



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 9 - Proper 14 (C)
August 11, 2019

RCL: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

There are promise and mercy, faithfulness (or lack thereof) and fulfillment threaded throughout each of the lectionary readings for this proper. Even in the harsh reproach of the Lord to Judah and Jerusalem in this passage from Isaiah, there is, ultimately, a promise of mercy—scarlet sins turned white as snow, as wool—even as the people’s empty sacrifices and half-hearted, insincere worship has stretched YHWH’s patience beyond the breaking point. The people have been mindlessly attending to the letter of the law, offering prayers and sacrifices, even as they’ve ignored the spirit behind it, as evidenced by the need to remind them of what doing good looks like: caring for the most vulnerable among them—the oppressed, the orphan, the widow. Divine utter disappointment is underscored by God’s very grammar in this passage; the great “I Am” (Exod. 3:14) proclaiming, remarkably, “I am weary...I have had enough... I cannot endure.”

Whereas everything that cannot be endured is emphatically expressed in terms of the second-person possessive pronoun, *your*: your sacrifices, your new moons, your appointed festivals, your hands full of blood. In other words, nothing the people are doing, whether within the Temple or without, has anything to do with “I Am”. Yet even after all that, YHWH still seeks relationship, is willing to “argue it out”, and even still willing to promise mercy: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.”

- In what ways is our worship half-hearted today? How might we be more aware and intentional in our individual and corporate worship?
- Who are the most vulnerable in your community? How does your worship influence their needs or seek after their justice?

Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24

Whereas in Isaiah, God is prepared to “argue it out” with the people, in Psalm 50 it is clear that YHWH is neither plaintiff nor defendant; rather, “God himself is judge” (50:6). This ultimate sovereignty is more eloquently highlighted in the very first three words of the psalm in Hebrew. In translation, we read the opening phrase as, “The Lord, the God of gods”. But in Hebrew, the opening phrase is simply a stark and powerful repetition and intensification of the names of God: *’el, ’elohim, yhw*. It’s as if the psalmist is singing God’s name ever more deeply and plaintively: God, GOD, God Whose Name Is Beyond Human Language, whose very speech creates the world in which we live—*that* is the One with whom we have made a covenant, and even more astonishingly, has covenanted with us. And as in the above passage from Isaiah, those who hear this psalm are reminded that faithfulness is more than simply performing some ritual or fulfilling the letter of any law. What truly honors is constant remembrance of and thanksgiving for the One whose “mercy is everlasting[,] and [whose] faithfulness endures from age to age” (Psalm 100:4).

- How might you remind yourself of God’s promises when you drift into forgetfulness?
- Can you imagine being as patient with other’s shortcomings as God is with ours?

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

The themes of promise and faithfulness also oscillate at the heart of Paul’s letter to the Hebrews. He begins this chapter of his letter with the helpful, eloquent, and much-quoted definition of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The Greek *pistis/pistos*, faith/faithful, appears eight times in these twelve verses, five of those in the rhetorical anaphora of the repeated initial phrase “By faith.” Notably, *epangelia*, promise, is referenced four times—not to mention the promises implicit in “inheritance” (11:8) and the city prepared for the faithful by God (11:16). In language reminiscent of Psalm 50:1, Paul proclaims that “by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God” (11:3).

If in the passages from Isaiah and the psalm we are given examples of apostasy and hypocritical worship, Paul’s letter to the Hebrews calls on the exemplary commitment of another ancestor, Abraham, who by faith obeyed whole-heartedly. In his steadfast faith, and even in his old age, he received the promise of descendants, “as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17; 15:5). The incalculable patience and mercy of God are superseded only the exponential nature of God’s promise-keeping to the faithful, a fulfillment with far-reaching implications: “By your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:18). All this, not through fulfilling the law, but by unwavering faith.

- How do you talk about faithfulness in your church? In your home? In the world beyond both?
- In what way do your obedience and faithfulness live up to God’s mercy and promise?

Luke 12:32-40

Luke’s Gospel begins with a particular dedication to “Theophilus” (literally, “beloved of God”), in which the author writes of setting down “an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1). This dedication is followed in quick order by the foretelling of two events: the births of first John the Baptist, then of Jesus. It is then followed in turn by two exquisite hymns particular to Luke: Mary’s beautiful Song of Praise, the *Magnificat*, and Zechariah’s *Benedictus*. Together, these hymns, the initial verses, and dedication not only explicitly illustrate the twin themes of promise and fulfillment, but they also greatly inform the passage at hand; for not only are promise and fulfillment threaded throughout Luke’s writings, they are distinctly imminent in his Gospel, as this passage illustrates. The fullness of time overflows in Luke; keeping watch is prayer, and faithfulness is both a means and an end. Therefore, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit” (12:35).

- Is there room in the name “Theophilus” for you, beloved of God? Can you hear Luke speaking directly to you?
- What does it mean to love God with all your heart? What does that look like in your life?

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