HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Bible Study

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

January 3, 2016
Text: Genesis 29:15-30
“A Bride Worth Waiting For”

This is a strange text with which to begin a new year. It is all about being sneaky and cheating and taking advantage of people. Are any of these traits among your New Year’s resolutions?

The background story is how Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, tricked his father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the birthright blessing that belonged to Jacob’s younger brother, Esau. (Those sordid details are in Genesis 27.) Now, in this week’s study, Jacob seems to get his comeuppance; he thinks he has worked seven years to earn the right to marry the girl of his dreams (Rachel), but his father-in-law, Laban, fools him by getting the less desirable Leah into the bridal bed. Thus, the trickster gets tricked. Daytime soap operas can’t top this stuff!

I think one of the saddest verses in the biblical story is Genesis 29:30:

“… (Jacob) loved Rachel more than Leah. Leah was his wife. She was really a pawn in this mish-mash. Sadly, after she has given birth to six sons for Jacob (Genesis 30:20), she says—perhaps with more hope than reality—“Now my husband will honor me.” Just when it appears that Leah finally has an edge in gaining Jacob’s favor, Rachel becomes pregnant for the first time. The son who is born to Rachel is Joseph.

The scheming is not over. When Jacob bargains with Laban about what price it would take for Jacob to move on with his own household, Laban gives Jacob only messed-up sheep but Jacob finds a way to compromise the value of the flock of Laban’s sheep (Genesis 30:35-42). Cheating begins cheating.

What is going on here? The key figures make all kinds of moral and ethical mistakes. It is hard to find a trustworthy person in the crowd. Surely, God does not intend for God’s children to behave in this way! But, take note! God still uses the frail, broken, self-serving nature of these people to move forward God’s purposes. To use a badly worn cliché, God has made delicious lemonade out of this crop of lemons.

This is no invitation to behave badly, but it is a reminder that God’s grace is sufficient to see even our shabby efforts. After all, the tomb is empty because God has conquered our worst. Thanks be to God.

What Someone Else Has Said:
In Religion in the Oval Office (Oxford) Gary Scott Smith quotes President James Madison: “Nothing is more subject to delusion than piety. All manner of errors creep and hide themselves under that veil.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Use even my weakness, Lord…”

January 10, 2016
Text: Song of Solomon 6:4-12
“The Most Beautiful Bride”

Toni and I were married for almost fifty-two years and I never once told her that her hair was “like a flock of goats” (Song of Solomon 6:5). Nor did I ever suggest that her teeth were like sheep who had just been washed (Song of Solomon 6:8). Maybe I was not romantic enough.

This book is one that students of the Bible argue about. Is it filled with symbols of the relationship between God and Israel? Is it an allegory about Christ and His bride, the Church? Is it a wedding ritual? Is it simply a matter of hormones raging out of control? Erotic lines and the dialogue of love make this book unlike any other biblical material.

However you choose to interpret these verses, it is clear that the Church’s traditions is not afraid of sexuality and physical attraction. Whether these verses are images of God’s love or two love birds tweeting one another, they are filled with passion and energy. Anne Crampler has written: “Love poetry is included in Scripture because it is part of human life and essential to God’s purposes.”

In the handful of verses that are this week’s study focus, the writer praises “my dearest” both for her inner strength and her outer beauty. First, Tirasah (Song of Solomon 6:4) was once capital of the Northern...
Hosea follows these instructions and marries Gomer and they have three children (Hosea 1:3, 6, 8) and each child was given a dreadful name: one for his name describing how Israel will be defeated, one name ascertaining that God will not pity Israel, and one same claiming that God no longer sees Israel as God’s people. To say the least, these were not good signs.

Students of the Bible often disagree on the meaning of the directive for Hosea to marry a prostitute, but however one’s view is shaped, the text says that Israel has behaved like a prostitute (Hosea 1:2). No wonder Hosea’s marriage (if it represents Israel) has produced such unfortunate descriptions/names for the children.

What is going on here?

Whatever else one makes of these verses, one thing is clear: God loves God’s people enough to give them fair warning when they are about to go off the track. That warning system is a role that is often given to the prophets.

How would we today recognize a signal from God that we are falling into spiritual prostration, that we are living out unjustly, that we are far afield from God’s will? What would God say to us today about ways in which we are unfaithful?

There is a joke—sort of a joke—about a pastor who said, “I must be a prophet; I have run out of four years!” Maybe not. But we do need to listen to those whose voices sound a different note than all those around them. “Different” does not mean “right,” but it might alert us to the good news that God loves us enough to chastise us and to correct us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book on the parables of Jesus (Reading the Parables, Westminster John Knox), Richard Lischer writes, “...if we focus exclusively on the theological dimension of the good news, how do we guard against the easy spiritualization that oversimplifies the suffering of the poor?”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my ears, Lord...”

January 24, 2016

Texts: John 2:1-12 “A Wedding in Cana”

This week’s study text is often referred to as “Jesus’ first miracle.” Although the King James Version describes this event as a miracle (John 2:11), more recent translations call it a sign. The word being translated here is σημεῖον. That word literally means “putting a mark on something to show that it is significant.”

What I notice is that even though this “water into wine” moment seems significant, no one makes much of it at the time. The servants and the headwaiter (or steward) are about the only ones (other than Jesus and Mary) who are aware of what has happened. It helped the disciples “believe in him” (John 2:11), but what about all the other guests at the wedding? They are strangely quiet about the whole thing. Only in looking back—as John does—does this grow in significance.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection (Baylor University Press), Edgar A. Colosimo-Emrich has written: “...Christ’s manner of life was not for his sake but for ours. His association with other people does not satisfy the needs of his life but the ends of the incarnation. By making friends of the faithful, he associated with sinners, Jesus opened the way to salvation...In the incarnation of the Word, the primordial exemplar becomes a human exemplar, but the latter only follows on the former.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of this and every place, turn my daily moments into time when I know Your presence...”

January 31, 2016

Texts: John 11:38-44 “The Death of a Friend”

Even though we know that death has a hundred percent guarantee, we find all sorts of ways to avoid using the word. Check on the obituary section of your local paper. In the paper I read this week, one person “departed this life,” another “passed away peacefully,” another “left this earthly life,” another “he took her last breath on earth,” one “made a peaceful transition to be with her creator.” According to John 11:14, Jesus said simply, “Lazarus has died.”

I don’t mean to make light of these euphemisms; they help us deal with death, but the truth is that behind each of these expressions is a reality: someone is dead. That is the context of today’s study text. Lazarus has, uh, slipped away. The King James Version is more to the point: “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:14).

Philip William Otterbein (one of the founders of the United Brethren with whom The Methodist Church merged in 1968) preached a sermon entitled “The Salvation-bringing Incarnation and Glorious Victory of Jesus Christ Over the Devil and Death.” He spoke about the text (Hebrews 2:14) that asserts that Christ destroyed the one who has power over death, the devil. Otterbein notes that the word translated “destroyed” is one of two New Testament words that can be translated “destroyed.” One of the words means “to obliterate so as to no longer exist.” The other word—and the one used in the text in Hebrews—is katagorō, a word that means “doom” in the sense of rendering useless and putting into submission.

Do you see the power of what Otterbein is saying? Death is not obliterated so as not to exist, we still die, but death has lost its power; we still die but death does not have the final word (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Jesus has a wonderful way of giving us a glimpse of the kingdom of God. He does not heal every sick person in Judea; he does not feed every hungry person in Jerusalem; he does not give sight to every blind person or cure all lepers in Palestine. But he does give us a glimpse of that kingdom in which there is no sickness, mourning, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4). And in this study text, we get a glimpse of Jesus’ power over death. Lazarus will, of course, die again and, as one writer has said, will need his grave clothes again. Jesus, on the other hand, dies, but can leave his grave clothes folded in the empty tomb. He won’t need them again (Luke 24:12). His resurrection points to a resurrection promised to us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Oscar Cullman (Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body, MacMillan) wrote: “The Christian hope relates not only to my individual fate, but to the entire creation.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Giver of new life...”

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