

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 9 (March 3-9)

Day 57: Numbers 21-23, Psalm 47, Luke 5

by The Rev. Frank Allen

Today's readings speak to the paradox of our life with God. They speak to the mixed messages, the mixed experiences we all face in life. God is with us. God is moving in our lives and in the lives of those around us. In those sweet moments of life, God even intervenes from time to time to change our minds or our circumstances. Yet in the midst of our experience of God alive and at work in us around us, our circumstances are not always easy. We struggle. We fall. We face great difficulties and challenges that lead us to a greater dependence on God or a faith that wanes.

The reading from Numbers speaks to just this paradox in our lives with God. The Hebrews are on the verge of entering the Promised Land, but as in other times of their traveling, grumbling erupts over God's inability to give them what they think they want when they want it. God is with them, but there are still struggles to face and hurdles to overcome. Those are the snakes that begin to attack them in the midst of their following after God – real snakes, no doubt, but spiritual snakes as well.

And what a funny way God offers salvation from the attacks. Moses is commanded to make an image of a snake and hold it before those who have been bitten and they are healed – healing in the midst of hardship. God brings us delivery from enemies, but doesn't remove them completely, leaving room for a life of faith and dependence.

And to this life, Jesus first followers and we are called in Luke Chapter 5. The call of God in Jesus Christ is compelling and brings miraculous catches of fish, people healed of leprosy and paralytics restored. It also brings conflict with the powers and authorities of Jesus' day and ours. Miraculous events coupled with the challenges of living in the everyday world.

Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we, too, are called to wrestle with the challenges and blessings that are ours in God.

QUESTIONS

- Where in your life do you see God at work in the midst of life's struggles?
- What would you tell someone else about this life with God and the blessings and trials that come for all of us?

PRAYER

Blessed Lord, you promise life to all who answer your call, give us confidence and faith to trust in you though the road ahead of us appears dark and difficult, and bring us home in safety at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Frank Allen is Rector of St. David's Church in Radnor, Pennsylvania.

Day 58: Numbers 24-26, Psalm 48, Luke 6

by The Rev. Frank Allen

Each day brings the opportunity for us to grow more adept, more confident in our following after Jesus into a life that's really life. We may struggle and even fail today. Our growth and confidence may grow in increments so small that we think we are standing in place are even receding, but by God's grace this is not so. Take heart, for by God's choosing and God's mercy, we are becoming the persons God has called us to be.

Today's task is to pay attention to God's purposes for our lives and not our own purposes alone. God has called us to live a certain way and to build a certain kind of community, a community that lives in such a way that we remain close to God and draw others by the way we live.

The Hebrews find this dual purpose out as they come into closer contact with their neighbors, the Moabites. They forget the purposes and the kind of life God has called them to lead among themselves and in the midst of people who don't know the one

true God. They begin to intermarry and even worship other gods. The result is a swift and harsh judgment that makes many Christians uncomfortable and wondering if this God is the same God Jesus calls Father. Rest assured that it is and that the discipline, harsh though it is, is meant for their good in order that they may return to the life God has been calling them to live.

Jesus' followers face a different challenge regarding the worship of other gods, gods more subtle than the gods of the Moabites. Too easily we mistake religion and religious practices for God's purposes at work in our lives. The Sabbath is nothing to be worshiped nor are other religious laws or practices. They are the means to the ultimate end – God.

So today, let's remember to live the life that God has called us to live in spite of the temptations and other ways of living. It's the opportunity we need to help us grow as followers of Christ.

QUESTIONS

- In your practice of your faith, do you find yourself willing to share your faith by the way you live your life? What does that look like?
- Where are the practices of Christianity getting in your way of living as a Christian?

PRAYER

Merciful Lord, give us strength for today to acknowledge you in all our ways. And though we may forget you, please do not forget us for the love of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 59: Numbers 27-29, Psalm 49, Luke 7

by The Rev. Frank Allen

God's ways are not our ways, the prophet Isaiah tells us later this year. God's ways are different than our ways of power and prestige and physical vitality. And though it's not that God has a particular judgment against power or prestige or physical

strength, it's just that God approaches them from the backside as though they are of secondary importance.

The pleas of Zelophehad's daughters over what property in the Promised Land would be allotted to their family since their father has no male heirs appears to be a fairly cut and dried issue. Property ownership by women in Moses' day was unusual. The laws of the day should make for an easy decision – no. On the other hand, the God of justice might have other ideas and grant the land in the name of fairness and evenhandedness. So what's the man of God's first response to this apparently easy decision? Moses brings the matter before God and awaits God's decision. Moses is a man of God because he relies on God first and foremost. The Lord speaks to Moses and the matter is decided with a wisdom that is far beyond most of us.

Psalms 49 is the most proverbial of all the psalms, reminding us of the importance of wisdom and the fleeting reality of life. Neither power, nor prestige, nor long life compares to the true riches found in the wisdom and the life lived with God.

And it is the faith, not the worthiness of the centurion that brings healing to the centurion's servant. It is faith, not the importance or unimportance of the widow of Nain that empowers Jesus to bring her son back to life. It is faith that brings forgiveness to the sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet with oil and tears. It is faith that saves us.

God's ways may not be our ways, but when we seek the Lord and offer what little faith we have, God will give us the answer and change the circumstances of the world around us. It is the opening of the door of our lives that gives God permission to enter in.

QUESTIONS

- When is the last time you prayed and asked God to help you with a question or some difficulty you are facing in your life?

- Where do you have a need in your life that you could open the way for God to heal you?

PRAYER

Lord God, we trust that you are a God who provides us all we need; help us to set aside our reliance on earthly power and prestige and prosperity and out our trust in you first, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 60: Numbers 30-32, Psalm 50, Luke 8

by The Very Rev. June Osborne

Luke Chapter 8 ends with three vivid stories of Jesus bringing liberty and assurance to some anguished people. We are drawn into the troubles they face and are amazed by the way Jesus meets them in the midst of their very specific needs.

Firstly, the disciples are facing the danger of a storm at sea. We all know what it's like to panic in the face of fear and for anxiety to overwhelm us. Jesus' question 'Where is your faith?' may seem like a harsh response but isn't it exactly what we need to ask ourselves sometimes when we're trapped by fear?

The Gerasene Demoniac was also imprisoned but by a form of mental torment. Jesus' rescue of him, involving as it does a herd of pigs rushing into the lake couldn't be more dramatic, but the story focuses not on the lost herd but on the wonder of how much God had done for him.

And then we have the parallel needs of Jairus' 12 year old daughter and the woman who had bled for that same length of time. They were victims of chronic and acute illness, and Jesus takes time with them and heals.

In our psalm God says to those who follow him 'Call on me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you and you shall glorify me'. Some of the troubles of our world seem beyond our control. We read of the aggression against the Midianites reminding us of the misery and cruelty of war. All of us can become victims of fear, torment

or illness. Yet Jesus' encounters with these individuals remind us of how he wishes liberty for each one of us and in our troubles we should not forget God, or what He wants to do for us.

QUESTIONS

- Which of the people Jesus meets in Luke 8 do you best relate to, and why?
- What binds and limits our life, and how might we seek for a greater liberty?

PRAYER

O God our Father, you are the comfort of the sad and the strength of those who suffer. Hear the prayers of all your children who cry out to you in their troubles, and to every soul that is distressed today grant mercy, refreshment and liberty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Very Rev. June Osborne is Dean of Salisbury Cathedral in England.

Day 61: Numbers 33-35, Psalm 51, Luke 9

by The Very Rev. June Osborne

The editor of the psalms tells us that Psalm 51 was composed by David after the prophet Nathan had rebuked him for his desire of Bathsheba and all that followed from it. We know that after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC the king entered into penitential rites on behalf of his nation and this text may have been part of that corporate confession. The language of contrition and confession means that we often use it as part of our Lent journey of worship.

'Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin' isn't only a religious expression for few men or women lead their lives without some sense of failure or remorse, and all have a great need of forgiveness: of being forgiven but also that they might forgive themselves.

It was the good news of forgiveness and a changed life which Jesus' disciples took with them on their missionary endeavors. You can imagine that when they returned they would want to share their exploits and their own growth in faith. They are thwarted, first by the crowds who demand Jesus' attention and who need feeding. But then Jesus himself begins to explain that his messianic calling is one of suffering not triumph, and they too must 'take up their cross'. That cross will be different for each of us. Denying ourselves is a long and challenging path and it isn't easy to absorb how it brings us life.

As we come towards the end of Numbers there is a recollection of the 42 stages of Israel's journey through the Wilderness from Egypt and before they begin to settle in a new land of promise. Our own journey, learning how to be true followers of a suffering Lord, might sometimes feel just as arduous but through it God creates in us a clean heart, and puts a new and right spirit within us.

QUESTIONS

- What do you think might be your 'cross' which you have been asked to take up in order to follow Christ?
- Is there something which you wish to confess or express penitence for today?

PRAYER

Loving God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in me a clean heart that I may obtain from you a knowledge of your mercy and a deep sense of your forgiveness; in your holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 62: Numbers 36, Psalm 52, Luke 10

by The Very Rev. June Osborne

At the end of the tenth chapter of Luke Jesus engages with two people who seek to justify themselves. The lawyer wants an individual religion which would guarantee his eternal destiny and make him feel that he'd ticked all the boxes of what was required

of him. The disciple Martha similarly wanted everything to be tidy and perfectly ordered and was prepared to tire herself to the point of resentment in order to achieve that.

Jesus confronts both of them but only when they indicate that they're discontent with the framework they've built for themselves and that they need his help. What he offers them is a different starting point.

To the lawyer he gives a wonderful story which has reinforced to every generation that religion is about right relationships, not based on prejudice or systems which exclude but on common humanity and compassion. The law requires love of God *and* neighbor. Both our Old Testament passages show us how easily those human relationships become corrupted and that for society to be good it needs the love which we call justice, without which there can never be peace.

To Martha he gives a tender rebuke and steers her towards a different set of priorities. We know that in other places Jesus enters into theological dialogue with Martha and in John's gospel it is Martha, not Peter, who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and gives voice to that conviction.

Perhaps fostering the love of God and our neighbor also needs us to stop justifying ourselves and to consider our starting points?

QUESTIONS

- Consider the issues which you find difficult to deal with and ask yourself what is it you are assuming – your starting points – which prevent you from making progress?
- Where do you try to justify yourself, and what might Jesus have to say about it?

PRAYER

Lord God, you know that it is often my starting points which lead me astray. Help me to always sense your priorities and to foster your love so that worldly cares and a desire to justify myself may not distract me from doing your will. Amen.