it. Yet many of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day got caught up in their own importance and forgot about those to whom God called them to minister. Jesus has this latter group in mind when he issues this condemnation.

False religious leaders display their pride of position and draw attention to themselves. Jesus says they “like to walk around in long robes” (12:38). To

“like” means to relish something or to delight in something. They delight in their “long robes.” Their long robes sweep the ground and draw the attention of others. Wearing these long robes, a person can neither hurry nor work.

Therefore, these robes identify the person wearing them as someone of honor or esteem. The Bible challenges us to “do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). In contrast, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day seek to glorify themselves.

False religious leaders demand that others recognize their importance. Jesus says they like “to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces” (12:38). This point grows out of the first one. Because they seek to glorify themselves, they find fulfillment when others recognize their prominence and honor them for it. They also seek “the best seats in the synagogues” (12:39). Being in the best seats accomplishes two purposes: (1) it underscores their importance to God’s work, and (2) it forces others to look up to them. These false religious leaders also desire the “places of honor at banquets” (12:39). Their egos are so big that they cannot be satisfied with the glory they receive within the synagogue. They also want everyone in the community to recognize how important they are. Sitting in the chief seats at banquets underscores their importance.

False religious leaders use their authority to take advantage of other people. Jesus claims that “they devour widows’ houses” (12:40). How do they do this? Three suggestions may offer some clarification. Perhaps the scribes have control of a fund and can draw from it, and they ask widows to contribute more to that special fund than can be reasonably expected. Or perhaps they offer their help in settling estates that fall to the widows and then take for themselves more than is rightfully theirs. Or maybe they take unfair advantage of material support that initially has been volunteered for the widows. In one way or another, these religious leaders claim their love for God and for the widows while at the same time they con them out of everything they have.

Finally, false religious leaders try to impress others with their religiosity. Jesus claims, “For the sake of appearance [they] say long prayers” (12:40). The scribes fill their prayers with religious clichés to try to impress the people with their religious zeal. They voice the loudest “amens” and use the correct religious language. However, it is all for show. It is not genuine. Mark does not indicate any response from the religious leaders who come under this incisive criticism of Jesus. Perhaps by this point they have slipped away.

The Poor Widow: Commended by Jesus

Mark 12:41-44

Having concluded his dialogue with the religious leaders, Jesus sits down to observe the movement of people who come into the temple to give their offering to the Lord (12:41). He witnesses the parade of prominent people who bring their significant gifts. The terms “rich” and “large sums” signify the size of their offerings. This opening scene recalls Jesus’ warning in Matthew 6:2 where he says, “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.” Does this mean someone literally plays a trumpet as the wealthy drop their coins into the offering receptacle? Probably not. Jesus is most likely referring to the shape of the offering receptacle itself. These receptacles were shaped like a horn turned upright. Some of the wealthy worshipers learned how to drop their coins into the trumpet-shaped receptacle in such a way that the coins rattled all the way down. Thus, they drew attention to their own generosity.

Jesus turns his focus from these wealthy worshipers loudly dropping their large offerings into the receptacle to someone no one else may even notice. Mark calls her “a poor widow” (12:42). Instead of being rich, she is poor. Instead of giving a large sum, she only offers two small copper coins. Instead of drawing attention to herself, she slips in and out so unobtrusively that no one else notices her. Her gift seems so insignificant that it appears to be nothing when compared to that of the rich worshipers. Yet Jesus magnifies her gift as greater than all the offerings of the wealthy (12:43). Why? Jesus explains in the closing verse of our text: “For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had” (12:44). Two thousand years later we continue to commend this poor widow, not because of what she accomplished in her time on this earth, but because of the generosity of her gift (she “has put in everything she had,” 12:44) and because she uses her gift not to bring attention to herself but to give honor to God.

Conclusion

Each of the three sections of our lesson provides insight into living the Christian life today. In the first section—Jesus’ teaching that delights the crowd—he reminds us of the special work God sent him to accomplish. To Israel, God promised a future Messiah who would fulfill the promises to Israel and redeem all who turned to him. Jesus is that Messiah. He accomplished that work and now sits at the right hand of the Father. Consequently, we can give our allegiance to him with the confidence that he will fulfill his promises to us.

In the second section—Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders of his day—he reminds us that true faith is in the heart and not in outward appearances. The world judges people according to what they see on the outside. God judges us according to what God sees on the inside. Money is not the currency with which we do business with God. Our currency is faith. If we have faith, we can serve God. If we have faith, we can make a difference for God in this world. If we have faith, we can receive the word of commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

In the third section—Jesus’ commendation of the widow who gave her offering to the Lord—he reminds us that the key in our giving to the Lord is not the amount of our gift but the condition of our hearts. As a corollary to that central truth, the story also reminds us that anyone can give an adequate gift to the Lord. God does not demand that we give a large offering if we do not have the resources to do so. God does not demand that everyone give a similar amount. God only expects us to do our best.

Insight

November 18, 2018

Mark 13:1-13

Think about the predictions some have made concerning the future. Here is a quote from Wilbur Wright: “In 1901, I said to my brother Orville that man would not fly for fifty years.” Here is a quote in 1911 from Marshal Ferdinand Foch, French military strategist and future World War I commander: “Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value.” Irving Fisher, a professor of economics at Yale University, affirmed on October 17, 1929, “Stocks have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau.” In 1934, former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George declared, “Believe me, Germany is unable to wage war.” In 1949, a writer for *Popular Mechanics* asserted, “Computers in the future may... perhaps only weigh 1.5 tons.” Trying to predict the future can be a hazardous undertaking, for none of us can see it.

None of us can see the future, that is, except Jesus the Son of God who shares the omniscience of the Father. We see evidences of Jesus’ omniscience in the Gospels. In John 1:47-49, Jesus knows Nathanael before he even meets him. In John 2:25, the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus “needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.” In Luke 6:8, Jesus knows what the Pharisees are thinking when the man with the withered hand approaches him. In John 4, Jesus knows the marital history of the Samaritan woman, leading her to exclaim to the citizens of the nearby village, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” (v. 29). Witnessing Jesus’ repeated disclosures about the future that come true, the disciples conclude, “Now we know that you know all things” (Jn 16:30). The fulfillment of Jesus’ predictions about what will happen in the immediate future instills within the disciples confidence that Jesus can also predict the more distant future. Consequently, as the shadow of death falls over Jesus in that final week of his life, the disciples probe Jesus for insight into what the future holds.

The Temple’s Future

Mark 13:1-2

After Jesus recognizes the generosity of the widow who gives her offering in the temple, Jesus leaves the temple with his disciples for the last time (13:1). One of the disciples calls attention to the “large stones” and “large buildings” as he exults in the glory of the temple. In the New American Standard Bible, the word

“large” in our text is translated “wonderful”; the New International Version translates it “magnificent.” These other translations capture more clearly the meaning of the disciple’s statement. Jesus concurs with the disciple’s appraisal of the splendor of the temple. The Jerusalem temple in the early decades of the first century AD was a magnificent structure. But then Jesus shocks the disciples by predicting the temple’s destruction. He tells them, “Not one stone will be left here upon another” (13:2).

Jesus’ declaration concerning the future destruction of the temple is significant for several reasons. When the religious leaders make their case against Jesus before the Sanhedrin, they will charge him with conspiring to destroy the temple based on this statement (Mk 14:58). In addition, Jesus’ declaration about the temple is important because it later comes true. In AD 70, Titus, son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, will defeat the Jews, capture the city of Jerusalem, and destroy the temple, obliterating it completely. Jesus does indeed understand what will happen in the future. Finally, Jesus’ declaration about the temple is important because it stimulates the disciples to think about their future. Their dread about the events of the present moment has unnerved them. However, Jesus’ comment about the future destruction of the temple inspires them to focus again on the days ahead. This will open the door for Jesus to inform them about the future of the world they live in.

The World’s Future

Mark 13:3-8

The setting changes as Jesus and his disciples move from the temple to the Mount of Olives. Mark tells us that Jesus sits with his disciples “opposite the temple” (13:3). As they observe the beautiful structure from a distance, the disciples remember Jesus’ earlier revelation that this magnificent building will be destroyed. This prompts the question that will launch Jesus into his exposition concerning the future of the world. They ask, “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” (13:4).

The disciples obviously have in mind the destruction of the temple when they ask, “When will this be?” However, the phrase “all these things” suggests that they have more in mind. They also want to know about the end of the age. In fact, the disciples cannot think of one of these events without thinking of the other, because to them, the destruction of the temple will mark the end of the age. In his response, Jesus includes both ideas: the destruction of the temple and

his second coming at the end of the age. At times, we cannot discern which of these two ideas Jesus has in mind when he speaks to the disciples.

Dr. Ray Summers, one of my teachers at Baylor, told us once that we need to think of all the events Jesus discusses here as mountains in the distance. From our perspective, they all seem to be at about the same place. As we move toward them, however, we realize that a large distance separates these individual peaks. In the same way, as Jesus presents his teaching to the disciples, he seems to suggest that all these events will occur simultaneously. As we approach these events, however, we will discover that Jesus has in mind different events separated by time. We need to remember this perspective as we examine what Jesus says to the disciples.

Jesus begins with a word of warning: “Beware that no one leads you astray” (13:5). Jesus has in mind strong, charismatic personalities who will come along and convince others that they are God’s special messengers (13:6). They will then persuade people to accept their false predictions concerning the future. Jesus tells his disciples not to be surprised when that happens.

These false messengers will not only deceive people concerning their own spiritual insight. They will also deceive others concerning the events to come. At the time Jesus taught his disciples on the Mount of Olives, the Roman world enjoyed a period of peace. Within a short time, however, war would rock the Roman empire. From that day until the present, every generation has faced the reality of wars or at least the rumors of war. Often, false prophets have identified these wars as signs that the end is near (13:7). Jesus warns his disciples not to be swayed by these “date-fixers.” Wars will come and go, Jesus affirms, but they will not necessarily mark the end of the age.

Other false teachers will point to the calamitous events in nature as signs that the end is near (13:8). Prophetic literature often predicts that earthquakes and other natural disturbances will accompany the end of the age. For example, when the seer in Revelation describes the end of the age, he talks about “flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake” that will shake the earth (16:18). However, Jesus explains to the disciples that we cannot accept any one event in nature as a guarantee that the end of the world has come. Jesus refers to these events—wars and rumors of war, earthquakes and famines—not as the end of the world but as “the beginning of the birth pangs” (Mk 13:8).

The Disciples’ Future

Mark 13:9-13

Instead of giving more details about the world's future, Jesus turns his focus to the disciples' future. Jesus seems to say, "Do not spend all your time speculating about the end of the world. Instead, focus your attention on what is ahead for you." Jesus then explains the challenges and opportunities the disciples will face in the days ahead.

He warns them, first, that they will undergo persecution (13:9). "Councils" probably refers to the local Jewish courts, including the Sanhedrin. "Governors and kings" refers to political leaders like Herod Agrippa I. Jesus paints a future for the disciples filled with suffering and perhaps even death.

He affirms that the good news will be taken to the world (13:10). This "good news" includes the basic truths about Jesus. He fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. He lived a sinless life. He died a vicarious death on the cross for our sins. God raised him from the grave three days later. Someday he will return as the victorious Lord over all. The word "nations" reminds us that the scope of the gospel includes the whole world. "Proclaimed" reminds us that Jesus depends on us to get the message out.

Jesus promises the disciples that the Holy Spirit will instruct them (13:11). As a part of the persecution ahead for them, the religious leaders will bring them before the council to give an account for their decision to be followers of Jesus. The thought of standing before magistrates and kings must have terrified these early disciples. Jesus assures them they do not need to worry about this experience, for the Holy Spirit will be with them to inspire them to make the proper response.

Jesus also warns the disciples that faith in Jesus will create tension with members of their families (13:12). Sometimes tensions arise between one family member who is a believer and another family member who is not. We will often find that when we are the most in tune with God, we will be the most out of tune with the world. The result can be conflict and tension within our families.

Our allegiance to Christ will also incite the hatred of others who reject Christ. Jesus warns his disciples, "You will be hated by all because of my name" (13:13a). Just as the enemies of Jesus destroyed him because the light of his life exposed their sin, those who live in darkness hate those who live in the light because they expose their sins and their emptiness. Consequently, they will try to silence us.

Jesus does not paint a promising future for the disciples. They will face persecution and tension and hatred. Yet, despite what looms before them, the

disciples will reveal their true faith by their continued allegiance to Christ (13:13b).

Conclusion

What does Jesus' insight into the future teach us about living for him today? His prediction that the temple will be destroyed reminds us that our faith does not depend on a building. The Jewish faith continued to thrive even after the Romans destroyed the temple. In the same way, our faith is not dependent on a building. The church does not consist of bricks and mortar. Instead, it consists of people who share a relationship with each other because of their shared relationship with Jesus.

Jesus' warning against accepting false predictions concerning the end of the world cautions us about those who profess to have detailed knowledge about when the end will come. The church has often given special honor to those who boldly outline the exact details of the consummation of our age. According to Jesus, such honor is misplaced, for no one can correctly read the signs and determine the exact date for the end of the world.

Jesus states that we will be better served if we focus our attention on what God wants us to do in the present and prepare for the things we will face. Living for Jesus in the world has never been an easy assignment. Misunderstanding, criticism, obstruction, and sometimes, even persecution will inevitably come our way. We must be driven by the same faith that prompted Peter and John's response when the Sanhedrin demanded they stop talking about Jesus. They declared, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

Worship

November 25, 2018

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8

As Leonardo da Vinci worked one morning on his unfinished painting of the Last Supper, a friend observed and exulted over the two silver cups on the table in front of Jesus in the picture. He complimented the artistic skill Leonardo exhibited in their design. At once, Leonardo took his brush and blotted them out with the explanation, “It is not those cups I want you to see. It is that face—the face of Jesus.”

Both Daniel in his prophecy and the writer of Revelation in his description of the last days express a similar sentiment. As they describe the future, they direct our attention again and again to the one who controls the present flow of history and who will bring the future to its culmination. Whenever we become sidetracked with some of the images and scenery in their description of the last days, we can almost hear them protesting, “It is not the scenery I want you to see. It is the one who stands behind the scenery and who controls the events I am describing.” Let us focus on these figures who stand at the center of our text: the “Ancient One” (Dan 7:9), the “one like a human being coming with the clouds” (Dan 7:13), and “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5).

The Ancient One

Daniel 7:9-10

Let us begin with Daniel’s reference to “an Ancient One” (7:9). Who is this Ancient One? Only Daniel uses this phrase in the Bible. Yet we can conclude from the context that this term refers to the eternal God of Israel before whom all people and all nations will eventually come in judgment. Perhaps by referring to God as the Ancient One, Daniel wants to contrast God’s permanence to the temporary nature of the mighty nations, represented by the various beasts in his vision (Dan 7:1-8), that move onto the scene and then quickly disappear only to be replaced by yet another temporary empire. These so-called mighty nations come and go. In contrast, God remains the same yesterday, today, and forever, from one generation to another. Daniel refers to other “thrones” (7:9) but says nothing more about them here. Instead, he focuses his full attention on the throne upon which the Ancient One sits.

Notice Daniel’s glowing description of the Ancient One, whose clothing is “white as snow” and whose hair is white “like pure wool” (7:9). The white hair

and clothes designate the purity of this One before whom all nations will be judged. As the description continues, Daniel sees a throne of “fiery flames” and wheels that are “burning fire.” This fire emanating from God is the purifying fire of judgment. The wheels probably symbolize the ongoing movement of God’s judgment upon all nations. The “stream” imagery conjures the same picture (7:10). From the throne, the fire of God’s judgment pours out on the world like a flowing stream of water.

The Ancient One is not alone while rendering judgment on the nations. The phrases “thousand thousands” and “ten thousand times ten thousand” are biblical hyperbole (7:10). Countless numbers of angels gather around God in the moment of judgment as “the books were opened” (7:10). These books contain the report of everyone’s life. One commentator calls them “forensic evidence.” Perhaps the point of the vision is that God’s judgment is not biased but is rather just, because it is based on the evidence clearly recorded in “the books.”

The One Like a Human Being

Daniel 7:13-14

At this point, Daniel focuses his attention on the one through whom the Ancient One will carry out judgment. Daniel identifies him as “one like a human being” (7:13). Most other translations use the more common term, “Son of Man,” to describe the one referred to in our text. Jesus later identifies with Daniel’s vision by using this term, Son of Man, as a reference to himself. For Jesus, the term conveys both his messianic mission (Mt 16:27; Mk 14:62) and his full humanity (Mt 8:20; Lk 7:34).

In 7:14, Daniel brings together several words and images to exalt this “one like a human being.” To him the Ancient One gives “dominion.” This word means the power to rule, acknowledging his superiority over all the other empires. To him the Ancient One gives “glory.” This word is usually translated “honor” and speaks of the deference given to someone of recognized esteem. To him the Ancient One also gives “kingship.” This word can be translated “a kingdom.” As the other kingdoms pass away, God gives him a kingdom that is eternal. Because of who this one like a human being is, the people will gladly “serve him.”

Daniel concludes his description of this one like a human being by acknowledging that his dominion is “an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away” and that his kingdom “shall never be destroyed” (7:14). Daniel’s vision affirms that the power to rule over all peoples, previously given to human rulers

like Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:1), will now be given to this special agent sent by God, and “all peoples, nations and languages” will worship him (7:14).

The Ruler of the Kings of the Earth

Revelation 1:4-8

The last part of our lesson text shifts our attention to the book of Revelation. John, the self-proclaimed author of this final book of the Bible, addresses this letter to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). “Asia” refers to a province within the Roman Empire that is in modern-day Turkey. John names these seven churches in Revelation 1:11. He extends the blessing of God to the members of these churches with the familiar greeting of “grace” and “peace” (1:4). John affirms that God extends undeserved blessings to the people of these churches (grace), thus restoring harmony between God and them (peace).

John goes further to identify the source from which this greeting comes. He begins with a reference to the One “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4). This description focuses on God, who self-identifies as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). John then refers to “the seven spirits who are before his throne” (1:4). John probably uses this term to affirm the Spirit’s rule over the seven churches mentioned above, not to suggest there are seven spirits. Finally, John identifies Jesus as the source of this greeting of grace and peace (1:5). In mentioning God, the Spirit, and Jesus, John foreshadows the concept of the Trinity that will be more fully developed by the theologians of the opening centuries of the Christian era.

Notice the phrases John uses to affirm who Jesus is. He begins by identifying Jesus as “the faithful witness” (1:5). Many religious seers have speculated about the way things seem to be, but their speculations were eventually disproved by history. In Jesus, we have a faithful witness who tells us the way things really are. He tells Pilate, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (Jn 18:37). In addition, John calls Jesus “the firstborn of the dead” (1:5). Some may question the validity of the claim that Jesus is the faithful witness of the things to come. Why should we believe him? His resurrection answers that question by verifying his credibility. John also refers to Jesus as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). Mightier than any army that ever marched, more powerful than any Caesar who ever reigned, greater than any parliament that ever sat, Jesus possesses the authority of God that enables him to carry out his redemptive assignment for the world.

After identifying who Jesus is, John recognizes what Jesus does. To begin with, Jesus loves us (1:5). Note that John starts with this acknowledgment of Jesus' love. Jesus does not first liberate us and lift us up to a new life as kings and priests and then decide he loves us. The love comes first. Paul confirms this idea in Romans 5:8 where he writes, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Then, John says that Jesus liberates us. Our text declares that Jesus "freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5). We also find the word translated "freed" in Luke 13:12. For eighteen years, a spirit of infirmity has held a woman in its grip, crippling her body. Jesus tells the woman, "You are set free from your ailment" (Lk 13:12). What Jesus did for the woman physically he does for all of us spiritually. He sets us free from the sin that holds us in bondage and liberates us to become what God wants us to be. In addition, John tells us that Jesus lifts us to a new level of life (1:6). Jesus transforms us into kings and priests. To make us a "kingdom" speaks of the power and authority Jesus gives us. To make us "priests" describes our participation in his kingdom work. Jesus wants to do more than just liberate us from our sins. He wants to lift us to a new level of participation in completing his redemptive work. This description of what Jesus does for us evokes from the writer of Revelation another of the doxologies that permeate this final book in the Bible: "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1:6).

Remembering what Jesus has done for us in the past leads John to focus on the things Jesus will do for us in the future. The image of Jesus "coming with the clouds" (1:7) replicates the image used by the prophet Daniel in the section we covered earlier in this lesson (Dan 7:13) and the image used by Jesus himself as he revealed to the disciples what would happen at the end of the age (Mt 24:30; 26:64). The image reflects power and victory and exaltation.

John concludes this section with a declaration from "the Lord God," a reference not to Jesus but to God (1:8). John refers to the Greek alphabet with his reference to "Alpha," the first letter in the alphabet, and to "Omega," the final letter in the alphabet. Our similar term, "from A to Z," connotes completeness. From the beginning of time to the end of time, God is already here. John reinforces that idea by repeating the image from Revelation 1:4. God has no beginning or ending. He was, he is, and he will be. Consequently, the only proper response to this majestic, omnipotent, eternal God is praise and worship.

Conclusion

What lessons can we draw from these visions of the prophet Daniel and from John, the author of Revelation? Both texts paint a picture of God's majesty and control of human history. Daniel's contemporaries believed that powerful nations like Babylonia, Persia, and Greece controlled the movement of history. In John's day, the Roman juggernaut seemed to control it. Both Daniel and John assure us that this is not the case. Over, around, and through these temporary kingdoms runs the thread of God's sovereign power and purpose.

Both texts affirm the central role Jesus plays in God's unfolding plan for the world. For Daniel, the one he describes as the Son of Man—whom we know to be Jesus—fills the starring role in the events reflected in his visions. For John, the one he describes as the ruler of the kings of the earth—whom we know to be Jesus—will return to the earth to consummate God's plan.

Both texts suggest that Jesus will play a redemptive role in God's plan for humanity. In Daniel's image, Jesus will come to bring judgment on the nations of the world and redemption for God's people. In John's image, Jesus will reflect his love for his people by liberating them and lifting them to a new level of life.

A Righteous Branch

December 2, 2018

Jeremiah 33:14-22

We live in a world of symbols that represent an object, a function, a process, or a person. For Christians, the cross symbolizes Jesus' death by which he made possible our salvation. For the Allies during World War II, Churchill's gesture of holding up two fingers in the shape of a "V" symbolized eventual victory for the Allied cause. A blue line on a map symbolizes a river. Athletes who wear pink when they take the court or field symbolize their support for breast cancer sufferers. A red heart placed at the bottom of a note symbolizes love. We do much of our communication using symbols.

We see the same practice in the Bible. As the Old Testament prophets predict the Messiah who is to come, and as the New Testament writers describe the Messiah who has come, they use symbols. During Advent season, we are going to draw on some of those symbols to understand more fully the person and work of the Messiah, predicted in the Old Testament and presented in the New Testament. The first of these symbols comes from the prophet Jeremiah. He described the promised Messiah as "a righteous Branch."

The Context

Jeremiah 33:14

In the opening verse of our text, Jeremiah refers to "the promise" God made to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (33:14). What is this promise? We find the core of it in what commentators often call the Book of Consolation in Jeremiah 30–33. In our text for this lesson, we see the closing verses of this Book of Consolation. In the Book of Consolation, the prophet promises that God "will restore the fortunes of my people" (Jer 30:3). The prophet also promises that God "will bring them back to the land" (30:3). "I will restore health to you," God promises (30:17). God also promises to return their fortunes to them (30:18). God promises, "I will satisfy the weary and all who are faint I will replenish" (31:25). God even promises to "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (31:31). Once more, God promises through the prophet, "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (31:33).

God confirms these promises to Jeremiah when "the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah a second time" (Jer 33:1). In this second revelation, God promises to restore the physical structure and the daily life of the city (33:6-7). God's

promise of “prosperity and security” (33:6) signals that Judah will once more become a community in which daily life is well structured and well lived. God also promises to restore the spiritual well-being of the city (33:8). Jeremiah identifies three things that separate the people of Judah from their God. The Hebrew word translated “sin” in the beginning of the verse means to be twisted or bent. The Hebrew word translated “sin” toward the end of the verse means to miss the mark. The Hebrew word translated “rebellion” means to turn against one to whom you should be giving your allegiance. These three words are like the facets of a diamond, each reflecting another dimension of Judah’s sin against God. Jeremiah promises that a day is coming when God will straighten out the lives of those who live in Judah, restore the nation to the correct path, and squelch Judah’s rebellion. God further promises to restore the reputation of the city (33:9). The reestablishment of Judah to her rightful place as God’s chosen people and the renewal of God’s obvious blessings on Judah will lead the surrounding nations to enthusiastically support God, praise him for his greatness, and stand in awe of his magnificence.

How different will Judah’s fortunes and the world’s support be when God restores the people to their rightful place as God’s chosen ones! Plenty will replace the desolation. Voices of mirth will replace voices of despair. Hills and valleys full of sheep will replace empty hills and valleys. God will restore the people in every way. These promises provide the background for Jeremiah’s opening statement in our text where God announces God’s fulfillment of the promise to Judah and Israel (33:14). God affirms through the prophet that what hitherto was a promise will now become a reality.

Notice the phrase Jeremiah uses as he announces this assurance that God will fulfill God’s promise to the people. He declares that “the days are surely coming” (33:14). Jeremiah uses this phrase repeatedly in his book. At times, he uses it to introduce a negative prediction. For example, in Jeremiah 51:47, the prophet predicts, “Assuredly, the days are coming when I will punish the images of Babylon; her whole land shall be put to shame, and all her slain shall fall in her midst.” On the other hand, Jeremiah uses this phrase to introduce a positive prediction. For example, in Jeremiah 30:3, the prophet predicts, “For the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it.” In our text, Jeremiah uses the term to introduce the positive pronouncement that God “will fulfill the promise” that God made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah (33:14).

The Branch

Jeremiah 33:15-16

Jeremiah introduces a symbol to explain how God will fulfill God's promise: the "righteous Branch" (33:15). This reference to a Branch echoes the statement Jeremiah makes earlier in 23:5. Other prophets also utilize this Branch symbol to prophesy about some future king who will establish God's righteousness on the earth. For example, Zechariah twice affirms that God will send God's servant to carry out God's purpose concerning the people. He refers to this redeeming servant as "the Branch" (3:8; 6:12). Likewise, Isaiah describes a future servant of God as "a shoot [that] shall come from the stump of Jesse," and he identifies this future servant as "a branch" (11:1). Jeremiah thus echoes the words of these other prophets by predicting that God will send the "righteous Branch" to Judah.

What will this righteous Branch do? First, he will "execute justice...in the land" (Jer 33:15). Old Testament writers use this word "justice" in two ways. The word can describe a judgment rendered on someone. Ecclesiastes 12:14 uses the word this way: "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." The word can also refer to the rights belonging to a person. Exodus 23:6 uses the word in this way: "You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits." Perhaps Jeremiah has both ideas in mind. If so, then he promises that this righteous Branch will bring judgment on those who refuse to follow God's commandments and on those who deprive the people of their rights. God will execute justice.

In addition, the righteous Branch will "execute...righteousness in the land" (Jer 33:15). The word "righteousness" describes right living or living that conforms to a set of standards. The unrighteousness of Judah brought down on them God's judgment, resulting in their loss of favor among the neighboring nations. God will send the Branch to inspire the people to live according to his standards again.

And then this righteous Branch will save Judah and bring safety to Jerusalem (33:16). To save means to deliver someone from a problem or to remove a burden from someone. The prophet promises that the righteous Branch will remove those things and also the enemies that threaten God's people. God will surround them with a shroud of security. The reference at the end of verse 16 is confusing. To whom does Jeremiah attribute the title "The LORD is our righteousness"? In our text, Jeremiah seems to refer to Jerusalem when he suggests that "it" shall be called "The LORD is our righteousness." However, in a

parallel passage in Jeremiah 23:6, Jeremiah says, “And this is the name by which *he* will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” This fits better with the prophet’s message. The person who is the Branch will execute justice and righteousness in the land and bring safety to Jerusalem.

The Davidic Connection

Jeremiah 33:17-22

In the closing part of our text, the prophet connects the promise of the Branch with the Davidic monarchical line (33:17) and with the covenants God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and with David in 2 Samuel 23:5 (33:22).

Second Samuel 23:5 speaks of “an everlasting covenant” that God makes with David. Jeremiah picks up on that theme in our text. He compares God’s covenant with David to the covenant God made with creation when God established the regular succession of day and night. The transition from day to night is a part of the nature of things. It is a covenant that cannot be broken. Jeremiah attributes to God’s covenant with David that same permanence. Like the covenant God made with creation to establish the transition from day to night, God made a covenant with David to establish the everlasting succession of his heirs to the throne of Israel. This covenant with David is a covenant that cannot be broken. The Branch, who will fulfill God’s promises to Judah and to Israel, will be a descendant of David.

Notice that Jeremiah sets the covenant that God made with the Levites concerning the priesthood side by side with the covenant God made with David concerning the monarchy (33:18). This perpetuation of Levitical leadership in the temple assures Israel that, just as the Davidic monarchy will never end, neither will the presence of a legitimate priesthood to lead the worship of God’s people.

A look at Israel’s history reveals that a descendant of David has not always sat on the throne of Israel. Does that mean God did not fulfill his promise to Israel? Does it mean that Jeremiah offered false promises to Israel? Neither of those alternatives fit with our understanding of God or of prophecy. What alternative is left? Christians believe that Jesus fulfills Jeremiah’s promise. He is the descendant of David who rules over God’s kingdom. He is the Branch who will bring justice and righteousness to God’s people.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from this symbol that Jeremiah uses to speak of Jesus the Messiah? The image of a branch suggests fruitfulness or prosperity. When the psalmist describes what God did for Israel in the past, he draws on the symbol of a vine and its branches. This vine takes root and fills the land with its branches. The spreading branches of the vine cover the mountains with their shade (Ps 80:8-11). Thus, to speak of Jesus as the Branch implies a future of fruitfulness and prosperity for God's people.

The connection of the Branch, whom we interpret to be Jesus, with David reminds us of the continuity of God's work in the Old Testament with God's work in the New Testament. God does not begin a new work in the New Testament but rather completes the work already begun in the Old Testament. We must include both testaments to fully understand God's work of salvation.

Connecting the work of the Branch with the work of David also suggests the idea of perpetuity. If Jesus is from the line of David, then we can apply to Jesus the earlier promise to David of an everlasting covenant (2 Sam 23:5). Jesus will complete God's work. As Jesus declares in the opening scenes in the book of Revelation, "I am the first and the last" (Rev 1:17). No one else will be needed.

The Messenger of the Covenant

December 9, 2018

Malachi 2:17–3:5

While I served as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Richardson, Texas, one day a young lady who had recently joined the church dropped by my office for a visit. In our conversation, she shared some of the difficulties facing her. She told me how she prayed for God’s help and how she tried to do God’s will. Yet the problems continued to plague her. She looked at me and said wistfully, “Sometimes I wonder if it is really worth it to serve God.”

Some of the leading characters in the Bible voiced that question. For example, when Moses, who became discouraged about leading the Hebrews through the wilderness, told God, “If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once” (Num 11:15), he was asking, “Is it really worth it to serve God?” When Joshua, who despaired over the horrendous defeat at Ai, cried out, “Ah, Lord GOD! Why have you brought this people across the Jordan at all, to hand us over to the Amorites so as to destroy us?” (Josh 7:7), he was asking, “Is it really worth it to serve God?”

Apparently, Malachi’s contemporaries voiced the same question. To understand the reason for this question, we need to understand something about the time in which they lived. What is the time frame for Malachi’s prophetic ministry? Most scholars place the book in the period between 515 and 440 BC. Since the rebuilding of the temple had been completed, the prophet’s time frame must be after 515 BC. And since we hear no mention of the work of Ezra or Nehemiah, the prophet’s time frame must be before 440 BC. Biblical scholars refer to this time as the postexilic period. They usually place Malachi’s ministry closer to 440 BC. Why did the Israelites raise this question at that time? We will explore the answers in this lesson.

The Question

Malachi 2:17

When the exiled Jews in Babylon were released, they returned to their homeland with great expectations. The prophecy of Isaiah 40–55 seemed to predict fruitful days and an exalted world position for Israel. Instead, the returned exiles found living as hard as ever. To make things even worse, their condition contrasted with the condition of the unrighteous who seemed to prosper. Out of that context

arises the question, “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17). Their protest reflects a tunnel vision that overlooks the full scope of God’s activity in their history.

For the Israelites to question God’s activity on their behalf reflects a faulty recollection of their past. God inaugurated their history by God’s choosing them through Abraham. God confirmed the choice of Israel in a miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery. God then sealed their unique place through the covenant relationship made with Moses at Mt. Sinai. God confirmed God’s love for Israel throughout their history, despite continued rebellion on their part, and nowhere did God do this as clearly as in their deliverance from Babylonian captivity. Imagine people with this kind of heritage, having this kind of history, and having received these kinds of blessings wondering whether God loves them. Malachi accuses his contemporaries of wearying the Lord with their words (2:17).

Not only do they blame God for their problems. They also place the responsibility everywhere except in the right place—with themselves. Perhaps, they muse, the problem lies with the sacrificial system, which is no longer sufficient to broker their relationship with God. Or maybe the problem lies with the priests, who no longer provide adequate spiritual leadership to the people. The Jewish citizens in Jerusalem even try to blame the problem on non-Jewish people in the area. Not finding satisfaction with any of these answers, the people finally lay the responsibility on God. God has either forsaken them or has lost power over evil—or both. The people’s loss of confidence in God generates indifference toward the prescribed patterns of worship, contempt toward the priests, bitterness toward the wicked, and skepticism toward God.

In response to these protests, the prophet points his contemporaries to a day in the future when they will have to answer to God for both their attitudes and their actions. At that point they will no longer have to ask, “Where is the God of justice?” for God will be in their midst (2:17).

The Response

Malachi 3:1-3

At this point, the prophet turns his attention to that future day when God will mete out justice. Before God comes to set things straight, God will send a messenger to prepare the way. This promise of a messenger as a harbinger of God’s return to set things straight clearly echoes the earlier promise that God would send someone to the wilderness to “prepare the way of the LORD” (Isa 40:3-5). All four Gospels affirm that John the Baptist fulfilled this promise found

in the books of Isaiah and Malachi. John the Baptist was the messenger who prepared the way for the Lord (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4; Jn 1:23).

Why will God send this messenger? Malachi predicts that this messenger will “prepare the way before” the Lord (3:1). To prepare the way means to remove the impediments that make a road impassable. This messenger will have a key role in the future events Malachi predicts. Nevertheless, the special messenger is not the leading actor in this future episode but merely a supporting actor. He is to prepare the way for another. When the messenger has prepared the way, Malachi says “the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (3:1). Note several elements in Malachi’s promise. He predicts that the Lord will “suddenly” appear. Malachi prefigures Paul’s image of the return of the Lord being “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2). God’s judgment can come at any time, Malachi warns his contemporaries. When the Lord comes to “the temple,” God will judge the inappropriate activities of the people in relationship to the temple mentioned in Malachi 1:6-8. At that time, the temple will become a place where the righteous can be safe. Malachi also identifies this one who will return in judgment as one “in whom you delight” (3:1). That expression notes a genuine concern in the hearts of the people for God’s justice to prevail. In their hearts, they really do love God and long to be restored to a rightful relationship with the Lord.

With the coming of the Lord, Malachi proclaims, judgment will begin, and no one will be able to stand in the face of God’s judgment (3:2, NIV). Malachi presents two images to support this assertion (3:2). One image, found in other prophets as well (Isa 1:25; Jer 6:29; Zech 13:9), is that of a “refiner’s fire” (3:2). On the day of the Lord, God will come to burn away the impurities in the lives of the people. The other image, not as common among the other prophets, is that of “launderer’s soap” (3:2). This image also suggests cleaning away impurities, this time not by fire but by soap. Both images suggest that the day of the Lord will be more than a time of celebration for God’s people; it will also be a time of judgment.

The returned exiles complain to God because they cannot recognize God’s justice in their current circumstances. The prophet Malachi points them to a future day when God will return. At that point, the prophet assures them, the people of Israel will not only see the justice of God at work but will also be brought under God’s refining, cleansing fire. “He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver,” the prophet promises, “until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness” (3:3).

The Result

Malachi 3:4-5

In the final part of our text, the prophet clarifies the consequences of the day described in the preceding verses. Malachi marks the transition from that day's reality to its result with the word "then," which begins each of our last two verses. Malachi foreshadows the idea seen in other places in the New Testament that God's day of judgment will be a day of division. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats provides the quintessential affirmation of this. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory," Jesus declares, he will divide everyone into two groups (Mt 25:31). "He will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left" (Mt 25:33). Eventually, the goats "will go away into eternal punishment" and the sheep will receive "eternal life" (Mt 25:46). Malachi pictures a similarly disparate experience for the righteous and for the wicked on that coming day of judgment.

"Then," says the prophet, the righteous will bask once more in the glorious presence of God and will once more offer their gifts to the GOD with glad and generous hearts" (Mal 3:4). Since worship stands at the heart of Israel's relation with God, when things are right with their worship, things will be right with the people. The day of the Lord will usher us into a time in which we enjoy all the blessings God has prepared for those who love him. It will be like waking up every day to a glad, new day!

The unrighteous will experience that day in a different way. "Then," says the prophet, the unrighteous will experience God's judgment (3:5). Malachi's words "draw near" and "judgment" and "bear witness" bring to mind a court scene. In this court, God will be judge and prosecutor. The prophet identifies some who will come under God's indictment. "Sorcerers" participate in witchcraft and communication with the dead. "Adulterers" defame the sanctity of the home. "Those who swear falsely" while they are under oath rob others of the right to a fair trial. "Those who oppress" workers and widows and orphans perpetrate an injustice that infringes on the rights of others. Justice will come quickly on all of these, for God will have no need for extended arguments or for the accumulation of facts. God already knows the facts. On that day, Malachi's contemporaries will no longer ask, "Where is the God of justice?"

Conclusion

What does Malachi's promise of eventual justice on the day of the Lord say to us today? This promise, first, should give us patience. Knowing that someday

God's justice will be exercised should help us endure the daily injustices of life because we know that eventually, in God's timing, God will make things right. The psalmist captures this idea when he writes, "Wait for the LORD, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land" (Ps 37:34).

The promise that God will eventually manifest God's justice on the day of the Lord should also give us hope. Our hope for the future is not wishful thinking. Instead, it is rooted in God's promises. God has promised eternal and abundant life through Jesus Christ. If we have not yet experienced that, we nevertheless know it is coming because God promised it and we know we can depend on God. That is why the writer of Hebrews admonishes us, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful" (Heb 10:23).

The promise that God will eventually manifest justice on the day of the Lord should also challenge us. When we realize that everything about our lives will be laid out in full array before a holy God, who would not respond as Isaiah did when he encountered a holy God in the temple: "Woe is me! I am lost!" (Isa 6:5)? Knowing that we must someday give an account of our lives to God should generate within us the determination to live for the Lord each day.

The Lord in the Midst

December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3:11-20

When the family moved into town, they made plans to attend the local church the next Sunday. The ten-year-old girl was excited to be able to visit God's house. She was surprised on Sunday morning when she discovered that the church was only three blocks away from their house. She turned to her mother and said, "Aren't we lucky to live in the same neighborhood with God?"

"Where is God?" Theologians have debated that question across the centuries. Some emphasize the idea of God's transcendence. Understood theologically, this term identifies God's divine otherness, or distinction from the finite world. Understood relationally, the term describes God's separateness, or distance from the finite world. The transcendent God is distinct from and separate from the world. Others emphasize the idea of God's immanence. This term describes the nearness, presence, or indwelling of God in creation. The immanent God sustains and preserves creation and energizes humanity. In his sermon to the Athenians, Paul includes both ideas. In announcing God's transcendence, Paul declares, "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands" (Acts 17:24). In affirming God's immanence, Paul asserts that God "is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).

While recognizing the transcendence of God, the prophet Zephaniah focuses on God's immanence as he presents to Judah his prediction of God's coming judgment. The prophet says, "The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst" (Zeph 3:15). "The LORD is in your midst" is another way to say, "Aren't we lucky to live in the same neighborhood with God?" "The LORD in your midst" provides another symbol to help us understand more about Jesus during this Advent season.

The Mercy of God

Zephaniah 3:11a

When did Zephaniah carry out his prophetic ministry? The opening verses of the book place his ministry during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, who reigned from 640 to 609 BC (Zeph 1:1), but at what point in that time frame did the prophet carry out his ministry? The conditions the prophet addresses fit better

with the period before the revival that stirred Judah under Josiah's leadership in 621 BC, when they discovered the book of the law in the temple. Zephaniah probably ministered a few years before that discovery.

We can summarize his message in a single sentence: God's judgment is coming. In Zephaniah 1:4–2:3, the prophet predicts that God's judgment will come on Judah (1:4). God's judgment will also come to the surrounding nations. Zephaniah predicts God's judgment on the Philistines (2:4-7), on Moab and Ammon (2:8-11), and on Ethiopia and Assyria (2:12-15). God will administer this judgment on "the great day of the LORD" (1:14). This day will be a day "of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry" (1:15-16). This is what Zephaniah has in mind when he opens our text with the words "on that day" (3:11). That day will be a day of judgment on the nations (3:8).

Yet the message in our text is not a message of doom but a message of hope. Instead of saying, as he does earlier in his book, that Judah will be destroyed on that day, the prophet asserts that "on that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me" (3:11). Some of Judah, a remnant, will be spared from God's judgment, and they will display a different attitude than the arrogant leaders of the day. Because the remnant will no longer participate in those kinds of sins, they "shall not be put to shame." They will instead experience the mercy of God.

The Remnant

Zephaniah 3:11b-14

In this second part of our text, the prophet focuses the spotlight on this "remnant of Israel" (3:13). Many of Israel's prophets mention the remnant of Israel who would be spared from God's judgment and through whom God would continue to carry out God's plan. Micah refers to "the remnant of Jacob" (5:7), and Amos identifies "the remnant of Joseph" (5:15). Isaiah uses the remnant concept throughout his prophecy to identify a spiritual kernel of God's people whom God would protect from judgment and with whom God would continue to carry out the promises to the covenant people (Isa 10:20, 11:11, 28:5 for some examples). In some cases, as in Micah 2:12, God would gather this remnant from among those who had turned away from God and come under judgment. In our text, God seems to remove all these who have turned away, leaving the faithful few whom the Bible refers to as "the remnant" (3:11b).

The prophet then describes this remnant of God's people. He begins by calling them "a people humble and lowly" (3:12). The word "humble" describes someone who is afflicted or someone who faces personal trauma. "Lowly" refers to a person's social status. Those who are "lowly" contrast with the rich. They actively seek God (3:12). They demonstrate the life strategy suggested in Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." This passionate desire to please God motivates those in the remnant to live in obedience to God and therefore display an extraordinary holiness. They will also find comfort in God's presence. In the words of Zephaniah, "they will pasture and lie down" (3:13). Further, this passionate desire to please God will instill within them a new courage. "No one," the prophet declares, "shall make them afraid" (3:13). This recognition of the dedication and devotion of the remnant evokes from Zephaniah a doxology to God and an invitation to those in the remnant to join him in this spirit of rejoicing (3:14).

To whom does this prophecy refer when it promises a new life of humility, hunger for God, obedience to God, and courage for God? In other words, who is this remnant? At first glance, we understand the remnant Zephaniah describes to be the exiles whom God brought back from Assyrian and Babylonian captivity and whom God restored to their promised land. This is the historic answer to the question. However, the returning exiles never experienced or demonstrated the things the prophet describes in our text. This leads us to the eschatological answer to the question. The great day of the Lord about which the prophet speaks is not the return of Israel from exile but the eventual appearance of God's Messiah. And the remnant about which the prophet speaks is not ultimately the returning Hebrew exiles but rather those who gather around God's Messiah and become a part of God's new covenant people. We can legitimately apply both the historic and the eschatological interpretation to Zephaniah's prophecy in our text.

The Promise from God

Zephaniah 3:15-20

In this final portion of our text, the prophet conveys to the people of Judah their role in the future. Verse 14 provides a transition to this section. It provides the conclusion for the prophet's description of the remnant and the foundation for the prophet's description of the future that God has in store for this remnant. Why should they rejoice?

In verse 15, the prophet explains why Israel should rejoice. First, Israel should rejoice because God has removed Jerusalem's judgments, turned aside her enemies, and come to dwell in her midst. Second, Jerusalem should rejoice because she no longer has any reason to be afraid, for God has removed both her oppression and her opponents. In verses 16-20, the prophet elaborates on these two themes.

To begin with, Israel should rejoice because God is in her midst (3:16-18a). This promise echoes the language of the covenant. As God came to Abraham in the beginning of Israel's history, God will come again to Israel. As God expressed unconditional love for Abraham, God will express it for Israel. As God made a covenant with Abraham, God will renew the covenant with Israel. God is not distant from Israel, separated from Israel by God's glory. Instead, God is present with Israel, "in your midst," drawn to Israel by his love.

In addition, Israel should rejoice because she no longer has reason to fear, for the God who is present in her midst and who renews God's covenant love for Israel will express that love by several specific actions (3:18b-20). God "will remove disaster from" Israel (3:18b) and "will deal with all your oppressors" (3:19). One commentator suggests that this promise parallels Isaiah's promise of debt cancellation in Isaiah 40:1-2. That passage assures Israel "that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." In addition to taking something away from Israel, that is, her oppression and her oppressors, God will restore Israel's fortunes and return to Israel the renown that certifies them as God's chosen people (3:19b-20). This promise is reminiscent of God's original promise to Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:2-3).

When Jesus came to the earth, he reinforced this picture of the God in our midst. His dialogue with the disciples on the last night of his life presents an example of this. One of his disciples, Philip, presents this request to Jesus: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus responds, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:8-9). The transcendent God does not remain distant from those whom he has created. Instead, he comes to us and dwells with us. How lucky we are to live in the same neighborhood with God.

Conclusion

How does this message of the God in our midst impact our lives? First, this message of God in our midst should encourage us. We are never alone. God is always present with us through the incarnate Word we know as Jesus. Jesus concluded his commission to the church with this comforting reminder: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

This message of God in our midst should alarm us. God is not like a human companion whose life is marked by sin. God is instead the holy, sovereign God. Isaiah reflected the seriousness of being in the presence of a holy, sovereign God when he visited the temple for worship. When he realized he was in God’s presence, he cried out: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa 6:5).

The message that God is with us should empower us. We do not have to face the challenges of life in our own power. Instead, we face these challenges through the power of God who dwells within us. That truth evoked from Paul the triumphant cry, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31).

The One of Peace

December 23, 2018

Micah 4:9–5:5a

When we mention the name Dwight D. Eisenhower, we instinctively think of war, for Eisenhower earned his worldwide fame as a master of war. Pushed into a leadership position when the United States invaded North Africa at the beginning of America's participation in World War II, his triumph in that campaign led to his appointment as the Supreme Allied Commander and the leader of Operation Overlord, as the Allied invasion of Western Europe was codenamed. He eventually led the Allies to victory over the Axis powers. Yet Eisenhower recognized perhaps more than any other leader the disastrous consequences of war and the deep longing in the human heart for peace. Late in his presidency, Eisenhower visited the major Western European capitals. While in England, he made a statement that confirmed his growing hatred of war and his continual desire for peace. He declared, "I think the people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way and let them have it" (Tom Wicker, *Dwight D. Eisenhower* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002] 112).

Israel's prophets understood this desire for peace. That is why many of them included in their prophecies about the promised Messiah the assurance that he would bring peace. When Isaiah points his contemporaries to the future deliverer of Israel, he refers to him as the "Prince of Peace" (9:6). Ezekiel promises that when God's Messiah comes, he will "make a covenant of peace" with Israel (37:26). Zechariah expands the promise associated with the coming Messiah to include "peace to the nations" (9:10). Micah sounds that same note when he refers to the coming deliverer of Israel as "the one of peace" (5:5). Micah gives us yet another symbol to help us flesh out the meaning of Jesus and his purpose during this Advent season.

The Fall and Rise of God's People

Micah 4:9-10

Who was Micah and when did he carry out his prophetic ministry? Micah was the last of the four great prophets of the eighth century BC, the others being Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. Even though the southern kingdom of Judah was his home, he directed his prophecy to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Micah identified the conditions in Israel and Judah

that portended God's judgment. In his writings, he accuses his contemporaries of immoral actions. These actions incite them to devise wickedness (Mic 2:1) and to oppress the socially deprived (2:2). He also accuses them of corrupting the religion of their day. He asserts that "its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money" (3:11), while at the same time they neglect the things God requires of them: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Because of the people's immorality and corruption, Micah predicts that both Israel (1:6) and Judah (3:12) will fall. In our text for this lesson, the prophet expounds on this judgment from God and its consequences.

Notice that each section of our text begins with the word "now." In Micah 4:9, the prophet asks, "Now why do you cry aloud?" In 4:11, the prophet declares, "Now many nations are assembled against you." In 5:1, the prophet acknowledges, "Now you are walled around with a wall." In each section, the prophet will observe the despair of the "now" through the lens of hope provided by his understanding of the future.

In the first part of our text (4:9-10), Micah focuses on the condition of the Hebrews in Babylonian captivity. The movement of the citizens of Judah into Babylonian exile happened in stages. One major movement came in 597 BC when Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem, captured King Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah), and carried him, along with his noblemen and artifacts from the temple, back to Babylon (Jer 24:1). Another major movement came in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem again, seized King Zedekiah, burned the city, destroyed the temple, and removed all but the poorest of the citizens into Babylonian exile (2 Kings 25:8-12).

Micah contrasts the present condition of the exiles with their ultimate future. In the present, their conditions evoke from them a cry of despair. In the present, they have lost their king and have no one to counsel them. In the present, they suffer pain like the pain a woman experiences when going through childbirth (4:9). In the present, they will be taken away into Babylonian exile (4:10a). Micah does not deny the pain and discomfort of their present.

Yet he uses the image of childbirth to contrast their present with their ultimate future. A woman going through childbirth experiences excruciating pains. She might even think she will die in the labor process. But the outcome of this pain is new life. Micah uses that picture to describe the situation facing Judah. As they go through their present condition of invasion, defeat, and exile, they might think they will die in the process. However, as the process of labor for a woman

results in the delivery of a new life, the process of exile for Israel will deliver them into a new life. Micah promises that they will be “rescued” (4:10). This word means to take someone away from danger. In other words, God will remove the exiles from their captivity. Micah also assures them that God will “redeem” them from their enemies (4:10). This word means to release them from some sort of bondage. The Babylonian exile will not be the final chapter in the story of God’s people. Now they suffer humiliating defeat; one day they will experience God’s redemption.

From Defeat to Victory

Micah 4:11-13

In the next part of our text (4:11-13), Micah describes the invasion of Judah by the foreign armies of Babylon. Again, the prophet compares their present with the future. The present situation finds Judah facing defeat (4:11). A powerful army stands at the gates and prepares to invade the city. “Many nations” perhaps refers to the various units that make up the invading Babylonian army. Micah allows the invading army to articulate their own intentions as they invade Judah. What do they mean when they say they want Judah to be “profaned”? The sanctity of Judah rests in the sacred courts of the temple, which contains the holy of holies that represents God’s presence among them. The invading Babylonians intend to break down the walls and destroy the temple, along with its holy of holies, thus removing God’s holiness from the earth.

However, God has other plans (4:12). They believe they are about to harvest Judah, but as God’s plans unfold, they themselves will be harvested. When the dust has settled, Judah will not be the sheaves on the threshing floor. The invaders will be. The imagery of “horn” and “hoofs” pictures the ox pulling the threshing-sledge as the wheat is separated from the chaff. God will be the harvester and Judah will be the ox doing the threshing. The prophet promises that God will equip this ox (Judah) with an iron horn and bronze hoofs and they will pulverize the other nations (4:13). Now the armies surrounding them seem invisible, and Judah seems doomed to destruction. Then, though, Judah will be supernaturally empowered to turn defeat into victory and to transform apparent loss into splendid gain.

From War to Peace

Micah 5:1-5

In the final part of our text (5:1-5), the prophet highlights a special leader who will enable God's people to rise again and who will transform defeat into victory. In describing this special leader, the prophet again compares the present with the future. He begins with the word "Now" (5:1). At the time Micah delivered this prophecy, the people of Judah found themselves in the middle of a war against the invading armies. Our translation has Micah declare, "Now you are walled around with a wall." Most of the other Bible versions translate this statement in the imperative. For instance, the NASB translates Micah's statement in these words: "Now muster yourselves in troops" (5:1). In either case, Micah describes here a condition of war. An army lays siege on the city. Those within the walls of the city fight back to defend themselves. Micah further implies that the invading army has the upper hand. To "strike...upon the cheek" signifies humiliation. In other words, the victims do not even have the strength to defend themselves.

However, God wants to create not a field of war but a world at peace, and plans to do that through a special leader. In this final part of our text, the Lord describes this future leader. God announces, first, that this ruler will be born in Bethlehem and that he will rule over Israel (5:2). The reference to his origin being "from ancient days" connects him with David, whose origins also connect with Bethlehem (1 Sam 16:1, 18). This ruler will reunite the house of Israel, both northern and southern kingdoms, into one people of God (5:3). This new ruler will be a shepherd king and not a military king (5:4). He shall create in the land a new era of peace (5:5).

The writers of the New Testament believe these predictions in Micah 5 to be fulfilled in Jesus. For example, in explaining the significance of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Matthew quotes Micah 5:2 (Mt 2:6). When the angels announce the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:14, they suggest that this new child will bring peace on earth, an allusion to Micah 5:5. When the people talking about who Jesus is ask, "Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" (Jn 7:42), they are referring to Micah 5:2. This future "Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6) will not only "make a covenant of peace" with Israel (Ezek 37:26) but will also bring "peace to the nations" (Zech 9:10).

Conclusion

What does it mean to call Jesus the one of peace? To begin with, it reminds us that Jesus provides peace *with* God. One of the most devastating results of our sin is that it estranges us from the God who made us and loves us. Instead of

being in a relationship with God, we are estranged from God. Instead of having an identity with God, we stand over against God. But now, we who were estranged from God because of our sin have been reunited with God through Christ's sacrifice. As Paul expresses it in the opening verse of Romans 5, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus also provides the peace *of* God. Our sin not only estranges us from God. It also enslaves us. It not only puts us at enmity with God. It also puts us at enmity with ourselves. Through Christ we, whose inner sanctuary is a place of war, can experience a sense of unity and purpose. Paul captures this idea in Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Finally, Jesus provides peace *for* God. Sin not only estranges us from God but also estranges us from each other. It not only puts us at war with God but also puts us at war with our fellow human beings. But now, in Christ, we can discover a *koinonia*, a fellowship, that breaks down these barriers between us. Paul expresses this truth in Ephesians 2:14: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

The Maturing Messiah

December 30, 2018

Luke 2:41-52

In our day, most people accept the humanity of Jesus without any problem but stumble over claims of his divinity. During the early centuries in the church, the opposite argument often surfaced. That is, some accepted Jesus as the divine Son of God, but they tried to explain away his humanity. For example, in the first century, Docetism denied the reality of Jesus' human body, asserting that he only seemed to be a human. Yet the New Testament clearly reflects Jesus' humanity. Galatians 4:4 declares that Jesus was born of a woman. Matthew 4:2 reveals a Jesus who experienced hunger. John 4:6 suggests that Jesus became weary. Matthew 8:24 claims that Jesus slept. Hebrews 4:15 admits that temptation came to Jesus as it does to us. John 11:35 shows his human emotion when, standing by the tomb of his friend Lazarus, Jesus wept. Mark 15:37 affirms that Jesus died. All these claims about Jesus reflect his human side. In fact, the writer of Hebrews concludes that Jesus must have been a human being or else he cannot be humanity's Savior (Heb 2:17).

If Jesus was a human being like us, then he experienced all the stages of life: birth, childhood, and eventually adulthood. All the Gospels give us intimate details about Jesus' adulthood, including his eventual death. Matthew and Luke give detailed descriptions of Jesus' birth. Yet only Luke provides any details about his childhood. Luke pulls back the curtain on Jesus' silent years to reveal the forces that influenced him during these early years of his life.

The Influence of His Jewish Context

Luke 2:41

The opening verse of our text reveals the influence of the Jewish context in which Jesus grew up. The religious life of the first-century Jews, among other things, featured festivals, which were annual religious celebrations to remember God's great acts of salvation in Jewish history. The first of these festivals—the one mentioned in our text—was Passover. This festival celebrated the time God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt as the firstborn sons and animals of the Egyptians died (Ex 12:27). Another of these festivals was called Pentecost. They participated in this festival fifty days after Passover to celebrate the ingathering of the harvest. A third annual festival was the Feast of Tabernacles that commenced five days after the annual Day of Atonement. This

festival commemorated the time when God protected the Hebrews as they dwelled in tents during the exodus from Egypt (Lev 23:41-43). These festivals stood at the center of Jewish religious life in first-century Palestine, and pious Jews annually made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate these festivals (Ex 23:17). Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem for Passover “every year” (2:41). This signifies the depth of their religious commitment. They obeyed the laws of God and they celebrated the religious festivals. Their religious commitment provided a context that exposed Jesus to the richness of the Jewish faith as he grew up.

In the verses that precede our text, Luke confirms their obedience to the demands of the law of God when he discusses Jesus’ circumcision and Mary and Joseph’s dedication of their son to God (Lk 2:21-24). Luke concludes the story of Jesus’ birth and dedication by saying, “When they [Mary and Joseph] had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth” (Lk 2:39). The sincerity of their commitment to God, displayed in their obedience to the law of God and reflected in their daily lives of commitment to God, provides the context for the remarkable incident described in the next section of our text.

The Influence of His Divine Calling

Luke 2:42-50

This unique incident, the only biblical story we have from Jesus’ childhood, takes place when Jesus is twelve years old (2:42). As I mentioned earlier, God’s word ordered all Jewish males to attend the three major feasts in Jerusalem every year: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Because of the length of the trip from various villages where the Jews lived and because of the difficulty of transportation, all Jewish men did not make it to Jerusalem for all three festivals. In that case, they at least tried to make it to Jerusalem for Passover. Luke affirms Joseph and Mary’s faithfulness to the law by noting that this trip to Jerusalem, described in our text, is an annual part of their routine (2:41). Women did not have to attend but they often did. Neither did children have to attend. So why does Jesus accompany his parents on this trip? Traditionally, at the age of twelve, a young Jewish boy becomes a son of the covenant, an achievement marked by the bar mitzvah ceremony today. We do not know the details of the ceremony in the first century, but we can conclude that Jesus marked his entrance into the covenant by going to the temple with his mother and father during their annual trip for the Passover.

Two aspects of the unfolding story seem to be odd from our modern-day perspective. To begin with, it seems odd to us that Mary and Joseph depart for home without knowing where Jesus is (2:43-44). However, in the first-century world, women and children did not always travel in the same group with the men. Since Jesus is at the borderline between boyhood and manhood in our story, each of the parents may assume that Jesus is with the other group, Mary thinking that Jesus has chosen to travel with the men and Joseph thinking that Jesus still finds his place with the women and children. When they discover that he is not with them, they immediately return “to Jerusalem to search for him” (2:45). They finally find him in the temple, “after three days” (2:46). We can understand the “three days” as encompassing one day’s journey away from Jerusalem, one day’s journey back, and then one day looking for Jesus.

Their discovery of Jesus in the temple introduces the second odd aspect of the story: the response to Jesus by the teachers and leaders in the temple. Joseph and Mary find Jesus in a serious conversation with these religious leaders. As Luke puts it, they find Jesus “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (2:46). Jesus not only challenges these religious leaders with his profound questions. He also responds to their questions with astounding answers that create wonder among those who hear him (2:47). This story foreshadows Jesus’ compelling teaching later in his ministry.

When they find Jesus, Mary and Joseph express their embarrassment and anxiety to their son, an embarrassment that grows out of their feeling of negligence and an anxiety that has expanded exponentially over the three days of frantic searching for him. “Why have you treated us like this?” they ask Jesus, a standard parental rebuke even today when children do not live up to expectations (2:48).

Jesus’ response to his parents reflects wisdom and a sense of purpose that clearly distinguish him from most twelve-year-old children (2:49). Luke reflects that at an early age, Jesus already has a sense of his unique filial relationship with God and the special purpose God has given him, for he announces to his parents, “I must be in my Father’s house.” Jesus expresses a conscious awareness of his unique relationship with God and an unhesitating submission to God’s unique calling for his life.

The response of his parents to Jesus’ declaration that he must be about his Father’s business reveals something about them (2:50). Even after the extraordinary epiphanies surrounding Jesus’ birth, they still do not grasp the full dimensions of the promises given to them at that time. Consequently, the

wisdom reflected by their young son as he confounds the scholars with his understanding astonishes them.

The Influence of His Human Family

Luke 2:51-52

After this incident in the temple, Jesus returns home to a normal family setting as he lives under the authority of his parents. Although he knows that his ultimate purpose on the earth is to fulfill his calling from God, at this point he willingly submits himself to his earthly father and mother's will and to the influence of his family.

Luke reflects on the impact of Jesus on his mother. He tells us that "his mother treasured all these things in her heart" (2:51). As parents, each of us can recall special moments in the lives of our children that seem recent even though they may have happened years and even decades ago. We see the same picture of Mary in our text. Does Luke have in mind this special incident in the temple when he refers to "all these things"? Perhaps. I like to think that he also has a much broader perspective in mind. During these years as Jesus goes from the age of twelve, when the temple event occurs, to the age of thirty, when he inaugurates his ministry, Mary will witness many events in Jesus' life and will see Jesus transition from one level of maturity to the next. As she observes all these events in her son's life, she will treasure them in her heart.

Luke then highlights the maturing process Jesus goes through as he participates in the life of his family (2:52). This is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. In this verse, Luke describes the multiple dimensions of Jesus' life that we must always consider when we evaluate him. Luke tells us that "Jesus increased." This word means to drive forward or to advance. It pictures movement or progress. Luke's declaration affirms that as Jesus grows up in the household of Joseph and Mary, he will become more than he was before, mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. Although it certainly reflects on Jesus, this description of his balanced growth also reflects on his parents. They provide for their son the context in which he can grow "in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." In so doing, they become one of the significant influences in Jesus' life.

Conclusion

The importance of this passage extends far beyond the Gospel of Luke, for Luke's picture of Jesus is the counterpoint to three later heresies of the church:

Gnosticism, Apollinarianism, and Marcionism. First, Luke undermines the claims of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a heresy that denied the truly human body of Jesus. Luke counters that theory. Notice the language he uses to describe Jesus as he affirms that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years” (2:52). This is language used to talk about someone with a physical body. To hold the position of Gnosticism is to deny the message of Luke.

Luke also undermines the claims of Apollinarianism. Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea (c. 390), taught that Jesus had the body and soul of a human being, but that his mind was divine. However, Luke’s affirmations in our text that Jesus “increased in wisdom” (2:52) suggest someone with a human mind that can develop from one level to another. To hold the position of Apollinarianism is to deny the message of Luke.

In addition, Luke undermines the claims of Marcionism. Marcion, in the mid-second century, held the position that Jesus appeared in Palestine as a full-grown man. However, Luke’s explanation in our text that Jesus “increased...in years, and in divine and human favor” (2:52) describes a person who develops from childhood to adulthood. To hold the position of Marcion is to deny the message of Luke.

I am thankful that, as Luke gathered the material to provide this ordered account of Jesus, he chose to include these details about Jesus’ secret years, for he enables us to understand more clearly the factors that influenced this one who would ultimately become the world’s Savior.