

# biblestudy: may 2020

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

## May 3, 2020 Text: Revelation 22:1-5 “The River of Life-Giving Water”

It’s strange how this happens. I just sat down to write the next commentary for this series. It is the first time I have done so since my son died unexpectedly. And guess what: the text is a description packed with images of the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1), showing God’s ultimate gift of presence with God’s people. It is a promise of victory even as we walk through valleys of grief.

One of the key images is a river (Revelation 22:1). Perhaps one’s baptism is a foreshadowing of that river of life. ”Remember your baptism and be thankful,” is the invitation to anticipate that fully present kingdom of God. That water flows from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1) and thus it is when baptismal waters splash on an infant or on a new believer.

And notice that that water (Dare we call it “baptismal water?”) nourishes the tree of life, producing a harvest that heals the broken places (Revelation 22:2). Life comes from a tree! Jesus dies on a tree and from that death has come healing. In our baptism, we participate in that death in order to participate in that resurrection to healing.

In Revelation 22:4, the description is given that in God’s coming kingdom, the servants (literally, slaves) of the Lord will see God’s face. That is to be fully in God’s presence. What a gift! In Exodus 33:20, God tells Moses that one cannot look on God’s face and live, but now those human limitations are put asunder and the full image of God

(Genesis 1:26) is restored.

In ordinary times, the darkness of night can be a context of fear or can be the hiding place for our misdeeds. If we are trying to cover up our sin, we might even fear the light, aware that in good light, others might see our broken deeds. But in God’s good kingdom, in the new Jerusalem, there is “nothing accursed found there” (Revelation 22:3), so there is no night, only the light of God’s full presence.

The writer John has revealed a picture of God’s good future. Because the promises of God are true, we can make claim upon this assurance even now. That’s not a bad thing to grasp in days when Death seems to have such a strong word! Of course separation from those we love is painful, but there is a “blessed assurance” that God’s tomorrow is a river of life.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Jürgen Moltmann (*The Theology of Hope*, Harper and Row) has written: “Thus hope goes on its way through the midst of happiness and pain, because in the promises of God it can see a future also for the transient, the dying, and the dead.”

### Prayer:

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

## May 10, 2020 Text: Genesis 3:21; 4:10-16 “God’s Grace Toward Adam, Eve, and Cain”

United Methodists around the world are meeting this week (May 5-15, 2020) in General Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The future shape of The United Methodist Church (or even its existence) will unfold in the decisions that are made. Issues around human sexuality have deepened divides among us. In that context, we study these verses in Genesis about how God gives grace for new beginnings.

Our study begins with Genesis 3:21. God provides clothes for Adam and Eve. Previously, they had done that “fig leaf thing” (Genesis 3:7), but fig leaves do not exactly make for sartorial splendor. With this new clothing, God has shown a grace and care for the fallen couple. Before their sin, Adam and Eve had evidently been quite comfortable and wholesome in their relationship although they were naked (Genesis 3:7). This had not been an issue until they broke in their relationship with God. When relationship with God is broken, our relationship with one another is also broken. God meets Adam and Eve where they are in their new shame and, with the gift of garments, he gives them a healing way to be in relationship with one another.

The other account in this week’s study tells how God treated Cain after Cain killed his brother, Abel. God spells out some potent punishment for Cain (Genesis 4:11-12). Cain pleads for mercy because such pun-

ishment would destroy him (Genesis 4:13). God puts a protective mark on Cain so no one would kill him (Genesis 4:15). What a gift of undeserved grace! God is a God of new beginnings and Cain moves on and civilization begins to unfold. (Look at the list of people named in Genesis 4:17-22.) This all happened because God protected an undeserving Cain.

What need for new beginnings do we bring to God? Which of our broken relationships require God’s touch for healing? What new revelation does God offer for the mess in which we find ourselves? This week’s study verses present God’s willingness to give grace to some very undeserving people. Maybe I need to scribble my name on these pages in the Bible. What about you?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Frederick Buechner (*A Crazy, Holy Grace*, Zondervan Press) has written: “There is forgiveness, There is compassion. There is mercy in God. And therefore, you dare take your chances and do what you can do with the hand that life, or God, has dealt you...Open your ears and your eyes to the elusive, invisible, silent presence of healing, of the power of God to heal, which moves as quietly, as undramatically, as the wind moves.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Grace, O God, I need Your grace...”

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May 17, 2020 Text: Exodus 16:2-15 “God Provides Food in the Wilderness”

Well, what happened in Minneapolis last week? I am writing this well before the 2020 General Conference of The United Methodist Church. Delegates have not yet even received copies of all the proposals to be considered. So, you have an advantage: you know what happened!

Although I cannot describe the results of the 2020 General Conference, I think I can say with confidence that for some—if not all—in this denominational family, there are going to be journeys in a wilderness. In a wilderness, we do not feel the comfort of our usual places of security. In a wilderness, there is often little hint of in which way we should move next. In a wilderness, we no doubt complain about how we got into this mess and we long to go back to the way things used to be. Wilderness living is not easy living.

It is not just the Church that faces life in a wilderness. Have you not had to get on with life after the loss of a loved one? Have you not sometimes wondered how to get all the bills paid? Have you not sometimes heard a doctor say “We are just not sure what to do next”? Have you not lived with the tension of some broken human relationship? Wilderness living is not easy living.

It is not surprising that the Israelites complained in the early days of their escape toward the Promised Land. It didn’t take long (Exodus 15:24). What was that---three days (Exodus 15:22)? We ourselves are good enough at complaining that we recognize it when we see it!

May 24, 2020 Text: Luke 23:32-33, 39-43 “Grace to the Dying Thief”

Last fall, I was at a Duke women’s basketball game. There were only 2.7 seconds left on the first quarter clock. Duke got the ball in bounds and Kyra Lambert dribbled a few steps and heaved the ball to the goal about 75 feet away. Swish! The crowd erupted in the loudest and most enthusiastic cheer of the evening. There is a special excitement when something good happens just at the last moment.

The other night I was at a men’s prayer group. (Let me tell the truth. It was during the prayer time that comes before every dartball game in our church league.) When the leader asked for prayer requests, one of the men asked for prayers of thanksgiving. His long-ill nephew had died, but just before his death, he made a profession of faith and was baptized into the communion of saints. There is a special joy when something good like that happens just at the last moment.

That same joy, that same excitement, is what captures us in today’s study text. In Luke 23, we read about the two thieves who were being crucified, one on each side of Jesus. One of them mocked Jesus, but the other one asked Jesus to remember him. Our Lord said to him, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). There it is again: a burst of extra thrill as someone comes to faith, even at the very last moment.

It is the same grace that breaks into a heart when someone is a youth

May 31, 2020 Text: Acts 2:1-21 “The Holy Spirit Inspires Jesus’ Followers”

These past few weeks have been about the evidence of God’s surprising gift of grace to the undeserving: Adam, Eve, Cain, the complaining Israelites, and the thief on the cross. Today’s lesson speaks of the presence of God for faithful followers, for those who came from all kinds of places, for those who were in a variety of religious expressions, and for those who simply were mystified (Acts 2:2-13).

It was so confusing that finally Peter (along with the other disciples) got everyone’s attention and tried to put all that had happened into perspective (Acts 2:14).

Notice this about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: it was both communal and individual. The text (Acts 2:2) speaks of a wind that filled the entire house; it was a gift of the Spirit to the entire community. “We are in this together.” Then, see what happened next: the Spirit came as tongues of fire and rested on each one individually (Acts 2:3). “This is a gift to me.”

Our personal journey of faith is in the context of community. Personal faith is not in isolation. It is part of a community story.

Our community experience is not all there is to faith. We also have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit.

The word translated “complain” (lûwn) literally means to stop and stay at the same place. Complaining does have that repetitive, over-and-over-again feel to it.

With abundant grace, God provides nourishment for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16:12). Wilderness food does not always look like what we want or expect. When the Hebrew children saw what God had provided, they asked, “What is it?” (Exodus 16:15). I suppose if our heart (and stomach) is set on prime rib, a pimento cheese sandwich, although nourishing, does not look like what we need. Perhaps sometimes we do not eat well in the wilderness because the nourishment is not to our liking.

This week’s text is an invitation to trust that God’s grace is sufficient. Even in the wilderness. Even if we do not recognize it.

What Someone Else Has Said:

*African American Heritage Hymnal* (GIA Publications, Inc.) contains this hymn text: “Tell me, how did you feel when you come out the wilderness, leaning on the Lord. I am leaning on the Lord. I am leaning on the Lord. Who died on Calvary.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lead me, Lord, in this wilderness...”

as the grace that breaks into a heart on a death bed. What makes this last minute gift of grace so remarkable is that no one expected it. All the chattering and all the muttering is making fun of Jesus (Luke 23:35, 36, 39). Then, all of a sudden, this criminal—there is no question of his guilt—offers a word of repentance and a gentle request: “remember me.”

I guess we could say that Jesus is an equal-opportunity grace giver. There is indeed a stir of excitement at the drama of this moment, but, truth to tell, it is the same undeserved gift that each of us in faith has received.

Jesus asks us to remember him at the Holy Table (Luke 22:19) and He, in turn, remembers those who accept His grace, be it a dying thief or a burgeoning believer.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Kenneth Carder (*Living Our Beliefs*, Discipleship) has written: “It makes a difference if we believe God’s preferential love and purposes are limited to our nation, our tribe, and our race, or if God’s love and purposes include all humankind.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Remember me...”

It is an individual experience.

Sometimes I tend to think that everyone’s faith story ought to be like mine. Sometimes I tend to think that others ought to be involved in church life in the same way as I am. But that is not what happened at Pentecost. Everyone did not hear it in the same way; Parthians heard it in a way they understood; Medes heard it in a way that they understood; Elamites heard it in a way that they understood (Acts 2:9-11).

The Holy Spirit came in a way that each could receive that gift. Thanks be to God.

What Someone Else Has Said:

*El Nuevo Testamento Dios Llega al Hombre* (American Bible Society) begins the Pentecost story this way: “Cuando llegó la fiesta de Pentecostés, todod los cretentes se encontraban reunidos en un mismo lugar. De repente, un gran ruido que venia del cielo, como de du viento fuerte, resonó en toda la casa donde ellos estaban. Y se les aparecieron lenguas como fuego, repartidas sobre cada uno do allos.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, grace-giving God, for the wideness of Your mercy...”