

bible⁺study: december 2018

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

December 2, 2018 Text: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 “Love and Devotion”

When I was a young boy, whenever I got ready to go off on some adventure—going to a movie with Pete Durham, playing baseball with Paul Gyles Braxton, going Halloween trick or treating with Stinker Clark—my mother would often send me off with this instruction of caution: “Remember who you are.”

That is sort of what is going on in this week’s study text: Deuteronomy 6:1-9. Moses knows that the Hebrew people are heading toward a “land flowing with milk and honey” (natural food you did not have to cultivate) and God has some instructions for them before they reach that Promised Land. What Moses said is still part of the word he brought when he delivered the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-21). Here is what Israel needs to know before they cross the Jordan River (Deuteronomy 9:1): “Remember who you are.”

There are many voices seeking to tell us who we are. Every magazine or TV program is replete with ads for what you need to buy in order to become “somebody.” God knew well the temptations the Israelites would face when they got across the River: foreign gods, military pressures, self-congratulation, unhealthy life styles, moral impurity. So, the Lord says, “Remember who you are.”

Jesus acknowledged that this instruction was the “greatest commandment.” When some of his naysayers tried to trick him about “which commandment in the law is the greatest” (Matthew 22:34-37), our Lord referred to this Deuteronomy text: “Love the Lord with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds” (Deuteronomy 6:5-6). Love God. Love neighbor. Love self.

This Deuteronomy text (Deuteronomy 6:4) is often called by its first word: *Shema*. Although sometimes that word is translated “hear,” most students of the Bible find it more appropriate to translate *Shema* as “listen.” It is possible to hear something and still pay it no mind. The commandment here is stronger than that: listen attentively, listen obediently. “Remember who you are.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Gregory Boyle in *Barking to the Choir* (Simon and Schuster) has written: “And truth be told about our God: God thinks of us even when we don’t think God there.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You have called us, loving God, and told us who we are...”

December 9, 2018 Text: Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 21-24 “Choose to Love and Serve God”

On the road I take driving into town, I pass a small independent Baptist church. Out front there is a sign board; its message is changed every week or so. Yesterday, I noticed a simple message: “Choice, not chance, determines the outcome.”

Joshua speaks to the Hebrew children who now dwell in the long sought Promised Land. Their story reaches back to slavery in Egypt, long years in the wilderness, and now to Canaan. Joshua challenges them to choose which god they will serve and the Hebrew children have lots of options!

Joshua tells them they are to choose whom they will serve (Joshua 24:15). The word translated “serve” is ‘*abad*. It is a word that is sometimes used simply to mean “work.” For whom will you work? It can even mean “enslaved to serve.” To whom will you be in bondage? No doubt, some of the Israelites would recall their ancestors’ plight of being “enslaved to serve” back in Egypt. No doubt, some would look around and see their new neighbors enjoying life with “new” gods. Nevertheless, Joshua says “to choose.”

Joshua understands that there is no choice of not choosing. Look around today. Even the more ardent atheist has some priority whom she serves, some standard for which he works. There are all kinds of

gods: popularity, humility (Yes, that can be a god!), wealth, intellect, being right, power, loose freedom, relationships, etc. One way or another, each of us will choose.

Joshua sets an example (Joshua 24:15) when he declares how he and his family will choose. Nevertheless, he does not demand that everyone follow that example! Choice is not choice unless there is freedom in choosing.

When the crowd first speaks of serving God, Joshua shows them the other side of the coin: God is a jealous God and is one who will hold you accountable for your sin (Joshua 24:19). Even so, the people promise obedience (Joshua 24:24).

What promise do we make?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Origen (200-254 AD) said (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IV*, InterVarsity Press) said “The dialogue between Joshua and the people of Israel is appropriated for converts to Christianity. Denying one’s pledge to serve the Lord nullifies the agreement with ruinous consequences.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Yes, Lord, I say ‘Yes’...”

December 16, 2018 Text: Psalm 103:1-17a, 21-22 “Love and Worship God”

This psalm is a paragon of praise. A quick read of the Common English Bible translation shows these words of honor and celebration of God: holy, good deeds, forgives, heals, saves life, faithful love, compassion, good things, fresh as youth, righteousness, justice, merciful, patient, forever. That’s pretty good even for a divine resume!

I imagine that some of these praises come from David’s own experience and some of them come from what others have told him. That’s one of the joys of the faith community: we can celebrate good things that have happened to our kin in the faith.

At least nine times in this week’s study text the psalmist calls on us to “bless the Lord.” The word rendered “bless” is *bârak*. It literally means “to kneel.” It is a posture of humility. It is a posture of servitude. It is a posture of submission. It is a posture of loyalty.

Do you remember last Ash Wednesday? There is a good chance that the pastor spoke these words as the ashes were marked on your forehead: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Psalm 103:14 recalls how Adam was created out of the clay, out of the topsoil (Genesis 2:7). God remembers that (Psalm 103:14). God knows that ultimately we shall blow away as grass dies and blows away (Psalm 103:15-16). But note! God’s love for us does not have those same boundaries. God’s love for us is forever (Psalm 103:17a).

In Psalm 103:19 (not printed in this week’s study text) there is a reminder that this God whom we are invited to praise is still in charge. This is no “Sugar Daddy” deity; “His kingdom rules over all.” The standards by which we live and indeed the standards by which we praise are to be the standards of God’s kingdom. Those would be the measurements we mentioned above: forgiving, compassion, righteousness, justice. May it be so.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Joachim Neander has written a hymn based on this psalm (Hymn 139, *United Methodist Hymnal*): “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation! O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation! All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near; join me in glad adoration. Praise to the Lord, who o’er all things so wondrously reigning bears thee on eagle’s wings, e’er in his keeping maintaining. God’s care enfolds all, whose true good he upholds.

Hast thou not known his sustaining? Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him! All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him! Let the amen sound from his people again; gladly forever adore him.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: ”O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise...”

December 23, 2018 Text: Luke 1:26-31; 2:22, 25-35 “Jesus: God’s Loving Promise”

The Advent/Christmas story is so rich and dynamic that one could almost open at random in the early pages of Luke’s gospel account and hit something of interest and value. In this week’s selected verses we are introduced to Mary (Luke 1:27), we learn about the coming Messiah (Luke 1:31), we see how Mary and Joseph acknowledged that Jesus belonged to God (Luke 2:22), and we hear Simeon proclaim that Jesus is good news for all people (Luke 2:31).

Looking over these verses chosen for this week’s study, I got to wondering. There is no manger. There are no shepherds. There are no wise men. Exactly what do we need in order to get the core truth of the coming of Jesus?

For starters, there is the name “Jesus” (Yeshua). It means “God saves.” (Luke 1:31). Then, there are all the ways that the story reaches back and ties into the journey of the Hebrew people (Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12:4, Exodus 22:29, Exodus 34:19-20, Numbers 18:16). Then, there is the expansive news that this child of Israel is going to offer salvation to all people, Gentiles, as well as Jews (Luke 2:31-32). There is even a hint of the suffering death that this Jesus will endure (Luke 2:35).

Unlike many of our Christmas accounts, these narratives are a bit subdued, some of them even routine. I find considerable solace in that reality, because many of my days are uneventful, “even routine.” This

quiet, daily stubble does not mean that God is absent! The God who brought the shocking news to Mary that she is going to be a mother (Luke 1:30) is the same God who shows up in the ordinary practices of a Jewish family (Luke 2:21-22). God is with me on the days my calendar is jammed; God is with me on the days my calendar is sparse.

When Toni and I were establishing our family traditions around the Yuletide, we pondered what to put on top of the Christmas tree. Finally, we decided to put a Chi Rho in that place of honor. (“Chi Rho” is a symbol made up of the first two letters in the Greek word for Christ.) We couldn’t find one at any stores, so we used cardboard and Reynolds Wrap to make our own. Somehow, that now seems to proclaim a solid truth: our Lord comes to us in the regular places of life. Thanks be to God.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Everyday Matters* (Abingdon), Gregory Jones quotes Dorothy Jean Weaver: “It is this world and none other into which God comes to be with us in the person of Jesus, the defenseless child and the crucified Messiah.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Lord, Jesus, into my daily life and bring Christmas anew...”

December 30, 2018 Text: Matthew 25:31-36 “Modeling God’s Love”

One time when I was a local church pastor I went to the county jail to visit a member who had been accused of molesting a young boy in a public restroom. When I inquired of the jailer about seeing this man, the jailer seemed confused: “Are you sure you want to see this man?”

A local church in my community maintains a “free pantry,” a rack of food that is left in the parking lot for anyone who wants to come by and pick up basic food items. One observer said, “I’ve seen one man who keeps coming by; I think he is selling the items.”

One of my favorite memories of the late Bishop Marion Edwards is the scene when he went to be at the coast following a devastating hurricane. Here was a prominent episcopal leader standing on the roadside, holding up a gallon of water for anyone who needed it.

Some churches have give-away nights, when high school students can come by and pick out a free outfit to wear to the upcoming prom. One of these youth was heard to mumble, “There’s not much of a selection this year.”

I was called to the hospital late one night because one of my members was threatening the staff with a huge knife. The man greeted me warmly and engaged in friendly chatter. When I suggested we have

prayer, he said, “Reverend, if you don’t mind, I’ll pray with my eyes open. If I close my eyes, the nurse will try to take my knife away.”

All of this is to say that there is no clear picture when we try to live out Matthew 25:31-36. Sometimes the response is gratitude. Sometimes the response is lack of appreciation. Sometimes the response seems to take advantage of others. Sometimes the response is unknown.

Decisions about the best thing to do, the best way to help, do not come easily. It does help if we can remember that it is Jesus whom we are serving (Matthew 25:25-26).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Leonard Sweet (*Me and We: God’s New Social Gospel*, Abingdon Press) has written: “The gospel is not a sequence of rules and acts but an organic and living Christ within the world...We are God’s junior apprentices. When we allow ourselves to be guided, molded, inbreathed, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can’t help but conceive what is good, true, and beautiful.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Help me to see you, Lord Jesus, in those around me...”

