

Remembering Injustice, Working For Justice

Common Lectionary Readings

Sunday, June 18, 2017

with Notes

Genesis 18: 1-15

- 1 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.
- 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.
- 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.
- 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.
- 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."
- 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes."
- 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.
- 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.
- 9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent."
- 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.
- 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.
- 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"
- 13 The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'"
- 14 Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."
- 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Commentary on Genesis 18: 1-15:

The context of the passage is that God has promised Abraham land and descendants, but neither promise has been fulfilled. Abraham lives in his tents, still a nomad; he has a son through Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, but not through his wife, Sarah. In the immediate chapter of Genesis (17) prior to the passage for this Sunday, Abram is said to be 99 years old, and God confirms his promises to Abram; Abram confirms his covenant with God by the mark of circumcision for him and all the males of his household. God changes his name to Abraham, and Sarai's name is changed to Sarah. God clarifies that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation, but he reaffirms that the nation covenanted with God and descended from Abraham will be through a son born to Sarah. Abraham laughs as he wonders how this will be possible at his and Sarah's age. From both God's and Abraham's sides, the covenant is reaffirmed. In the subsequent chapter, which we hear this Sunday, God will offer another assurance that the promise of an heir will be fulfilled.

The story of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah at the Oak of Mamre illustrates Middle-eastern hospitality. As three men are suddenly seen standing near him, Abraham quickly welcomes the visitors and arranges for their comfort and nourishment. The narrator tells the reader that it is the Lord who appeared. The narrative is from the J strand of the Pentateuch. The story is somewhat confused in that three men appear and Abraham converses with one who seems to be the leader and at other times with all three. Is God represented by all three or by the leader of the three? It is hard to say. Regardless, the welcome of the visit of God to Abraham's camp leads to God assuring Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son together.

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Sarah, upon hearing that she will bear a son, laughs. She is beyond child-bearing age, and she giggles that she may yet know sexual pleasure. This sets up an exchange in which God declares that something amazing or marvelous is not beyond God's power to accomplish.

The fulfillment of the promise is announced in chapter 21. Abraham and Sarah conceive, and Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

Considerations for Preaching from the Text of Genesis 18: 1-15:

Those who were gathered at Mother Emanuel AME Church on the evening of June 17, 2015 welcomed a stranger into their midst. Knowing how the young man turned violent against his hosts, what has happened to our society and to the Church because of this act? How would you entertain strangers? Considering the way things are today in our society, would you be cautious? Would you question why they are at your door? How might we integrate the exhortation of Hebrews 12: 2 into our practice of hospitality: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"?

The men who visit Abraham and Sarah offer hope that the promise of a son would be fulfilled despite the obstacle of Abraham's and Sarah's ages. If you were in their position, how would you respond to God's assurance? Against the obstacles that lie in the way of a more racially just society, where and how do you find assurance that God will open a future that is more just?

Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19

- 1 I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications.
- 2 Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

- 12 What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?
- 13 I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,
- 14 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.
- 15 Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.
- 16 O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds.
- 17 I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD.
- 18 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,
- 19 in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!

Commentary on Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19

This is a Psalm of thanksgiving. The psalmist has faced a life-threatening illness and, having overcome the illness, praises and thanks God.

Verses 3-11, which are not in the Psalm for this Sunday, indicate that the Psalmist faced death, and by calling upon God, found mercy. The Psalmist believed in the face of affliction and the lack of dependability of other humans.

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Verses 12-14 shifts the scene to a libation about to be poured forth before the altar in thanksgiving. Asking how to make a response to the Lord for the cure that has been experienced, the psalmist will make thanksgiving in the temple.

Verses 15-19: God cares about his faithful ones who offer praise, and God is not indifferent when they die. By being rescued from death, the psalmist can continue to offer sacrifice to the Lord. The last two verses state the psalmist's intention to do this.

Considerations for Preaching from the Text of Psalm 116:

"What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?" The Psalmist wishes to give thanks to God for rescue from sickness. The families of the Emanuel Nine did not receive their loved ones back after the night of June 17, 2015. Yet, some have expressed words of forgiveness and encouragement for repentance for the murderer. Would this be a response you could make in thanksgiving for what God has done for you? Would you be understanding of someone who would find this difficult to do? Considering the Mother Emanuel Massacre, what kind of "return" is called for on the part of the Church to God and to society?

Romans 5:1-8

- 1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
- 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
- 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,
- 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,
- 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.
- 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
- 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.
- 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Commentary on Romans 5: 1-8

In the first four chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul has outlined the ways in which both Gentile and Jew are subject to condemnation because of sin (1:18 – 3:20). Nevertheless, God has revealed his power to save through Jesus Christ in the face of humanity's sin (1:16-17; 3:21 – 5:21).

The passage (5:1-11) for this Sunday deals with the presumption of some that misfortune is due to the punishment of God for sin. In these eleven verses at the start of chapter five, Paul explains rather that the consequence of the justification gained by Christ for his followers is peace rather than misfortune. Paul goes so far as to claim that Christians can boast of their afflictions because these serve to build character and hope.

The source of that hope is the love of God that believers experience through the Holy Spirit. The proof of that same love is the length to which God has gone in his son dying for sinners. Paul contrasts the difficulty of giving up one's

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life for those who are good and deserving with the even more amazing love shown in that Christ died for us while we were still sinners and undeserving. God has proven that God is for us despite our sinfulness.

Having been saved in Christ, the enmity that sin has created has been broken down. Humans can be reconciled to God and pardoned for their sin. By faith, this pardon is received and the believer is justified. Because of this, believers can exist in peace with God. They can be assured of the effectiveness of their salvation through the dying and rising of Christ.

Considerations for Preaching on the Text of Romans 5: 1-8

There are moments of doubt that can shake our sense of being right with God, but the assurance of the effectiveness of the salvation brought about by the dying and rising of Jesus—the love of God proven through Jesus' death for us sinners—provides a perspective to counter the doubts and fears we face. The deaths of the Emanuel Nine might shake our faith—at least our faith in the goodness of fellow human beings—but God entered our existence and died for all. All humans are loved by God, all human beings have been offered the justification and salvation of which Paul speaks.

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

9:35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;

38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

10:1 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;

3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;

4 Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans,

6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

7 As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'

8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Commentary on Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 8

There are five great discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. These provide the Gospel with a structure that parallels the Torah's five books. The first discourse is the Sermon on the Mount. The passage for this Sunday is an introduction to the second of these discourses—a discourse on mission.

9:36 – Jesus has compassion for the crowds of people who came to him. They are described as "like sheep without

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a shepherd.” This kind of characterization has parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures (eg. 1 Kings 22:17; Jer. 23:1-6; Mic. 5:2-4). Poor leadership was often lamented in such passages, and some (Ezek. 34:1-6) raised messianic hopes for God to intervene as a wise and compassionate shepherd in place of the sinful leaders of his people. Moved by compassion for the plight of people, Jesus responds by sending his disciples on mission.

9:37-38 – Despite the great need he has observed and which has moved him, Jesus anticipates that a great harvest is possible. The enormity of the potential harvest demands many laborers, and, because of their scarcity, the disciples must ask God to provide more laborers. Prayer is part of the mission.

10: 1 – Jesus calls together the Twelve. Unlike other gospels, there is no account of them being chosen by Jesus in this gospel. They are simply named at this point. The Twelve are also called “apostles” for the only time in this Gospel. Their number undoubtedly calls to mind the twelve tribes of Israel, and Jesus sends them out to proclaim the kingdom among the people of Israel.

The names of the Twelve in the gospels have some variations. Among them is Simon “the Cananaean.” This would have been understood as indicating he was a member of or sympathizer with the Zealots. The Zealots were dedicated to overthrowing Roman rule.

The mission of the Twelve is not to Gentiles or Samaritans—at least not yet. Ultimately, Matthew’s Gospel will extend the reach of the disciples’ mission to “all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20). He sees the needs of the people to include not only leadership but also healing, and he shares his ministry of leadership and healing with his disciples.

10:8 – Even though Jesus and his disciples would be within their rights to accept payment for their services, they must not be corrupted by greed, as were the rulers against whom Ezekiel had prophesied. Jesus chose to depend on the hospitality of those followers who had means, but never demanded payment.

Considerations for Preaching on the Text of Matthew 9:35 – 10:8:

Jesus includes persons associated with a fanatic revolutionary movement (Simon the Cananaean) and a betrayer (Judas Iscariot) among those who are his disciples. Simon’s following of Christ led him to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus; Judas’ betrayal led to tragedy. Indeed, the Twelve will abandon and deny him upon his arrest. He calls all people. He invites all to find the Good News of God’s Kingdom. Jesus took risks in taking on disciples.

The disciples are sent out to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons.” In what ways is racism similar to these ills that the disciples are sent to address?

This is a Gospel story of sending disciples on mission: Jesus sends out disciples to announce Good News and to bring liberation from ills. To address what ills of today is the Church sent out to bring liberation? What is the mission of the Church in response to the reality of racism? How are we sent to bring Good News to address this ill?