

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, Year C
Trinity Sunday- Proper 19 RCL 2025
Parish of the Good Shepherd, Waban

(These question sheets use brackets—[]—to mark verses that were included in the old Lectionary but are not used in the Revised Common Lectionary. You will not hear them on Sunday, but they will add to your understanding.)

Our Sunday readings follow a three-year cycle, constructed around the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke. (These are called the “Synoptic Gospels,” as if seen through a common eye.) Each year we read more or less straight through one of these, with variations for special seasons. (The Gospel of John, which transforms history into poetry, is used to heighten times of extraordinary celebration, such as Christmas and Easter.) The new Lectionary year begins on I Advent. This is Year C, and our Gospel is Luke.

The weekly reading from Hebrew Scripture (the “Old Testament”) during the post-Pentecost season usually offers two options. The first respects the integrity of Hebrew Scripture by moving through books sequentially; in Year C, it features Israel’s major prophets. The second option, the one carried over from the previous Lectionary, uses passages chosen to echo or enhance some theme in the Gospel reading, though sometimes it’s a challenge to guess what the editors had in mind!

The “New Testament” reading usually comes from one of the Epistles, and like the Gospel readings it tends to go straight through one book at a time. There is usually no deliberate connection between its contents and the other readings, but it is startling how often they seem made for each other anyway. In special seasons, selected passages from the Book of Acts or Revelation may be used instead.

Trinity Sunday: June 15

For your information

This Sunday begins the long post-Pentecost season. Jesus is gone, and the disciples must continue without him. Next week, we will go back to a much earlier point of the story and follow Jesus and his disciples on the road. But today the readings prepare us for that journey by affirming the foundation of our faith: the Holy Trinity.

Prov 8: 1-4, 22-31

Ps 8

or Canticle 2 or 13 (Apocrypha, Song of the Three Young Men, 29-34)

Rom 5: 1-5

John 16:12-15

Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31 (and read vss. 5-21)

For your information

The Book of Proverbs comes from a time when it was thought that the Spirit had abandoned Israel; the voices of the prophets were no longer heard. Instead, there were common-sense appeals to doing those things that would make life tolerable and decent.

Questions

1. The voice here is that of the Lady Wisdom. How does she describe herself? What has been her role in creation so far?
2. What elements of this address sound as if they might be Christ's own voice? What elements could represent the Holy Spirit? Is there anything in it that fits neither of these?
3. How might Wisdom be a good companion on the long road that we and the disciples follow after Pentecost, the daily challenge of living faithfully without being sure where we're going?

If you have time

—Read Chapter 7, the context for Lady Wisdom's speech.

Romans 5: 1-5

For your information

Paul's letter to the Romans was written to a congregation which he had not founded, or even met face to face. It contains the full sweep of his understanding, at a time late in his life, and is designed both for Gentiles who know little of Judaism and for Jews who wonder how they will fit into this new faith.

1. How does Paul account for our peace with God? Is this a peace you know personally?
2. What does Paul feel justified in boasting about? What exactly does he mean by boasting—behavior which is not usually admired?
3. What is the progression that starts with suffering and ends with hope? Does it necessarily happen that way, in your experience? Has it happened in your own life?
4. What is the role of God in this sequence? of Christ? of the Holy Spirit? Do only Christians follow this development?

John 16: 12-15

For your information

This is another passage from near the end of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. Again, the Greek term "Paraclete" (NRSV: "Advocate") gives the Holy Spirit a quasi-legal role, intended to "prove the world wrong...."

Questions

1. What do you think Jesus means when he tells the disciples that he still has many things to tell them but can't, because "you cannot bear them now"?
2. According to vs. 12-15, what is the role of "the Spirit of truth" for the disciples? Does it match your understanding of the Holy Spirit? What exactly do you think "truth" means here?
3. What does this passage have to do with the change of seasons noted above?

If you have time

--Read vs. 5-11. Why does Jesus claim it is to the disciples' advantage for him to leave? What would they lose if he stayed? Can you apply this statement to your own experience with charismatic people?

--In this same passage, what will the Advocate prove the world wrong about, and in what way? Does the Holy Spirit still act in this way?

Proper 7: June 22

I Kings 19: 1-4 (5-7) 8-15

Ps 42 and 43

or Isaiah 65: 1-9

Ps 22: 18-27

Galatians 3: 23-29

Luke 8: 26-39

I Kings 19: 1-4 (5-7) 8-15

For your information

Elijah managed to get a certain amount of respect from King Ahab. By this time, he had challenged all the prophets of Baal to a contest, won it, and killed them all. But Ahab's wicked queen Jezebel set out to destroy him. Surrounded by enemies, he fled.

In this story, he is in Beersheba, in southern Judea, Ahab's territory.

Questions

- 1, What is Elijah's state of mind when he goes into the wilderness? What familiar features of wilderness journeys do you find here?

2. How does this theophany (appearance of God) match, or differ from, other theophanies you recall? What sort of God does this seem to be? Why? Why does God ask Elijah what he's doing there? Wouldn't God know?

3. What does Elijah have to say to God? What seems to be his tone? Why does he say it all twice?

4. What is the significance of God's command to Elijah in v. 15?

5. What does this incident contribute to our Pentecost season?

Isaiah 65: 1-9

Questions

1. What is the image of God in vss. 1-2? Is this the way you understand God in relation to you?

2. In what ways do the people offend against God? Are these serious offenses in themselves, or representative of something else?

3. What does God intend to do as a result of this behavior? Are these intended actions just, harsh, merciful, or what? What do they show about God's relationship with Israel? with us?

Galatians 3: 23-29

For your information

This passage continues Paul's discussion of the law and its replacement by faith. The Greek word "paidagogos," translated "disciplinarian" (NRSV) has a dimension of "babysitter"--a servant who led a young boy to and from school.

The term "Greek" here means almost the same as "Gentile," i.e. non-Jew, because since Alexander's conquests, virtually the whole Mediterranean world was dominated by Greek culture. One was either a Jew or generically "other;" only Jews were heirs to God's covenant made with Abraham.

The formula, "There is no longer Jew nor Greek..., etc." appears several times in Paul's letters, and may be part of an early baptismal liturgy.

In Greek religion, an initiate often identified himself with a god by putting on the god's robes.

Questions

1. In what sense has the law been a "disciplinarian" for Jews up to now? Why is it no longer necessary, according to Paul? Do you think that we still need some sort of "disciplinarian," and if so, why? Do we have one?
2. What does Paul believe to be the result of baptism? What divisions break down? What might this collapse of boundaries have meant to people of Paul's time? to us? In what sense(s) are we "one in Christ Jesus"?
3. Who would have welcomed this claim about unity? Who would have been unnerved, offended, or outraged by it? Why?
4. How does this picture match your own understanding of your baptism?

If you have time

--Compare Paul's attitude here ("neither male nor female") with that of I Cor. 14: 33b-36 (which is authentically Pauline) and I Tim. 2: 11-12 (which is believed not to be). What difference do you see? How would you explain it, if at all?

Luke 8: 26-39

For your information

Gerasa is Gentile territory, but Galilee is Jewish. The geography here is symbolic, not literal.

Demons were believed to be numerous, hostile and destructive. Most people lived in fear of them.

Living outside the city meant being deprived of one's security and even one's identity, as did being unclothed.

The name "Legion" may hint at an allusion to Galilee's occupation by Roman soldiers, 6,000 of them to a legion, and a subtle suggestion of what would become of them.

Pigs were commonly used as sacrificial animals by Greeks and Romans, but were unclean to Jews.

Questions

1. What is the man's posture before Jesus? How does he address Jesus? Why are these details significant?
2. What is Jesus' manner toward the demons? Why does the man experience the exorcism as "torment"? What is the demons' plea to Jesus, and why does he comply?

3. What details demonstrate the man's return to sanity and community? Why does Jesus send him home?

Proper 8: June 29

II Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14

Ps 77: 1-2, 11-20

or I Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21

Ps 16

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

II Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14

For your information

According to God's command, Elijah has put his mantle over Elisha, naming him his successor. Elisha has become his devoted servant. Ahab is dead, and Israel's kingship has continued to deteriorate.

The first-born son receives a double portion of the inheritance.

Questions

1. What seems to be the relationship between Elijah and Elisha as this episode begins? What details underscore their bond?
2. What earlier story does v. 8 recall? What might that suggest?
3. What does Elisha ask for from Elijah? Will he receive it?
4. What do the details of vss. 11-14 (the cry, "Father, father!", the chariots of fire, the mantle, the parting of the water) tell us about Elijah's special relationship to God, and about Elisha's new position after he is gone?

If you have time

--Read more of the story of Elijah, beginning with ch. 17 and ending with II Kings 2: 12.

I Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21

Questions

1. What does God demand of Elijah now? How would you describe his role? Is this what you expect of a prophet, especially one who will become a foreteller of Christ?

2. The NRSV interprets Elijah's words in v. 20 as "Go, and return to me, for I have done something very important to you." What has he done? Are there any other calls in Scripture that this one reminds you of, or is it unique?

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 (and read vs. 2-12)

For your information

Here Paul makes the argument against circumcision which we have seen in many places. The context is a question which was urgently important at the time: can one become a Christian without first being a Jew? Many Jewish Christians, including some who proselytized in the same places that Paul did, believed that Gentiles must take on all the practices of orthodox Judaism, including circumcision, before baptism.

Questions

1. For Paul, what is the connection between circumcision and slavery? Why does he make that extreme statement in v. 2? What is his tone here, and through v. 12? Why do you think he talks like this? Do you consider that tone helpful for the Galatians, or for us?
2. What particular sort of freedom is offered through Christ, in Paul's understanding? What sort of freedom is not OK? What paradoxical sort of "slavery" also comes through Christ (v. 13)? Have you felt yourself either "freed" or "enslaved" in these ways?
3. What are the fruits of the flesh, according to Paul? the fruits of the Spirit? What do you think "flesh" means in this context? Would you want to modify his list at all?

Luke 9: 51-62

For your information

It is still early in Jesus' ministry, but already Luke is emphasizing that Jerusalem is the inevitable, essential end of the journey. Everything from now on will lead there.

Only a little is known about the Samaritans. Once they had been part of the people of Israel, but they had become separated for several reasons--partly, perhaps, their tribal origins, but also their focus on Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem as God's holy center. They would not normally have helped pilgrims headed for Jerusalem. Jews considered them unclean; a "good Jew" did not associate with Samaritans.

Questions

1. Why do you think Luke chooses to begin the Jerusalem journey with the Samaritan episode? What does James' and John's offer (v. 54) show about their attitude at this time? How do they seem to understand their role? their mission? Who would be their equivalent in our culture?

2. Burying one's father was a profoundly holy obligation for a Jewish son. How do Jesus' words (v. 60) strike you? How would you characterize his statements/demands in vs. 57-62? How do they define the terms of the journey? Do you think they apply to us as well?

3. What have the disciples learned by now? What have they not learned? What state do they seem to be in?

4. What do you think is the connection between v. 58 and the two encounters that follow? Do you see discipleship this way? Have you ever found yourself having to make such choices?

If you have time

--Compare v. 62 to Gen 19: 15-16. What is the principle here? Do you find it merciless, or what?

--Consider how this passage is related to the previous events in the same chapter: the first expedition of the Twelve and its aftermath (vss. 1-11), the feeding of the multitudes (vss. 12-17), Peter's claim about Jesus' identity and Jesus' words about the fate of the Son of Man (vss. 18-24), the Transfiguration (vss. 28-36). It's a packed chapter. What's going on here?

--Read chapter 4 of John's Gospel for an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. How does this incident add to our sense of who Jesus was?

Proper 9: July 7

II Kings 5: 1-14

Ps 30

or Isaiah 66: 10-14

Ps 66: 1-8

Galatians 6: (1-6) 7-16

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

II Kings 5: 1-14

For your information

The two books of Kings (originally one book) tell the stories of the kings of Israel after David, with particular emphasis on how they kept God and the Temple at Israel's center, or (more often) did not. We witness the gradual apostasy and erosion of Israel, with various prophets (especially the greatest of these early ones, Elijah, and his successor, Elisha) calling the nation and its rulers to account.

We are not told the names of either the king of Israel or the king of Aram at this time, but apparently the Arameans were more powerful.

Questions

1. What is the plight of the king of Aram? Who suggests a solution? What is the role of Naaman, the Aramean army commander?
2. What is the reaction of Israel's king to the Aramean king's request? Why? What is Elisha's response? Why?
3. What cure does Elisha propose? Why is it not acceptable to the king of Aram? How is his mind changed?
4. What are the various levels of power and authority in this story? What are the levels of wisdom? What prevents some characters from being wise? Whose wisdom prevails, and how? What might we learn from this, about hierarchies and about ourselves?

Isaiah 66: 10-14

For your information

This passage is thought to be from "Trito-Isaiah," the third segment of the book of Isaiah, written not by him but by his later disciples. The content of "Deutero-Isaiah" (ch. 40-55) suggests that it was written during the Babylonian exile, when Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed. This section shows the city (probably including the Temple) restored; but the first Isaiah's warnings about corruption among Temple-based authorities may be a reason why it is now Jerusalem, not the Temple per se, that is God's holy center.

Questions

1. According to this reading, what is now to be the relationship between God and Jerusalem? between Jerusalem and God's people? What images are used for each? What sort of God is this? Does the welcome seem exclusive, or inclusive?

If you have time

--Compare this passage with Isaiah 40: 1-11, the beginning of the Book of Consolation, which proclaims that the exile is nearly ended.

Galatians 6: (1-6) 7-16

For your information

Paul is continuing this letter's theme of the role of Jewish law and its transcendence in Christ. Here he develops the theme, in order to clarify further the special sort of freedom given to Christians and what its fruits should be.

Vss. 7-16 depend heavily on distinguishing between "flesh" and "spirit," one of Paul's central subjects in this letter. It's a division that is important in Greek culture, and reflected in the Greek language, the common language around the Mediterranean at that time. Over many centuries, it

led the Church to all sorts of condemnation of “the flesh” and rejection of sensuous pleasures. But the Hebrew language, Paul’s native tongue, made no such division. For Jews, the rich and luscious things of the creation were God’s abundant gifts, to be savored with gratitude. Paul is well aware of this tension and often addresses it, struggling with the language.

As v. 11 implies, Paul’s letters were usually dictated to a scribe.

Questions

1. How does Paul instruct Christians to treat sinners? On what grounds? What would it mean for us to do the same?
2. What does it mean to “bear one another’s burdens”? How does this “fulfill the law of Christ”? What law? How can we “test [our] own work”? Does v. 5 contradict v. 2?
3. What obligation does v. 6 prescribe toward one’s teachers?
4. In vss. 7-10, how does Paul sum up the nature of Christian labor? What does he seem to mean by sowing “to your own flesh”? by sowing “to the Spirit”? Do you agree that we “reap whatever [we] sow”? What is your evidence?
5. What is the issue in vss. 11-16? Who are the people referred to in v. 12, what is their argument, and what motive does Paul infer? What does this conflict have to do with what should be our “cause for pride” (v. 4), our reason to “boast” (v. 14)? How exactly has the event of the cross changed Paul, and (implicitly) every other baptized Christian? How do you understand the radical force of that moment? According to Paul, why is circumcision no longer necessary? What is “a new creation”? How does this conflict apply to us?

Luke 10: 1-12, 16-20

For your information

The large number of disciples cited in Luke may recall the table of the nations of the world in Gen. 10, where 70 (or 72, in another text) nations are referred to. Luke may be underscoring the universality of this mission.

Jewish law (Deut. 19: 15) required two witnesses to attest to the truth in every case.

The sin of Sodom (v. 12) seems here to be identified as lack of hospitality to strangers, a major obligation in Middle East culture--not homosexual activity per se, as is often alleged. (See Gen. 19.)

Questions

1. In addition to the law noted above, what other reasons can you see for doing mission in pairs? Is this advice that you try to follow?

2. Why do you think Jesus sent his missionaries into places ahead of him? (See 9: 26.)
3. What might be the implications of the image, "like lambs into the midst of wolves"? Have you ever found yourself in that role?
4. Why would these missionaries be told to travel light? to "greet no one on the road" (ordinarily, a serious breach of etiquette)?
5. How are the missionaries to treat those who welcome them? those who reject them? Does this behavior toward the inhospitable sound like Christian mercy, or what?
6. What results do the missionaries report from their first journey? Do all missionary journeys end this way? What is Jesus' advice/warning about how to understand their success?

Proper 10: July 13

Amos 7: 7-1Ps 82
or Deut 30: 9-14
Ps 25: 1-9
Col 1: 1-14
Lk 10: 25-37

Amos 7: 7-17 (and read vss. 1-6)

For your information

Amos was "a dresser of sycamore trees," raised in the Southern Kingdom (Judea) but called to prophesy to the royal court at Bethel, in the Northern Kingdom—unlike most prophets, who spoke to their own people. His forceful preaching earned him the enmity of powerful people, who had been enjoying an unprecedented period of peace and stability under King Jeroboam. He denounced Israel's military habits, injustice, immorality and shallow religious observance rather than true fidelity, and warned of punishment to come. Amaziah is the official court prophet in Bethel.

Questions

1. What is God's first intention toward unfaithful Israel? How does Amos change God's mind? What does God decide to do instead? What is a "plumb line," and how might it be an ironic fulfillment of God's promise not to abandon Israel? Do you recognize any sort of "plumb line" in our time, or in your life?
2. How are Amos's warnings received at court? What sort of prophet does Amaziah seem to be? How does Amos respond to his censure? What is to be Israel's punishment? How can this fate show God's faithfulness?

Deut 30: 9-14

For your information

This passage comes from a service of covenant renewal, for which Moses gathered the Israelites shortly before they entered the Promised Land. He already knew that God would not allow him to enter with them; the leadership was to pass to Joshua. Here he reminds his people of God's promises, and the obligations which go with them, as revealed at Sinai. The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth and final section of the "Book of the Law," otherwise known as the Torah, which stands at the center of Israel's Holy Scripture. An old story says that a copy of Deuteronomy was found in the ruins of the temple in King Josiah's time, and used as an organizing core for the 7th century BCE unification and reform of the whole people.

Questions

1. Exactly what are the terms of the Mosaic covenant, as presented here? According to v. 10, what is the connection between obedience to God's "commandments and decrees" and wholehearted love of God? Is this the way you understand obedience?
2. In vs. 11-14, Moses insists on the immediacy and simplicity of God's commandment; "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." How would you paraphrase this line? Do you find it to be true? If so, how have you experienced it?

If you have time

--Read all of ch. 29-32:47, for a full account of this pivotal scene in Israel's history and Moses' poignant farewell.

Col 1: 1-14

For your information

Colossae is a town in Asia Minor; the church there was probably founded by Epaphras, but Paul and/or his companions would have been in communication with its people. There is some reason to think that this letter was written not by Paul himself but by a companion using his name and authority.

Questions

1. As usual, this letter begins with celebration of the virtues of the Colossian church. What does the writer praise? What is "the hope laid up for you in heaven," and how might it make the love shown in this community possible? If the author were to write to our community at Good Shepherd, what might he say in his greeting to sum up who **we** are?
2. What does the writer intend to pray for on behalf of this community? Is there any implication that these things are particularly needed there? Would we welcome such prayers for us?

3. The writer says in v. 13 that Christ "has rescued us from the power of darkness." What, specifically, do you think he means? Have you witnessed or experienced anything that might be a result of this "rescue"?

Lk 10: 25-37

For your information

Since Jewish law made no distinction between religious and "secular" law, a lawyer would be keenly interested in Jesus' interpretation of God's law, especially with regard to the ultimate question presented here. In context, he may be questioning the role of the law in what the missionaries are preaching. As usual, Jesus answers a question with a question.

V. 27 shows Jesus drawing on two lines from Torah: Deut. 6: 4-5 and Lev. 19: 18.

Jewish culture severely restricted the concept of "neighbor." Rules of purity and impurity, honor and shame, etc. greatly limited the number of those for whom one might be expected to show concern.

"Justify himself" (v. 29): show that he is righteous, acceptable to God.

Only a little is known about the Samaritans. Once they had been part of the people of Israel, but they had become separated for several reasons--partly, perhaps, their tribal origins, but also their focus on Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem as God's holy center. They would not normally have helped pilgrims headed for Jerusalem. Jews considered them unclean; a "good Jew" did not associate with Samaritans.

A priest represents "the highest religious leadership among the Jews" (NRSV); a Levite is his close lay associate.

A denarius is about a day's pay for a laborer.

Questions

1. What details show the contrast between the "good Jews'" response and that of the Samaritan?
2. What does this story suggest about the place of "outsiders" in God's community?
3. What do you think is the lawyer's reaction to this story? Does he seem to learn anything? If so, what?
4. Do you see any reason why the Samaritan issue begins the Jerusalem journey (9: 53 ff.) and then is raised again here?

Proper 11: July 20

Amos 8: 1-12
Ps 52
or Gen 18: 1-10a
Ps 15
Colossians 1: 15-28
Luke 10: 38-42

Amos 8: 1-12

For your information

This vision depends on a pun, in Hebrew, a language where puns were understood to carry important connections. The words for “end-of-the-season (summer) fruit” and “end” are almost the same.

1. Again, God says of his people Israel, “I will never again pass them by.” Is this necessarily good news? What does God mean?
2. What is the character of the offenders described in vss. 4-6? What have they made of religious observance?
3. What particular punishments does God promise? Which are the worst, for you?
4. What is the longing described in v. 12? Why is it so devastating?

Gen 18: 1-10a

For your information

Mamre was a sacred place, near Hebron, where Abraham built an altar.

Note that Abraham's warm welcome to these travelers comes before there is any evidence of their special identity. This generous hospitality was considered a moral and spiritual obligation in that bleak, nomadic part of the world, where lives might depend on the care offered to strangers.

Barrenness was seen as a particular tragedy in a culture where "Be fruitful and multiply" was one of God's central commands. It was especially devastating, and bewildering for this couple, since God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as "the stars in the sky."

Questions

1. The travelers are sometimes three, sometimes one. What do you think is going on here?
2. After Abraham's dignified, ceremonial welcome, we are given a picture of Sarah eavesdropping behind the door! What is her reaction to the prophecy, and why? How does this

little vignette (vss. 10b-15) affect our sense of the story and of God's nature? (The name of the son to be born--"Isaac"--means "he laughs.")

If you have time

--Read I Sam. 1 and Luke 1: 5-25 for two other accounts of barren women who become pregnant as a result of God's favor.

Colossians 1: 15-28

For your information

The writer continues to explain what Jesus' death and resurrection have accomplished. Note the emphasis on "his fleshly body," which underscores the force of the Incarnation for all (embodied) human beings. (By this time, some "false teachers" were denying that God could have become fully human; they saw this as a shocking notion.) Then, in v. 24, the writer moves on to his body in another sense: the Church.

"Christ's afflictions" (v. 24) probably means "afflictions suffered for Christ's sake," rather than suggesting that anything might have been lacking in Christ's own suffering.

The "high Christology" evident in 1: 15-20 suggests a late date of composition, maybe even as late as 70-80 CE. Though Colossae's new little church seems to have been faithful in many ways, it was constantly threatened by the mix of many religions which swirled around the Mediterranean.

A repeated theme in Colossians is the triad of faith, hope and love. Sometimes it is interwoven with another triad: wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.

Questions

1. In this lavish description, who does the writer claim that Jesus Christ is, image by image? What does each one mean to you? How would you explain their meaning to someone with no knowledge of him? What does it mean that God made peace "through the blood of his cross"? Do you understand Christ this way?
2. After all that positive language, the writer turns in v. 21 to something else. What situation in Colossae does he seem to be addressing? How do the previous sections of this letter prepare for this shift? What is said here to be the connection between what Jesus has already done for us and our ability to keep on claiming it (vs. 21-23)?
3. What "hope" has been proclaimed? What could it mean that the gospel (good news) "has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven"? What does it have to do with the Colossians? How can they take advantage of it? How does this apply to us?

4 What does it mean that Paul has become a servant of that gospel? How could we become its servants?

Luke 10: 38-42

For your information

Jesus is doing several irregular things here. He is alone with a woman not his relative; and he teaches a woman in her own home.

Sitting at the Lord's feet is the posture of a disciple.

Questions

1. What is the difference between Mary's behavior and Martha's? between Mary's (apparent) attitude and Martha's? Which one is more like you?
2. What is Jesus' response to Martha's complaint? Does he think it is justified? Why or why not? What might be Jesus' tone of voice as he speaks to Martha? How do you think she feels afterward?
3. What might be the "many things" that distract Martha? What do they distract her from? Doesn't hospitality--a strong obligation--require a lot of effort (see the passage from Genesis, above)? What might be the "one thing" that is necessary? What is the "better part" that Mary has chosen? What are the things that distract you, from what, and how might that change?
4. Why do you think the reading from Genesis was chosen to go with this one?

If you have time

--Read John 11: 1-44, for another view of these sisters. Is it a consistent picture?

Proper 12: July 27

Hos 1: 2-10
or Gen 18: 20-32
Col 2: 6-15 (16-19)
Luke 11: 1-13

Hos 1: 2-10

For your information

Hosea seems to have been a prophet in the last days of "Israel," the Northern Kingdom after its separation from Judah, during the prosperous reign of King Jeroboam and the disasters that followed it, including conquest by the Assyrians (c. 750-732 BCE).

Questions

1. Why does God instruct Hosea to marry Gomer, a prostitute? How do the names of their children reflect God's attitude toward Israel? What are the implications of v. 9?
2. After such a start, what is promised in vss. 7 and 10? What sort of God is this?

Gen 18: 20-32

For your information

This passage immediately follows last week's. Lot is Abraham's nephew, and has traveled with him for many years, from their homeland in Haran.

Again, the author speaks of "the men" and then of "the Lord," who sometimes seems to separate himself out from the others.

Questions

1. According to vss. 16-19, what does the Lord have in mind for Abraham? Why does he decide to tell him about the intended fate of Sodom and Gomorrah? What does this decision imply about their relationship from now on?
2. In 18: 2, Abraham bows down to the ground before his guests. In 18: 22, Abraham "remain[s] standing before the Lord." What do you make of this?
3. What is Abraham's argument in 23-32? How would you describe the way he presents it? What does it show about him--and about the Lord?

If you have time

--Read Exodus 32: 1-14 for another example of a human being who persuades God not to act with the full force of his anger.

--Read Gen. 19 to complete the dramatic story of Sodom and Gomorrah and its aftermath. Where is conventional morality--simple right and wrong--in this tale? What are we to make of it?

Colossians 2: 6-15 (16-19)

For your information

Here the Colossians are specifically warned against the many false teachings that come at them from all sides. Nothing else is necessary, says the writer; Christ is the embodiment of "the whole fullness of deity."

Paul and his writings are known for the tension between the "already" of our faith--what has already been accomplished through Christ--and the "not yet"--what is still a goal or a hope for us.

Questions

1. Once again, flesh and spirit are contrasted. We have just been told that Christ's bodily death was what cleansed us. What might it mean then to be "circumcised with a spiritual circumcision," to put off "the body of the flesh," to be "buried with him in baptism" (cf. BCP p. 306)?
2. According to this segment, what exactly has already been accomplished and how? What does it mean to you that the record of our trespasses has been nailed to the cross? How does this free us? What does it ask of us, if anything?

Luke 11: 1-13

For your information

Luke's Gospel has been called "a primer on prayer," since more than any of the others it shows Jesus praying at critically important moments. This version of what we know as the Lord's Prayer is shorter than Matthew's (Mt. 6: 9-13), mostly because of the doxology Matthew includes at the end.

"Temptation" or "the time of trial" was not thought of as character-building. It was always to be avoided if possible.

Questions

1. This is apparently a very simple prayer. Spend a little time meditating on each line, imagining what exactly would change if it were to be fulfilled. Does it cover everything? If not, what would you add?
2. In v. 4, we are to say that we forgive all who are indebted to us. Is this wishful thinking, or what?
3. Vs. 5-8 have to do with how to get one's prayers answered. What is Jesus' advice? Are you surprised?
4. Vs. 9-13 continue Jesus' words about the power of prayer. Many people through the ages have taken it literally, and felt betrayed when their prayers were not answered. Do you find what he says to be true? When you pray for something, do you receive it? Do you find what you search for? When you knock, does the door open? If not, what is Jesus talking about?
5. Is there anything about this prayer that is specifically Christian?
6. Why do you think the first reading was chosen to go with this one?

If you have time

--Compare vs. 5-8 with Lk. 18: 1-8. Any similarities?

Proper 13: August 3

Hos 11: 1-11

Ps 107: 1-9, 43

or Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14; 2: 18-23

Ps 49: 1-11

Col 3: 1-11

Lk 12: 13-21

Hos 11: 1-11

The prophet Hosea was commanded by God to marry a prostitute. He continued to love and be faithful to her in spite of her infidelities. Their marriage became a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. Here God is speaking about their history together. "Ephraim" is Israel.

Questions

1. What are the details of their history that God recalls in this passage? What are the good parts, and the times of betrayal? How did God continue to treat Israel?
2. How does God seem to change his mind, in v. 5? What are God's reasons? What other examples can you remember of God's doing this?
3. How does God change yet again? What makes God relent? What does God hope will be the final resolution? Why might that happen? What sort of God do we see in this passage?

Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14; 2: 18-23

For your information

The title, "Ecclesiastes" comes from a Greek word, "ecclesia," meaning "congregation" or "assembly." Apparently the author was the leader of such a group, but not (as the opening says) either a preacher or the son of David (i.e. Solomon). The book's style suggests a date as late as 300 BCE; it is similar to the Mishnah, "the part of the Talmud that contains laws and regulations" (NRSV).

Questions

1. What specific parts of his life does the writer now consider to be vanity? Why? Do you see parts of your life this way?

2. How would you describe the tone of this passage? What sort of context might lead someone to speak this way?

Col 3: 1-11 (and read 12-17)

For your information

Lists of vices and virtues were common in Hellenistic philosophical writing, and appear in many of the NT epistles. The first list of sins here seems to include sins of the body and passions, the second those of the mind.

Questions

1. Vss. 1-4 sum up the implications of being “raised with Christ.” What difference does it make for us?

2. The imagery of shedding and donning clothing is used here to describe the transformation of baptism. If the old ways have already been shed, how do you explain the fact that the same old sins keep turning up?

3. Verse 11 contains what one NT scholar calls the "baptismal reunification formula," which appears also in Gal. 3: 28, 1 Cor. 12: 13, Gal. 6: 15, I Cor. 15: 28, and Eph. 1: 23. Consider its claims one by one. How would each of them have radically affected the culture of that time? Do they sound radical today? What categories might we substitute in our time?

4. How might Jesus be seen as an example of the virtues named in v. 12? Do all of them fit him? Which of them is a challenge to you? What behavior is prescribed for Christians, and what does it have to do with Christ? Can you/do you follow these instructions?

If you have time

--Compare the other contexts in which the "baptismal reunification formula" occurs. Why do you think it appears so often?

Lk 12: 13-21

For your information

Ordinarily the formula for sons' inheritance was fixed; the eldest received twice what the younger ones did.

Questions

1. What is Jesus' point in his response to the request of v. 13? Why is he so abrupt?

2. This so-called "parable of the rich fool" has a very harsh conclusion (v. 20). What accounts for this man's being reprimanded so severely? Isn't he just making preparations for a comfortable retirement?

3. What does it mean to be "rich toward God" (v. 21)?

4. Why do you think the first reading was put with this one? What matches? What doesn't?

Proper 14: August 10

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20

Ps 50: 1-8, 23-24

or Gen 15: 1-6

Ps 33: 12-22

Heb 11: 1-3, 8-16

Lk 12: 32-40

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20

For your information

Isaiah was a prophet to Judah and Jerusalem during the period 742-701 BCE, while the Northern Kingdom (called "Israel" after the split) was annexed to the Assyrian empire. It was a time of great unease, as Judah feared the same fate.

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of rampant immorality, especially their vicious treatment of strangers (see Gen 18).

Questions

1. In comparing Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah, what does Isaiah suggest about their present state and their probable fate? What has Judah been substituting for faithful behavior, who has been hurt, and what does God think of that? What might be a present-day analogy?

2. What does God intend as a punishment? What commands and what promises immediately follow? Are the commands difficult? What seems to be God's particular concern? What will be the result of obedience? What sort of relationship between God and Israel do you hear in these words? What do they say to us?

Gen 15: 1-6

For your information

"Abram" is Abraham before God renames him. Here is the first of many chapters in the story of Abraham's struggle to have an heir. (Eliezer seems to be a slave whom he has adopted.) It comes just after Abram and his 318 longtime "trained men" have scored a large victory over enemy

kings, and a Canaanite priest, Melchizedek, has blessed him. The Jewish people will later call themselves "children of Abraham."

"Righteousness" means "in a right relationship with God."

Questions

1. What does this story (especially v. 2a) tell us about the importance of children in Israelite families? What does this conversation add to our understanding of the relationship between Abraham and God?

If you have time

--Read Gen 11: 31-14: 24 for the early years of the man whom all Israel will call "Father Abraham." What sort of person is this? What marks him for greatness?

--Read Deut 26: 1-10 for the words of the story by which the people of Israel are to identify themselves--to the Canaanite priest in the Promised Land, and ever after as well. Can you find Abraham in it?

--Read Romans 4 to see how Paul uses this incident to assure the Romans of their inclusion by God, even though they are not Jews.

Heb 11: 1-3, 8-16 (and read 4-7)

For your information

Hebrews is an anonymous letter, written probably in the generation after the apostles, when many Christians had already suffered much abuse for their faith. It encourages them to stay faithful to the promise of salvation in Christ. This passage expands on the role of faith in remaining hopeful.

Questions

1. Paraphrase the definition of faith in v. 1. How does it fit your own life and experience?
2. What does v. 2 tell us about the relationship between creation and what preceded it? What does this have to do with faith?
3. According to the writer, how was faith visible in Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah? How is faith visible in the faithful people you know? in yourself?
4. What is the connection suggested here between the fulfillment of God's promises and the sense of being "strangers and foreigners on the earth"? Do you have a sense of not being at home in this life, of "seeking a homeland"?

If you have time

--Read the stories of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4: 3-10), Enoch (Gen. 5: 21-24), Noah (Gen. 6: 13-22). Do you agree with the writer's interpretations of them? Are there other biblical figures you would add to his list?

Lk 12: 32-40

For your information

"Little flock" would have referred originally to Jesus' small, beleaguered group of disciples, then to members of the tiny churches that Luke would have seen on his journeys with Paul.

This passage includes an image of the "messianic banquet" which will occur at the end of the age.

Questions

1. Are we at Good Shepherd a "little flock" in the sense that Jesus means here? Do all his words apply to us?
2. What sort of purses do not wear out? How can we make such purses for ourselves?
3. Do you agree that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"? What evidence of this have you seen, in yourself and others? in our culture?
4. Do you consider yourself to be "dressed for action"? If not, what would you need to change?
5. What connections do you see between this reading and the first one? the second?

Proper 15: August 17

Is 5: 1-7
Ps 80: 1-2, 8-18
or Jer 23: 23-29
Ps 82
Heb 11: 29-12: 2
Lk 12: 49-56

Is 5: 1-7

For your information

This passage is a parable in the form of a love song, like one that might have been written at the time of a festival. It invites the listeners into a story which they are then required to interpret.

“Wild” grapes are more accurately grapes from a plant rotten at the root.

Questions

1. Who is the speaker at each point? (It changes.) In the terms of the story, what is the relationship between the beloved and his vineyard at first? How does that change?
2. Who is the “I,” and what challenging questions does he ask Jerusalem/Judah? What implicit answers would they be forced to give?
3. What does the “I” intend to do as a result? Does it seem justified?
4. How does the speaker explain the parable in v. 7? What is the “cry”? What sort of God is evident in this parable? How does it apply to us?

Jer 23: 23-29

For your information

This passage comes in the midst of a diatribe against false prophets and their role in the downfall and defeat of Jerusalem. Baal is a Canaanite god; his cult was seen as a constant seduction to Israel.

Questions

1. Do you recognize the tendency to think that God is "far off" and not "near by"? What does God say about that here? What are the consequences of that tendency, in your experience?
2. Do you know of any "false prophets"? How can we recognize them? Have you ever rejected a prophet as "false" who proved to be true, or believed one to be true who proved false? How did you come to recognize your mistake? What is intended by the comparison of straw and wheat? How is God's word like a fire? a hammer?

Heb 11: 29-12: 2

For your information

This passage continues to develop the theme of faith's power in the face of adversity. The writer draws on some of the best-known OT stories for his examples: the parting of the Red Sea (Ex 14: 21-31,) the fall of Jericho and the role of the prostitute Rahab in helping it to happen (Joshua 2, 6).

Questions

1. In vss. 32-38, the writer gives a long list of what faith has accomplished, but without specifics —probably on the assumption that his audience would immediately know the references. How many can you identify?
2. In vss. 39-40, what might the writer mean by “what was promised” but not yet given to all those heroes and martyrs of the past (the “witnesses” of ch. 11)?
3. According to this writer, what brought our faith to perfection? How?

Lk 12: 49-56

For your information

This passage recalls Luke 3: 16, in which John the Baptist describes the baptism Jesus comes to bring.

Questions

1. What is Jesus' response to the expectation that he will "bring peace on earth"? What later history might bear out his prediction of what he would bring instead? Why did he have this effect? What then does it mean to call him the "Prince of Peace"? Does he cause peace in your life, or division?
2. Jesus is very severe toward those who fail to "interpret the present time." What do you think would have been the signs they failed to read? Why would they miss or ignore them? Do you think he would accuse us of the same thing?
3. What connections do you see among these three passages? Do you see any changes in tone as the weeks after Pentecost go on?

Proper 16: August 24

Jer 1: 4-10
Ps 71: 1-6
or Isaiah 58: 9b-14
Ps 103: 1-8
Heb 12: 18-29
Lk 13: 10-17

Jer 1: 4-10

For your information

The prophet Jeremiah's ministry began around 627 BCE; he died in Egypt sometime after 587. He spoke to the leaders and people of the Southern Kingdom (Judah and Jerusalem) at a time of

widespread faithlessness, injustice and unease. His warnings were not heeded, and he suffered opposition and punishment. His life overlapped the Babylonian exile.

Questions

1. What authority does Jeremiah claim for his words? How does he describe the origin of his vocation? Are we all formed and called in that way?
2. In Hebrew Scripture, calls to prophets are always met with their protests, reasons why that person believes himself to be wrong for the job. What is Jeremiah's protest? How does God respond?
3. What work does God assign to Jeremiah? What exactly might those general statements mean? Do they fit any prophet, at any time?

Isaiah 58: 9b-14

For your information

This passage comes from one of Isaiah's disciples, at a time when Israel was beginning to anticipate her restoration.

Questions

1. What is the basic promise made on God's behalf in v. 9b?
2. This passage has an "if...then" pattern. What are the "if" conditions? What seem to be God's particular concerns? What are the "then" rewards for Israel's obedience? Which ones are particularly important to you? Which seem most to apply to us?

Heb 12: 18-29

Questions

1. What scene is being described in vss. 18-21? What is the nature of the covenant which it initiates? Is this your image of how God is likely to appear?
2. What is the nature of the "new covenant" presented in vss. 18-24? What is the "sprinkled blood," and what word does it speak, as opposed to "the blood of Abel"?
3. Why do you think the voice promises to shake both earth and heaven once again? What must be removed by this shaking? What will remain?

Lk 13: 10-17

For your information

Luke's Gospel often shows Jesus as teacher, speaking with authority in synagogues and likely to be in disagreement with local religious leaders.

"The woman bent over" is absent from the former Lectionary. In recent years, she has become an emblem of the plight of women, then and recently, and its transformation by healing, spiritual or civil.

Despite the implication of this passage, curing the sick was understood to be an appropriate use of Sabbath time.

Questions

1. This woman has been "bent over" for a long time. Is there any hint that her condition may be symbolic as well as literal?
2. What argument does "the leader of the synagogue" make against Jesus' healing action? How does Jesus respond? How does his imagery of "bondage" and "freedom" connect with the sort of kingdom he is proclaiming? What is the importance of his calling the woman "a daughter of Abraham"?
3. What does this story suggest the Sabbath is for? What is the spirit of the Sabbath, and how might we observe it?

Proper 17: Aug. 31

Jer 2: 4-13
Ps 81: 1, 10-16
or Sirach 10: 12-18
or Prov 25: 6-7
Ps 112
Heb 13: 1-8, 15-16
Lk 14: 1, 7-14

Jer 2: 4-13

For your information

The Book of Jeremiah is a sometimes perplexing, even apparently random assemblage of materials. Jeremiah is often calling Israel/Judah to account, and warning of punishment to come, but the warnings are mixed in with God's loving promises and even with Israel's apparent full repentance.

Cyprus represents the far western boundary, Kedar the far eastern.

Questions

1. What is the relationship between Israel's central offense ("they went far from me") and the second charge ("...became worthless themselves")? Does the second follow from the first, in your experience?
2. According to vss. 6-7a, what history should have bound Israel to God for all time? What happened instead?
3. Who is being called upon to witness this apostasy (turning away from God)? What does Jeremiah/God consider unprecedented about it? How should the witnesses react, and why? What are the "two evils" of v. 13? How might they apply to us?

Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus, Apocrypha) 10: 12-18

For your information

The teacher Ben Sira (Sirach) wrote down his wisdom sometime before 180 BCE. It seems to have been well known to the early Christian community, but was excluded from the Jewish canon. It represents a period when prophets and the inspiration of the Spirit were thought to be gone from Israel, and "Wisdom literature" emphasized the virtues and practices needed to get along in a bleak time.

Questions

1. The focus of this passage is the sin of pride, but Sirach says the reverse: "the beginning of pride is sin." What might this mean? Why is pride the source of such disaster, so much rage and punishment from God?
2. If pride and violent rage "were not created for human beings," were they created for someone else?

Prov 25: 6-7

For your information

Like Sirach (see above), Proverbs is part of Wisdom literature. It is made up of several collections, edited over time.

Questions

1. What is the advice given here, and for what reason? Is it in fact "better to be told, 'Come up here'" ? Why? What would be one's motive, and is it a worthy one? How might we apply this advice?

Heb 13: 1-8, 15-16

For your information

This passage begins the conclusion of the letter to the Hebrews. After speaking at length of the glory to come, the writer has advice for faithful living in the meantime. Hospitality to strangers was--and is--a strong imperative in Middle Eastern culture. Those who are in prison or tortured are likely to be Christians persecuted for their faith.

The Book of Hebrews has built up an image of Jesus Christ as the great high priest, who has assumed all priestly functions, on behalf of all peoples.

Questions

1. The advice given here is highly selective. Why do you think the writer chose each of these points to emphasize? How do they speak to the particular challenges of his community? Are they as relevant today? If so, how?
2. Have you ever "entertained angels without knowing it"? What does this image evoke for you?
3. The "bottom line" of this advice seems to be v. 8. What exactly do you think the author means? How would you support his statement--or do you disagree?
4. What "priestly function" does Christ have for us according to v. 15? Why do we need him to do it? What is a "sacrifice of praise," and how can we make it? What other "sacrifices" are "pleasing to God," in v. 16? What traditional sacrifices do they replace?

If you have time

--See Gen. 18: 1-8 for the source of v. 2; Josh. 1: 5 for the source of v. 5; Ps. 118: 6 for the source of v. 6.

Lk 14: 1, 7-14

For your information

According to Jewish understandings at that time, the poor, crippled, lame and blind were "unclean," not favored by God. Proper folks were to provide alms for them, but not to come too close.

Questions

1. There seems to be a considerable degree of "enlightened self-interest" in Jesus' advice here: do this because it pays off! Is this Jesus' point? How literally does he mean these words, and how might we obey them?
2. What would the Pharisees, who are "watching him closely," think of his advice, especially considering that he is a guest in a house where apparently just the opposite is happening? Would you want such a guest in **your** house?

Proper 18: Sept. 7

Jer 18: 1-11
Ps 139: 1-5, 12-17
or Deut 30: 15-20
Ps 1
Philemon 1-21
Lk 14: 25-33

Jer 18: 1-11

For your information

Here is another of the various fragments that make up the Book of Jeremiah.

Questions

1. What does Jeremiah observe in the potter's house? What immediate connection does God inspire him to make with God's relationship to Israel? What exactly are the correspondences between one image and the other?
2. Again we have examples of the "if...then" statements that appear in Jeremiah. What are Israel's choices, and the likely consequences? How can God, who is presumed to be good, be "shaping evil against you"?

Deut 30: 15-2

For your information

The "Deuteronomic historian" was the editor who finally drew the first five books of Hebrew Scripture--the Torah--together into one narrative that told Israel's story up to the wanderers' entry into the Promised Land. He reinterpreted Israel's early history in the light of later experience, and reaffirmed the covenant made with Moses (cf. Ex. 29: 1) in a way that spoke to the many centuries of struggle since that time. A major purpose for him was to gather the fragmentary traditions of Israel's various tribes into one corporate narrative, and to insist on centralized worship of God; small, scattered shrines were fertile ground for the growth of practices that reflected the surrounding pagan religions. This passage sums up what's at stake, in Moses' farewell address to his people. In subsequent ceremonies of covenant renewal, this would have been the moment in which Israel's vow was focused.

Questions

1. How does Moses explain what it means to "choose life"? to choose death? What will be the consequences of this choice for the people of Israel?

2. Do you think Jesus would have expressed this choice in the same terms, with the same consequences? Why, or why not?
3. How might this choice apply to us today? What, specifically, would reflect our choice of life, or death? What would be our "other gods"? And since possession of the land is not relevant to us, what would be at stake for us?

Philemon 1-21

For your information

This letter, the shortest of the generally accepted Pauline letters, is written to a Christian (Philemon) converted by Paul. Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had left him under circumstances that are not explained; probably he ran away, and according to the law, might therefore be severely punished or killed. He had been converted, and had joined Paul's community. As required by law, Paul now returns him to his owner, but as a different person, deserving different treatment.

Questions

1. What is Paul's present situation? How does he use it in his argument?
2. How does Paul create a context for his appeal to Philemon? On what basis does he make his request?
3. What exactly does he want Philemon to do? What responsibility is he willing to assume?
4. What does this letter show about Paul's understanding of what Christians owe to each other? About what he hopes or believes to be the relationship between his authority and his followers' choices?

Lk 14: 25-33

For your information

Lk. 13: 22 has just reminded us of Jesus' inexorable progress toward Jerusalem; again, whatever happens now must be understood with that in mind.

Questions

1. Verse 26 uses very strong language, and although Jesus is using hyperbole, as he often does, the point of this verse and v. 27 is strong. As the passage continues, what comparisons does Jesus use to explain what's at stake and why he's speaking with such apparent harshness?

2. This passage begins with Luke's note that "large crowds were traveling with him." Why is it important to us to know that? Why might Jesus say these things to a large and apparently enthusiastic group of followers?

3. Does v. 33 apply to us? Does it apply to everybody? Is there perhaps some category of faithfulness that does not require us to give up everything, even our families, or is there some other way of reading these words that is not so literal but demanding in some other way? Is it OK not to try to "build a tower" when you know you can't finish it? Does v. 32 allow some room for those of us who want to follow but cannot make such absolute sacrifices--i. e. what might these "terms of peace" be? What would you want to say to Jesus about all this, if he were to address us in the same words?

4. What connection do you see between the first passage, from Deuteronomy, and this one?

Proper 19: Sept. 14

Jer 4: 11-12, 22-28

Ps 14

or Exodus 32: 7-14

Ps 51: 1-11

I Tim 1: 12-17

Lk 15: 1-10

Jer 4: 11-12, 22-28

Questions

1. Often Jeremiah's voice proclaims God's anger at Israel and warns of punishment to follow. But what attitude is in God's words this time? For what reason? How is this future different from what God would do?

2. What is the condition of God's people according to God, in v. 22? Can one not know how to do good? How, then, would one learn?

3. What results of God's judgment does Jeremiah prophesy in vss. 23-26? How does God sum up the impending doom? Do you see any room for hope in God's words?

Exodus 32: 7-14 (and read v. 1)

For your information

This passage comes immediately after God has first given the "tablets of the covenant" to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Aaron is Moses' brother and "first lieutenant"; when God called Moses to leadership and Moses said he couldn't lead because he stuttered, God said that his brother Aaron could do the talking for him.

God's promise to Abraham (then Abram) is made in Gen. 15: 5-7. It reflects the two imperatives given to Israel in Genesis: **have many children**, and **take possession of the land**.

Questions

1. What picture of the people's capacity for faithfulness do we get in 32: 1? What sort of leader is Aaron? (See 32: 21-24 for further evidence of his character.) What are the implications for the future?
2. What is God's reaction to this act of idolatry? What does God resolve to do? What is the meaning of "stiff-necked people," and how does this phrase fit the Israelites? Does it fit us?
3. How exactly does Moses persuade God to "change his mind"? How do you react to the terms of his argument, and to the concept of God's mind being changed? In what other stories does God do this? Does Jesus ever change his mind?
4. This story about Moses is often seen as an early foreshadowing of Christ's role between God and us; Christ is a "new Moses," leading us out of bondage through a wilderness and into a promised land. If you accept this analogy, what sort of God is implied by this need for an intercessor, especially as reflected in this conversation?

If you have time

--There is more to this piece of the story. Read Ex. 32: 15-33: 3 for the further consequences of the Israelites' behavior. Do they deserve what they get? Note Moses' role in this part, and the fact that he did his mediating before he actually came down from the mountain; if he'd first gotten a look at the golden calf, and heard Aaron's excuses, do you think he would still have interceded with God for the people?

--Compare Ex. 16: 1-21 for the Israelites' first rebellion against Moses, and God's response. What sort of God do we see here?

I Tim 1: 12-17

For your information

I Timothy is one of the "pastoral letters," written under Paul's name but with some major differences in style and content. This practice would have been accepted as a way for a loyal disciple to use Paul's authority in addressing problems in the small churches. The picture given here of his former life is more starkly stated than in his own letters, though it is similar to that in Acts 9: 1.

Verse 15 is used in the BCP, as part of the assurance of pardon. (See BCP, p. 332.)

Questions

1. We often hear, "Ignorance [of the law] is no excuse," but [Paul] says here that he acted out of ignorance, in unbelief, and therefore received mercy. Do you think that's an excuse? Give examples from your own life, or those of others you've seen. What would Jesus say about this? Are we now beyond the reach of mercy, because we know and still go wrong? Or does real understanding always result in obedience?

2. According to the author, what use has God made of Paul's conversion? Do you agree that the conversion of such an apparently hopeless case has this effect? Have you seen examples?

Lk 15: 1-10

For your information

Tax collectors were particular objects of contempt for observant Jews, because they were Jews who served the hated Romans, gathering money from the people of Israel to serve the pagan Empire and its emperor who claimed to be a god. This in-between role made them obviously "unclean"; of course it also allowed proper Jews to follow the law but avoid contamination. Because of the ritual importance of meals, one did not invite such people to one's table. That is why so many stories about Jesus' focus on meals and the people he welcomed to the table. This setting embodies what Luke sees as the central issue between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes: is anyone to be excluded from the feast?

Questions

1. What is the implication of the fact that "all the tax collectors and sinners" were coming to hear Jesus? Why exactly would the Pharisees and scribes grumble?

2. How would you characterize the behavior of the man in the first parable, the woman in the second, and the father in the story of the prodigal son which immediately follows? Would you behave the same way in similar circumstances? Would most sensible people do so? Why, or why not?

3. What then is the point about the nature of God as illustrated in these three stories? Why do you think that in every case others are invited to join in the rejoicing? Who do you think will accept the invitation, and who will refuse it?

4. What are the implications of this question for one's ability to take part in the heavenly banquet? How exactly do we accept or refuse that invitation, in our present lives and for eternity?

