

November 2023

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

November 5 - Text: Exodus 29:42-46 "That I May Dwell Among Them: The Tent of Meeting"

Those in the Wesleyan tradition often speak of "prevenient grace." This tradition is a reminder that God takes the first step toward us. God speaks and invites us to listen. God offers love and invites us to respond. God spots human need and invites us to serve. God gets there first.

This week's focal text (Exodus 29:42-46) teaches us that God wants us to create places...create habits...create practices that God can use to bring us that life-giving grace. These conditions are to be "regular" (verse 42). And God will provide leaders (verse 44). And these ordinary places will be made holy by the presence of God (verse 43).

God is not limited to this "tent of meeting" (verse 42) that we create, but God recognizes that often we hear God more clearly, more quickly, when we are in a place where we have met God before. And notice the community nature of God's reaching out to us: "your generations" (v. 42); "meet with you"—plural (v. 42); "meet with Israelites"—plural (v. 43); "priests"—plural (v. 44); "Israelites"—plural (v. 47); "they...their...them"—plural (v. 46). These verses invite us to be in a community where God speaks.

It is not surprising that God would want to have places in the human experience where God might interact with humankind. After all, God was

incarnate in human flesh (John 1:14; Romans 8:32)

Where is that "tent of meeting" for you? Where for you are the community relationships that become tools for God's presence? God has said that these places and relationships are so God can be with us (Exodus 25:8). And these places and relationships are to be *tâmiyd* (v. 42). That is a Hebrew word that can be translated "regular," "continually," "perpetually," "daily," "constantly." It is an invitation to spiritual disciplines. It is an invitation to spiritual habits.

The journey of faith is not intended to be a solo trip. Faith is not a "once and done" matter. This week's texts remind us that we are in this together. These verses describe God's reaching out to be with us as an ongoing gift of grace.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, (Gallup Press), Frank Newport quotes Chaeyoon Kim and Robert Putnam: "Our findings suggest that religious people are more satisfied with their lives because they regularly attend religious services and build social networks in their congregations."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "O Holy One, You seek to find ways to let me know You love me..."

November 12 - Text: Psalm 27 "Sheltered by God; Sheltering God"

The loud crack of gun shots rang across the college campus. Students scattered in every direction, uncertain where one might find safety. Then, over the campus loudspeaker system came the serious advice: "Shelter in place. Shelter in place."

In this week's focal text (Psalm 27), the psalmist faces evildoers (v. 2), adversaries (v. 2), foes (v. 2), an army at war (v. 3), trouble (v. 5), enemies (v. 6, v. 11) more adversaries (v. 12), false witnesses (v. 12), and violence (v. 12). And the psalmist shouts with joy: "Shelter with God. Shelter with God."

Sheltering with God does not mean that we shall not have trouble or distress. It means that ultimately one can see "the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (v. 13). Even death has to take second place to the presence of God (Ephesians 2:4-6). (Take a moment and read those verses from Paul's letter to the saints at Ephesus.)

When the psalmist - attributed to David - speaks of one request of God (v. 4), it is a desire to live in the house of God, to be present in God's temple. The temple in Jerusalem may be a symbol of God's presence, but it is God's presence, not the building, that is the source of the confidence and joy that the psalmist expresses (v. 3, v. 6). This same assurance is celebrated in the familiar Psalm 23: "and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." (Psalm 23:6)

The psalmist recognizes that this kind of confidence in God does not come easily. Believing in God's sheltering presence is not automatic, so the poet pleads: "Teach me your way, O Lord." Yes, it is going to take the Lord's leading (v. 11).

Although written thousands of years ago, Psalm 27 is a word we need to hear in this day. Our divisions, our uncertainties, our angers confront us daily. So we plead with the psalmist, "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud" (v. 7). And God will.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Will Willimon (Don't Look Back, Abingdon Press) wrote: "...Hope is always dependent upon God's fidelity and goodness. More than wishful thinking, biblical hope is a reasonable, confident expectation that's based upon the nature and work of God—past, present, and future."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Today I come to You, well aware that I am burdened with anxieties that only You can resolve, so I pray for Your presence in a way that will set me free to serve You fully..."

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November 19 - Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-20
"Celebrating God's Provision"

Last Sunday, John reported on the bi-annual stew our church conducts. Twice a year, our congregation makes about 1,300 quarts of Brunswick stew, selling it to fund mission projects throughout the year. When John thanked folks for preparing, cooking stirring, and packaging - all that goes into a successful stew, he paused and said, "This is a good example of our stewardship."

Brief pause for you to groan.

Deuteronomy speaks of the stewardship of the land God has given the Israelites. The key to caring for this bounty is to remember that it comes as God's gift and not as the harvest of our wisdom. (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). We are stewards of what God gives us when we walk in the ways God intends (v. 6).

Before the Israelites got to the Promised Land, they wandered in the desert for forty years. Even there, however, they were still to honor the presence of God and to acknowledge that. Leviticus 23:33-43 spells out how they were to celebrate God's presence with a series of festivals. Desert or Promised Land, God's presence is to be recognized.

How do we honor these instructions for our own time? When there is plenty, we give God credit. When there is desert we still honor that God is with us. [Remember Psalm 23:4—"Even though I walk through the darkest valley—valley of the shadow of death (KJV)—I fear no evil; your rod and your staff—they comfort me."]

Deuteronomy 8:11 tells us how we are to remember God's presence, how we are to be stewards of God's presence. It is by doing what God has commanded. How about loving your neighbor? How about caring

November 26 - Text: John 1:1-14
"The Word Dwells with Us"

Our study lessons for the past three weeks have explored ways in which we can experience God's presence.

Just as I typed that first sentence, my phone rang. It was Don. He often goes with me to Duke women's basketball games, but he had to miss last night's game because of a conflict in his schedule. This morning, he had read about the yesterday's game, but he wanted to talk to someone who was actually there. He asked about the crowd. He asked about a friend we usually see at games. He asked about specific players. The fact that I had actually been there made a difference to him.

The people of God had heard about the coming Savior. The people of God had read accounts of what it would be like when the promised King would arrive. The people of God had heard messages from God. But it was not the same as it was when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us! (John 1:14) God had been present in many ways, but God's living human presence in our midst gave God's people a chance not just to read about the game, but actually to go to the game! When we read the Gospels, we are talking to people who actually went to the game.

And now, through the Holy Spirit, we get a chance to experience that living presence. The resurrected Lord is still with us. We are at the game!

The Gospel writer makes it clear that the "Word become flesh" is the real

for yourself? How about watching over the environment God has given us? How about feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, visiting those in prison? How about using a God-lens as we decide how to spend our money and our time?

Good stewardship—good stewardship—recognizes that God is in our midst.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book of poetry (Becoming Just, Resource Publications) S T Kimbrough, Jr., has written: "Deeds can be our ruin, if they're rooted in conceit. / If they cause utter vexation, our lives will be bittersweet."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Open my heart to Your presence, O God..."

thing. That Word is the true God from the beginning (v. 2). That true Word is the one who spoke creation into being (v. 3, Genesis 1:3). The Word of God gave us life and light (vv. 4-5, Genesis 1:3-4). With the coming of Jesus Christ, we get to go to the game.

John 14:19 quotes Jesus: "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." That is a pretty good assurance that we get to go to the game.

(By the way, the final score last night was Duke 72, Texas A & M 52. I'm glad I got to go to the game!)

What Someone Else Has Said:

Martin Marty (Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers, Augsburg Books) has written: "If it is shocking, it is also appealing, because the incarnation, God's taking on of a form like ours, makes God accessible, available, and approachable."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Amazing grace! You have come and lived among us, O God!..."

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