

bible⁺study: september 2016

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

September 4, 2016 Text: Isaiah 11:1-9 “The Peaceful Kingdom”

Of course, I do not want to get you into trouble with a friend, but find someone who “knows it all” and ask him or her if “the lion shall lie down with the lamb” is in the Bible. Then (with appropriate humility, of course) open the Bible to Isaiah 11:6 and say, “Show me where it says that.”

Over the years, we have played a bit loosely with these verses, but whether we think a lion (as many people assume) or a wolf (as the text says) is cavorting with the lamb, it is an unusual scene! The prophet is clearly describing something unlike any world in which we have lived. My mind races to a vision of a world in which people live together in this same kind of peace! No wonder Isaiah calls it “the new heavens and the new earth” (Isaiah 66:22).

What will it take for such a world to come into being? The prophet says it will require wisdom, understanding, planning, strength, knowledge of and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2). The spirit of that day of peace is one in which appearances and hearsay do not count for anything (Isaiah 11:3).

In this kingdom of peace, things will be made right for the poor and

needy (Isaiah 11:4). How will this divinely-appointed ruler deal with the violent and wicked? Isaiah gives no call for murderous force used against such evil; instead God’s leader slays with “the rod of his mouth” and “the breath of his mouth” (Isaiah 11:4), ways that are verbal. In comments on this verse, Patricia Tull says this means legislation on behalf of the needy and against those who are violent.”

This seems unreal. No wonder our earnest prayer is that such a kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Religion in the Oval Office* (Oxford), Gary Scott Smith writes, “When people’s faith gives them confidence, assurance, comfort, consolation, and inspiration, it is generally positive. Their faith often stimulates individuals to be more compassionate, generous, and hopeful and supplies a constructive blueprint for bettering social conditions.”

Prayer:

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

September 11, 2016 Text: Isaiah 25:6-10a “The Mountain of God”

Many of our best memories are around eating together (family reunions, holiday meals, a sandwich when hungry, sharing Italian cream cake). On the other hand, these same settings can be filled with tension and anxiety (family squabbles, food insecurity, lack of nourishment). When we eat together at the Lord’s Table, there is the richness of diversity of those who share that Meal, but there also remains the question “Who is missing from the Table?”

The prophet Isaiah foreshadows Jesus’ vision of the kingdom being like a wedding feast (Matthew 22:2) or John’s image of heaven as a great banquet (Revelation 19:9) or our Lord’s establishing the Lord’s Supper as an anticipation of the full kingdom of God (Luke 22:16-18). Interestingly enough—and maybe just a little bit frightening—is that Isaiah now envisions God’s great banquet to be provided for all people (Isaiah 25:6). (Later, theologians speak of Jesus’ atonement as “universal atonement,” that is, atoning for the sins of all people, not just some.)

Even death cannot stand in the way of this gift of God. Death is swallowed up forever (Isaiah 25:8). The word translated “swallow” (*bāla*) is the root word for a lot of words, meaning such things as destroyed, devoured, covered, eaten, used up, or pinched off. God’s conquering of death is not temporary; it is “forever” (25:8, CEB); it is a victory won (25:8, KJV).

Where is this mountain where God will do all these things (Isaiah 25:6)?

Mountains are often symbols of the presence of God. Noah’s ark came to rest on a mountain (Genesis 8:4). God called Moses from Mount Horeb to go lead God’s people from Egypt (Exodus 3:1). Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:20). The first temple was built on Mount Moriah (2 Chronicles 3:1). Mount Zion is the dwelling place of God (Psalm 74:1).

So, this mountain is simply a mark of God’s presence. Wherever God is present, these things happen! The prophet spills over with joy in anticipation of the meal that God will provide (Isaiah 25:6). Maybe some of that same spirit is reflected in the way the Holy Communion, in recent years, has become more of a celebration (“Eucharist” means thanksgiving) rather than a morose dwelling on our failure. We do not ignore our failures, but we celebrate because of what God has done with those failures!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In the fifth century, Cyril of Alexander (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, InterVarsity Press) wrote: “They confess that God will give rest on this mountain. And it seems to me that mountain here refers to the church, for it is there that one finds rest.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Feed us, Lord, on the mountain...”

September 18, 2016 Text: Isaiah 40:21-31 “Foundations of the Earth”

There are nine questions in this week’s study text. Most of the questions are in the same spirit as when we ask “What part of ‘No’ do you not understand?” Isaiah is saying: Surely you must get it by now! How obvious does it have to be! Maybe this time he is asking: “What part of ‘Yes’ do you not understand?”

What is it that the prophet thinks is so evident? What is it that Isaiah understands to be so clear? God is the Creator (Isaiah 40:21, 26)! God is everywhere (Isaiah 40:22)! Human honors pale in comparison to God (Isaiah 40:23)! God has no equal (Isaiah 40:25)! God cares about our lives (Isaiah 40:27)! God will give strength to God’s people (Isaiah 40:29, 31)! God doesn’t wear out (Isaiah 40:28)!

Many students of the Bible conclude that these verses—indeed, Isaiah 40 through Isaiah 55—were written by a different prophet than the one who wrote the earlier chapters of this book. The target audience for the verses in this week’s text seems to be the people who have been living in Babylonian exile. They are on the cusp of returning home. It is as if Isaiah (some call him “Second Isaiah”) wants to remind them of the basics of the faith.

Last year at Christmas my son gave me an Amazon Echo. I enjoy asking this electronic device all sorts of questions (What is the temperature in Topeka, Kansas? What is the score of the Duke football game? What is the meaning of “asinine?”). So, just now, I asked, “What is the theme of the Book of Isaiah?” Amazon Echo replied, “The theme of Isaiah is Isaiah.” I’m not sure if this is profound or simply a space-filler. It does stir some thought! It raises the question “Is the way I live my life the same as the way I talk my life?” “Does my walk match my talk?” “Is the theme of what I say the same as the theme of how I live?” Is the living Isaiah the same as the theme of the writing Isaiah? Is the living Belton the same as the theme of the writing Belton? Hmmm. Let’s not go there.

What is the theme of this portion of Isaiah? One way to put it would be: The theme of this portion of Isaiah is “God is God and we are not.” Even so, the gracious God gives to the tired and weary, strength that can come only from God. It is a gift! (Isaiah 40:31)

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What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Singing the Lord’s Song* (Abingdon), Bruce Birch wrote: “...this period of Babylonian exile has much in common with our own time. Many today are experiencing confusion and despair... in need of words

of hope. To see exile as an image of the modern church will allow us to hear the hopeful words of...Isaiah with a new freshness.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: ”Lord, I bring my weariness...”

September 25 2016 Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 “Everlasting Covenant”

There are numerous handles by which to pick up this week’s study text. Remember: Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2 when he taught at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19). Remember: God promises new beginnings for those in distress (Isaiah 61:3-4). Remember: God sees God’s love expressed in justice (Isaiah 61:8a). Remember: God’s covenant promise does not have a shelf-life (Isaiah 61:8b). Remember: Righteousness is a growth industry (Isaiah 61:11).

The range of images and the breadth of topics in these verses remind us just how far-reaching God’s grace and love can be. There is God’s touch on the prophet (61:1). There is care for the poor (61:1). There is healing for broken hearts (61:1). There is freedom for those who have been captured and, might we say, addicted (61:1). There is comfort and support for those who are sorrowful (61:2). There is inspiration for the discouraged (61:3). There is a fresh start for those who have borne losses (61:4). There is a passion for justice (61:8). There is a standard of integrity (61:8). There are visible blessings from God (61:9). There is recognition of holy living (61:10). There is the planting of a good tomorrow (61:11).

These verses make it hard to think of anyone who is left out of God’s touch!

Of course, God’s presence in our lives is both an encouragement and a challenge. We are grateful for ways in which God is with us in our

times of difficulty, but we also must accept that God’s judgment is upon our wrongdoing. God’s love of us is not a free ticket for us to behave any way we wish. For example, if God loves justice (61:8), God will hold us accountable if we support systems of injustice.

So, we note that these verses stir a variety of views and offer a diversity of themes. If I had to identify the one common ingredient in all this assortment, I think it would be this: God is at work. That is a word of hope to those who feel abandoned. That is a word of caution to those who make up their own ethical standards. That is a word, after all, that became flesh and dwelled among us (John 1:14), even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Sue Monk Kidd’s historical fiction *The Invention of Wings* (Viking), one of the key characters, Sarah, reflects: “I hadn’t really expected Lucretia to respond, but after a moment, she spoke: ‘God fills us with all sorts of yearnings that go against the grain of the world—but the fact those yearnings often come to nothing, well, I doubt that’s God’s doing.’ She cut her eyes at me and smiled. ‘I think we know that’s men’s doing.’”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Ever-present God, thank You for Your all-sufficient grace...”

VIP Report

DEATHS

PILGRIM, Mike, husband of Carolyn Pilgrim (retired) died April 8. Service was held April 21, at Maggie Methodist Church, Maggie Valley

JOHNSON, David Wesley , (retired) died April 7. Service was held April 16 at Southern Pines UMC.

THOMPSON, Leo Clifford (retired) died March 27. Service was held April 16 in Raleigh.

KNOTT, Garland, (retired) April 14. Service was held April 23 at First UMC New Albany, MS

BIRTHS

Laura (Windborne) and Kevin (Macedonia) Johnson are grateful to announce the birth of Madeline Elizabeth Johnson, April 16.

Ryan and Katie Paul (Extension Ministry: Baltimore-Washington Conference) share with joy the arrival of Ethan Christensen Paul, May 25.

REID Tennie Meads, widow of James, died May 16. Service was held May 20 at Front Street UMC, Burlington.

SHIELDS, Betty, wife of Bob (retired), died May 25. Service was held June 4 at Trinity UMC, New Bern.

BISSETTE, Lester C., died May 28. Service was held June 1 at Bailey UMC, Bailey.

Ideas to Liven Up Sunday School Class

Penny For Your Thoughts

When everyone arrives ask them to choose a penny from a bag. When everyone is seated ask them to look at the date on their penny. Ask them to think about something that happened to them that year. The answers can be funny, short or serious and allows each person to share as much or as little as they want. Start with the oldest penny date and work forward until the most recent penny is shared. Ask if they can relate their penny event to a corresponding bible figure/scripture with a similar story.

Trip Through the Bible A-Z

Take a trip through the Bible without leaving your seat. Begin by saying "I took a trip through the Bible and found "Abraham". The next person will repeat what was said and then add something they found that begins with the next letter in the alphabet and so on. So the second person says "I took a trip through the Bible and found Abraham and Beersheba". The third person says "I took a trip through the Bible and found Abraham, Beersheba and Canaan". Play continues for the whole alphabet.

Guess Who?

At the beginning of class, tape the name of a Bible character to the back of each person. They cannot see the name--only the other participants will know which character they represent. Each person can ask questions about who they are (ex.), male or female, Old or New Testament. The first person to guess the Bible character wins.

Role Play

Any narrative passage of Scripture can be turned into a script really easily. Have participants volunteer to be specific characters. When time comes to read the lesson's passage, it becomes a little mini-drama everyone can both watch and follow along with in their Bibles.

Ideas from ym360.org