

# The Bible Challenge

## Meditations Week 5 (February 3-9)

### Day 29: Exodus 22-24, Psalm 24, Matthew 25

*by The Rt. Rev. Andy Doyle*

Christians, Episcopalians specifically, begin with a very important assumption that God created the world. Certainly this notion of God as creator of all things is found in our creedal statements, which are rooted in the first follower's experience of Jesus, and echo our earlier Abrahamic tradition. Today we read in Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

As creatures in this world we are reminded that we are his and we are made as members of a wider creation. The temptation is to believe that God has given all of this to us to manipulate for our own purposes. The truth is, and we confess it regularly, that God created all things (including us) and that all things belong to God. When we open the gates of our hearts and souls to this reality we find that we must respond. We respond, not by negotiating percentages and ownership with God or others, but by being stewards of God's whole world. Out of this understanding we care for the poor, we share our goods, we remember our neighbor and especially God's favorite people, the alien in a strange land. All things belong to God, as do we. Out of this stewardship comes a call to sow and multiply God's grace and the wealth within His creation. We see not a world of scarcity but rather a world of abundance. Out of that abundance we are able to share with others. We are able to feed, clothe and shelter Christ in the form of the other. Stewardship is not a self-interested negotiation with the creator.

### QUESTIONS

- What am I doing with God's things?
- How am I using them?

- Am I creating a sustainable world where all have enough and the riches of the kingdom of God are multiplied?

## PRAYER

*Heavenly Father, creator of all good things, we know you reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter, help us to be stewards of your creation in all aspects of our life. Amen.*

## **Day 30: Exodus 25-27, Psalm 25, Matthew 26**

*by The Rt. Rev. Andy Doyle*

Psalm 25 implores God to help us know his ways and to learn his ways. Abiding in the grace of God means to dwell under an outpouring of love. When we dwell and abide in this grace, it is natural for us to wish to respond in some feeble way.

In Exodus God sets apart priests, asks the Israelites to make a tabernacle, altar and some very fine vestments. We are invited to respond to God by giving God the very best of ourselves and to tend this sacred space. Exodus also tells us that in the midst of this priesthood and tending of the sanctuary God is present. We find God through the struggle of tending to God's ways. "Tending" involves setting apart time and space in our lives to follow him. It is the pressure of God's grace that invites us to respond by molding our actions, words and time into a place where God is experienced.

The woman with the oil and the alabaster jar are responding to God's grace as experienced in the person of Jesus and his ministry. In setting apart her life, her wealth and her time she bears witness to God. I imagine some people are moved to a faithful response. She challenges others to see and rethink their commitment to Jesus.

Not everyone is able to do this. Not everyone is interested in this prayer or this work. As Christians who are Episcopalians we recognize the life we lead in community reflects our desire to live

in God's ways. Our Episcopal rule of life (the Baptismal Covenant) offers a shape to our life that seeks to live in the grace of God and respond in word and action to that grace in our everyday life. Whether we are receiving food for our spiritual journey through the remembrance of Jesus' own sharing of bread and wine, to regular worship, outreach, service and evangelism, we Episcopalians are tending to God's things. We are anointing the body of Christ with fine oil – a life lived for God in Christ Jesus alone.

#### QUESTIONS

- What can I do in my life today that will worship God?
- How will this witness to God's invitation to live life differently?

#### PRAYER

*Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for inviting us to make room in our life to worship you. We ask that you will help us to see opportunities to live out your overflowing grace in a world desperate to see your hand at work. Amen*

#### **Day 31: Exodus 28-30, Psalm 26, Matthew 27**

*by The Rt. Rev. Andy Doyle*

One of the apostolic fathers said (paraphrasing Genesis 3.8) God wishes to walk with his creatures in the eve of the day. Jesus said, "How long have I wanted to gather you under my wings like a hen gathers her chicks." In response to this desire of God and his choosing to be with us, people have long responded with words reminiscent of Palm 26 wherein the author sings of his desire to walk with God in integrity.

Like the verses in Exodus we can see that, for a long time, people have walked with God in the safety of a sanctuary. In the sanctuary people worship and wear different things. I force my youngest one to get cleaned up. We have a rule: no holes in your

clothes when you go to church. We do and act differently in the sanctuary as we seek to go there and walk there with God for a little while.

God comes into the creation that he loves. He enjoys walking with us in the cool of the evening breeze. And, he invites us to live out our Christian lives in the world. We are called not only to dress up and go to church but to leave the church and take God with us; that God may walk with us and talk with us as we make our pilgrim journey through the course of our day. We are to take God with us and introduce God to our family and our friends, our neighbors and coworkers. We are to take God in the tabernacle of our souls and meet the poor, hungry and homeless who live along the path of our life.

When we do this work of worship in the midst of our living, what we find is that God is already there. He has been waiting for us all along. God is already there in our lives and the lives of those we would seek to help. He is already there. We find it was us and our need to walk worshipfully through life that was the missing piece. I think when we do this we cannot help but see God in Christ Jesus; and we cannot help but say after everyone we meet, "Truly this is the son of God."

#### QUESTIONS

- What would happen if I wrote down everyone I saw and I met today?
- I will write down their names. And, then I will write next to their name "Jesus Christ." When I am done, I will spend 30 minutes and pray quietly.
- What was your experience?

#### PRAYER

*Jesus Christ comes into our midst and opens his arms to us on the hard wood of the cross. Help us to worship God by opening our arms as God's saving embrace to the world around us. Amen.*

## **Day 32: Exodus 31-33, Psalm 27, Matthew 28**

*by The Rev. Barbara Crafton*

It was a miracle that Moses even lasted forty years in the wilderness with the Israelites. What with their steady whining and frequent backsliding, leading them was no picnic. And his brother Aaron, whom he trusted, was little better — here, for instance, we read about the golden calf they make while Moses is up on the mountain talking to God.

There is something distinctly familiar in Aaron's response when his brother catches him in the act: "Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" Well, that's not exactly how it went down, is it? The writer of Exodus makes sure we know that Aaron worked pretty hard himself on that golden calf ("fashioning it with a tool"). It didn't just pop out of the fire like magic— Aaron MADE it.

Forming a golden idol out of people's melted earrings is not a sin we're likely to commit today. But minimizing our own role in the sins we do commit is alive and well. We see it on the news all the time: "Mistakes were made," someone in public life says carefully, which falls considerably short of saying "I made a mistake." And all of us know what it is to avoid owning up to our own less-than-holy moments. Even to ourselves.

Just come clean, we silently beg the straying politician as he parses his words ever-so-carefully into the forest of microphones facing him and his frozen-faced spouse. Get it over with. Yes. Do it. However much a truth hurts, avoiding it will hurt more, in the end.

### QUESTIONS

- There has been much discussion in this election year about the relationship between private morality and fitness for public office. How do you respond to it?

- Have you ever been caught in a web of your own falsehood? Or caught someone else? How did the decision to take responsibility — or not to do so — play out in that instance?

#### PRAYER

*Merciful God, you know the secrets of our hearts. Give us the integrity and the courage to be what we seem to be, and lead us back to the truth when we stumble and fall short of it. For you never turn away when we turn to you, and for this we give you humble thanks. Amen.*

The Rev. Barbara Crafton is noted author and retreat leader.

#### **Day 33: Exodus 34-36, Psalm 28, Mark 1**

*by The Rev. Barbara Crafton*

“Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: ‘No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.’ And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.”

Can you imagine — a capital campaign so wildly successful that people must be ordered to stop contributing? Neither can I. Human beings form societies in order to accomplish things that are too big for one person to do alone. From ancient hunting and subsistence farming to the modern stock market, we reach out for help when we can’t do it by ourselves. We make teams, sell shares, set up committees, hire assistants. Many hands make light work, we say.

Unless they don’t.

One of the great truths of life together is that it always causes friction. We can’t read each other’s minds. We each have our own vision. A great leader communicates her vision in a way that

others can see and embrace it, but there is usually a slip or two along the way — nothing fatal, usually, but different enough from what we expect to require a little more flexibility than we thought we'd need when we began. If you are undone by the unexpected, life will make you a nervous wreck in no time. If we want to accomplish anything in life, we'd better surrender at least some of our rigidity.

We must also be ready to move through our projects. The people who brought in all those things for enhancing Israel's worship of God were so excited about the first stage of the effort that they wanted to stay there. They would have brought in fancy fabrics forever. But now it was time to stop collecting goods and begin deploying them — a different activity altogether.

We can't prepare forever. Eventually, it is time to take the plunge and use what we have.

#### QUESTIONS

- Have you ever given or received a gift that was not needed? Embarrassing! How was that communicated?
- Have you ever gotten stuck in the preparation phase of something you cared about? How were you helped to move on?

#### PRAYER

*God of all our blessings, I want to help. Help me do so cooperatively, with an open mind and a listening heart. Help me not to take it personally when someone tempers my enthusiasm. Help me to entrust the outcome of all human effort to you. Amen.*

#### **Day 34: Exodus 37-39, Psalm 29, Mark 2**

*by The Rev. Barbara Crafton*

It's not always easy to see — the biblical writers were human beings, as we are, and sometimes confused their own customs

and preferences with the divine will, as we sometimes do. But a thread of blessing winds through the laws laid on Israel: it is for our good and for our joy that God makes demands on us. At bottom, the law is for us, not against us.

Often, we see Jesus interacting with people who have lost sight of this. Grimly competitive in their by-the-book fidelity to the letter of the law, they react with violence to the intimacy with God upon which Jesus bases his own relationship to it — “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:28) For Jesus, the law points consistently to a loving God. For them, it has become an end in itself.

Many Jewish writers speak of the enormous blessing of Sabbath, a blessing which continues through even the most secular life. They get up from a meeting and take their leave, take an early train home, breathe deeply of a weekly rest – a rest like the one which even God embraced. From it they emerge to face another challenging week, knowing that the blessing of Sabbath will come again, and soon.

## QUESTIONS

- Have you ever found a freedom wrapped in a restriction? Something you would not have seen were it not for being unable to do what you wanted to do?
- Have you ever broken a rule for a good reason?

## PRAYER

*O God, we thank you for the things we can do and the things we can't. Help us to see the freedom wrapped in our restrictions, and to look beneath the surface of our rules to discern their spirit. Amen.*