

bible⁺study: december 2020

Belton Joyner, Jr.

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

December 6, 2020 Text: Psalm 8:1-9 “God and Human Beings”

A little digging has revealed something interesting about the word in Psalm 8:4 that is translated “human beings” (Common English Bible, New Revised Standard Version) or “man”(King James Version). The Hebrew word is ‘*enôwah*. That word, in turn, is based on the word ‘*ânash*. So, what is the meaning of ‘*ânash*? Oops. It means “frail, feeble, desperately wicked, incurable, sick, and woeful.” That’s not a description you are likely to put on your resume, but that is the way the psalmist has depicted you and me.

No wonder the psalmist ponders “Why would God even think about people?” (Psalm 8:4) Even so, the psalmist acknowledges that God has turned to just such frail people to handle God’s wide-ranging creation. In light of this biblical insight, how do we believers dare ignore concerns about environmental perils and creation disarray?

This psalm is one of the psalms that is intended to be sung. The heading in the Common English Bible notes that these verses are for use by the “music leader.” (The King James Version says “to the chief musician.”) Does the Bible you are using say something (just before the first verse) like “according to the Gittith”? Most students of the Bible think that “Gittith” is a kind of harp. Let the music begin!

I was curious to see what sung response *The United Methodist Hymnal*

offered when this psalm is read in a responsive reading. There are two suggestions. One is “Sing praise to God who reigns above,” a tune that is from the core of European hymnody. The other is “Many and great, O God, are thy things,” a song that is from the Native American tradition. (These are hymns 126 and 148.) What a wonderful reminder that God the Creator has given life to varied traditions, multi-cultural expressions, racial diversity, and differing patterns! God has crowned all of us with “glory and grandeur” (Psalm 8:5).

Psalm 8 begins with a praise of God’s name. (In biblical times, a name was considered the definition of one’s character; remember that some names changes when life circumstances changed.) The first reference -v. 1 (“Lord”) acknowledges the Hebrew name “Yahweh.” The second reference-v. 1 (“lord”) is acknowledgment of the kingship and ruling by God. No wonder we praise God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Faithful and Fractured (Baker) has this statement from Rae Jean Prose-schold-Bell and Jason Byassee: “The God of the universe works on behalf of the oppressed. And his I AM is always in present tense.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “How majestic is Your name...”

December 13, 2020 Text: Philippians 2:1-11 “Imitate Christ”

These verses (Philippians 2:1-11) hardly sound like something written by a man in prison. Ordinarily, one might think that a prisoner is going to be concerned mostly about self, but the apostle speaks of community (“being united”-v. 2) and working for the common good (“agreeing with one another”-v. 2). Paul urges his readers to “watch out for what is better for others”-v. 4. Why would a man stuck in prison keep telling the Philippian Christians to think about and work for others?

It is because to do so is to imitate Christ—v. 5.

Then, Paul shifts into what was probably a hymn sung by the early church (vv. 6-11). So, some students of the Bible think that in these poetic verses, Paul is quoting a hymn that the Philippian congregation would already know. He unfolds an account of how Jesus lived his life as one for others.

What does that look like for us? During last Lent, Tyler Williams included these thoughts in a devotional he wrote for the North Carolina-Conference: “I hope we see a church composed of a beautiful diversity of people.

I hope we see a church stronger and more resilient because we courageously stuck together.

I hope we see a church bound together not by lock-step agreement, but by the Holy Spirit.

I hope we see a church where people might disagree politically or theologically but love each other unconditionally.

I hope we see a church where no member would ever consciously or unconsciously say or think of another, ‘I have no need of you.’”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Karl Barth (*The Faith of the Church*, Living Age Books of Meridian Publishing) has written: “It belongs to the Church to witness to the Dominion of Christ clearly, explicitly, and consciously.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, You have shown us how to live; now, walk with us as we try to follow Your example...”

December 20, 2020 Text: John 1:1-18 “Becoming God’s Children”

Although this text (John 1:1-18) does not usually bring to mind Christmas carols and shepherds and wise men, it is one of the most powerful Scriptures about the birth of our Lord. The pre-existent Word (what God had to say) took on human flesh (John 1:14).

The Common English Bible says, “and made his home among us.” The New Revised Standard Version says, “and lived among us.” Moffatt translates, “and tarried among us.” The Emphasized New Testament reads, “and pitched his tent among us.” The King James Version notes “and dwelt among us.” The Living Bible records, “and lived here on earth.” The Message puts it this way: “and moved into the neighborhood.” John Wesley translated it: “and tabernacled among us.”

I might say “And lived in Bahama, North Carolina.” You might say, “And walked around in Portland, Maine.” You might say, “And was seen in Greencastle, Indiana.” You might say, “And was at home in North Port, Florida.” It begins to kick in: Jesus took His breaths in the same air that we breath, had dealings with folks like the ones we

encounter, and was tested by daily life’s temptations. As the writer of Hebrews has written, “Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters, in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God...Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:17-18). Also, see Hebrews 4:15. The bottom line: We are left with no excuse. Our Lord has been where we are and calls us to follow Him even in that very place. He’s been there. He knows what it is like. And still we are called ourselves to be children of God (John 1:12).

John is clear that we are God’s children, not by our good works or by our getting it all figured out, but by God’s free grace (John 1:13). In the Wesleyan tradition, we put it like this: God’s searching grace (prevenient grace) comes among us (v. 11). If we welcome that grace, accept that gift, we are made right with God by God’s gift—v. 13 (justifying grace). Then, we are set free to live out that grace in holiness (sanctifying grace) because of what God has done—v. 16, 18. Now there’s a Christmas gift to love!

contd.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Fifth century Augustine (*Ancient Christian Commentary in Scripture New Testament IV a*, Intervarsity) said: “When a person...is...considered to be among the children of God, such an achievement must not be considered to have been accomplished by their ability alone. This ability they have received through the grace of God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You are still among us, Holy Word, so shower us with the grace of Your presence...”

grace

December 27, 2020 Text: John 14:8-14 “The Father Dwells in Jesus”

Once when I was a little boy, I prayed that I’d make a 100 on my third grade arithmetic test. (Let’s just say that I made less than that.) Another time, I prayed that I’d learn how to be a ventriloquist. (Let’s just say that at least I got a sore throat.) Then, there was the time I prayed that “Stinker” Clark—Yes, that is what we called him—would let me play with his baseball glove. (Let’s just say that catching bare handed is a developed skill.)

Okay. Was God zero for three on those prayers? John 14:13-14 reports that Jesus said, “You ask for it and I’ll do it.” Well, that’s not exactly what our Lord said. He said “Ask in my name.” That means the prayer is to be in the spirit of love, in the grace of forgiveness, in the insistence on justice, in the purposes of God, in the gift of relationship, in the character and will of Jesus, in the advancement of the kingdom, in the pursuit of peace, in the integrity of witness.

No wonder the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:2)! No wonder the apostle Paul acknowledged that “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26)! The writer of Lamentations knew what it is like to feel a prayer is unanswered (Lamentations 3:8) Jesus is not suggesting that prayer is a kind of divine order blank. Rather, prayer becomes a conversation and God and the one talk about “what is best.” Even Jesus Himself was moved to pray “Not who prays

my will, but thine be done.” So, a prayer can be said to be answered even though we don’t get what we wanted. Prayer is one way we say that we know that God is in charge. Prayer is one way the believer can get on the same sheet of music as our Lord.

In case the disciples had missed the point, Jesus in these verses is making it clear that He and the Father (and the Holy Spirit to come—John 14:16) are cut out of the same piece of cloth. And God created the cloth and God did the cutting! To pray in Jesus name is to open ourselves to the Trinitarian reality of God.

What Someone Else Has Said:

David W. Blight in the biography *Frederick Douglass* (Simon and Schuster) says: “Growing in confidence and boldness, (Douglass) spoke about the nature of prayer. As reported by Nathaniel Rogers, Douglass argued that the ‘most effectual sort of prayer was “doing” and not “saying.” ... His prayers ‘in words’ had never been answered as a slave. Only his own action by running away to freedom achieved a prayer answered.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...”



In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.