

biblestudy: february 2019

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

February 3, 2019 Text: Philippians 3:1-16 “Renounce Everything for Christ”

Paul starts off naming all the things he has going for him: circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God , the full richness of the Hebrew tradition , absolute loyalty to the laws of God, and complete obedience to righteous behavior (Philippians 3:5-6). That doesn’t look bad on a spiritual resume!

Then, I ponder my own journey: Sunday School every week since days in the nursery, finding a worship service even when out of town on vacation, educated with first-rate theological study, smiling at people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, bringing food for our congregation’s free pantry. Well, you get the picture: I’m not half bad as a church member.

But Paul keeps on writing and he messes up my party. Just when I think I have it pretty well put together, he tells me that none of that means a thing (The New Revised Standard Version calls it “rubbish;” the Common English is a bit more explicit: “sewer trash.”) unless it is Christ at work within me. (Philippians 3:8-9). Paul knows that this relationship with Christ is a journey (Philippians 3:12). The expedition is toward maturity in the way of Christ. John Wesley speaks of this as “going on to perfection, full love of God and full love of neighbor.”

This is not an easy text. Even those who translate it from the Greek

ponder how best to put it into English. (At the bottom of this page in my NRSV Bible there are seventeen suggestions for alternative translations.) When we get to the bottom line, Paul calls on us to depend not on our good works, but to depend on the gifts of Christ. Paul does not tell us to stop doing good works or to stop these personal acts of piety; he just underlines the truth that unless these qualities are fruits of a relationship with Christ, they are worthless.

The context for Paul’s advice to the church in Philippi is a controversy brought on by those who insist that Gentiles be circumcised in order to be considered of the household of faith (Philippians 3:2). Even though Paul values his own circumcision (Philippians 3:4-5), he refuses to let that become a divider into “us” and “them.” Our oneness is in Jesus Christ and any meaningful righteousness that we have is the harvest of our link in faith to Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:9).

What Someone Else Has Said:

In John Wesley’s *Moral Theology* (Kingswood Books), D. Stephen Long writes “The new birth is depicted in active, moral terms. It is a ‘vast inward change’ which requires us to ‘live in quite another manner than we did before; we are, as it were, in another world.’”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Fill me, O Christ...”

February 10, 2019 Text: Psalm 48:1-3, 9-14 “Pondering God’s Steadfast Love”

This psalm is about Jerusalem (Zion) as a special place in the journey of God’s people. Notice all the specific memory-factories in the Holy City: mountain (Psalm 48:1), citadels (Psalm 48:3, 13), temple (Psalm 48:9), towers (Psalm 48:12), ramparts (Psalm 48:13). The psalmist invites the listener to walk around all these places and to recall how God has been present and continues to be present in this spot (Psalm 48:13). Pass it on to the next generation!

We know what that is like, don’t we? I think back over places that have marked significant moments in my life: second floor apartment of a good childhood friend in Fairmont, a ball park in Siler City, a place on the Drew University campus where I once dropped Toni as I tried to carry her on my shoulders, a backyard in Bahama where our son’s dog was buried, a doctor’s office in Durham where the news was not always good, a Chatham County cemetery where the grass seems to want to mourn rather than grow green...

It does not take long for congregations to develop memory of “back when.” Even brand-new faith communities have a recall of the first time they got together for study or for worship. Long-time congregations often have pictures in the hallways of earlier buildings, and maybe even a photo of a highway marker “Francis Asbury preached here in 1792.”

The psalmist’s celebration of all that Jerusalem has been is something with which we can identify: special places, special people, special times. And no wonder! The Scripture makes it very clear that God has chosen to live in this world. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:14).

These verses from Psalm 48 invite us to places of sacred memory. Where are the Jerusalems of your experience? Where have been the Mount Zions of your life? Join the psalmist in looking at those places and remembering, all the while acknowledging God’s steadfast love throughout the voyage. Thanks be to God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In the foreword to *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Abingdon Press), J. Bruce Behney and Paul H., Eller have noted: “History, as life itself, is comprehensive, embracing thought and action, both of which must be evaluated in relation to the contemporary and changing milieu....A person and a church are distinguished by the memories they keep.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of the journey, as fully as we look ahead to the gifts of tomorrow, we hold hands with a past when You have blessed us and when You have sustained us...”

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February 17, 2019 Text: Psalm 66: 1-9, 16-20 “Praising God’s Mighty Works”

In this week’s text, the psalmist goes back and forth between talking to God and talking to the listeners (readers). Note how in verses 1, 2, 5-8, 16-19 phrases are addressed to other believers; verses 4, 10-15, 20 are words spoken to God. It is almost as if each time the writer starts talking to others about God, the writer has to stop and offer some praise directly to God.

Those of us who evidently were behind the door when singing talents were distributed always take some delight in the King James Version and the New Revised Standard Version translation of Psalm 66:1---“joyful noise.” I am encouraged by the fact that the Lord seems to value our intent more than the professional quality of our sound! Noise it is! The Hebrew word here is shâ’own—a term that is used when there is the tumult and sound of a rushing flow of water that clears everything in its path. Perhaps the poet wants to challenge us to praise God in a way that moves everything else out of the way.

Psalm 66:6 recalls the experience of the Hebrew children as they crossed over the Red Sea to escape the pursuit of the Egyptian army (Exodus 14:21-22). Over and over again, the psalm looks back at what God has done in the past: for example, “...see what God has done” (vs. 5); “He turned the sea into dry land” (v. 6); “...I will tell you what he has done for me” (v. 16); “But truly God has listened” (v. 19). Then, suddenly at the very close of the psalm, the poet claims that God’s

steadfast love that has been present in the past is still present: “...God...has not...removed his steadfast love from me.” (v. 20). The same care and call that moved the children of Israel toward the Promised Land is still alive and well!

This is one of the psalms (plus a few times in Habakkuk) in which the word *Se’lah* is scattered throughout the text. Students of the Hebrew language are not sure what the word means. It is probably a direction to the song leader. Maybe it means “sing louder.” Maybe it means “play a musical instrument here.” Maybe it means “softer sounds.” Maybe it means “Pause here for the meaning to sink in.” Maybe it means “Let the people say ‘Amen’.” Maybe it means “Let a soloist sing.” Here’s another possibility: God has a sense of humor and wants to tease us a little just when we think we have grasped and understood all the mysteries revealed in Scripture! *Se’lah!*

What Someone Else Has Said:

S. Paul Schilling has written (*The Faith We Sing*, Westminster Press) “The moving assurances of (the psalms) ... may be making use of vivid metaphors and poetic hyperbole to voice the profound faith that God never forsakes us, that no evil can remove us from the divine presence, and that our destine is in the hands of one who loves us.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord...”

February 24, 2019 Text: Psalm 91:1-16 “Living with God’s Loving Assurance”

Although this psalm begins with words addressed to the believer from the psalmist, the final three verses are given as if God is reflecting aloud on God’s relationship with those who love God. There are seven verbs that describe the actions of God.

It is interesting to compare various translations, as students of the Bible work to capture what God has inspired in the text. Let’s look at those seven verbs by comparing four different translations: King James Version (KJV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Common English Bible (CEB), and New International Version (NIV).

Here are seven things God promises:

Psalm 91:14a—deliver (KJV), deliver (NRSV), rescue (CEB), rescue (NIV)

Psalm 91:14b—set him on high (KJV), protect (NRSV), protect (CEB), protect (NIV)

Psalm 91:15a—answer (KJV), answer (NRSV), answer (CEB), answer (NIV)

Psalm 91:15b—be with him (KJV), be with them (NRSV), be with you (CEB), be with him (NIV)

Psalm 91:15c—deliver and honor (KJV), rescue and honor (NRSV), save and glorify (CEB) deliver and honor (NIV)

Psalm 91:16a—satisfy (KJV), satisfy (NRSV), fill you full (CEB), satisfy (NIV)

Psalm 91:16b—shew him my salvation (KJV), show them my salvation (NRSV), show you my salvation (CEB), show him my salvation (NIV)

Some of these actions are in response to the human condition. Some of these actions are initiatives by God. All of these actions capture something that happens relationally. This is not the description of a long distance God! The psalmist celebrates with us the story of God who walks with us on life’s strange pathways.

What Someone Else Has Said:

John Tyson (*The Way of the Wesleys*, Eerdmans) has written: “...It is possible to view (the Wesleys’) conversion experiences as primarily about receiving an inward assurance of their acceptance by God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, I hear You...”

Random Acts of Kindness Day is February 17, 2019

Launched in 1995, Random Acts of Kindness (RAK) Day is an annual opportunity to unite people around the world through kindness. This year, RAK Day is celebrated on February 17. This day has grown in popularity each year and is celebrated by individuals, groups and organizations, nationwide, to encourage acts of kindness. Try some of the examples listed below or create RAKs of your own.

- Let someone go ahead of you in line
- Buy more at the grocery store & donate the extra
- Compliment a work colleague on their work
- Send an encouraging text to someone

- Take muffins to work
- Let a car into the traffic ahead of you
- Wash someone else’s car
- Pay the bus fare for the passenger behind you

More info and stories about RAK Day can be found at: <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/kindness-stories>