

# biblestudy: november 2016

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

## November 6, 2016 Text: Revelation 21:1-8 “Everything is Brand New”

A friend of mine says that it used to be that when he heard that a Bible reading was from the Book of Revelation, he would shudder and think “Oh, no! It’s something I won’t understand.” Now, he says, when he hears that a text is from Revelation, he shudders and thinks, “Thank Goodness, I can’t understand it!”

This friend has moved away from trying to grasp the ways of God with human comprehension. Thank Goodness God’s ways are richer, deeper, more powerful, and even more mysterious than what we can understand!

In this study text, after we have plowed through all the images that are not to be taken literally [God dressed for a wedding (v. 2), divine Kleenex (v. 4), the disappearing Atlantic (v. 1), and a lake with a lot more problems than just coal ash (v. 8)], we are left with one assurance: God is going to make things right.

Reading these verses is like watching a football game you recorded while you were out of town. You heard the final score while you were gone, but you wanted to watch the recording. Even as you watch your team fall behind 14-0 in the first quarter, 21-0 at the half, and 28-0 after three quarters, you get excited and thrilled, because you know that in the fourth quarter your team had a miraculous comeback and won the game, 35-28. You can bear to watch the pain of those first three quarters, because you already know who wins the game!

## November 13, 2016 Text: Revelation 21:9-14, 22-27 “I See a New Jerusalem”

The other day I was waiting for traffic to pass so I could cross the street. I was in Portland, Oregon, a long way from Bahama, North Carolina! Casually, I glanced at the license plate of the last car to go by. The license plate number was “LVJ 0611.” My heart skipped a beat. “LVJ 0611!”

Do you understand why this so excited me? (There may be half a dozen people reading this who will immediately know.) “LVJ” are the initials of my late wife and “0611” was her birthday. That combination of letters and numbers wouldn’t mean much to anyone who didn’t realize just what they symbolized for me.

The same kind of thing is happening in this week’s study verses. The number “twelve” shows up over and over again in the description of God’s new Jerusalem, God’s new way of doing business (Revelation 21:12-14). (Multiples of twelve also appear in verses 15-21.) What’s the big deal about the number “twelve”? Why does John’s heart skip a beat when he has this vision of “twelve” in the new Jerusalem?

“Twelve” describes the fullness of God’s inclusive love. The twelve tribes of Israel had been broken into northern and southern kingdoms, but in God’s grace they are back—not as ten northern and two southern, but as twelve (v. 12). Inclusive! The ministry of the twelve apostles form the foundation of the city wall (v. 14) and these were the ones

the sake of your steadfast love” (Psalm 44:26, NRSV). Paul claims that in Christ Jesus God has answered that plea, and now “nothing can separate us from God’s love” (Romans 8:38).

God’s love comes in many different flavors and shapes. There certainly seem to be times when it is hard to recognize God’s love, especially in the midst of a storm. May God grant such a gift of faith that I can raise my arm in triumph and say to life’s storm: “Is that the best you’ve got?” After all, the worst storm nailed Jesus to a cross and now that cross is empty. Praise God!

### What Someone Else Has Said:

When Richard Lischer (*Stations of the Heart*, Alfred A. Knopf) writes of hope in the midst of the dying of his son, he says “Until that time I was completely ignorant of hope, perhaps because I had never been so desperately in need of it. But that night I momentarily lost my fear of hope, which is nothing other than the fear of death, and remembered again the Bible’s quaint promise, ‘Hope maketh not ashamed.’ I will not be ashamed of my hope.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of new beginnings, move into the places of my hurting and bring a presence that will not go away...”

who had carried God’s saving message not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. Inclusive! Talk about inclusive---the gates will never be shut (v. 25)!

My joy at seeing “LVJ 0611” might be a mystery to others, unless I tell that story. The writer John’s joy at the number “twelve” in his vision remains a mystery, until its pointer to inclusive love is revealed. “The kings of the earth” (v. 24) and “the honor of all the nations” (v. 26) come into that city. That’s inclusive! Me thinks there are some surprises about who is in the Lamb’s book life (v. 27)! (And maybe some surprises about who is not.)

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Steven O’Malley and Jason Vickers have written (*Methodist and Pietist*, Kingswood): “An unpartisan community of those reborn in Christ, which overcomes barriers of class, confession, race, and ethnic/national identity, and which was seen as the prophetic harbinger of...the coming Age of the Spirit, was the controlling self-understanding for early United Brethren and Evangelical ecclesiology...”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: “God of tomorrow, Your vision of love and grace is broader than mine and I give You thanks...”

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November 20, 2016 Text: Revelation 22:1-7, “Living Waters”

In the rubrics for baptism (The United Methodist Book of Worship) there is this instruction: “The water may be poured ceremonially into the font at this time in such a way that the congregation can see and hear the water.” The cleansing, restoring, nourishing power of water is a key symbol in our spiritual tradition.

When our Lord was ready to begin his public ministry, he came to John the Baptizer, seeking to be baptized, “to fulfill all righteousness.” With the water still dripping from his face, Jesus heard a voice from heaven, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17, KJV). Water has been a mark of the presence of God.

Ezekiel records a strange vision (Ezekiel 47:1-12) of water that is at first ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then waist-deep, and then too deep for walking. Eventually, this water nourishes fruit-bearing trees and provides a home for all kinds of edible fish. Water brought the fullness of God’s creation (Genesis 1:10, 28; 2:5, 10).

So, all of these images enrich the text for this week’s study. In the coming kingdom, the water that God provides will not only provide around-the-clock food (Revelation 22:2), but will bring leaves for the healing to all the broken places among people (v. 2). The word translated healing (thērapēia—see the English word “therapy”?) comes from a word that means “to wait upon,” as a servant might wait upon

the one served. In other words, the “healing of the nations” might occur when we ask “How can I serve you--help you be fully what God intends you to be?”

The closing verse in the study text (v. 7) describes how one can be blessed: by living now as if this vision is already true. The Church is the community called to show the world what it will be like when the fullness of the reign of God comes upon earth. Jesus on earth gave us a glimpse of that reign (John 1:18) and the Church is now the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Water is the sign that God cleans, restores, nourishes, and claims God’s people. Baptism is a sign of what God is doing. That’s part of why United Methodists baptize babies. God’s washing, healing work begins before we even know it: life-giving water (Revelation 22:1).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Ibrahim Abdul-Marín (*Green Deen*, Bennett-Koehler Publishers) wrote, “Water behaves in the scripture as it behaves in our lives---it is ubiquitous, flowing in and out of everything.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Refresh Your people, O God, with renewal of our baptismal waters...”

November 27 2016 Text: Revelation 22:12-22 “Alpha and Omega”

These verses are almost like a tennis match, volleying back and forth between two points: (1) God’s invitation is a free gift to all; (2) how you live your life makes a difference.

Note the emphasis on God’s gift of grace in Jesus Christ: “Favored are those who wash their robes...” (v. 14). Look back at Revelation 7:14 to see that this refers to depending on Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross....”The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’...” (v. 17) This is an open invitation to any who hear....”The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all” (v. 21). John closes the report on his vision by underlining that it is all about free gift of grace.

Now, on the other hand, note the emphasis on the way you live your life affects your relationship with God: “...to repay all people as their actions deserve” (v. 12). God’s reward is for those who deserve it....”Outside are the dogs...” (v. 15). Everyone is not admitted to God’s full kingdom....”If anyone adds to (the words of this scroll), God will add to their person the plagues...” (v. 18). God determines what the rules are.

How do we hear the truth in both of these emphases?

Perhaps there is a clue in some of the questions John Wesley asked (and are still asked about candidates for licensed or ordained mini-

stry): “...Have they gifts, as well as evidence of God’s grace for the-work?...Have they fruit?...” The confirmation of the gift of God’s grace being active in a life is in the fruit, the evidence that God’s grace is at work.... As stated in Ephesians 2:10: “Instead, we are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.”

Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega. (These, of course, are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet.) That means that Jesus Christ completes the good work begun in us, just as Jesus Christ is the gift of love that begins the journey within us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Calvin vs. Wesley* (Abingdon Press), Don Thorsen wrote: “By justification, people are saved from the penal effects of sin and restored to both the favor and fellowship of God. Therefore, by sanctification—the sanctifying grace of God—believers are redeemed from the power of sin and go through a progression of restoration in the image of God...Christians ought to act responsibly in partaking of God’s biblically prescribed means of growing in grace.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, the Beginning and the End, move with me as I journey toward holy living...”

News

Name Change for One Great Hour of Sharing

The United Methodist Church has renamed a popular special Sunday observance that includes an offering to cover disaster relief costs. The name “UMCOR Sunday” replaces the “One Great Hour of Sharing” title within the denomination. UMCOR is the United Methodist Committee on Relief, a major Protestant humanitarian agency that is part of the General Board of Global Ministries. It was founded more than 75 years ago. UMCOR’s work of alleviating human suffering around the world includes disaster relief and supplies, disaster risk reduction, and humanitarian development. *Based on UMCOR.org article by Elliott Wright.*

A Worldwide Gathering of Women

The United States will host the 2016 Assembly of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women Aug. 31 - Sept. 3 2016. Every five years, members of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women gather for a world assembly. The last assembly was held in 2011. The 2016 assembly will be in Houston, Texas. The World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women is a worldwide fellowship claiming more than 3 million members. United Methodist Women is a supporter and member. As members of United Methodist Women, you’re invited to attend! For more information and online registration form go to: <http://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/a-worldwide-gathering-of-women>. *Based on UMW.org article by Tara Barnes.*

Every Day Grace Magazine

Issue number three of *Every Day Grace* magazine becomes available soon. The focus is on the stories of rural eastern NC women. We hope you enjoy this edition. All Vine subscribers automatically receive *Every Day Grace* magazine. Churches also receive copies of the publication.