



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 23
Proper 27 (A)
November 8, 2020

RCL: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

The people of Israel return to holy ground to renew the holy covenant in this, the final chapter of the Book of Joshua. Joshua has led the twelve tribes into the land of Canaan as promised by God, and this renewal of the covenant is the culmination of that period in the life of the people.

The people rehearse the story of God's saving acts toward them: deliverance from slavery in Egypt, protection on the journey, and arrival in the land promised by God. God is consistently loyal and steadfast; the people often struggle with a similar response.

At this renewal of the covenant, Joshua presents the people with a decision to make: whom will you serve—the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt or other gods? This is not a choice to be made lightly or with verbal assent only. This choice requires the movement of the heart: “Incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

We daily have to answer the question: whom will you serve? The other gods in the lands where we reside work to distract our attention and acquire our service. We daily must say with Joshua, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

- What are the other gods that reside in the land where you live? (“isms” are usually a good place to begin.)
- How do you daily choose to serve the Lord with mind *and* heart?

Psalm 78:1-7

The speaker in this psalm is a teaching voice from among the people: “Hear my teaching, O my people...” And what is it that the teacher wishes to communicate? The teacher intends to share the story and instruction of God so that it may pass from generation to generation.

As the psalmist notes, God requires this teaching from generation to generation. It is how the community shows a commitment to the covenant given by God. When later generations rely on the commandments as a way to order personal and communal life, God and the covenant are honored.

In the reading from the Book of Joshua, we heard of the need to “Incline your hearts to the Lord.” This psalm begins with the imperative to “Incline your ears to the words of [the teacher’s] mouth.” As people of faith, we incline our hearts to God and also listen and learn within our communities for the teachings that point us to God. We learn the stories of God and of ourselves in community—in the traditions of sacred word and symbol passed from generation to generation.

- Who were your first “teachers” within the faith community?
- How can we best equip future generations in the teachings and traditions of our faith?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Paul offers these words to the Thessalonians as words of encouragement. People have died, and Jesus has not yet returned as expected. What does it all mean?

Paul reminds the community that what it all means hinges on belief in Jesus. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus destroyed death. Period. No question mark. As Paul paints the picture of Jesus’ second coming, he assures the Thessalonians that *all*—both those who have died in Christ and those still alive—will be with the Lord.

The questions come when, after accepting belief in Jesus, there is a delay before Jesus’ triumphant return. The questions come as loved ones die and grieving and suffering continue. Those questions voiced by the Thessalonians continue today. What does it all mean?

Just like the Thessalonians, we too can be encouraged because of our belief in Jesus and Jesus’ destruction of death. Just like the Thessalonians (and Paul), we do not know when Jesus will return. We do know, however, that there is Jesus and that Jesus is resurrection. We are not a people without *hope*.

- Have you ever had questions or concerns like those of the Thessalonians?
- How do we focus on the hope of Jesus in this time while we wait for Jesus’ return?

Matthew 25:1-13

“The kingdom of heaven will be like this.” We know this construction; we know that we are about to hear one of Jesus’ parables. In this week following All Saints’ Sunday where we contemplated the whole company of heaven, we should expect a parable attentive to the second coming.

This theme will command our attention in the season of Advent. As the liturgical year draws to a close, we meditate on the second coming of Christ. We sensed this focus in the reading from 1 Thessalonians, and it

is continued in the parable Jesus shares: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The ten bridesmaids wait anxiously—even if falling asleep—for the arrival of the bridegroom. The wise prepare with extra oil for their lamps and the foolish do not. Heralds of the Advent message seem to reverberate: “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Isaiah 40:3).

With what we know of parables, however, we know better than to try and encapsulate the full meaning of the parable in one, quick reflection (if ever). The parables demand a bit more of us.

We can allow our imaginations to be captivated by the coming bridegroom and the need to prepare while also being open to questions that prompt our further exploration of the parable.

I wonder where the foolish bridesmaids were to go and buy oil at the midnight hour...

- What further questions (as the “wondering” offered above) do you have when you consider this parable?
- How do you get ready to get ready? In what ways can we prepare for the season of Advent?

This Bible study, written by Elizabeth Farr, originally ran for Proper 27 (A) in 2017.