

# biblestudy: november 2020

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

## November 1, 2020 Text: Genesis 8:20-21; 12:6-8; 28:16-22; 1 Samuel 7:10-12 “Worship at Ad Hoc Altars”

After the flood, Noah built an altar to worship God (Genesis 8:20-21). I think I would have been more likely to blame God for making me stay on board with those stinking, defecating animals.

Abram built an altar simply based on God’s promise to give him the land for Abram’s descendants (Genesis 12:6-8). I think I would have been more likely to make sure God delivered on the promise before I did much worshipping.

Jacob used a rock for a pillow and then dreamed what God had to say to him; he recognized that that ordinary place was actually a place of God’s presence (Genesis 28:16-22). I think I would have more likely to wait until I got in my pew at Bethany to make sure I was on holy ground.

When the Israelite army routed the Philistines, Samuel gave God the credit and built an altar of stone and called it “Ebenezer” (stone of help) (1 Samuel 7:10-12). I think I would have been more likely to think “What a great general I am; my army has won the day.” (Well, at least I learned what the hymn writer meant when he wrote “Here I raise mine Ebenezer.”)

After reading the focal passages for this week’s study, I began to think if there were unexpected, out-of-the-ordinary places where I had worshiped God. Yes! There was summer church camp when the expect-

ed worship moment came at vespers, but the unexpected time of worship came when a counselor told me that I was still okay even though I was the only kid at camp who did not know how to swim. There was the walk back to the house from the mailbox as I read a handwritten note from my teen-aged grandson, telling me how much he loved me. Then, there was the time a romantic tryst became a time of praising God when Toni and I agreed to spend the rest of our lives together as husband and wife. It was what this lesson calls “worship at ad hoc altars.”

I guess we can come to understand that no place is off limits for God’s activity. Even if I have wandered into far places, the convenient grace of God can find me. Praise the Lord!

**What Someone Else Has Said:**  
John Tyson (*The Way of the Wesleys*, Eerdmans) wrote: “The Wesleys believed that all people have within their conscience a witness to the presence and call of God upon their life. The conscience becomes a kind of loudspeaker through which God the Holy Spirit addresses people in their inner self.”

**Prayer:**  
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of working grace, come and find me where I am and move me to where You would have me be...”

## November 8, 2020 Text: Luke 4:31-44 “Worship in the Synagogues”

Jesus had a rich ministry in a lot of settings: mountain tops, street corners, deserted places, lakes and rivers, small towns, big cities, but this week’s study text reminds us that our Lord kept His ministry rooted in traditional places of worship.

Luke 4:31 reports that Jesus went every Sabbath to the synagogue. Luke 4:33 tells of a wild experience that happened during one of those synagogue visits. Luke 4:43-44 is the declaration by Jesus that His preaching ministry was to continue in the synagogues.

I do not want to suggest that God is only present at 11:00 AM (Eastern Standard Time, of course) on Sundays, but I do want to remember that systematic gathering with the worshiping, teaching community was part of the example that Jesus set for us.

Do you recall how it was last spring when, because of the coronavirus, churches closed and did not offer gathered worship services? We tried, but there was something missing when we were not around squirming children, restless youth, exhausted parents, rested elders.

Late last winter, I preached somewhere I had not been before, the annual preaching mission at Whiteville, NC, United Methodist Church. I got curious, so I went through my files to figure out how many different United Methodist churches I had preached in throughout the North Carolina Annual Conference. Gasp! I remembered small, rural congrega-

tions. I remembered English Gothic sanctuaries. I remembered fellowship halls with folding chairs. I remembered contemporary designs. I remembered simple plank buildings. I remembered steepled brick towers. 275 different gathered settings for worship. (No, I didn’t get moved to new appointments that often! My appointments included some conference-wide responsibilities that took me all over the place.) Every one of these settings had one thing in common: people coming together to worship God. It is at the core of who we are. Even when illness or disability keeps us away, our hearts and our minds go to those gathering places.

As we thought about last week, the worship of God can erupt in all kinds of places, but, as Jesus showed with His own journey, there is a gift of grace when the community of worship comes together.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**  
*The United Methodist Book of Worship* (The United Methodist Publishing House) has this introduction: “When the people of God gather, the Spirit is free to move them to worship in diverse ways, according to their needs.”

**Prayer:**  
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “O for a thousand tongues to sing...”

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**November 15, 2020 Text: Matthew 18:15-20, Hebrews 10:19-25 “Worship as the Church”**

In the early days of the Methodist movement, the men and women gathered in small groups: bands, classes, societies. Even before that, the Wesley brothers along with a few friends formed what came to be called the Holy Club at Oxford University. What they had in common was the “desire to flee the wrath to come.”

How did they go about that life together? They focused on accountability to one another for faithfulness to God, confessing the broken places in their lives, and dialogue about how each might live the Christian life of witness and service.

Matthew 18:15-20 shares an early church pattern for this kind of responsibility to and for each other. Hebrews 10:19-25 recognizes that some have begun to back off from this “up close and personal” conversation.

In the Matthew passage, the key word is “listen.” (In the King James Version, it is translated “hear.”) The word in New Testament language is *akúuō*. In English it can mean “hear,” simply an auditory event. (“I hear the fireworks as they blast out all that noise.”) It can also mean something that is reported. (“I hear that Sam never paid back the ten dollars he borrowed.”) Or, it can mean you are understood. (“I hear what you are saying; I know what you mean.”)

**November 22, 2020 Text: Revelation 4:1-11 “Worship at the Throne”**

After reading Revelation 4:1-11, it becomes clear that human vocabulary falls short when trying to describe the power and glory of God. This is apocalyptic literature, meaning it is written in symbolic language. One could take almost any one of the writer John’s images—throne, jasper, carnelian, rainbow, twenty-four, thunder, flames, crystal, lion, fox, human being, eagle, elders—and pour rich and far-reaching meaning into it.

Dreams, such as this, are not uncommon in the biblical accounts of God’s self-revelation. Abimelech has a dream in which God reassures him (Genesis 20:6). Joseph had a series of dreams as God revealed some future to him (Genesis 37:5-11). God speaks to Nazareth Joseph in a dream, to help him understand that Mary’s child is from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20). Some time later, the wise men were warned in a dream to avoid Herod (Matthew 2:12). Peter reminds his listeners that the prophet Joel had said there would be visions and dreams as God unfolds God’s plan (Acts 2:17).

The New Testament word for “heaven” is *ōuranōs*. Sometimes it means the sky. Sometimes it means any great elevation. Sometimes it means the abode of God. 1 Kings 8:27 reminds us that no matter how we define and shape heaven, God is still greater. No wonder John strains to tell about the images that come to him in this trance!

**November 29, 2020 Text: Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:13-18 “In God’s Image”**

It’s hard to believe that it is already the first Sunday of Advent! The months leading up to this holy season have been marked with uncertainties and stresses. This week’s study texts offer us some assurance that God still has joy and salvation for us.

You may have run across the theological term *imago dei*. That is simply a classic Latin translation of what we translate into English as “image of God.” Genesis 1:27 boldly claims that we human beings are created in the image of God. That puts us into relationship with God, relationship to one another, and relationship with the whole created order.

Human beings in all gender expressions are the creation of God (Genesis 1:27). The next verses (Genesis 1:28-30) show how God wants that image to be expressed: with care for the whole created order.

In writing about Psalm 139:13-18, one writer (J. Clinton McCann, Jr.) has said, “Certainty is elusive.” Some of the Hebrew words show up only in this passage, so it is difficult to get a solid grasp on their meaning. Are the psalmist’s reflections universal truth or personal experience? Is God to get the blame/credit when a human life is packaged with physical or mental limitations? What about abortion? What plans does God have for me that I have misunderstood? What about miscar-

The Hebrews text (Hebrews 10:25) tells us that to continue to listen/hear/understand each other sets us free for service and witness (“sparkling love and good deeds”) No wonder the early Holy Club undertook prison ministry; no wonder those early Methodists established a credit union; no wonder Philip William Otterbein challenged the first generation United Brethren to tithe regularly. When we are at our best, we hold each other accountable for lives that show the fruit of faith.

The title of this session is “Worship as the Church.” What that says to me is that God is glorified when God’s people live life together in such a way that God’s care for all is pursued. That sounds like worship to me.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God’s Household* (Discipleship Resources), Steven Manskar wrote: “(John Wesley’s) understanding of salvation led him to develop an organization that was a means of grace...given instruction, support, accountability, and communal love needed to help them experience and grow in their faith and love of God and neighbor.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Bind us together, Lord...”

In the midst of all the glorious scenes of heaven, John notes that there is a glass sea, looking like crystal (Revelation 4:6). For some students of the Bible, this sea marks the presence of evil, even in the center of all the praise and worship. [Later, in John’s writing, the sea is a reservoir of evil (Revelation 13:1).] But keep in mind what John later notes: When the new heaven and the new earth come into being, the sea (evil) is no more (Revelation 21:1). God has won!

Ultimately, this study text is about how the worship of God crosses the boundaries of time and understanding. Four living creatures (maybe the whole created order—Revelation 4:9) worship God. Twenty-four elders (perhaps standing for faithful believers—Revelation 4:10) throw down their crowns (human recognition) and say that only God is worthy. What crown do I need to throw down?

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Retired Duke professor James (Mickey) Efird has written (*Daniel and Revelation*, Judson Press): “(John) believed that the church could keep the faith since it was God who was revealed in these chapters who rules forever and who would be with them in their suffering!”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord...”

riage? Do you see why Dr. McCann has said “Certainty is elusive”?

One thing is clear in what the psalmist writes: Human beings are not free lance creatures; we are intended to reflect God’s multi-flavored presence. No, we are not God, although we may try to be. God is still beyond our comprehension (Psalm 139:17), but we are born to reflect the love and justice and healing and joy that God’s presence expresses.

I am left to wonder where has my life besmirched the image of God? How does God use my life to touch the world with God’s presence?

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *Table Matters* (Cascade Books), Felicia Howell LaBoy has written: “Since holiness is an attribute of God, it is an attribute that humans are meant to share as creatures created in the image of God. Humans cannot attain holiness based on their own initiative because of the power and penalty of sin. Thus, only God can make holiness attainable to humans by God’s Grace. This is done through the person and work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

**Prayer:**

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