

biblestudy: february 2020

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

February 2, 2020 Text: Exodus 3:1-12 “Holy Place”

What makes a place “holy ground”? I think back to Westside Methodist Church in Hopatcong, New Jersey. It was there that Toni and I got married. Before the wedding, I had been in that space probably a hundred times. Is that what made it holy? A few years after the wedding, that stone building was sold and was turned into a bar. Did it lose its holiness? It was an ordinary building, but God used it to focus human love and to give it divine blessing.

That is what is happening in this week’s study text. Moses was in an ordinary place, doing an ordinary thing. He was working for his father-in-law, taking care of sheep (Exodus 3:1-2). The burning bush signaled that this was a special moment (Exodus 3:2-4) and God was in that moment. It was a moment in which God acknowledged the pain of an oppressed people and God wanted to do something about it (Exodus 3:6).

When God sees love and does something about it, that is a holy place. When God sees pain and does something about it, that is a holy place. When God sees possibility and does something about it, that is a holy place.

What impresses me about biblical accounts of “holy places” is that they are almost always ordinary places. How about Moses just doing his job tending the sheep? How about a shepherd boy David being called into service? How about Jesus’ birth out among the cows?

February 9, 2020 Text: Exodus 40:16-38 “Holy Presence”

Eight times. Eight times. In just a little more than a dozen verses (Exodus 40:13-31), eight times the biblical witness records that Moses did “just as the Lord had commanded Moses.” Is it any wonder that the account ends with the remarkable signs of the presence of God!

As I was typing this on a Tuesday afternoon—around 5:00 to 5:30—my land line phone rang four times. I glanced to see who was calling and then did not answer any of the rings. There were numbers I did not recognize; there were fund-raisers I wanted to ignore; there was even a call from Belton, Missouri! It got me to wondering. How does God react when we refuse to take one of God’s calls? How would this story in Exodus been different if Moses had not done as God commanded?

Frankly, sometimes I wish God were as specific with me as God seems to be with Moses. Look at the verbs: place...hide...bring...bring...place...set up...put...put...set up...hang up...take...anoint...anoint...anoint...bring...wash...dress...anoint...bring...dress...anoint. Whew! That is a lot that God is asking Moses to do, but it is pretty exact. Do this and then do that and then do the other.

Is God that precise in talking with you? With me, not so much! I know I am commanded to love, but what does that love look like? Sometimes I want God to “come down the ladder of abstraction” (as S. I.

How about Saul just “doing his thing” on the road to Damascus? How about the writer John describing heaven as a place with streets and gates?

In Exodus 3:11, we see Moses responding as many of us would: Why me? God gives the answer that turns that into a holy promise: “I’ll be with you” (Exodus 3:12). When you boil it down to its essential, that’s what makes somewhere a holy place, the activity of God. It might not be a burning bush; it might be someone saying to me “I need you.” It might not be the excitement of a land flowing with milk and honey; it might be a Saturday night phone call, “Can you teach Sunday School tomorrow?” It might not be a mountain-top such as Horeb; it might be the stir in your heart when you read of some social injustice. Those too are holy places.

What Someone Else Has Said:

John R. Tyson (*The Way of the Wesleys: A Short Introduction*, Eerdmans) has quoted what John Wesley said: “...holiness is no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart....It is no other than the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus. It consists of all heavenly affections and tempers mingled together in one.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! Come and dwell in my daily life and bring Your holy presence...”

Hayakawa put it). How do I love my neighbor? How do I love the homeless? How do I love those with whom I disagree? How do I love my enemy?

As this study text moves to a close, God has also made a move. Instead of being off on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32-34), God has come to dwell in the midst of the people (Exodus 40:34). Remember how a cloud led the Israelites by day as they escaped from Egypt? Now a cloud forms at this meeting tent (Exodus 40:38) and God is on the journey with God’s people.

Do you suppose that the cloud in my thinking—“How do I love?”—is a sign that God is on the journey with me?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Table Matters* (Cascade Books), Felicia Howell LaBoy has written: “The Judeo-Christian story lets us know that while humans may have abandoned God, God has not abandoned us. Instead, God is working throughout history to restore us to our true selves and to loving relationships with God, with others, and with all creation.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Bring Your presence into our midst and move our hearts to obedience...”

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February 16, 2020 Text: Psalm 24:1-6 “Holy People”

In the Wesleyan tradition, there is a teaching about Christian perfection: full love of God and full love of neighbor. Those who are being received as clergy in full connection with an annual conference are asked “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” The desired answer is “Yes.” (“Expect” in the time of Wesley’s writing meant “look forward to.”) We speak of “moving on to perfection.” Another way of saying it is “full intent and maturity of love.” Sometimes it’s called “entire sanctification.”

That seems to be what the psalmist is describing in Psalm 24:4: “clean hands and a pure heart.” It is clear that such a fullness of love has to come as a gift from God (Psalm 24:5). In light of this description of “who can stand in God’s holy sanctuary,” most of us would have to say we come into the sanctuary on our spiritual knees.

In the opening verses of this psalm we get a glimpse of how many ancient people viewed the creation. The sea was seen as a turbulent, even out of control, power. Then, God created the earth and placed it “firmly on the waters” (Common English Bible, Psalm 24:2). Whatever image is used for the creation, God is in charge!

Some students of the Bible think these verses were sung as part of a procession carrying the Ark into the temple. (Others say that the Ark

never left the temple.) The Ark was a structure that symbolized the presence of God. (See, for example, Joshua 3-4. Judges 20:27-28, and 1 Kings 8:1-12.) You might want to take a look at hymn 213 in The United Methodist Hymnal. It is based on Psalm 24.

As I glanced back at the open Bible on my desk, suddenly I saw something I had missed. At the top of these verses are the words “A psalm of David.” Clean hands? Pure heart? David? This David who had a man killed in order to steal his wife (2 Samuel 11) comes into this journey toward righteousness with his own broken places. So, this “moving on to perfection” is open to all of us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Robert Tuttle, Jr. (*Sanctity Without Starch*, Bristol) has written: “Grace obeys God out of gratitude. Legalism obeys God out of compunction. Grace is justice and mercy. Legalism is justice alone. Grace loves. Legalism fears. Grace responds. Legalism reacts. Grace wants only to please God because God alone is worthy, worthy of praise, worthy of glory, worthy of honor, worthy of every obedience.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me...”

February 23, 2020 Text: Isaiah 61:1-11 “Holy Purpose”

Because Jesus quoted this week’s study text (Luke 4:17-19), many students of the Bible describe these verses in Isaiah as “Servant Poems,” the prophet’s anticipation of the coming Messiah. Others argue that the proclamation and invitation in Isaiah’s words are aimed at the entire Hebrew people. Whichever it is, A. S. Herbert has reminded us that “This prophet, like his predecessors, had visions, but he was no visionary.” Isaiah spoke “in quite practical terms.”

It’s those practical, real-world purposes that make this text some hard to hear. If God is vague in God’s expectation of me, I can muddle around and not really get very specific in what I am doing for the Lord. But not so in this text! The prophet names those among whom the people of God are to work: poor, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, mourners (Isaiah 61:1-2).

Isaiah 61:8 narrows it down to one word: “justice.” (In the King James Version, the word is “judgment.”) It is hard to capture all that is contained in that Hebrew word (*mishpât*), but it is a demand for getting things right, much as a court might determine what is guilt and what is innocence. Where life is broken for some, we work to heal. Where poverty leaves some hungry, we work to feed. Where prejudice limits possibilities, we work to give everyone a chance. Where some try to live life ignorant of God’s good grace, we work to teach of saving power. We work to make things right.

(If this begins to seem a bit overwhelming, no wonder! Old Testament scholar Robert Culver has identified no less than thirteen dimensions to the word *mishpât*. It’s almost as if God has more to say than will fit into one word!)

We who are now the body of Christ inevitably hear this text through Jesus’ reading of it in his hometown, Nazareth (Luke 4:17-19). It has become our story. And it is not easy. When Jesus shared this word from Isaiah, he as much as said “It’s not going to work here” (Luke 4:24). And no sooner had he finished giving his understanding of the text, he got run out of town (v. 29).

Reading Isaiah, we get a positive image of what happens when God’s will is done (Isaiah 61:10-11): “rejoice,” “joyful,” “victory,” “praise.” That’s “promised land stuff,” but Jesus reminds us that the journey there is not easy.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Pieces of Peace* (self-published), Wil I. Jackson says: “Real men (and women) do not thwart the way of peace. Real men (and women) do not undervalue any human life.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Use me, Holy Spirit...”

Random Acts of Kindness Day is February 17, 2020

Launched in 1995, Random Acts of Kindness (RAK) Day is an annual opportunity to unite people around the world through kindness. 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.

Start a piggy bank for a cause

Write down someones best qaillties

Start a fund raiser for a good cause

Be kind to your server

Tutor someone

Leave a generous tip

Share your favorite recipe

Make a handmade card for someone

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