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## Daily Meditations

### August 17-22, 2020

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 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.

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## COLLECT, PROPER 15

*Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of this redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

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## The Apple does not Fall Far from the Tree

### Monday, August 17, 2020

#### Judges 17:1-13

*Micah said, "Now I know that God will make things go well for me—why, I've got a Levite for a priest!" - v. 13*

The story of Micah is fascinating, full of almost every kind of self-serving behavior. Why does Samuel, the reputed writer of Judges, include it here? Not only is it a warning against an example of almost every kind of bad behavior, but Samuel emphasizes that it reveals what a rudderless and adrift people will do when left to do "what is right in their own eyes" without a leader.

First, Micah steals a lot of money from his mother. When she curses the thief, he comes clean, returns the loot, and mom then blesses him in the manner of Jacob blessing his sons. She vows to devote all the money to making household gods that will be most likely used for telling the future and making decisions. Importantly, YHWH is just one among them but not preeminent. Mom covers all the bases: the One God of Moses as well as the *teraphim* of the surrounding cultures.

But, as the saying goes: Apples do not fall far from the trees—sneaky mom uses only a fraction of the cash for the *teraphim*, despite her vow.

Micah then appoints one of his sons to be the household priest, obviously in violation of Moses' Law that states only Levites can be priests. Perhaps sensing this isn't "kosher," when young Levite Jonathan comes traveling along, seeking his fortune, a real Levite is installed as priest, and Micah breathes the sigh of relief above—NOW he's gonna make it big.

Micah and mom felt so much in control. What could go wrong? This fascinating double-dealing little drama plays out in the next chapters.

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## Snake in the Grass

Tuesday, August 18, 2020

### Judges 18:1-15

*They said, "Oh, good—inquire of God for us. Find out whether our mission will be a success." The priest said, "Go assured. God's looking out for you all the way." - vv. 5-6*

The Promised Land! This glorious goal brings the diverse and quarrelsome Israelites across the desert to the "land flowing with milk and honey." But, uh-oh! Someone's already enjoying this bounty, so the tribes go to war with the indigenous Canaanite peoples, each for the portion Moses/Joshua allotted them. This mostly worked in favor of the Israelites, but because the tribe of Dan would not believe God's promise that they would prevail, they could not oust the tribes on their lands. They then went looking for a new home, all 100,000+ of them.

At the risk of stereotyping, the Danites already have a tradition of treachery, forecast in Jacob's blessing of his son Dan:

*Dan is only a small snake in the grass/a lethal serpent in ambush by the road/When he strikes a horse in the heel/and brings its huge rider crashing down/I wait in hope for your salvation, God. (Genesis 49:16-18)*

Jacob foresees that God will use Dan's snake-in-the-grass treachery to bring justice.

Looking as we are through the telescope of centuries, it is hard to realize that the Israelites had only been in Canaan for a generation or two. Unbeknownst to Micah and his pet Levite, trouble is on the horizon. (Don't you love foreshadowing?)

Now the stories intertwine. A scouting party of Danites is offered the hospitality of Micah's house on their search northward, but canny Micah does not invite them into his pseudo-shrine. Instead, the Danites run across the renegade Levite Jonathan who tells them about the household gods and idols (incidentally, also where the family wealth is consolidated in the silver that encases them).

The Danites use Jonathan's services to divine their future and receive the quoted encouragement. Amazingly, the Danites did not trust the promise of God, but they rely on the assurance of a renegade priest consulting a syncretistic pantheon of local gods. None of this bodes well.

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## If You Trust Me

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

### Judges 18:16-31

*Micah said, "You took my god, the one I made, and you took my priest. And you marched off! What do I have left? How can you now say, 'What's the matter?'" - v. 24*

The Danites set up the stolen god-figures for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his descendants become priests to the tribe of Dan several hundred years forward to the time of the land's captivity. All during the time that there was a YHWH-sanctioned sanctuary of God in Shiloh, the Danites kept the god-figure that Micah had made for their private use.

Flabbergasted! That's how I feel when I juxtapose inconsistent and treacherous human behaviors with the incomprehensible and faithful love of God. Samuel, the writer of Judges, points out that the Israelites run amok because they have

no leader, no king, and the turmoil of this period of conquest does seem to support this. Individuals such as our petty thief and god-maker Micah try to protect themselves and shape their own futures every which way they can. After the treacherous behavior of the migrating Danites, poor Micah goes home without his "security blanket" and also without his treasure (a common place to store precious metals was to make household gods).

And all this time God extends his open arms and his promises to both Micah and the tribe of Dan: "I AM, I am the only god, and you shall have the land I promised if you trust me." These are lessons for today. Fear and self-reliance separate these humans from God's grace, egged on by a couple of bad character traits of Micah's. Jesus studied the Hebrew Scripture (The Old Testament), and truly almost all of what we call the New Testament is a commentary or enlargement of that Scripture. These stories go to the heart of humanity's relationship with God as well as revealing human beings in all our flawed yet wondrous glory. "What is man that You take thought of him/And the son of man that You care for him?" - Psalm 8:4 (NASB)

Trivia Bonus: the Hebrew word *Dan* means "judge," and the final judge or warrior/deliverer immediately before the above story of Micah is Samson, who wars with the Philistines in the Danites' struggle to oust them from their portion of The Promised Land. Samson is of the tribe of Dan. Also, after this story of Micah, the Danites establish themselves at the northernmost portion of the land in a city named appropriately Dan, at the headwaters of the River Jordan. The word Jordan derives from *yerden*, meaning "coming down from" and the name of the city Dan.

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## The Perfect Human

Thursday, August 20, 2020

### Job 1:1-22

*Job was a man who lived in Uz. He was honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion. He had seven sons and three daughters. He was also very wealthy—seven thousand head of sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, five hundred donkey, and a huge staff of servants—the most influential man in all the East! - vv. 1-3*

And so begins the oldest book included in our Bible and also the one viewed as its highest form of literature. The story is set in the times of Abraham and the Patriarchs, and in one form or another has been around for about that length of time. As with many of our cultural shaping stories, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and others, the original writer is unknown, but the writer's voice still resonates with us across the ages.

In the manner of epics, it begins with the above description of Job, a perfect example of a perfect man in the culture in which he lived. Job's honesty, integrity, humility, discernment, and religious devotion are above reproach; his family is numerologically "perfect" ( $7 + 3 = 10$ ), and his wealth (livestock) is also "perfect" ( $7,000 + 3,000 = 10,000$  camels and sheep;  $500 \times 2 = 1000$  oxen; and 500 donkeys). All this together makes him the "Time" magazine's "Man of the Year." Why? Why is this "perfect" human the main character in this tale of woe?

The lesson I take from this beginning is: "If it can happen to this guy, it can happen to me." All my striving to make my life honorable and secure will not shield me from possible disaster. The first chapters of Job set the scene and introduce most of the characters, thus framing the events or action of the story, and the final chapters complete the frame, finishing or completing the action. In the *Iliad*, the Greek epic that has so influenced Western civilization, the reputed writer Homer opens with the Greek gods having a dispute and "messing with" the lives of humans. So the beginning of the epic tale of Job narrates God discussing Job's merits with his heavenly minions, especially one called Satan or the Adversary, who challenges God about Job's religious devotion. In the test that Satan initiates to satisfy the challenge, what happens to the "perfect

human" Job cannot be just bad luck; it must be cosmic in dimension and deeply personal in terms of humanity. Thus, in one fell swoop, Job loses literally everything except his wife and his life, spared only because God "fenced" that off from Satan.

Through the ages, this troubles us in the Judeo-Christian tradition because of our belief in a benevolent and loving god, from whom even discipline is construed as love. God loves us, and he is all-powerful. So...why do bad things happen to good people? Isn't God our Father looking out for us? Guiding and directing our steps? How can God allow this to happen to us, his children?

It is a rare person who has not struggled with these thoughts, and that is why Job has much to say to us now as always. All humanity is in this together.

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## Just Being There

Friday, August 21, 2020

### Job 2:1-13

*[Job] told [his wife], "You're talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God—why not also the bad days?" Not once through all this did Job sin. He said nothing against God. - v.10*

Three of Job's friends heard of all the trouble that had fallen on him. Each traveled from his own country—Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuhah, Zophar from Naamath—and went together to Job to keep him company and comfort him. When they first caught sight of him, they couldn't believe what they saw—they hardly recognized him! They cried out in lament, ripped their robes, and dumped dirt on their heads as a sign of their grief. Then they sat with him on the ground. Seven days and nights they sat there without saying a word. They could see how rotten he felt, how deeply he was suffering.

How many times have I heard people say, "I can stand anything as long as I have my health." In today's reading, Satan causes Job to lose his health and well-being, on top of losing his family and wealth. Scripture notes that Job does not "sin with his lips," but it says nothing about what his thoughts are. If I were in Job's sandals, I would be asking, "Why me? Why this?"

But it doesn't take as catastrophic a disaster as Job's to make us question events. We like to believe that we have a certain level of control over our lives and the events that occur to us, but the reality is that we do not. If someone has cancer or heart disease, often a friend might immediately think, how has that poor sick person been abusing his or her body to cause this. However, the longer we live, the more we recognize that bad things happen to good people...for no reason whatsoever. It's a rare person who cannot relate to an occurrence of this life experience, especially in these days of coronavirus.

Instead of criticism, a person in this situation needs support, sympathy, and solace. Job's three far-flung friends all converge to "comfort and console" him, a wonderful impulse, and they grieved when they saw him. They then sat with him for a week, silently sharing his pain and humiliation, just "being there." In our time of isolation, illness, and anxiety, this matters to us also.

Reaching out to one another is how humans best weather catastrophes. "We're all in this together" has been a constant refrain over the past several months, underscoring our need for the comfort and consolation of friends and human interaction. Just recently my heart was lifted and cheered when a small group of my friends gathered outdoors to "socially distant" socialize for an hour. A couple of weeks before that I feasted my eyes on all of my far distant children and grandchildren in a video call. A beautiful lesson that I hope I can retain is that we both give and receive comfort from just reaching out and being there. It's not about my words.

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# With Less of You, there is More of God

Saturday, August 21, 2020

## Job 3:1-26

*What's the point of life when it doesn't make sense,  
when God blocks all the roads to meaning?*

*"Instead of bread I get groans for my supper,  
then leave the table and vomit my anguish.*

*The worst of my fears has come true,  
what I've dreaded most has happened.*

*My repose is shattered, my peace destroyed.  
No rest for me, ever—death has invaded life." - vv. 23-26*

In times of trouble, loss, illness and death, hopeless situations, Job's voice resonates with us across the ages. The human condition has not changed, regardless if we live in the distant past or in today's pandemic present. And the answer is still the same: It is not what happens to you but how you react to it that matters. Job fervently wishes the pain and agony would go away, but he still does not curse God for what has happened. He plumbs the pits of despair, seeing no positive life for himself and expressing the frustration and loss of hope, but he still expresses these feelings in terms of his own life.

Jesus' said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5): "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."

I confess, when I first thought of these words of wisdom, I recalled them as "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God." But this translation from *The Message* seems to tie directly to Job's predicament. When you are lying flat on your back after being flattened by life's events, the only place you can look for help is upwards to God. Job never rejects or curses God, even in this dark moment.

Our question as to why bad things happen to good people is not answered by God in Job, but it is explored from human perspectives. People are still writing books about this question. In this reading, Job grieves, he questions, he probes, he even despairs, but he also accepts and never doubts that God is there, which seems like the only sane path through disasters. Two very different but well-known songs occur to me in regards to Job: the hymn *Trust and Obey* and Paul McCarthy's *Let it Be*. "When you walk with the Lord..." and "There will be an answer...let it be."

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