

biblestudy: may 2021

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

May 2, 2021 Text: Exodus 33:12-23; 34:5-8 “God Declares Who God Is”

When I read this week’s focal passage, my heart and mind raced to John 1:14 where the Gospel writer tells us that the “Word became flesh and lived among us.” That assurance echoes what was revealed to Moses: God is going with us on life’s journey.

When Moses pushed the point (Exodus 33:18) and asked God to allow him to see God, the Lord said, “I’ll come by you, but you won’t be able to check out my face.” Bummer! Isn’t seeing someone’s face the way we think we can tell the most about someone? Those coronavirus days of wearing masks made it frustrating. Was that person smiling and joking when she made that comment? Was that man yawning while I explained something to him? Did that little boy have downturned lips when his mother told him that he would have to wait until Christmas to get a new baseball glove?

No, Moses will not be able to see God’s face (Exodus 33:22). However, God tells Moses what God’s presence with him will be like: kind, compassionate (v. 19 CEB), gracious, merciful (v. 19, NRSV). Moses! Where kindness and compassion and grace and mercy show up, that is where God is!

I know a pastor who every week asks her congregation “Where have you seen God since we were last together?” So far, no one has replied, “I had a vision and saw this old man with a beard who said he was

Yahweh.” No, the replies are: “A neighbor brought me soup when I was sick.” “My grandson called me out of the blue just to check on me.” “My teacher gave me another chance to take the exam after I told her that I had cheated on the first one.”

Those in the Wesleyan tradition know that sometimes we do not know that we are instruments of God. We call it “prevenient grace,” that grace of God that is at work in our lives (and the lives of others) even before we can name it. God’s grace does not always look like an old man with a beard!

Where have you seen God at work since last week?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Call It Grace* (Viking), Serene Jones wrote: “(This way of love) allows us to see God not as another object, distinct from us, but as the air, the flow, the spirit, the life force that moves between us and through us.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Holy One, Giver of the grace of hope and purpose, open our eyes to see Your good presence in the unfolding of daily life. Grant us to find meaning in the broken places as we find Your healing touch...”

May 9, 2021 Text: 1 Kings 19:9-18 “God in the Quiet Sound”

You have to wonder if God “got the memo.” Surely, the way you make your presence known is to be loud and obvious. Wind. Earthquake. Fire. (1 Kings 19:11) That’s where I’d expect God to show up. But in this account, God is in the quiet, in the silence. It’s like the difference between a front page headline and a little ad for a used car tucked away in the classified ads of a newspaper.

Twice God asks Elijah “Why are you here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:9, 13) It is almost as if God wants to have Elijah to say how he perceives things before God steps in to act. If my prayer time with God is conversation, that may well include my full and open and honest sharing of how I see my life situation. God can tell if we are making believe about how things are going. If things are tough all over, say so! God wants to deal with the “real person,” not some fake, idealized being. Elijah spells it out: “Your people have thrown away Your covenant, killed Your prophets and now are after me! (1 Kings 18:10, 14)” Elijah is certainly not sugar-coating anything!

When this encounter unfolds, Elijah is hiding in a cave (1 Kings 18:9). God tells him to leave the cave and go to the nearby mountain (1 Kings 18:11). In order to get a message to us, God may need us somewhere other than where we have been. What if God wants to speak to us through a street protest rather than through a comfortable pew in church? What if God wants to speak to us through a church clothing closet for the needy rather than through the Wednesday night Bible

study? To say this is not to deny God’s activity in church or in Bible study. It is a reminder that God is a God of the unexpected and perhaps God’s voice is in the silence, in the quiet, in the mission outreach activity.

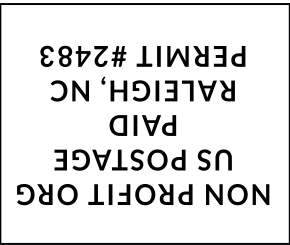
God has a plan. It includes folks we have not heard much about: Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha (1 Kings 18:15-16). I doubt any of this was on Elijah’s “to do” list. Perhaps I missed what God wants me to do because it is not what I wanted to do or it is not what I figured next steps ought to be. At minimum, these verses ought to alert us to the possibility that maybe God is inviting us to a life we had not imagined. Is God calling you to ordained ministry? Is God calling you to visit the lonely? Is God calling you to get engaged in political life? This week’s study text is one surprise after another. Does God have a surprise for you?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *God Is Not...* (Brazos Pres), Brent Laytham has written: “For us, idolatry is less about visible images of Yahweh.... Our idolatry is more about verbal imaginations of Yahweh—what we do with our bodies. But the point remains the same: the critical danger is not an image of a false god, but a false image of the true God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Speak, Holy One...”



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May 16, 2021 Text: Luke 9:28-36 “Jesus Transformed”

You and I have the benefit of two thousand years of witness by those who have followed Jesus as the chosen voice of God. That was not the case for those first followers of the Lord. In fact, this week’s study text says that Peter, John, and James were speechless when this was revealed to them (Luke 9:38).

According to Luke, Jesus had just told the disciples that He would suffer and die and rise again (Luke 9:32). That was a lot to take in. In fact, Matthew reports that when Jesus told them this, Peter yelled back at Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” (Matthew 16:22) Jesus told him that kind of talk was the kind of thing that Satan might say (Matthew 16:23).

No wonder that a few days later, Jesus and James and John and Peter go apart to sort out things (Luke 9:28). (Have you ever needed some time to reflect on what God seemed to be saying to you?) Heavy duty praying was not something those disciples did very well, so they are bordering on falling asleep (Luke 9:32) when they suddenly had a vision: Jesus and two other men.

They recognized Moses and Elijah and they want to celebrate that (Luke 9:33). We have our own list of saints, don’t we—Martin Luther, John Wesley, Harriet Tubman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—and we surely want to

May 23, 2021 Text: Daniel 7:1-14 “The Ancient One and the Human Figure”

Spoiler Alert: This lesson is for Pentecost Sunday. Remember (Acts 2:1-13) that when the Holy Spirit came upon the gathered Pentecost community all sorts of strange things happened, such as varied folks from all over hearing the preacher in their home languages. Observers thought they were drunk (Acts 2:13).

Spoiler Alert: The text for today comes from the Book of Daniel. That Old Testament writing is “apocalyptic” in its style. That kind of expression looks at the world to come and describes it in strange symbols and images and visions, clearly not “business as usual.”

So, here we have Daniel telling about a dream he has had. He sees four beasts rising up out the sea (Daniel 7:3). Remember that for ancients, “the sea” was often a symbol for evil and enemy. These four creatures are up to no good. Old Testament scholar Stephen Cook says they represent four enemies of Israel. The lion (v. 4) is Babylon (where the main street of the capital is lined with images of lions). The bear (v. 5) could be Media who conquered many nations in the region. The four-winged leopard (v. 6) might be Persia, a nation divided into four kingdoms. The fourth beast (v. 7) was “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong” (NRSV) and might be seen as Greece (by some readers) and Rome (by later readers). This “dream” seems more like a “nightmare”!

Then God shows up (Daniel 7:9). The fourth beast is killed immedi-

May 30, 2021 Text: 1 John 4:7-21 “God Is Love”

Maybe you will want to double check my math, but I counted some form of the word “love” twenty-nine times in today’s study text. They are all some form of the New Testament word *agape*. That is the kind of selfless, self-giving, unconditional love. Not only is that the way that God loves us, it is the way we are called to love one another.

The New Testament language has four words that get translated “love.”

I met and fell in love with Toni. We were married for more than fifty years. Such a love has intimacy and passion and desire for the other. That is *eros*. (See our English word “erotic”?)

There are many people in my life whom I admire and trust. They are loyal friends. It might be an invitation to a ball game or the delivery of a surprise birthday cake or a call “just because I wanted to talk.” This love is *philia*. (“Philadelphia “means “city of brotherly love.”)

Let me name these: Belton III, Belton IV, Vance, Liam, Mary Beth, Peggy Ann. There is a splendid affection for those in our family. Although not often used in ancient Greek, such a love is *storge*.

Then, there is *agape*. Not only do we experience that love in how God loves us, but we are invited to show that love back to God and to others

celebrate them. But just as they are about to build a shrine to honor these great men, they find themselves in a cloud. In the biblical accounts, a cloud is often a sign of the presence of God (Exodus 14:19-20, Luke 3:21-22, for example). Indeed, the voice of God is heard from the cloud.

And the voice of God is clear: Jesus is the “chosen one” to whom the disciples are to listen. Remember that this week’s lesson is in a series on the ways in which God reveals God’s self to us. We do not all have these mystical experiences, but we need to be open to hear what others learn through such occasions.

I ask myself: What does it mean “to listen to Jesus”?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Jürgen Moltman (*The Way of Jesus Christ*, Fortress Press) has said: “We should rather view the whole process of the human begetting, conception, and birth of Jesus Christ as the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ’s birth from the Spirit is a statement about Christ’s relationship to God, or God’s relationship to Christ.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Speak to me, Lord...”

ately (Daniel 7:11). The other three are spared and eventually serve God (Daniel 7:27).

What are we to make of all this? The bottom line is that God is going to win. It is hard to imagine an enemy more frightening than the ones in Daniel’s dream; nevertheless, God defeats them and the story ends with good news. Some students of the Bible see the reference to “one like a human being” (v. 13) as a prophetic forecast of the Messiah who comes as a human.

Any way you slice it, these verses depict God’s triumph over those things that would limit us, would harangue us, would destroy us. Ironically, the name “Daniel” means “God is my judge.” It is not just my enemies that God challenges; it is also I whom God judges and invites into righteousness. How does the spiritual go? “It’s me; it’s me; it’s me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Roberta C. Bondi (*In Ordinary Time*, Abingdon) has written: “Prayer is sharing ordinary life, with its ordinary silences, distractions, pains, and pleasures, with God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You win, O God, You win!...”

In the Wesleyan tradition, “perfection” might be defined as “full love of God and neighbor.”

In Jesus Christ we see that kind of love (1 John 4:15).

How can we human mortals pretend to be able to love with *agape*? The epistle writer says it is because God has first loved us (1 John 4:19) and has thus shown us what such love looks like. John Wesley (in *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*) wrote that this verse was “the genuine model of Christianity.”

“To love others” is more than a suggestion. It is a commandment (1 John 4:21). Help us, Lord!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (Random House), David Brooks wrote: “Love starts as a focusing of attention. The opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Gracious God, for loving us. Move our hearts now to love others...”

Happy Mother's Day to all of our mothers. We thank you, honor you, and remember you always. Love from your children.