

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 8 (February 24 – March 2)

Day 50: Numbers 4-5, Psalm 41, Mark 15

by The Rev Dr. Lydia Mwaniki

Mark 15 presents the most difficult experience of Jesus in his earthly life. This experience was a consequence on betrayal, which Jesus had predicted in Mark 14:18; “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.” This prediction came to pass in Mark 14:43 when Judas one of the Twelve, his betrayer, came with an armed gang as though to arrest a criminal. They then handed him to the authorities to be tried. In Mark 15, the Good Friday experiences of Jesus include trial, beating, mocking, crucifixion and finally death.

We may never quite know the same agony of betrayal. But many have known similar ‘Good Friday’ experiences of agony. The psalmist’s ‘Good Friday’ experience in Psalm 41 for example is the agony of betrayal by friends, who rejoice in his sickness and wish him dead.

What are your ‘Good Friday’ experiences? Have you suffered betrayal and rejection by close friend? Jesus had a similar experience and so he understands what you are going through. He is journeying with you very closely in that experience so that you are never alone. Like the psalmist who shows his total dependence on God, our help is in the Lord. Just lay your total trust in him. He will deliver you because he has trodden the same path.

QUESTIONS

- Recount your past ‘Good Friday’ experiences of agony and distress
- How did you go about each of them?
- From your experiences, what good can come out of a ‘Good Friday’ experience?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I rejoice in my 'Good Friday' experiences because I know you are with me. May those who rejoice in my troubles confess about your goodness and faithfulness to me, and turn to you for forgiveness. Amen.

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Day 51: Numbers 6-8, Psalm 42, Mark 16

by The Rev Dr. Lydia Mwaniki

A story is told about tiny frogs who organized a competition. The goal was to climb up a very high tower. Down the tower there was a huge multitude who had come to watch the race and to cheer up the competitors. Very many tiny frogs started off the race. But meanwhile, you could hear some of the voices from the multitude saying:

No one can make it! The tower is very tall. No one has ever climbed up there. You will not make it!

The tiny frogs began to give up one by one as the voices from the multitude became louder and louder. After a while, all gave up except *ONE* tiny frog who made it to the top. This was a big surprise to the multitude who then decided to do an investigation in order to find out how the tiny frog managed to get to the top. Guess what? It happened that the tiny frog was *DEAF!*

Today's Gospel reading (Mark 16) brings us Good News of Resurrection. There is life beyond the Good Friday experience of death. Jesus persevered to the end in order to accomplish his mission and goal of reconciling humanity with God and with one another. The road to success is difficult. But like Jesus, we must be determined to accomplish our goals. It doesn't matter how dark our Good Friday experiences are. We need to focus beyond them to the day of victory- the day of resurrection. We must live beyond the grave. Like the deaf frog, we need to be deaf to the

voices of discouragement from within us and all around us that come between us and our success. Move on with Jesus!

QUESTIONS

- From the above story of the tiny frogs, who in your experience represents the multitude that pulls you down the tower?
- What lessons do you learn from Jesus' resurrection and the tiny deaf frog about how to deal with the multitude?
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PRAYER

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. For I will yet praise him. My savior and my God" (Ps 42: 5, 11). Amen.

Day 52: Numbers 9-11, Psalm 43, Luke 1

by The Rev Dr. Lydia Mwanik

A Chinese pastor once gave his testimony of having spent 18 years in prison for the sake of his faith. His task was to empty the human waste cesspool:

Because the pit was so deep, I could not reach the bottom to empty; I had to walk into the disease-ridden mass and scoop out successive layers of human waste, all the time breathing the strong stench...So, why did I enjoy working in the cesspool? I enjoyed the solitude...I could be alone and could pray to our Lord as loudly as I needed. I could recite the Scriptures, including the Psalms I still remembered, and no one was close enough to protest. Also, I could sing loudly the hymns I still remembered...again and again...I experienced the Lord's presence. He never left me nor forsook me. And so I survived and the cesspool became my private garden (Sam Storms "Praise God in the Midst of your Darkness).

Both the Psalm reading and Luke 1 bring examples of two different people who still find it possible to praise God and serve him in their cesspool experiences. Psalm 42 is a prayer of someone in exile. Like the Chinese pastor, he is in the hands of

the ungodly, who treat him in a cruel way. He longs to go back to Zion his homeland. However, in this cesspool he says, 'I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise him...'

In Luke 1, Zechariah and Elizabeth did not have children. This would be enough reason to doubt God's love and faithfulness and lax in his service. But on the contrary, when angel Gabriel comes to break the Good News that they will bear a son, he finds Zechariah deeply involved in God's service in the Temple (Lk 1:8). Then the angel says to him, "God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son..." (Lk 1:13).

Our praise and service to God is not conditioned by our circumstances, whether good or bad. We praise and serve God for who He is. Try praising God in your cesspool!

QUESTIONS

- What is your cesspool experience like?
- What will you do *now* to ensure that you continue praising and serving God despite your strong feeling that God has abandoned you?

Day 53: Numbers 12 – 14, Psalm 44, Luke 2

by The Rt. Rev. Henry Parsley

As we "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Holy Scriptures a helpful question to ask is: what does this text tell us about God and about ourselves? At its deepest levels, the Bible reveals both the nature of God and the reality of us.

Numbers 12-14 continues Israel's wilderness journey. It is a story of profound doubt and fear. The peoples' resources are challenged. There is distrust of Moses. Unrest is rampant. The people complain that God is not with them. It would be better to 'go back to Egypt' where life – even in slavery- seems safe.

So it is with us. In the deserts of the heart we wonder if God is really there. Fear is endemic to our nature, tempting us back to wherever “Egypt” is for any one of us.

Moses reminds them again and again that God is with them on the journey. God “abounds in steadfast love.” (14.18). Such *hesed* is tough love sometimes, holding us accountable. But it is always faithful. If we but trust, God’s steadfast love will always see us through.

Luke 2 tells us of the birth of the One who is Emmanuel, *God with us*. Here uniquely is the account of angels appearing to shepherds in a blaze of glory. “Do not be afraid...I am bringing you good news of great joy,” an angel says. The joy is that Jesus, God in the flesh, is the incarnation of the divine steadfast love.

Shockingly, the Messiah is laid in a manger. Jesus’ birth in a poor stable is a sign that no place is too lowly for him to be, no person too unworthy for his embrace, no fear unable to be cast out by his love. There was no room in the inn because God wants to make a home in every room of our poor lives.

In the deserts of the heart God’s steadfast love and grace are ever present. It is our nature to doubt, but God’s nature to be faithful. Because of this hope is real, and where there is hope there is life. With Mary may we ‘treasure these things and ponder them in our hearts’.

QUESTIONS

- Reflect on your fears. Is there a persistent thing that makes you afraid, and tempts you to go back to “Egypt?” Reflect on it.
- Be still and imagine that Jesus is beside you. He asks ‘what can I do for you today?’ How would you answer?

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PRAYER

O God, in Jesus you have come among us and showered us with your steadfast love. In the desert journeys of our lives keep us

moving forward in faith. Come to us at the point of our greatest need and help us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bishop Henry Parsley has recently retired as the Bishop of Alabama.

Day 54: Numbers 15 – 17, Psalm 45, Luke 3

by The Rt. Rev. Henry Parsley

Luke, like all good physicians, paid attention to detail. In his gospel our Lord's life is richly grounded in historical fact. Chapter 3 begins telling us exactly when the ministry of John the Baptist began – in the 15th year of the Emperor Tiberias, when Herod was ruler of Galilee, etc. The gospel opens up on the great stage of the ancient world.

Luke stresses Jesus' absolute immersion in the whole human story. He is being clear that Jesus' mission of bringing the good news of grace is not just for Israel but for all – absolutely all. He is "a light to enlighten the Gentiles," as old Simeon put it in his beautiful song. His humanity is our humanity.

Similarly, in verses 25 – 38 Luke gives us the genealogy of Jesus traced through David, Jacob, Noah, and ultimately "Adam, the son of God." For Luke he is the "new Adam," the son of God who gives us back our true nature and shows us how to be fully human.

At Jesus' baptism the Spirit descends on him and he hears the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased." There are few more eloquent, life-transforming words in the Bible. Our baptisms participate in Jesus' baptism. As we participate in Christ we can hear God say to us too, 'You are my son, my daughter, the Beloved.'

This is not easy to hear. Like the people of Israel in the wilderness in Numbers 15-17, we doubt. We experience volcanic moments where we know that we have missed the mark. We lose our way.

But when God looks upon us he sees Christ in us. He sees not our imperfection, but our Lord's perfection, imputed to us. "You are the Beloved," he says. That is the deepest truth about you.

There is something called the mirror theory in psychology, which asserts that we see ourselves most truly in the face of those who love us. The gospel invites us to see ourselves as God sees us in Christ – as the Beloved. This frees us to live as Christ lived from his baptism. To live beyond fear, in abundance and overflowing joy.

QUESTIONS

- Is there a particular person, or persons, in whose presence you feel beloved? Recollect what that feels like, and imagine how God holds you even more in his love.
- Make a resolve today to show someone else that they are beloved. Go and do it.
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PRAYER

Gracious God, source of light and life, we thank you for this magical and fragile world in all its detail and richness. Open our eyes to see your grace in all things and to rejoice in their beauty. Open our ears to hear you call us in Christ the Beloved. Open our hands that we may offer the same love to others, to the glory of your Name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 55: Numbers 18-20, Psalm 46, Luke 4

by The Rt. Rev. Henry Parsley

In today's readings two wildernesses meet: the Sinai where the Israelites continue their difficult journey and the Judean desert where Jesus endured temptation. Both remind us that the vocation of God's servants is always tested and purified. The ordeal is part of the journey.

Oscar Wilde wrote in one of his plays, "I can resist everything but temptation!" This reality of our nature has been evident since the primordial fall in Eden. It is tough to resist the seductive delights that would lead us astray. Note well that it is the Spirit who leads

Jesus into temptation. He must experience all that we experience, if he is to be our Savior. Indeed his temptations are ours as well: to be heroic, to be all-powerful, and to be sensational. All add up to *hubris*, overweening pride, our deepest desire 'to be as gods.'

Jesus counters each with words of Scripture, affirming that only God is God, not us. His profound humility and obedience overcome the will to power. So Augustine could write that in Christ 'the pride of man is healed by the humility of God.' Humility is everything.

From this soul-searching ordeal Jesus emerges ready for his ministry. In Nazareth he radically identifies himself the servant in Isaiah, whose work is to bring good news to the poor and healing to the hurt and outcast. He proclaims God's Jubilee of forgiveness and restoration for all. His messianic vocation is about love, not power. This inclusive love is scandalous to his countrymen and, not for the last time, they try to get rid of him.

The readings in Numbers conclude with the pivotal moment when Moses strikes the rock at Meribah and water flows forth for the parched pilgrims. In the midst of the desert new life is born. So it is with Jesus' wilderness experience. Through suffering he is formed for a servant life through which the living water of grace flows for all people.

QUESTIONS

- Do you remember a time of ordeal that tested your faith? Recall both the difficulty of it and any gifts that you may have received through it.
- It has been said that the opposite of love is not hate, but power. How do you respond to this idea?

PRAYER

Gracious God, as your Son endured the temptations and ordeal of the desert, grant that amid the many temptations of the world we may hold fast to you and find your love sufficient to purify us for your service; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.