

EPIPHANY 4

Year B

This Bible study was written by Jill Stellman for Epiphany 4 in 2012.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵ “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ ¹⁷ Then the Lord replied to me, ‘They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ But any prophet who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’

Commentary from Jill Stellman

This passage refers back to a previous passage, Deuteronomy 5:22-27, where Moses reminds the people of Israel that when they were given the Ten Commandments, they did not think they could handle listening to God directly, and so they asked Moses to be an intermediary and tell them what God says to them. In this passage, God promises to send the people of Israel a prophet who will continue to function in this way, giving them God’s message. Having a prophet appointed by God is another way that the Israelites are set apart from the nations that surround them. The verse just before this passage says that the people of Israel are not to “give heed to soothsayers and diviners,” as other nations do. Instead, God will raise up a prophet like Moses that will have God’s message, so soothsayers and diviners are unnecessary for them.

Discussion Questions

In what ways does being a part of God’s people now, i.e. being Christian, set us apart from the world around us?

How do you listen to God?

Psalm 111

¹ Hallelujah!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, *
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the deeds of the Lord! *

they are studied by all who delight in them.

³ His work is full of majesty and splendor, *

and his righteousness endures for ever.

⁴ He makes his marvelous works to be

remembered; *

the Lord is gracious and full of compassion.

⁵ He gives food to those who fear him; *

he is ever mindful of his covenant.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his

works *

in giving them the lands of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithfulness and

justice; *

all his commandments are sure.

⁸ They stand fast for ever and ever, *

because they are done in truth and equity.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;

he commanded his covenant for ever; *

holy and awesome is his Name.

¹⁰ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of

wisdom; *

those who act accordingly have a good

understanding;

his praise endures for ever.

Commentary from Jill Stelman

This psalm is a song of praise, beginning with a call to praise for the entire congregation. The psalm then gives many reasons for praising the Lord. It speaks of the greatness of God's works, and generally alternates between speaking of God's might and/or majesty in those works and God's mercy toward God's people.

There is a kind of frame regarding knowledge – verse 2 says that God's deeds “are studied by all who delight in them,” and verse 10 provides the familiar saying, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The psalmist tells us that studying God's works leads to praising God. We can see God's majesty, power, righteousness, and compassion in the things that God has made, and this leads us to praise God with all our might.

Discussion Questions

What parts of God's creation cause you to praise him spontaneously?

How does creation show that God is gracious and full of compassion?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

8 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge, ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed. ¹² But when you thus sin against brothers and sisters and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never again eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Commentary from Jill Stellan

It might seem that this passage has nothing to do with contemporary society. After all, no one sacrifices animals in temples set up to Roman gods anymore. Paul is making a more general point here, though. He is telling the Corinthians that their behavior is causing some who are weaker in faith to return to belief in idols. In an echo of the reading from Deuteronomy, Paul is telling the Corinthians that in order to set a good example and prevent their “weaker” brothers and sisters in Christ from returning to old beliefs, they need to be set apart from the society of their day by refraining from participating in some beloved social activities. Refraining from these activities may cost them friends and possibly important social connections, but Paul tells them that he is willing to give up all of this for the sake of saving the weak in faith, and that the Corinthians should be, too. In the same way, there are activities in our society that we might participate in that may cause those with a weaker faith to lose their faith, and we need to be sensitive to this.

Discussion Questions

What kinds of current social activities might cause other Christians to lose their faith, or to misunderstand the meaning of true faith in Christ?

Are we willing to give up some of our comfort and/or activities we enjoy for the sake of others?

How would you respond to the statement, “For some people, your life is the only gospel they will ever read”?

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Commentary from Jill Stelman

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus seems to not want others to know that he is God’s Son. People seem to understand that he is special from the very beginning, though, and that shows in this reading, the first activity in Jesus’ ministry after he calls his disciples. The passage begins with the amazement of the people not because of a miracle that he has worked, but because of his teaching. They can see that when Jesus teaches, he does so in a confident, authoritative manner without the equivocation that the scribes may have had. Jesus then proceeds to provide a concrete example of his authority by casting out a demon, who knows exactly who Jesus is and says so. Jesus hushes the demon (a reminder of Psalm 107:42b: “all wickedness will shut its mouth”) and casts it out. The crowd is even more amazed at this demonstration of his power, even over unclean spirits, and though Jesus may not want anyone to know that he is “the Holy One of God,” people begin to spread the word about him.

Discussion Questions

How does Jesus’ teaching amaze you?

Where and/or how do you see Jesus’ power demonstrated today?