



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 4, Year B
March 11, 2018

[RCL] Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Numbers 21:4-9

Earlier this year, I made my first transatlantic flight from the United States to Italy. When I first received my plane ticket, I took note of the fact that I would be on an airplane for close to ten hours, but I didn't fully grasp what it would be like to be confined to such a small space for such a long period of time. Only a few short hours into the flight and I found myself obsessively checking the "flight tracker" on the screen on the back of the seat in front of me. I was overcome with impatience, yet I was powerless to change anything about my situation. Knowing from my own experience that patience is a rare virtue, I can't blame the Israelites for growing restless as they wandered in the desert. If you or I were in their place, chances are we would have reacted in a similar way. Perhaps then the lesson we may learn from this passage is not that we should be able to remain perfectly patient at all times, but that we should not allow our impatience to cause us to lose sight of the God who calls us out, journeys with us, and will not abandon us in the wilderness.

- Imagining your life as a journey, to what destination are you currently traveling?
- In moments where you have felt lost, how have you been reminded of the presence of God in your life?

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

"[The Lord's] mercy endures for ever." Forever? Forever is a long time—unfathomable even at the limits of our imagination. We struggle to comprehend how anything could last forever, because all of our life is defined by limitations and boundaries. We are born and soon after we discover that this life, as we currently know it, will not last forever. For this reason and if we are wise, we seek to make the most of our lives—living fully into each moment. Still, even in our knowing that this life will not last forever, we fail. We make mistakes and we fall short of the plans we make to become the best version of our selves. Today—in our Psalm, we are reminded that it is in our limitedness that we find reason to give thanks to the Lord, for we have been redeemed and his mercy endures forever, extending beyond the limits of our wildest imagination and the boundaries of this temporal life.

- As we contemplate the everlasting mercy of God, in what ways do you feel challenged to be more merciful to others in your life?

Ephesians 2:1-10

As we contemplate our futures, it is easy to allow our hearts and minds to become anxious about how our lives will turn out. Will I get the job or promotion I've been wanting? Have I saved enough to retire or to help my children get a good education? Have I invested my time and efforts in the right relationships? So often, our anxieties about the future are products of our own desire to earn and control the future we desire. In today's epistle, we are reminded that our ultimate future is not the product of our own hands and hard work, nor is it based on our own worthiness or our ability to discern the most fruitful decisions. Rather—our future was determined for us when we were most unworthy. God, “who is rich in mercy” chose us while we were yet sinners and gave us the gift of salvation. Today, we give thanks for we are what God made us—created in Christ Jesus for good works.

- What questions about the future currently keep you up at night?
- How might attempting to turn these worries over to God, who is “rich in mercy,” help relieve anxiety in your life?

John 3:14-21

Several years ago, in an attempt to live a healthier lifestyle, I took up the hobby of running. Now—even after running several times a week for almost five years, I find that I still learn new things, on a regular basis, that make me a better runner. Last year, for example, I discovered the importance of looking up and beyond my current stride while running. I learned this while jogging up a steep incline with my head down and not noticing a raised edge in the sidewalk just tall enough to catch the toe of my shoe. Suddenly and without warning I lost control of my stride and began to fall—for what seemed like a solid minute of trying to regain my balance. My downfall—no pun intended—was brought on by my stubborn refusal to look up beyond the present moment to see and prepare myself for what was coming next. Similarly—in life, it is tempting to be so fixated on our current circumstances that we can forget to look up and see that God has already lifted up and provided a Savior for all the world—who seeks to redeem and make all things new—even our present circumstance.

- How might trusting God to provide for your present circumstance free you up to see and prepare for what lies ahead?

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