



Daily Meditations March 18-23, 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: Judy Aronow, Pat Gillory, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T. Cay Rowe, Lisa Wilkinson, and Carroll Wilson.

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

COLLECT Lent 2:

*O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.***

There's More to the Woman at the Well

Monday, March 18, 2019

John 4:27-42

"At this moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman..."

We all know the story about Jesus and the woman at the well, and we are introduced to her in the verses just prior to the ones I'm discussing here. She had five husbands; she was a Samaritan, not one of Jesus' clan; and she seemed to have something of a questionable reputation, as John reports it. What happens next is, to me, the really amazing part of this story. While she's gone, Jesus speaks to the disciples. But, here's what she does: She goes to town, and she tells people that she may have met a man at the well who might well be the long-awaited Messiah. And, the people believe her! They follow her out to the well.

What seems remarkable to me is that Jesus would speak to the woman almost as an equal, or as mentor and student. Women in those days were most assuredly not equals and probably treated more shabbily than mules. Here, Jesus shows he values her. He elevates her. Now, she's no Oprah or Hillary or Ariana, but she is important to Jesus at that moment--and she is important to her people. I think this element of the story has gotten lost by the generations of men who translated the text, rearranged the text, interpreted the text, and presented the story from the pulpit. It's truly time to go back and read the verses here and put your focus on her, not on Jesus nor the disciples.

Wouldn't it be interesting to know her back story? What happened to her after

this event? Was she revered? It seems to me it might make a good movie.

Devoid of Meaning

Tuesday, March 19, 2019

John 4:43-54

"Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe."

Here, Jesus heals the son of a royal official and does so without ever seeing or laying hands on the boy. And then he rues his situation: "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." Few things he said during his ministry were more prophetic. We still look for miracles and signs. When something inexplicable happens to save a child in trouble or heals a woman believed dying, the TV news reporters always call it a miracle. Almost any unexplained event is a miracle.

I was watching the NBC evening news with Lester Holt the night tornadoes destroyed small towns across Alabama, and a reporter interviewed one man whose house was left standing while his neighbor's was demolished and the occupant was killed. I am paraphrasing here, but the survivor told the reporter, "I honestly believe my house wasn't touched, and I'm still alive because it was a miracle." *What?* God saved this fellow and allowed his neighbor to be torn to shreds? Why would He do that? The survivor obviously needed a sign, and I guess his words comforted some backwoods Bible-thumpers who think God picks and chooses his victims. If He's handing out miracles, why not bestow a few on the kids and moms at the Mexican border? Why not intervene so Yemeni babies don't die of starvation? Why not change the heart of Assad so he doesn't gas his own tribe? No, a miracle is now a cliché. It's devoid of meaning. It's a declaration used by the ignorant who decline for one reason or another to take responsibility for the state of the planet and its inhabitants.

The quicksand here is what we don't see because we desire miracles and don't want to work too hard to make ourselves "miracle machines." If Jesus were frustrated with the uneducated fools of his day, he must be in a state of apoplexy over what he's seeing on the nightly news in a nation that proudly sings "God Bless America," whatever that may actually mean.

Defying Common Sense

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

John 5:1-18

"Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a sabbath."

These verses provide us with another of the signs Jesus used to get across his divinity: He healed a man who had been ill for 38 years. He did this on the sabbath, and the man carried his mat, which the Jews-in-chief thought was sinful. So here is where the Jews add a major sin to the list they've been keeping about Jesus' breaking the law.

But worse, *worse*: He claims to be the son of God, making himself equal to God. I'm sure they were astonished and thought him a madman and a very dangerous one. To the Jews educated in Mosaic law, there was one God, and only one. Take a look at the Decalogue, brought down by Moses himself. I must say I can see the Jews' point. The idea of God being two entities and not one, defies not only the 10 Commandments but also common sense--to the

Jews. If you suddenly have more than one God, why not have 15 or 20 or 100 like the ancient Greeks and Romans? These Jews weren't around when Jesus explained the deal. Let's review John 3:16, which, by the way, is not a quote directly from Jesus; it is a commentary by the writers of the Book of John: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." So, then, there's that explanation.

But then Christians found themselves believing in a third incarnation of God called the Holy Spirit. The Trinity. Three in One. If the Jews were flabbergasted by the claim that there were two Gods and one was standing right there before them, what would they make of Three? What do we make of Three?

Bear with me here as I move through a minefield some would consider heretical. Is it possible that the concept of the Holy Trinity is and has been failing the faith? All the great churches of Europe are empty. The churches of America are emptying out. Young people aren't going to services at all. Surely there are many causes for that, but is it possible that one cause is the difficulty people have in wrapping their heads around the idea of the Trinity? Could that be the reason we have seen the rise of megachurches that don't talk at all about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but simply worship Jesus, period? Many modern men and women don't believe in the Trinity any more than they believe anything they actually hear or see. Thus, the belief that vaccines cause autism. Thus, the denial of climate change. Thus, the continuing embrace of trickle-down economics. The truth is becoming irrelevant, if not meaningless.

Here, Jesus repeats a profound truth. I can't really blame those who don't believe him. But, it's not about proof, is it? It's about faith. When Jesus tried to prove his relationship with God through miracles and signs, few believed him. His miracles weren't enough. Do we need daily miracles to sustain our fragile hope? Must we invent miracles to revive us from lives that threaten to become nasty, brutish, and short? Or, can we live by faith alone? How can we few who remain deal with ever-increasing doubt and obtuse denial?

Admonitions from Christ

Thursday, March 21, 2019

John 5:19-29

"Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but passed from death to life."

More discussion occurs in these verses between Jesus and the Jews. The sentence above captures the flavor. Believe and be saved; don't believe and be damned. Why is this carrot of eternal life in Jesus' toolbox, his trump card, his ace in the hole? To me, it is a hard idea to swallow, but I have pretty much stopped worrying about it. That promise of eternal life is not what motivates me to be a Christian, a believer, and I'm getting to be an old man for whom that ought to be a valuable promise.

Isn't it true that most of us are more focused on how we will be remembered by our kids and grandkids and great-grandkids than we are about the life beyond? Or is that just me? What prompts me to do the right thing or to try to do the right thing is neither the threat of condemnation or the promise of life eternal. What prompts me to do the right thing is another admonition from Christ: To whom much is given, much is expected. I respond to need because I can. I have the capacity to do so. I have what it takes. It's an ethic that I learned through years of living as an involved human being, not a bystander. If that gets me a pass through the pearly gates, so be it. If not, there's not a single thing I can do at this point that would make much difference.

My Dad died in 1990 in Amarillo not long after his longtime closest friend, his hunting dog, had passed away, and after the funeral I was going through some of the things he kept in his little downstairs office. He was still using a full-size Royal standard typewriter in classic Army green. In the typewriter I found a single sheet of paper. On it were typed the last words he'd tapped out after a long life as a teacher and writer. Here are those words: Will there be dogs in heaven?

I hope so, Dad. I surely do hope so.

WWJD?

Friday, March 22, 2019

John 5:30-47

"But, I have testimony greater than John's."

Jesus argues here that his word has greater power than prophets that came before him because he bears with him the word straight from the lips of God. He cites his own law because he's the Son of God, and while the Jews and others might doubt that, he does not and will not and uses the carrot of eternal life and the threat of condemnation and performs miracles and signs and still, for goodness' sake, still these people, these Jews, these stiff-necked, hard-headed know-it-alls would prefer to cling to the Old Ways rather than adopt the ways offered through the New Covenant with Jesus Christ! Extraordinary claims, Jesus is saying, require extraordinary proof, and here I have given it to you over and over again. He might as well be screaming at a brick wall, and he accuses the Jews of believing in nothing, not even the laws of Moses. These are particularly damning words because to so many Jews, if there were ever to be a son of God, it should have been Moses. So, Jesus pulls out the zinger: If you had believed in Moses, you would have believed in me because Moses himself wrote about me. In Deuteronomy, Moses does prophesy that someday God will raise up a prophet like himself. The Jews, of course, would prefer not to see the miracles, not to see that they stand aside the Lamb of God, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

If it's not actual Mosaic law, and it's not what their eyes have shown them and what they have actually heard, then what is it these Jews do believe? They believe in themselves. It reminds me of my adolescent crush on the word of Ayn Rand, who wrote "Atlas Shrugged" and "The Fountainhead," classics in boy-lit. These Jews are the Howard Roarks (Rand's protagonist) of their time. They put their faith in their own brand of Rand's Objectivism.

I don't know what you call today's prevailing Western philosophy as demonstrated by the masses. It's not Objectivism, because reason has been tossed out the window of one of Howard Roark's skyscrapers. I think it's some wicked combination of voodoo, magic, fear, hedonism, and way too much alcohol and steroids and heroin.

So, here's the question: WWJD?

Works vs. Faith

Saturday, March 23, 2019

John 7:1-13

"So Jesus said to them, 'My time is not yet here, but the time is always right for you. The

world cannot hate you, but it hates me, because I testify to it that its works are evil'."

Through his short time of ministry, Jesus has had plenty of opportunities to see how things work as opposed to how the Jews say they work, or the Romans want them to work. And what he's seen is more evil than good. Why? The works he sees are the result of greed, a grab for power, lust. So, now that his time to leave is near, he's calling them out. He has stated what is right. He has set the right example. He has held out the ultimate carrot and stick. And he's realizing it's all for naught. Ultimately, of course, he's wrong. But how human is that lament? Many of us have raised good kids, worked hard and honestly and are now retired, and sometimes don't we reflect on whether any of it made a real difference? I am reminded of Shakespeare's Sonnet 71:

Sonnet 71 by William Shakespeare

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell;
Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it; for I love you so,
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you woe.
O, if (I say) you look upon this verse,
When I (perhaps) compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay,
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
And mock you with me after I am gone.*

I don't wish to be mawkish, so you might let that thought pass and move on to what this biblical passage in John has to say about works versus faith. There is a tension that is unstated. But it's been my observation that the person who does good is more valuable than the person who prats on about it. And I think that's well-grounded in our Christian heritage. At the end of the service on Ash Wednesday, our rector dismissed the congregation at Half-Time with a version of these words, known more formally as the **Corporal Works of Mercy**:

*Feed the hungry
Give drink to the thirsty
Clothe the naked
Shelter the homeless
Visit those in prison
Comfort the sick
Bury the dead.*

Amen. Amen.

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