

biblestudy: january 2022

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

January 2, 2022 Text: Psalm 19:1-6 “In Awe of God’s Creation”

When it snows in Michigan, my daughter-in-law likes to go for a walk in her snow shoes. When my friends Mary Ruth and Jimmie sent me a photograph of their yard in New Mexico, they bragged about how beautiful it was because there was no vegetation for miles that would block the view. Ken and Pat down in Florida love the steady warmth and think they are freezing if the temperature drops much below 60 degrees. When I look out my study window, I can count hundreds of trees.

Do you begin to glimpse the range of God’s creation? And that does not even include all the animals!

Of course, there is the other side of the story. A deadly tornado rips through eastern North Carolina. Devastating winter weather tears asunder life in Texas. And my niece in Idaho reports that the damaging snowfall ruined the greenhouse she uses for winter livelihood.

Some say that dreaded weather conditions are the result of how we humans have treated God’s creation. Some have said that God uses weather to teach us a lesson. Others remember what our Lord said: “He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

The psalmist says that the sun is thrilled to be fulfilling its daily task (Psalm 19:5). And the psalmist celebrates the fullness of God’s creation (Psalm 19:1). We are awed by the rhythm and energy of God’s creation and this is just what we can see! What about the planets created for far away galaxies!

The very fact that we mortals do not understand or even envision all of the created order simply underlines the awesomeness of what God has done and is doing. As noted above, Jesus indicates that God’s creation is not partisan (Matthew 5:45), but itself becomes part of God’s ongoing conversation with us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Carl Michalson (*The Rationality of Faith*, Charles Scribner’s Sons) wrote “The historical intention in the Christian doctrine of creation is...that (our) life does not derive its meaning from the world but from (our) relationship to God.” He quotes Thomas Aquinas: “‘Creation,’ he said, ‘does not indicate a point of beginning but a source of dependence.’”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord of all creation, You have graciously created more than we understand...”

January 9, 2022 Text: Isaiah 6:1-13 “Coming Into God’s Presence”

This week’s focal text is like a spiritual rollercoaster ride. It begins with a grand vision and celebration of God’s glory (Isaiah 6:1-4). Then, it moves to a mournful prayer of confession (Isaiah 6:5-6). Next comes the joy of sin forgiven, guilt absolved (Isaiah 6:7). In light of that comes a call from God for someone to go and deliver God’s message (Isaiah 6:8). The give-and-take continues as Isaiah answers that he is willing to do what God wants done (Isaiah 6:8). Following this high moment comes verses in which there is a swoop downward in which God says in effect “You might as well tell the people to be unfaithful because that is what they are going to do out of their unwillingness to listen (Isaiah 6:9-10). Isaiah raises a commonsense question: How long is this going to go on (Isaiah 6:11a)? The rollercoaster sweeps around a frightening curve with the carriage upside down as God says “Zilch. Zero. Nada.” Nothing will be left except a burning stump (Isaiah 6:11b-13a). And just when we think our ride is doomed and all hope is lost, the text slides safely and hope-filled back into home base: “Its stump is a holy seed (Isaiah 6:13b).”

Whew!

Isaiah has learned (and passed on to us) a lesson that will serve us well. Many of us would like to be in the ministry of harvesting the good crop, but Isaiah reminds us that there is more likelihood that most of us are -going to be in the ministry of seed-planting. May I give a personal testimony on that point?

One of the most effective pastors in our conference told me that he came into ordained ministry because of a sermon I preached at a youth event. I barely remember the event, much less the details of that sermon. But it was a seed! God used a seed I did not even know had been planted!

What a generous word of hope there is in the closing sentence of this text! It may look like a stump, but it is a holy seed!

What seeds do you carry with your life? How about the seed of welcome? How about the seed of inclusion? How about the seed of a smile? How about the seed of a food pantry? What about the seed of a quiet prayer? What about the seed of a soft answer? What about the seed of naming the name of Jesus? What about the seed of regular church life? What about the seed of daily devotions? What about the seed of forgiveness? Thank God for seeds!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Joy of the Gospel* (Image), Pope Francis writes: “True Christian hope, which seeks the eschatological kingdom, always generates history.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Here I am; send me...”

January 16, 2022 Text: Mark 9:2-8 “The Transfiguration”

What blessings have I missed because I had a pre-conceived notion as to how God would reveal God’s presence?

In this week’s study passage, Peter decides that the thing to do in the presence of the transformed Christ is to build a shrine (Mark 9:5) like they did in olden days (Exodus 25:9, 2 Samuel 7:2, 6). But God is trying to show these disciples that God is going to do a new thing (Mark 9:9-10).

Today, God invites the Church into new expressions of inclusion, but we may miss it because “We’ve never done it that way before.”

The transfiguration scene, from one perspective, may be seen as a forecast of the resurrection. There is also the echo (Mark 9:7) of the voice that proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism “You are my Son whom I dearly love”

(Mark 1:11). In a sense, this scene captures the full range of the public life of our Lord. The call to “Listen to him” (Mark 9:7) acknowledges the unfolding teaching. Baptism. Teaching. Resurrection.

Peter, James, and John are certainly three of Jesus’ closest disciples, yet they are terrified (Mark 9:6) at what is happening. (In *Living Letters*, Kenneth Taylor says they were “scared stiff.”) I am left to wonder if I have become so comfortable with God’s revelation that I don’t have these moments of being stunned or overcome. There was a time when the Church was terrified when God wanted to use women as clergy. There was a time when the Church was terrified when God posted that “Black Lives Matter.” There was time when the Church was terrified that God did not equip us all with the same sexual orientation. There was a time when the Church _____....you fill in the blank.

So, what do we do with the revelation? God tells us to listen to God’s Son. What do we hear being said in 2022? In a little more than a month, the Church calendar will call for Transfiguration Sunday. It’s not usually one of the “big moments” in Church life. I wonder if it is because we are terrified.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Roberta Bondi (*To Pray and to Love*, Fortress) has said: “It is the God

of wild grace, who delights in us, who for tender love of us in Jesus Christ has taken on all the darkness, pain, ambiguity, and vulnerability of what it means to be a human being in our midst.”

Prayer:

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

January 23, 2022 Text: Exodus 34:29-35 “Beholding God’s Glory”

Oops. This week, our study passage raises an embarrassing question. After all, folks could tell that Moses had been in God’s presence (Exodus 34: 29, 35). What about my life and witness makes folks think I have been in the presence of God? Oops.

Then, I noticed something about Moses’ humility. When he realized that the people were actually turned off by the bright light that glittered from his skin, he covered it with a veil (Exodus 34:33, 35). I got to wondering: Maybe I should not make much of a big deal about my piety and how God speaks to me. On with the veil when I am around others!

Oops again. Then, I came across how the apostle Paul interpreted Moses’ use of the veil. In 2 Corinthians 3:7, 13. Paul writes that the covering was not to protect the Israelites from the power and shock of the beaming light from Moses’ having been in God’s presence. No! St. Paul says that Moses put on the veil so others would not notice that the light was fading as time went by! Oops again, indeed.

There is some encouragement in this text. Even if (as Paul suggests) Moses had faulty motivation with the use of the veil and even even if Moses sometimes scared away his listeners (Exodus 34:31-32), he did continue to seek out the presence of God and he did share the commands of God as best he knew how.

Oops again again. Perhaps I have been postponing the work to which God calls me until I think I can do it perfectly. That gives me a pretty good excuse for not doing anything! If Moses had waited until he hit the exact balance between being in God’s presence and telling folks what they needed to hear, there would have been some long silences after he came down from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:29)! Oops again again.

Thanks be to God that our Lord can deal with our “oops.” In some ways, that is when we best behold the glory of God because there is no competition from our own light.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Glenn M. Wagner (*God Incidents*, self-published) quotes Richard Rohr: “Happy and humble people finally change people, much more than ideas, sermons, or theology ever will. We must know that any encounter with a large or lovely life changes our imagination forever. We always henceforth know it is really possible.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of the mountain-top, I rejoice that You are also the God of the valley. Use the me You have created and even use the me I have messed up...”

January 30, 2022 Text: Revelation 19:1-10 “Joining the Choir of Angels”

In these verses, John’s vision contrasts a prostitute (Revelation 19:2) with a happy wedding scene (Revelation 19:7-8). These images pit the immoral Roman power against the pure Lamb of God and the Church. (If we sneak ahead a few verses, we see that the Lamb is triumphant.)

Hallelujah! Alleluia! (Revelation 19:1, 3, 4, 6) Those words translate as “Praise the Lord” or “Praise God” and give us a hint of the joy and celebration that defines heaven. One writer—I forget where I read it—has said that when we sing the Doxology, we are practicing for our delight in the heavenly choir.

The words “sing, singers, song, songs” appear in the King James translation well over 300 times. Jesus and his disciples closed that last Supper by singing (Matthew 26:30). I did a rough count and determined that there is some reference to music in about one-third of the books of the Bible. In The United Methodist Hymnal, there is an index that identifies over 300 biblical accounts that have been put into the hymns, canticles, prayers and poems we use in our worship life.

It has been said that if we lost the Bible, we could reconstruct the Scriptures from the hymns of Charles Wesley. We sang hymns at the wedding service when Toni and I were married in New Jersey. We sang hymns when my grandsons were baptized in Virginia.

We sang hymns when we gathered for Toni’s funeral in North Carolina. We sang hymns when we acknowledged my son’s death at a service in Michigan. And yesterday, I heard myself humming “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” as I tried to get in my daily 10,000 steps.

All over the place. In all kinds of settings. And sometimes for no apparent reason at all. The outburst of praise and pleas that make up our music is clearly a part of who we are.

A few months ago I watched a service from a church in Indiana. A portion of the service was given to teaching us how to use sign language for a hymn for those who were hearing impaired. Motions captured feelings and energy and insight. Even without sound, it was music. This week’s study text is an invitation even now to join the choir of angels. Amen!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Horton Davies has quoted Bernard Manning in Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian (S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed., Kingswood Books): “Hymnody: There is the solid structure of historic dogma; there is the passionate thrill of passionate experience; but there is, too, the glory of a mystic sunlight coming directly from another world.”

Prayer:

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

