

bible⁺study: december 2022

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

December 4, 2022 Text: Judges 9:1-15 "Reign Over Us"

These strange verses become a reminder that ruling by human standards can have disastrous results.: first by describing how Abimelech cheated and killed his way to the throne and then, in a parable about trees, showing how paltry leaders will step forward if competent leaders do not accept the responsibility. The healthy alternative is for leadership to guide by divine standards.

Abimelech, at a minimum, can be accused of false advertising. After proclaiming how he was part of the family, he kills his brothers. My "false advertising" may not be as dramatic as this, but do I sometimes present myself as something I am not? Are there ways in which the Church says it lives by God's values, but ends up making decisions by human standards?

One thing of interest in the parable (verses 8 to 15) is how good, strong trees (olive, fig, vine) say "No" to the invitation to serve. When have you had gifts to share with others, but did not do so? Perhaps some type of false humility has led you to deny the opportunity. Perhaps some degree of "looking out for number one" has caused you to fail to serve. Perhaps some level of deafness to the cry of others has meant you were not "available."

If you read on past the assigned text, you will see that Abimelech does not come to a good end (Judges 9:56). He has been hit in the head by a rock thrown by a woman. Abimelech asks his armor carrier to stab

him to death so people won't say that a woman killed him (v. 54). Talk about male chauvinism! When has gender pride led me to hurt myself (and others)?

This week's study comes during Advent. That seems like a weird time to tell the history of Abimelech. Think of it this way. When I come to understand the limits of leadership from frail human values, I begin to see the hunger for a divine presence in our lives. Maybe it is fair to say that by looking at Abimelech, I become even more eager to look toward Bethlehem to see what this is that the Lord is doing!

What could go wrong?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *More Holy Humor* (Guideposts), Cal and Rose Samra share this story from a young father: "Our youngest daughter, Nancy, was almost four. My wife and I and our older children tried to prepare Nancy for Christmas by talking with her about the real meaning of Christmas and why the family celebrated it. Nancy had a wonderful Christmas, with lots of presents and toys. A few days later, she was talking with her older sister about what a great Christmas she had, and said, "I sure hope Joseph and Mary have another baby."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come, Holy Child..."

December 11, 2022 Text: Matthew 1:18-24 "Choosing Righteousness Rather Than Personal Honor"

Joseph could have dumped all the blame for the unexpected baby onto Mary (Matthew 1:18-19). In that time and culture, women had no way to defend themselves against the claims and blasts of a man. But, he decided "to dismiss her quietly," without any big fanfare or public disgrace. Then, an angel (literally, God's messenger) kicked it up a notch and revealed to Joseph God's gift of "Emmanuel" (v. 23). So, Joseph and Mary got married.

Usually, the Advent and Christmas story revolves around Mary. These verses remind us that Joseph's attitude and spirit are key ingredients in God's work to come and live among us. This got me to thinking. Are there those in my frame of reference who seldom get honor and appreciation for what they have done? Who are the unrecognized laborers in God's purposes?

Brantley Campbell. He was custodian at my home church. The classroom and sanctuary space was always cooled or heated to a level of comfort. The rooms were clean. He would stick his head in the door just before worship started, just to make sure everything was in order. And he was never given public praise.

Pete Durham. He was a school classmate of mine. He was not elected to a class office. The only "Superlative" by his name in our senior yearbook is "Most Talkative." He was the one who befriended me as a newcomer second grader. He was the one who was a quiet "Yes" as

I considered going into ordained ministry. And now, 69 years later, he is the one who stays in touch. But he has been given no great acclaim.

Iris Aybar. She was the first in her family to complete college. She studied child psychology and had a lucrative career ahead of her as a professional, but chose to work with underserved families with minimum finances. She has adopted stray animals. She has befriended folks of multiple ethnic heritages. But you will not see her name in Internet news.

Certainly we honor Mary, the mother of our Lord, but let us also recall with gratitude the unsung Joseph. The truth is that most of us are more likely to be "Joseph" (seldom acknowledged servant of God) than we are to be "Mary (celebrated as God's servant)". The story is not complete without both.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Useppa* (iUniverse), Ken and Pat Birth describe Bob Sumwalt: "It says something about Bob that in all his years, Bob Sumwalt never won a singles trophy, but he partnered many winners in doubles. Bob doesn't know how to be self-centered."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Thank You, Lord, for Joseph..."

December 18, 2022 Text: Matthew 2:1-12 "To Whom Do We Pay Homage?"

Once, when I was pastor of a local church, I was meeting with a class of elementary-aged boys. We were talking about how we could do a Christmas play, acting out the characters described in this week's focal text (Matthew 2:1-12). After we studied these verses, I asked for volunteers for the various roles.

"I want to be a wise man and bring the gold," one fellow said. Another one teased and said, "Since I am so wise, I should be a wise man." The others groaned, but smiled agreement. "Can I be Joseph?" Eddie asked. Then, one lad put on his best squeaky voice and said, "I'll even be Mary." "And if you can tell me what myrrh is, I'll be the third wise man." Then, there was silence. I waited. Silence. "We still have one more character. Who will play Herod?" Silence. Silence. Even with all of their joyful bravado and their good-natured planning, not a single boy was willing to be Herod.

What is it about Herod that stirs such resistance even in a classroom of young boys? There are other evil people mentioned in the Bible, but

Herod is enough like us to scare us. Herod took something evil and made it sound like good: "...Bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." Pay him homage? He wants to kill him! (Look at Matthew 2:13.) There are things that we consider wrong, but if we call them "good," we think they are okay.

Would you hire someone to kill somebody you did not like, kill somebody whom you did not trust? Of course, you wouldn't! But, if we call it capital punishment, we say, "Oh, it's okay."

Would you teach your children that success comes without hard work and will come to you regardless of your effort? No; you would not. But if we call it a state-sponsored lottery, we call it a good thing.

Herod shows us a side of ourselves that we had rather not see. No wonder those boys did not want to take on his name, even in a play.

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Excuse me for a moment. I need to slip away and do a bit of repenting.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Me and We* (Abingdon), Leonard Sweet completes a story this way: "And her epiphany was this: In order for the wise men to see the stars

that led them to Jesus, it had to be dark. Darkness helps us see the stars that ultimately lead to Jesus. The light is found only in the darkness, just as peace is found only through suffering."

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Shine Your light, Lord..."

December 25, 2022 Text: Matthew 2:13-15 "The Holy Family Becomes Refugees"

Isn't the Christmas story supposed to be in Bethlehem? But, here in this week's study text, the holy family has had to escape to a far place—back to Egypt from which the Jews had escaped centuries before. What an irony! They go to the very place from which once their ancestors had fled! (Did I hear someone say "God's ways are mysterious"?)

What a splendid reminder that life does not always unfold as we think it will! The events of daily living are not always what we anticipate ("What do you mean that we are leaving tonight for Egypt?"), but the constant is the caring presence of God.

Today I visited a church friend who has recently moved to an assisted living facility. He said, "At first I kept saying that I was only here for a brief time of recovery and soon I would be going back home. Now I know that God is here with me and I can stay here, knowing that I am not alone. God is here, too."

Life unfolds in that way doesn't it? We find ourselves in some situation, some relationship, that we have not expected. It may be the death of a loved one. It may be the loss of a job. It may be betrayal by a friend. It may be a painful decline in health. Or, it may even be a moment of unexpected richness and success.

This study text reminds us that God goes with us in the "Egypt" of our

lives. The Christmas account is a clear mark of God's willingness to live in the same world as we do. The Incarnation ("The Word became flesh and lived among us"—John 1: 14) is the evidence of God's presence in the journeys of our lives.

I am typing these words almost a year before we study this text. I have little confidence that I can grasp now in January what realities will surround us in December 2022; but, the Christmas gift of Christ among us and the truth of God's presence even as the Holy Family moved to Egypt give assurance that we shall not be alone. Emmanuel! God with us!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Donald McKim (*Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*, Geneva Press) writes: "Why did Jesus come into the world?... Jesus came to bring victory. Humans are captive to the power of evil. In his death he became our ransom and in his resurrection Jesus is victorious over powers of sin and death. Humanity is rescued, and we are saved."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord Jesus, You live among us even now and travel with us as our days unfold..."

Biblical References - Nov. Dec. 2022 Jan. 2023

NOVEMBER

November 6, 2022 Text:

Acts 17: 16-31 "Paul in Athens"

November 13, 2022 Text:

2 Kings 5: 1-19 "Go in Peace, Naaman"

November 20, 2022 Text:

Exodus 18:1, 13-27 "Wisdom from Another Tradition"

November 27, 2022 Text:

Romans 14:13-19 "When in Rome..."

DECEMBER

December 4, 2022 Text:

Judges 9:1-15 "Reign Over Us"

December 11, 2022 Text:

Matthew 1: 18-24 "Choosing Righteousness Rather Than Personal Honor"

December 18, 2022 Text:

Matthew 2:1-12 "To Whom Do We Pay Homage?"

December 25, 2022 Text:

Matthew 2: 13-15 "The Holy Family Becomes Refugees"

JANUARY

January 1, 2023 Text:

Galatians 3:23-4:7 "Children of God Through Adoption"

January 8, 2023 Text:

Luke 15:11-32 "We All Need Grace and Assurance"

January 15, 2023 Text:

John 17:1-24, Ephesians 4:14 "In the World, Not of It"

January 22, 2022 Text:

Colossians 3: 12-17 "Chosen by God and Dressed for Success"

January 29, 2022 Text:

Matthew 22: 1-14 "Sitting at the Adult Table"



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.