

May 2024

May 5, 2024

Text: John 14:1-14

“The Way, the Truth, the Life”

There are so many gifts to pick up in these familiar verses. Let’s pick up a few!

In John 14:6, Jesus says no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. Jesus is God’s embodied love. That means: no one gets to God except through God’s love. In theological language, we sometimes call this “prevenient grace,” an acknowledgment that our relationship with God begins with God’s movement toward us.

In John 14:1, our Lord invites us to believe in Him. Some students of the Bible think a better translation of *pisteuete* is “trust” rather than “believe.” The argument for that view is that “belief” sounds like having all the right doctrines in place; “trust” is more like “having confidence in.” Having confidence in God is what leads to an untroubled heart.

In John 14:2-3, Jesus says He goes to prepare a place for us. Not only that, but He says He will come and get us to make sure we get to the place He has prepared. What a gift! Jesus is promising that there is a tomorrow with Him! When today seems heavy, let us draw hope and rejoice in the promise that there is a tomorrow with Him!

In John 14:12, the Master astonishes us by saying that in the future believers will do even more good works than He has done. He is saying that His ministry was limited to Palestine, but our ministry of caring, of healing, of inclusion, of proclamation, of celebration will reach into every corner of the world we touch.

In John 14:8-11, Jesus has an exchange with Philip. Our Savior makes it clear that He is more than just a nice and helpful man. He is fully an expression of God. There is a voice within Him that is more than a human voice; it is indeed the voice of God. By getting to know Jesus, we are getting to know God.

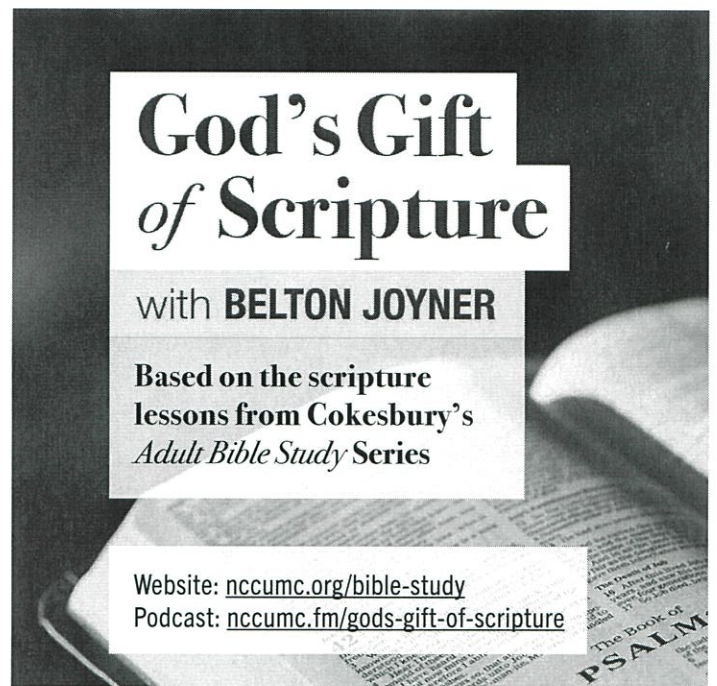
In John 14:2, Jesus makes it clear that God’s house has room enough for all. And that is yet another breath of Good News!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *When the Church Woke* (Cascade Books), William B. Lawrence has written: “The initial words of the risen Christ in the New Testament also show that the mission of the church, while consistent with the past, conveys the promise of the future.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, I come before You as did those early disciples, sometimes uncertain, sometimes with troubled hearts, but we hear with them Your promise to share these future days with us...”



May 12, 2024

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

“Go, Live Among, Tell, Invite, Include”

When I saw what the text was for this week’s study, I thought, “Oh, good! This is one of the most familiar and appreciated texts in the New Testament. Full speed ahead!”

Ten minutes later, I had not typed a single word. Then, I took time to play a couple of rounds of Word Trip, a fun game on my phone. Next, I moved to the TV and watched “Chain Reaction,” one of the popular programs on Game Show Network. I stopped by the refrigerator and grabbed a couple of frozen grapes. Refreshing! I sauntered back to my computer. I have the power setting to shut off my screen when it has not been active for thirty minutes. My screen was blank.

Why did I have so much trouble getting started on this study? It has dawned on me that I did not want to look at these verses because over and over again they convict me of failing to be a faithful disciple.

For starters, there are eleven disciples present, not twelve (v. 16). When have I chosen to step apart from the work of Christ? Some of the ones who gathered had doubts (v. 17). When have I not trusted the promises Jesus had made? Our Lord tells them to “Go” (v. 19). When have I preferred to have things stay the way they have always been, rather than leaving and going to some new place some new experience, some new relationship? Jesus sends the disciples to all nations (v. 19). When have I chosen to draw a line in my relationships, choosing my preferences, rather than the “all” to whom Jesus sends me?

The Master instructs the disciples to baptize in the name of the Trinity (v. 19). When have I given more attention to human distinctions than I have to the work of God? And Jesus tells the eleven disciples there to be teachers (v. 20) of all He has taught. When have I been a picker and chooser of what I

wanted to pass on?

Finally, our Savior calls on the disciples to remember that the risen and ascended Lord will still be with them (v. 20). When have I gone about my spiritual journey and mission as if Christ were no longer present?

I'm beginning to see why it took me so long to start typing these reflections.

What Someone Else Has Said:

William Lawrence, (*When the Church Woke*, Cascade Books) wrote: "Love is humbling oneself to the needs of a neighbor..."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Send me, Lord..."

May 19, 2024

Text: Acts 11:1-18

"Pentecost Reimagined"

This is a different text than the one we usually encounter on Pentecost Sunday. It is an account of a dream that Peter had and the implications of that dream for the inclusivity of God's people.

Those early believers had a disagreement about something (Gentile believers), so they got together to talk about it. It turned out that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the circumcised Jewish community. Their conclusion (v. 18) was: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

In these verses, Peter tells about a vision he had that led him to conclude that God did not divide folks into clean and unclean in the way some were doing (v. 9). This got me to thinking about how God might try to reach me with some truth I needed to hear. Would I hear it if it came from an unexpected source? Peter heard God speak in an unexpected way—a vision. Would I hear God speak if God spoke through someone with whom I disagreed? Would I hear God speak if God spoke in a political voice for whom I did not vote? Would I hear God speak if God spoke in a novel I had decided to read for relaxation? Would I hear God speak if God spoke in the words of a coach being interviewed after losing a game?

Of course, every unusual experience is not the voice of God, but I am encouraged by this week's study text to be open to God when God speaks in an unusual way, in an unexpected way. Peter's summary of the situation comes in verse 17: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" In the Eugene H. Peterson paraphrase of the New Testament (*The Message*, Navpress), Petersen has used these headings for these accounts in chapters 10 and 11 of Acts: "God Plays No Favorites" and "God Has Broken Through." Amen!

On this Pentecost Sunday, we recognize and celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Our usual study text for Pentecost is the account in the second chapter of Acts. Remember how the Holy Spirit blasted into their gathering with a violent wind and folks began to talk in all kinds of languages? Now, in this week's study verses, there is no violent wind and there is no mention of voices in all the languages of the world. But what these two Pentecost stories have in common is that the Holy Spirit spoke what needed to be heard. If we wait for the Spirit to come in mighty winds and strange tongues, we may miss the Spirit who comes as the Spirit did with Peter simply in a time of private prayer. I guess the bottom line for this Pentecost lesson is "Don't limit on where, when, and to whom the Spirit may come."

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book, *When the Church Woke*, William Lawrence has said: "The miracle of Pentecost is understanding others who are ethnically, socially, culturally, and linguistically separated: 'We can hear them.'"

Prayer:

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

May 26, 2024

Text: Acts 17:16-34

"Making Connections"

Was Paul's visit and witness in Athens a failure? He tried to meet the locals where they were in their spiritual journey. And when all was said and done, "Some scoffed, but others said 'We will hear you again about this.'" Finally, this week's focal text says "Some of them joined him and became believers" (v. 34).

Even if there had been no new believers, I think Paul's witness in Athens has to be considered a success, not by the numbers of new believers, but by Paul's faithfulness in witnessing. We are tempted to soften our witness in order to get more people on board. Perhaps a better measure of our spiritual success would be the fullness of truth that we tell.

In the Bible now open on my desk, there are headings over each account of Paul. I just happened to notice something about Paul's journeys. On just four pages, these headings put Paul in seven different settings: Prison, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, Corinth, Antioch, and Ephesus. Then, I looked further and saw the different kinds of people and places where Paul showed up: prisoners in prison, Jews in synagogue, Christians in Jewish community, public marketplace, individual believer, gathered church, new believers.

The title given this week's lesson has described the way Paul went about his ministry: Making Connections. I think of all the places I went last week and wonder how my way of connecting made witness for Jesus Christ: dartball, church

fellowship supper, supermarket, clergy meeting, food pantry for homeless, Zoom meeting on racism, conversation with repair man, Sunday School class, worship service, entertaining house guests, car dealer...You get the idea!

How Paul went about his witness varied from situation to situation. Here are some examples from the Book of Acts. Praying and singing hymns (16:25). Words of encouragement (16:40). Explaining the Scripture (17:2). Time with friends (17:10). Left after dialogue (17:33). Secular work (18:3). Changed his looks (18:18). Turned down invitation (18:20). And that is just for examples!

How does my life (maybe more than my words) witness in the places I go?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *When the Church Woke* (Cascade Books), William B. Lawrence says: "The promised future arrives through present discipleship."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Dear Lord, this week my life will take me to many different places and among many different people. Help me to give a witness with my life..."

June 2024

June 2, 2024

Text: Proverbs 12:14, 16:3

"Proverbs on Work"

According to the Conference Journal, I am retired.

However—what I remember is what a friend once said: "'Re-tired' just means that 'I am tired again.'"

The Book of Proverbs is filled with verses about work. Sometimes, it is talking about what you do to make a living; sometimes, it is talking about how you spend your time and energy.

Proverbs 16:3 puts it all into perspective. The New English Bible translation puts it this way: "Commit to the Lord all that you do, and your plans will be fulfilled."

That does not mean that life will always unfold in just the way we want or expect. It does mean that God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled.

Proverbs 12:14 says that both what we say ("fruit of the mouth") and what we do ("manual labor") are tools of God's good work.

There are two Hebrew words used for "work" in Proverbs. One of them (*mel-aw-kaw*) refers to how you make your living. The other (*po-al*) refers to any act or deed. Those of us who are retired don't get off the hook!

Galatians 6:1-10 gives some guidelines for understanding work. The apostle Paul sees work as any burden you bear (Galatians 6:5). This might be a physical load. This might be a mental load. This might be a spiritual load. Sometimes we help others by bearing their burdens (Galatians 6:2). The bottom line is that we work (carry burdens) for the good of all (Galatians 6:10).

There is a biblical witness and challenge for the work to which we are called. It has multiple dimensions through which God will bless us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Fortress Press), Hans Walter Wolff has written: "It is in this working world, with its many facets, that the task of creation unfolds itself to (us). Blessing is followed by progress. But hubris (pride) encounters 'thorns and thistles' everywhere."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord, You have called me to work in all aspects of life..."

June 9, 2024

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:18-26; 3:9-15, 4:4-8

"Ecclesiastes on Work"

I don't know about you, but I don't go to the Book of Ecclesiastes very often. I get confused when I try to figure out what the Teacher says. ("Teacher" is the self-given name of the writer of this book—Ecclesiastes 1:1.)

For example, Ecclesiastes 2:18 tells of hating one's work. In Ecclesiastes 2:24, the writer says there is nothing better than work.

For example, Ecclesiastes 3:9 asks what one can possibly gain from one's work. In Ecclesiastes 3:13, the Teacher says it is God's gift for everyone to enjoy his or her work.

For example, Ecclesiastes 4:4 says that people work out of envy of others. Ecclesiastes 4:8 tells of those who have no one with whom to share their riches.

One thing that I learn from all this is that it is important to know the context of biblical writings. It is important to know the question, in order to make sense of the answer. What was God's intent in inspiring the biblical writer?

Have you ever played the game "Word Trip"? In this game (I play it on my phone), one is provided seven letters and spaces in which to spell out words that can be made out of those letters. (For example, what words can you make out of the letters S E E C P I L?) Reading the Bible can be a lot like that. How do you put together the various messages in order to find out what God is saying to you?

There is a key question raised at the very beginning of this book: "What do people gain from all the toil

at which they toil under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:2) The same questions emerges in Ecclesiastes 2:11, 2:22, 3:9, 5:11, 5:16, 6:8. Maybe the writer of this book shares our stumbling for an answer. Look at Ecclesiastes 11:5: "Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything."

The Teacher draws it all to a close at the end of the book. "Fear God and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone." (Ecclesiastes 12:13) The commandments of God call us to find a way to love. Even in our work and toil.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The House on Lowell Street* (Linda Keane, Deep River Books), there is this line: "They may agree in principle," Rose said, "but they don't want to do anything."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Help me in my work, O Lord..."

June 16, 2024

Text: Genesis 1:27-28; 2:15

"Human Beings as Working Creatures"

Every Wednesday, Sharon Stone comes to Bethany Church to gather the plastic that members have saved for re-cycling. James Apisai changed his college major from Communications to Environmental Science. Nick Jeffries teaches care for creation by having an active farm on the grounds of Camp Chestnut Ridge. At my county dump, there are separate containers for things that can be recycled. When Gary and Michael Corsi-OConnor had a florist shop, they had a day each year when friends could come and get free flowers and plants to share with shut-ins. Octogenarian Eddie Sutton told me that today he worked to fertilize some bushes in his yard. Major League baseball player Adam Wainwright (Go, Cardinals!) has noted that taking care of one's body is a way of caring for God's creation.

These examples show how some of us have worked to live out the instruction from God that we human beings take care of what God has created (Genesis 1:26). The word translated "dominion" suggests that we have responsibility for God's creation. After all, we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). (The Hebrew word used here for "image" is *tselem*. It means "a representative figure". We are created to represent God.)

Psalm 8 is a reminder that God has made us responsible for the care of things that belong to God. When I hear an analyst speak of the major negative changes in our climate that are due to human action and inaction, I recognize that we are not always doing such a good job taking care of what God has created and given us to maintain and enjoy. That eighth psalm reflects the account in

Genesis 2 when God puts Adam in charge of God's Garden. That didn't go too well, did it?

Even for folks who are serious about caring for the environment, there is one dimension that is often overlooked as part of "creation care." Go back and re-read the last sentence of the first paragraph. When I get on the scales next Thursday, I wonder if God will think I am caring for God's creation, my body. When I decide to stop keeping track of my daily steps, I wonder if God thinks my pedometer was telling God how I care for my body, God's creation.

Everything God made was good (Genesis 1:31). What can we do to keep it that way?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Greta Thunberg (*No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, Penguin Books) wrote: "Erosion of fertile top soil. Deforestation of our great forests. Toxic air pollution. Loss of insect's and wildlife. The acidification of our oceans. Here are all the disastrous trends being accelerated by a way of life that we, here in our financially fortunate part of the world, see as our right to simply carry on."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: "Creator God, use me..."

June 23, 2024

Text: Exodus 35:30-36:7

"Worship and Work Must Be One"

Some times in the Book of Exodus, the same word (aw-bad) is used both for worship and for work. (For example, look at Exodus 5:18). Although that is not always the case, it does suggest that the Hebrew mind saw a close connection between the two—worship and work.

In this week's focal text, the work to build the tabernacle was paid for by the freewill offerings brought by the worshippers. Note that the workers whose elaborate design was used to construct the tabernacle were divinely inspired (Exodus 25:31). The gifts and abilities for work came from God. It is as if worship and work are in dialogue.

It may be relatively easy for someone who works in religious settings to think of her or his work as worship. But, what about those who labor and toil in other kinds of work? If what I can do is the best I can do it, I have worshipped God. A teacher, a farmer, a police officer, a storekeeper, a factory worker, an architect, a caregiver, a babysitter, a student, a road worker, a basketball coach, a manufacturer of toothpicks, a chef—what do they all have in common? If each has made use of the way God has equipped them for life, they have, in their work, worshipped God.

Usually, I think of worship as a pleasant, even comforting, experience. Usually, I think of worship as filled with beauty and peacefulness. Usually, I

think of worship as an intentional acknowledgment of God. And, worship can well be all of that. But worship can also be caring for a crying baby, reaching the top shelf for a “vertically challenged” customer, mowing the lawn on a hot day, advising a client how to invest money, or cleaning the teeth of a dental patient.

One thing that jumped out at me in this week’s focal text is the way the people came forward with voluntary gifts to pay for the work to build the tabernacle (Exodus 36:3). My mind goes to the financial offerings we bring for the work of God’s people. I can’t be in El Salvador, but I can give funds to pay for those who are there. I can’t be at our church colleges and universities, but I can give funds for those who study and teach there. I can’t spend a summer at camps created for the Christian journey, but I can give funds for those who staff those camps. I can’t administer the complicated work of church life, but I can give funds to support those who do that ministry. Worship. Work. It all comes together.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers* (Augsburg Books), Martin E. Marty has said: “For God to call to be worshipped is not a divine ego trip but somehow the expression of the love of God, which also means that worship is good for human creatures, the result of God’s activity.”

Prayer:

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

June 30, 2024

Text: Ephesians 4:11-16

“Working Together in Christ”

Our work honors God. And God uses work within the Church to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

Paul acknowledges that it is easy to get tricked by those who would mislead us within the faith community (Ephesians 4:14). However, God in Jesus Christ provides those who can help us mature in the faith (v. 15) in order for us to grow into love (v. 16). That is the standard that Paul offers as the testing point for life in the Church: Does it help us grow in to love (v. 16)?

I am encouraged when I look at Ephesians 4:11. Notice the wide range of gifts that Christ gives to the Church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. That is encouraging, but what really excites me is that Paul uses the word “some.” Faithfulness does not depend on my having all these gifts. A teacher might not have the gifts for evangelism. An evangelist might not have the gifts of a teacher.

Often, the Scripture points us to ways we can reach out into the world: serving the needy, working for

justice, inviting others to our Lord, caring for the lonely. All that is good and is not to be forgotten, but in this word to the Ephesians (and to us), Paul is calling for work within the Church, within the family of faith. As I have traveled in the community of faith, a variety—and I mean variety!—of people have escorted and challenged and comforted and instructed me. About all they had in common was accepting the Lord’s love. How about my third grade Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Rowland?

How about my sixth grade public school teacher, Mrs. Murdock? How about the brilliant professor Carl Michalson? How about a close friend whom I dare not name here? How about Martin Luther King, Jr. (who never knew my name, but shook my hand once)?

Your community gifts would be different from mine, but—using Paul’s term—they spoke (and lived) the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Thanks be to God! I suspect that we ourselves are such a gift to others. We may not recognize it; we may not claim it; but God is using you and me to help build up the body of Christ. Thanks be to God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* (United Methodist Publishing House) says this about the local church (para. 201): “Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You for Church!...”

July 2024

July 7, 2024

Text: Exodus 16:22-30

“Sabbath Rest for Human Beings”

After all these lessons on work, we come to this: God rested (Genesis 2:2) and so should we (Exodus 16:30).

In today’s focal text (Exodus 16:22-30), the house of Israel made sure they could rest on the seventh day by getting food for day seven prepared on day six. Some Orthodox Jewish communities still practice that discipline.

In Mark 2:23-28, we have a situation in which Jesus put this whole sabbath rest into perspective. As the disciples walked through a grainfield on a Sabbath day, some of them began to pluck up grain for food. When the Pharisees protested, Jesus gave an example from the life of David. In that account (1 Samuel 21:1-6), on a Sabbath the high priest gives David food that was supposed to be reserved for the high priest. Then, our Lord clarifies what that means: Sabbath rest is for the benefit of humankind.

Humankind was not created to benefit the Sabbath; it is the other way around; Sabbath was created for humankind.

This does not mean that we ignore the gift of Sabbath rest. It is part of God's creating rhythm. Genesis 2:2-3 tells us of God's example of rest. (The Hebrew words translated "rest" and "Sabbath" are varying forms of the same root word.)

Does Sabbath begin on Friday night? Does Sabbath begin on Sunday morning? If a pastor works all day on Sunday, can Monday be the Sabbath? What our Lord is trying to make clear is the importance of Sabbath is not in its "legal requirements." The importance of Sabbath is measured by the way it honors the one who is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28).

Right after Jesus spoke up about the Sabbath, He had another opportunity to clarify Sabbath practices. Mark 3:1-6 tells about Jesus' healing a man on the Sabbath. This so upset the Pharisees—sticklers for the law—that they began plotting how to get rid of Jesus (Mark 3:5). Even against that threat, Jesus gave priority to healing.

If we do not observe Sabbath, we are missing one of the strong gifts of God.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Matthew Sleeth (24/6, Tyndale Momentum of Tyndale House Publishers) put it this way: "Up to this point, everything has been created out of nothing, but on the morning of the seventh day, God made something out of something. Rest is brought into being."

Prayer:

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

July 14, 2024

Text: John 5:1-18

"Sabbath Work for Others"

Is Sabbath about taking off a day and doing nothing? There may be times when that is the case, but Jesus offers a larger view. In today's focal text (John 5:1-18), Jesus shows that sometimes Sabbath is about reaching out to help others.

Jesus does not do this healing in order to get attention or gratitude. In fact, He disappeared back into the crowd and the man who was healed did not even know who had healed him (v. 13). Only later (vv. 14-15) does this man understand who it was who healed him.

One of the things that upset some of the religious observers was that Jesus not only broke the Sabbath, but He did it and made it seem as if this was the action of God (John 5:17), thus making Himself equal to God. The writer John has already made that point: "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him

known." (John 1:14, 18) Breaking the Sabbath law for the healing was a sign that God was still at work.

The other day I went to the burial of the ashes of a friend. As we stood around after the service, his widow asked those of us there to offer some memory of Bill. I had to laugh as I recalled something that happened on a Sunday during General Conference. Bill and I were rooming together and at the halfway point of General Conference, I realized that I had not packed enough clothes for the two weeks. "I need these shirts and underwear cleaned. I'll never have time to do it tomorrow when we crank up full tilt again."

Bill replied, "I know it is Sunday, but you need those things for the next week. I'll go and find a laundromat and wash them for you."

"But, Bill," I protested. "That would mean you would miss the special afternoon worship program." We debated as to whether washing clothes would violate the Sabbath. I think Bill had a better understanding of Sabbath than I did. When I got back from the worship, Bill was walking into our hotel room with a bag of my newly cleaned clothes. Amen.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Everyday Matters* (Abingdon Press), L. Gregory Jones wrote: "Instead of trying to cram time for sabbath-keeping into my schedule, or even adding 'rest' at the end of my 'to do' list, I discovered a need and a desire to cultivate practices for 'opening the gift of time.' Could I refocus my life in a way that keeps the gospel's sense of time at the heart of my life, in the core of my imagination?"

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord Jesus, You have shown me the way to keep Sabbath..."

July 21, 2024

Text: Leviticus 25:1-7, 18-24

"Rest for the Land, Hope for Creation"

On the day I am writing this, the local newspaper has an article about how much of the land and atmosphere is suffering. Hmm. You don't suppose St. Paul saw that article, do you? In his letter to the Romans, the apostle writes of how all of creation is groaning and how it is in the bondage of decay (Romans 8:21-22). That sounds a lot like the twenty-first century!

Moses heard God addressing the same problem. In Leviticus 25, Moses records what God sees as the way forward. The animals and the crops will be sufficient if you give creation a rest from time to time.

(Now, here is a brief side trip from our study of Leviticus. Isn't it interesting, even encouraging, that so much of the biblical material deals with real life situation? These passages speak about

how to preserve holy living, even while getting enough to eat. The spiritual and the practical come together! The divine and the human walk the same streets! The Scriptures and the Internet roam the same earth!)

As I write this, I look out my study windows. In every direction, I see trees and plants. I remember when we were making plans to build this house. My beloved late wife Toni made a suggestion. "Why don't we build it in the sky and lower it in by helicopter, so we don't have to cut down any of these trees to make room for the house?" The contractor who would build the house joined Toni and me in laughing, but when I look out the window, I see towering evidence of trees that were left, a stream still rippling, and a narrow lawn that saved a few trees.

In 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 (When was the last time you turned to 2 Chronicles!), there is a report that the exile of the Israelites after the fall of Jerusalem lasted for seventy years. That was to make up for unobserved sabbaths and it took seventy years to do it. The way in which the Sabbath was observed varied, but the rhythm of work and rest was (and still is) God's wish for creation.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Methodism in the American Forest* (Oxford), Russell Richey quotes John Wesley: "As all the blessings of God in paradise flowed through man to the inferior creatures; as man was the great channel of communication between the Creator and the whole brute creation; so when man made himself incapable of transmitting those blessing, that communication was necessarily cut off...And then it was that 'the creature,' every creature was subject to vanity, to sorrow, to pain of every kind, in all manner of evils."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Forgive me, Lord, for the ways I have abused Your creation..."

July 28, 2024

Text: Matthew 11:25-30

"An Easy Burden to Bear"

After eight weeks of looking at the themes of work and Sabbath, we come to the good news (Good News?) that we are not alone in this venture. Jesus offers to be linked up with us ("Take my yoke upon you"—Matthew 11:29). And now because Jesus is carrying the load of the yoke, "the burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Thank God for such a gift!

Last week, I stopped for lunch at one of my favorite restaurants. I go there a lot, but I was surprised that the staff must have seen me drive up, because when I walked into the eatery, they immediately escorted me to a booth where they had waiting for me my standard drink order, a pitcher of unsweetened tea. Thank God for such a gift!

This came to mind, because the truth is that when we come to Jesus, He already knows our needs, our strengths, our journey. And He is already prepared to meet us there! I don't have to pretend when I go to our Lord in prayer. We might say, "He saw us drive up," so He is ready with the grace, the support, and the comfort we need. Thank God for such a gift!

Yes, we are still called to times of Sabbath. Yes, we are still called to places of service. Yes, we are still called to meaningful work. But, in these verses Jesus is telling us that we do not undertake all this alone. Jesus says He is the one to reveal God (v. 27), and He reveals a God who joins us in the adventure of creation, in the struggle of relationships, and in the possibility of victory. Thank God for such a gift!

Do you worry sometimes that you are not sharp enough, intelligent enough, to understand the meanings of Scripture or the subtle theological points that our teachers may make? Fear not! Jesus tells the disciples that God's way makes more sense to an infant than it does to the most learned among us (Matthew 11:25). We can come in our ignorance. We can come with our misunderstandings. We can come with our spiritual baby steps. Thank God for such a gift!

The word that is translated as "yoke" (Matthew 11:29-30) can be used for any instrument for connecting. In inviting us to put His yoke on us, He is inviting us to be connected to Him. He is carrying us, not the other way around. Thank God for such a gift!

What Someone Else Has Said:

The anonymous hymn 341 in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (United Methodist Publishing House) includes this stanza: "Thou didst reach forth thy hand and mine enfold; I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea. 'Twas not so much that I on thee took hold, as thou, dear Lord, on me."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: Thank You for such a gift..."

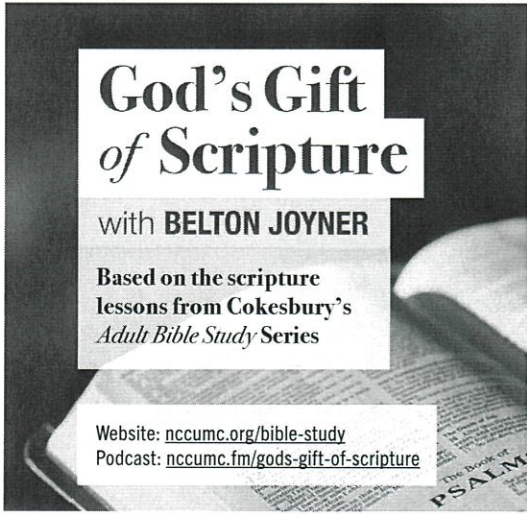
Important Dates:

General Conference

The United Methodist Church
April 23-May 3, 2024
Charlotte, North Carolina
For livestream and denominational news, visit gc2020.umc.org
For NCC-related info, go to nccumc.org/gc

Annual Conference

North Carolina Conference
of The United Methodist Church
June 13-15, 2024
Greenville, North Carolina
For livestream and NCC news, visit:
nccumc.org/ac2024



Listen to the Bible Study

Belton Joyner enriches and enlivens our study of scripture with his insightful writing. You can also engage with the Bible Study through an audio version of his weekly commentary, narrated by Belton himself. To listen or download every episode, type nccumc.org/studyaudio into the address bar of your internet browser (Chrome, Firefox, Microsoft Edge, etc.). Alternatively, listen to each episode released weekly on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

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