



Daily Meditations December 23-28, 2019

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 1 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT, ADVENT 4:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Liars, Beasts, and Lazy Gluttons Monday, December 23, 2019

Titus 1:1-16

"For this reason I left you in Crete so that you might set right what remains to be done."

Imagine that it is several years from today, and the Elon Musks of the world have managed to bring together an international coalition to build a protected city on the moon or on Mars, or more likely, a stand-alone space colony where all the needs of the inhabitants can be provided, assuring the community's longevity. No doubt at the outset everyone will be busy building, and it's likely that the startup will be operated in a military manner, that is, with a systematic hierarchy based on rank and experience. That assures efficiency. Soon, though, the "citizens" will inevitably begin to yearn to govern themselves. What will the new government look like? Who will set it up? How will it be financed? Who will make sure the winners don't enslave the losers?

We don't have to reimagine this scenario. It is playing out in real time in Afghanistan, as just one example. The existing government collapsed. An invading military tried to set up a democracy, and, so far at least, we have seen a reversion to what life must have been like in the Dark Ages: nasty, brutish, short, and mean. Setting up a system to corral people to do the right thing and to reduce their dependence on their basest instincts is a very hard thing to do, a lesson the apostle Paul learned again and again as he tried to turn discrete populations toward Christianity as a civilizing force for good as well as to spread the good news. In his letter to Titus, one of his companion missionaries, Paul is starting from scratch on the island of Crete, so the missal is filled with advice on how to choose leaders and how to deal with ne'er-do-wells, many of whom are the Cretans themselves, characterized in these few

verses in this way: "Cretans have always been liars, vicious beasts, and lazy gluttons." Further, "They are vile and disobedient and unqualified for any good deed." To say that Titus has a huge job ahead of him certainly minimizes the challenge.

Let us pause for a moment or two and consider what we would do if we faced the tasks posed to Paul and through Paul to his ally and friend. I remember a t-shirt slogan popular during the Vietnam War: "Kill 'em all, and let God sort 'em out." I don't think that's a good fallback position. *So what is?*

Moderate in all Things

Tuesday, December 24, 2019

Titus 2:1-10

"As for yourself, you must say what is consistent with sound doctrine..."

Undeterred by the default (and unraveled) social fabric of the Cretans, Paul instructs Titus to tell older men they must be temperate, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, love, and endurance. Self-control is also a recommended suggestion for the behavior of older women. And in younger men. The theme, we find, is just that: teaching or showing the Cretans how to be moderate in all things. Titus is told, "Urge the young men...to control themselves, showing yourself as a model of good deeds in every respect, with integrity in your teaching, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be criticized..." Titus, then--in his leadership role--is to live righteously so as to show, rather than simply tell, how that is done.

Do we have such leaders in our midst today? People who show us how to behave by their own behavior? Not many, it seems.

As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, we already know that Jesus did show us how to behave by his own behavior. We know what he taught. We know what Paul taught. We know what was expected of Titus. How then shall we live, if so many of us reject their teachings and do so willfully?

Devote Yourself to Good Works

Wednesday, December 25, 2019

Titus 2:11-3:8a

"They are to slander no one, to be peaceable, considerate, exercising all graciousness toward everyone."

How quaint, right? On this day that we celebrate as the birthday of Christ, might we take time to remind ourselves of the reason for the season, as the saying goes. Paul's letter to Titus lays it out, and I can't improve on his advice, which ought to be read from every pulpit in the land right now: "I want you (Titus) to insist on these points, that those who have believed in God be careful to devote themselves to good works; these are excellent and beneficial to others."

We will be tearing open packages today; we will be eating our fill and more today, and some of us will be reading the story of the Christ child's birth. It's a good day for a conversation with our families about what Christ's life meant in the context of the real world, the world Paul and Titus inherited and that we find ourselves re-immersed in. A good theme for dinner table small talk might be how each of us could make the world a better place. Paul's letter to Titus is

a short one. Perhaps it could be coupled with the Magnificat of Mary to point all of our families in what Paul would say is the right direction.

Stop Hiding Behind the Law

Thursday, December 26, 2019

Galatians 3:1-14

"O stupid Galatians!"

A few Sundays ago at the outset of Advent, Father Phil Mason reminded us during his sermon about the rejection by Jesus and his followers of Mosaic law as prescribed and enforced at the time of Jesus' adult life. He cited 613 laws, about half of which were prescriptive, meaning they were imperative things to do or observe, and about half of which were proscriptive, or forbidden. All of that from 10 basic commandments and the background and almost universal acknowledgement of seven deadly sins. Imagine!

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he vents frustration over the continuing confusion in early Christian communities over how to live. Should Christians show their faithfulness to the teachings and deeds of Jesus by following 613 Mosaic rules? Or should they ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?"

You people, Paul tells them, have been given the overwhelming gift of grace. And you are too stupid (yes, he calls them that) to see it. Stop hiding behind "the law," he says, and live as if you have been blessed and pass that blessing on to others. On this day after the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, what step could I take toward embracing that grace and acting as if it is so all-important that it requires action on my part so that I become a blessing to others and not a curse?

For You are All One

Friday, December 27, 2019

Galatians 3:15-22

"For if a law had been given that could bring life, then righteousness would in reality come from the law."

When I lived in the Amarillo area and in Wichita Falls, I often drove on U.S. 287 up onto the caprock and back down again, always taking care to slow way down as I approached the little spot in the road called Estelline. Estelline was a well-known speed trap, and I watched many a time as I drove by while the town's lone cop had someone pulled over to give him or her a ticket. The law in Estelline worked to enrich the city. Maybe you've heard it wise to drive carefully as you approach Martindale on your way to Luling out of San Marcos for the very same reason.

I can certainly empathize with black men who, rightfully, feel some of the laws of the land are stacked against them. We've all heard the phrase "Driving while black." And we know that our prisons are filled disproportionately with black men. If not the laws themselves, then the enforcement of the laws is out of whack, rancid, in far too many instances.

In these passages from Galatians, Paul tears down the 613 laws then in effect in the communities that recognized and subscribed to them and reminds the Christians of Galatia that God made a covenant with Abraham that supersedes all the laws that came after. That covenant was based on love, eternal love.

The laws undercut that covenant, and in the verses that follow the ones prescribed for my comment today, we find this very important statement by Paul: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The promise requires only faith, and that is a companion of grace. All of which is not to say that there are laws that deserve to be broken...except that's exactly what Paul contends. What laws would those be? How about laws that are not fair, not right, that serve only to arbitrarily punish, laws that ignore the second most important commandment of all: love your neighbor as yourself.

39.7 Million

Saturday, December 28, 2019

3 John 1-15

"Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does what is good is of God; whoever does what is evil has never seen God."

The third letter of John consists of just these 15 verses and is addressed to Gaius, another of Paul's missionaries and early Christian leaders put in place like Titus to organize the early church. One of Paul's purposes is to beseech Gaius to treat other missionaries with hospitality and friendship. Another reason for Paul's letter is to draw attention to one Diotrefes who is trying to undermine Gaius and take over. Paul promises that he will come in person to confront Diotrefes and straighten him out. "I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink," Paul writes. "Instead, I hope to see you soon, when we can talk face to face." He intends to have a one-on-one with Diotrefes, too.

There is not much of theological importance to take away from this letter. But these few passages about communication might well remind us that if we have power and we must initiate a confrontation, it's always better to do so in person. Taking someone to task in an email or on Facebook is just not the way to deal with an issue. Our written words are too easily misunderstood or taken the wrong way or ignored altogether. I did a Google search on the following phrase: "How email hinders human interaction." The number of results? Thirty-nine point seven million! (I also recall, though, my grandmother's admonition that "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." I'll let you figure out how that plays into the situation you face.)

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