

October 2023

Belton Joyner, Jr - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

October 1st - Text: Genesis 21:9-21

“Here by the Water:’ God Meets Hagar the Refugee”

This is soap opera material. A man who has fathered a child by one of the family servants (Genesis 16:4) decides that he needs to send that child away so the man can concentrate on raising the son he has had with his wife (Genesis 21:2, 12). The man tried to make things go okay with the servant he was sending away, so he gave her food and water for the journey (Genesis 21:14). Before long, those provisions ran out. The servant woman was so afraid that now her son would die that she put him off at a distance so she would not have to see him perish. That's when God provided a well of water and a promise that this boy would lead a great nation (Genesis 21:18-19). Oops. If this is a soap opera, it must be time for a commercial.

If there were to be a commercial, it would have to be to advertise the generosity of God. With all we know about Abraham, we might assume that God is too busy with him to have any time to care for those on this little side trip. Not so! God hears the cry of the refugee. Whom do I ignore because I think God is too busy loving others...uh, others like me?

When the child had been born to the servant girl (Hagar), Abraham named him “Ishmael” (Genesis 16:15). What irony! “Ishmael” means “God has listened.” Look again at Genesis 21:17. God has listened! God has heard the voice! When I pray, I need not worry about my language, my Southern accent, or my volume. We all live in a world of “Ishmael.”

October 8th - Text: Exodus 17:1-7

“Water from a Rock”

In this episode, God provides water for a thirsty people, but God uses people (Moses and some of the elders of Israel) to get the job done. Do you suppose God wants to use us in 2023 to do the things needed to make water plentiful and available? God's plan to care for the creation often includes human instruments.

When I read this story, I am reminded of Isaiah 43:19 when God says that “I am about to do a new thing.” Getting water out of a rock? That certainly is a new thing! What new thing might God want to do in the twenty-first century? Would we accept the work of God if it is not “the way we've always done it”?

I wonder why God told Moses to leave the people behind when he went off to strike the rock (v. 5). Perhaps their quarreling and testing would have distracted Moses. Perhaps their fierce complaining would have kept Moses from doing what he needed to do. Maybe there is a clue here that sometimes leaders have to get a little ahead of the flock.

In Exodus 17:5, God tells Moses to use the same staff that Moses used to strike the Nile (See Exodus 7:20). Sometimes in our eagerness to find some new thing that will work, we disregard how God has worked in the past. Is there something we have learned from our previous experiences that will help us attack today's issues?

Moses took along some of the elders of Israel and they saw what

October 15th - Text: Psalm 42

“Thirsty for God”

For the psalmist, longing for God is like a thirsty person longing for water (v. 2). We hear an echo of Psalm 23:2...“He leads me beside the still waters.”

The psalmist talks to God (v. 1...“my soul longs for you, O God”). The psalmist talks to self (v. 5...“Why are you cast down, O my soul...?”) In a sense, no matter whether the psalmist is talking to God or talking to self, the message is the same: “Things are tough and I need God.”

Twice, the psalmist affirms that the time will come when there will again be praise of the God who helps (v. 5, 8). Even though there is heavy despair, there is the thread of hope.

Is the psalmist giving me permission to get peeved with God? It strikes me that the poet is showing that our relationship with and our attitude toward God should be authentic. God is not going to be fooled if I sound like “happy glow” when I am actually miserable. The psalmist is truthful in saying that although the day will come when “I shall again praise him,” that day is not right now.

Many students of the Bible say that this psalm is actually continued in Psalm 43. That psalm carries the same dual reality as Psalm 42: My enemies are about to eat me alive and I feel neglected by You...but the day will come when I shall again praise You for all Your help.

We know what it is like to have mixed feelings. When my friend Ken died, his widow said, “I hate that he is gone, but I'm glad that he does not have to suffer any more.” It is that kind of truthful sharing that the psalmist

We all can speak to a God who listens.

Central to this account (and to the next few lessons) is water. Water is a key instrument for God's care for the creation. One writer has said that water is a metaphor for the human relationship with God. The Church has used the water of baptism as a sign of God's initiation to claim us.

Hagar and Ishmael might seem like a side trip in the story of God and God's people, but we do well to remember that these whom society might regard as “second rate” are within the purpose and care of God. Surely, in light of that, we give our attention and support to “the least and the lost.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016, the General Conference has stated: “In the Bible, water in both its physical and spiritual dimensions is a gift...Water cannot be monopolized or privatized. It is to be shared like air, light, and earth... (We) shall affirm, educate, and advocate for clean, accessible, affordable water as a basic human right.”

Prayer:

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

happened when Moses struck the rock. Water! It helps to have witnesses! Are there times when I have tried to “go it alone”? As Charles Wesley wrote (hymn 58, The United Methodist Hymnal), the faith journey is in a community context: “by saints below and saints above, the church is earth and heaven.”

Would Moses have done what he did to get water had not the people been yapping at him? [He even named the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling).] I do not mean to suggest that we ought to encourage the kind of anger expressed by the people, but I do think this occurrence reminds us that leaders need to listen to those whom they lead. As someone once said to me, “The view on the streets is sometimes better than the view from your office.”

Bottom line: God provided for God's People. Amen and thank You!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Leaders Eat Last* (Postfolio). Simon Sinek wrote: “(Being a leader) is about commitment to the well-being of those in our care...”

Prayer:

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

does. He feels deserted by God (v. 9); he remembers a time it was not like that (v. 4); and he points to a time when again there will be realized hope (vv. 5, 11).

The psalmist teaches us “Don't pretend.” If we don't understand what is going on, say so to God. If it seems that others think God is no longer with us, say so to God. And, let the hope linger that in God's own time we shall praise God for God's help.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In the fifth century, Augustine wrote: “God has everything that will refresh you. He is able to fill anyone who comes to him...This is what I am thirsting for, to reach him and to appear before him. I am thirsty on my pilgrimage, parched in my running, but I will be totally satisfied when I arrive.” [*Expositions on the Psalms, “Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, Volume VII, Psalms 1-50* (Intervarsity Press)]

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Just as I am, I pray...”

October 22nd - Text: John: 32-44
“Jesus, the Living Water”

The focal text begins and ends with the crowd divided. Some even wanted Jesus arrested (v. 32), but it ended up without anyone “laying a hand on him” (v. 44). After this incident, some of the chief priests and Pharisees got upset with the temple police for not arresting Jesus. They asked the police why they had not accosted Jesus (John 7:45). The police said they wanted to give Jesus a fair hearing (John 7:51). Some of the crowd remain unconvinced; they thought Jesus was a fraud (John 7:47).

In the midst of this back-and-forth bantering, Jesus made it clear that those who believed in Him would be drinking living water (v. 38), water that would flow and relieve the thirst that comes from guilt, sin, and even death.

Notice something in John 7:38. Jesus speaks of people who believe in Him. That is different from those who simply believe Him. I may believe what someone says, but if I believe in someone, I trust that person’s values, that person’s actions, that person’s promises, that person’s significance. That is what Jesus has invited us to do: not just believe what He says, but believe in Him.

These verses maintain the biblical images of spiritual water to satisfy the thirsty. What is my thirst? Is it for assurance of forgiveness? Is it for confidence in a heavenly future? Is it for strength for living in troublesome times? Is it for divine insight into my relationships? Is it for some level of healing? Our Lord invites us to believe in Him and to drink of the water that will assuage that thirst.

I live out in the country and my water comes from a well. My sister lives in a city and her water comes from a giant public reservoir. We both have water, but how we get it differs. We are invited to believe in Jesus,

October 29th - Text: Matthew 25:31-46
“I Was Thirsty”

After all of these lessons about the living water that God provides, we come to these verses that say that even Jesus gets thirsty. Jesus gets lonely. Jesus needs clothes. This is a bit of a turnaround isn’t it?

Our Lord so fully identifies with us that He hurts when we hurt. And now He calls on us to hurt when others hurt. Service to others is service to Christ. As A. W. Argyle has suggested: to neglect others is to neglect Christ.

It is interesting that both those who have helped the needy (Matthew 25:37-39) and those who have ignored the needy (Matthew 25:44) are surprised to find out that all this has to do with how we treat the Lord. Those who followed Jesus helped others not in order to get special credit, but simply because their character of helping was formed by following Jesus.

This lesson from Jesus does not mean that we are saved by our good works. It means that because of our saving relationship with God, we will do good works. The good works are fruits of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24).

This is not the first time that God’s People have been instructed to care for others. Look at Isaiah 58:7 (The fast that God chooses is to help

the Living Water, but the route we have taken to get to that belief may vary from one another. But, there is joy from drinking from that same divine Fountain!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Jürgen Moltman (*The Way of Jesus Christ*, Fortress Press) has written: “The peace of Christ is personally experienced through faith in the depths of the individual heart...But if this peace of soul is Christ’s peace, then it points every soul it touches beyond its own confines to the community of all created being in the cosmos...The peace of Christ is universal...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Almighty, ever living God, in Christ Jesus You have called me into love, and I am grateful. You have invited me to drink from an ever flowing fountain of love, and I am grateful...”

the hungry and homeless). Look at Ezekiel 18:7 (The righteous pays off debts, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked.)

This is not the only time that followers of Jesus have been reminded to be there for others. Look at 2 Timothy 1:16. (When everyone else turned away, one faithful household cared for the prisoner.) Look at James 1:27. (Pure and undefiled religion is caring for those in distress.) Look at Hebrews 13:2. (Helping strangers could mean actually entertaining angels.)

This lesson closes the series on the Water that God provides when our spirit is thirsty. Now, it moves us “to pass it on.” The One who has refreshed us is now thirsty because others are hurting. What do we do?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book *Is It Time?* (Abingdon), Adolf Hansen has written: “According (to a study of physical and emotional well-being), the thing that has stood out with more importance than any other is ‘good relationships.’ They keep people happier and healthier than anything else.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, are You thirsty? How can I help?..

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