



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 20
Proper 24 (A)
October 18, 2020

RCL: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Exodus 33:12-23

The context of this passage is the sin of the golden calf and Moses' responding intercession on behalf of the Israelites. That act had granted a tentative reprieve, but Moses here reengages God with a frantic, bulldog-like quality that recalls Abraham's interaction with God over Sodom (Genesis 18). Moses thus has the courage to seek God, to ask for the forgiveness of his people, and even to fight for a further concession. In response, God's revelation is limited and partial, with the curiously round-about quality of God's self-description in verse 19: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," echoing the famous "I am" formula concerning God's name (Exodus 3:14).

At stake, then, is our understanding of God as transcendent, untouchable, and unviewable, versus God's willingness to intervene on behalf of even the most stiff-necked of folks. The theophany that occurs in this story beautifully bears witness to both. Elsewhere, God will answer this question with another: "Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?" (Jeremiah 23:23).

- In our prayer lives, when do we know that "enough is enough" and one should let go of a prayer? When is it more important to keep pushing?
- What do you imagine that Moses sees in this scene?

Psalm 99

In this psalm, we hear both of God's particularity, as revealed through God's relationship with Israel, and God's universality, through the magnificent language of holiness. Importantly, it balances both mercy and justice, such that holiness is not a "separatist stance but a relational stance" and, like the Exodus reading, it speaks to the paradox of a God "not set apart from the world, but rather set apart to the world."¹ Israel is called to have such a relationship reciprocally with God.

How does the psalm suggest we manage that? It appeals to the great tradition of famous intercessors from the past who have done that very thing, mediated in awesome and fabulous ways, throughout Israel's history. Moses receives particular attention as an interlocutor between humanity and God, with six references occurring in this section of the Book of Psalms (90-106).

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, & William H. Bellinger (2015). *Psalms*. New York: Cambridge. 425.

Our challenge is to recognize our capacity to be such an intercessor, in the line of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, so that we might help God's people speak with God today.

- Some translations render the second half of 99:3, referring to God's holiness, as "Holy is He!" (ESV) or "He is Holy" (NIV). (Interestingly, the King James Version reads "for it is holy.") How do those translations, and the Book of Common Prayer's "he is the Holy One," add to or detract from your understanding of God?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Since they are generally recognized to be the oldest Christian writing available to us, I read these lines of Scripture with a particular awe. That understanding, of course, must be tempered by the reality that the letter itself was written deep into Paul's ministerial career. Thus, although we are reading 1 Thessalonians as the earliest of Christian witness among the extant letters, it demonstrates a writer already well-versed in his subject material. Already present then are Paul's famous triad of "faith, hope and love" in verse 3, the statement of High Christology in verse 1, and all the tantalizing clues to the history of the Early Church.

For us today, we might encounter Paul's statement about becoming "imitators of us and of the Lord" (v. 6) as somewhat arrogant. Given Paul's context, one without the long history and tradition of Christian apologetics with which we are blessed, it is not only logical that Paul would point to himself as a model but, given the persecution that he mentions in the same line, utterly brave.

- After reading this selection, how do you read the second person pronoun in the next chapter's verse 4? As singular or plural? Why?

Matthew 22:15-22

If there had been a modern press pool following Jesus and the Pharisees' exchange, an enterprising journalist might have asked the follow-up question: "What are the things entitled to the emperor? And what are the things entitled to God?" Such a clarifying rejoinder was not, however, asked or recorded, as in fact, Matthew continues his narrative with yet another exchange between Jesus and the hostile opposition.

The "coin debate" has vexed readers ever since. One noble attempt to answer it was provided by Roger Williams, the 17th-century theologian, who was an early proponent of the separation of church and state. Williams is a fascinating figure in the history of the Church; he tried to argue (against the Puritan concept of Christendom dominant in his day) that Scripture itself supported both freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. Williams suffered for that belief, but always maintained that "God is too large to be housed under one roof."

Our modern understanding of church-state relations is as flawed and limited as the Pharisees' original. Williams' witness and Jesus' response are, at the very least, a reminder that criticism of the government has itself a long lineage in the Church.

- How does one effectively discern when one should cooperate with governmental authority and when one should resist?

This Bible study, written by Charles Cowberd, originally ran in 2017.