

PENTECOST 21

Proper 24 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Victoria Lewis of EDS@Union.

Exodus 33:12-23

¹²Moses said to the Lord, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷The Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” ¹⁹And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord,’ and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

Commentary from Victoria Lewis

Earlier in this chapter, we learn that God commanded Moses to close up camp at Mount Sinai and led the Israelites to the “land of milk and honey,” but that God would not go with them. Moses is anxious and the Israelites are distressed and mournful. Gathered in the “tent of meeting,” Moses attempts to negotiate and change God’s mind. He needs reassurance that God will be with him and the Israelites during this journey. God answers Moses’ prayer, giving the promise of God’s presence. But Moses persists, boldly drawing closer to God. A promise of God’s special presence remaining with Israel on the way to the promised land is not enough for him. He wants *more* in his relationship with God. He’s craving closeness and intimacy, wanting to know God in greater and deeper ways. “Show me your glory,” he asks. God agrees, choosing to reveal God’s goodness and pass in front of Moses. Moses could only see God’s back, a unique term often not used for anatomy. Seeing behind God, Moses is able to experience the close presence of God while still being protected.

Discussion Questions

What kinds of spiritual intimacy are you seeking in your life?

In the thinking of the ancient Israelites, one’s name represented a person’s character and nature. For God to know someone would mean God knowing that person’s full self. What does it mean that God knows Moses by name? Do you feel known by God?

Psalm 99

- ¹ The Lord is King; let the people tremble; *
he is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the
earth shake.
- ² The Lord is great in Zion; *
he is high above all peoples.
- ³ Let them confess his Name, which is great and
awesome; *
he is the Holy One.
- ⁴ "O mighty King, lover of justice, you have
established equity; *
you have executed justice and
righteousness in Jacob."
- ⁵ Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and
fall down before his footstool; *
he is the Holy One.
- ⁶ Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel
among those who call upon his Name, *
they called upon the Lord, and he
answered them.
- ⁷ He spoke to them out of the pillar of cloud; *
they kept his testimonies and the decree
that he gave them.
- ⁸ O Lord our God, you answered them indeed; *
you were a God who forgave them, yet
punished them for their evil deeds.
- ⁹ Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and
worship him upon his holy hill; *
for the Lord our God is the Holy One.

Commentary from Victoria Lewis

Psalm 99 uses profoundly powerful and provocative language as a lens through which the holiness and awesomeness of God may be better understood and praised. It starts with concepts of kingship and power and rule: "Let the people tremble... let the earth shake." Now, in our modern age, imagery of sovereignty, power structures, and empire can feel uncomfortable. Many of us know of kings and hereditary rulers as tyrants refusing to yield power, or as imperial oppressors holding a tight grip on exploitative systems in society. But in ancient Israel, kings were often considered messianic figures sent by God to deliver the nation from those who sought to oppress them. With a strong king came safety and security, economic prosperity, and cultural flourishing. Psalm 99 couples proclamations of God's might with equal proclamations of God's holiness through attributes of justice and righteousness. Power and justice might not immediately go together in our minds, but the Psalmist uses well-understood language to give authority and credibility to God while proclaiming that God contains both.

Psalm 99 also harkens back to communal history recorded in other scriptural texts. It roots its poetic praises in ancestry. From referencing God being enthroned upon cherubim like the cherubim-adorned lid of the ark of the covenant to naming core ancestors and leaders of the ancient Hebrews, the Psalm reminds readers that God has shown up for them in the past and thus will do so again today. "For the Lord our God is the Holy One!"

Discussion Questions

There are so many names people use for the Divine: King, Father, Lord, Creator, Shepherd, and the list goes on. What language do you like to use when referring to and describing the Divine?

Why would it be important for the Psalmist to connect to communal history and tradition? How important is tradition in your own faith?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For they report about us what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Commentary from Victoria Lewis

“Good job, y’all!” This is essentially how Paul starts his letter to the church of converted pagans in Thessalonica, a major port city and capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul praises the community for their commitment, faith, and actions in the face of persecution. He has no doubt that God is working through them. They’re doing such a good job, in fact, that Paul jokes that the surrounding regions don’t even need him to visit! Their actions as sincere and steadfast followers of Christ have illustrated the power and transformative nature of the Gospel. Through both their individual and collective practices fueled by faith, their community became an exemplar of Christian living.

Discussion Questions

What is the role of community in this passage?
What is the role of community in your own faith & practice?

Our church and community structures look quite different today – politically, socially, and economically – than those of the Early Church. What can we take from this example of an early Christ-following community?

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

His message isn’t solely focused on the political issues of the time. What Jesus consistently seems to be doing throughout his teachings is recentering cultic and spiritual life back on God.

The day prior, according to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus flipped the tables of the money changers and drove the salespeople out of the Temple upon arriving in Jerusalem. He dramatically showed his disgust with the way commerce and exploitation had perverted the Temple. So, when Jesus faces questioning the following day, he’s frustrated that the people just aren’t getting it. He’s pushing them, and thus us as readers, to ask themselves, “Why do we perform these ritual practices and follow these traditions? What is it all even for?” His focus is not on the Roman occupation, but rather on a return to the worship of God over money or status or power. Jesus’ teachings are not limited to this transactional world that surrounds us; instead, he seeks to transform us.

Discussion Questions

What do you think this passage means in our modern context ruled by nationalism, capitalism, and empire?

Commentary from Victoria Lewis

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” What a puzzling answer to a puzzling question. At first glance, Jesus seems to be dividing the world into two camps: things that belong to the emperor, and things that belong to God. But I don’t believe that’s what he’s doing. Instead, he’s creatively saying that nothing belongs to the empire. Everything belongs to God, and our ultimate citizenship is not of this world. Coins, and thus money as a whole, are a human-made illusion that means nothing in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is not saying to make peace with oppression. He’s also not advocating for social withdrawal and outright rebellion. Instead, he’s cleverly pointing out that the question raised by the Pharisees and the Herodians isn’t the important one to be asking.

What powers or influences might be competing for your attention and focus?