

Bible Challenge March 12-18, 2017

Advent's weekly Bible Challenge is based upon the readings assigned for each Sunday. The Basic challenge is to re-read the texts that were read on Sunday morning and included in the Sunday bulletin. The Adventure and Explorer challenges are suggestions of different ways to deepen your knowledge of the Bible. The challenge is organized as one reading for each of five days, but find a pace or style that fits your schedule.

INTRODUCTION

During Lent we journey with all those around the world who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil. In today's gospel Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water and Spirit. At the font we are given a new birth as daughters and sons of God. As God made a covenant with Abraham, in baptism God promises to raise us up with Christ to new life. From worship we are sent forth to proclaim God's love for all the world.

DAY ONE: Genesis 12:1-4a

God's call of Abram and Sarai has a clear purpose—that through them all the families of the earth would gain a blessing. As they set out on their journey they are accompanied by promises of land, nation, and a great reputation.

¹The LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Adventure Challenge: Genesis 12.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A:* Research Abram (Abraham), for an overview of his life and his importance in the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian traditions.

Option B: Two key words from the Lord to Abram are: *go* and *bless*. How do these words or commands fit into your Lenten journey? How does the word *curse* also fit? Who is cursed and why?

DAY TWO: Psalm 121

The Lord watches over you; the Lord will not fall asleep.

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?
²My help comes from the LORD,
the maker of heaven and earth.
³The LORD will not let your foot be moved,
nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep.
⁴Behold, the keeper of Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep;
⁵the LORD watches over you;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
⁶the sun will not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷The LORD will preserve you from all evil
and will keep your life.
⁸The LORD will watch over your going out and your coming in,
from this time forth forevermore.

Adventure Challenge: Psalm 121. (If you have time, read Psalm 120 or 122; alternatively, try to memorize at least some of Psalm 121.)

Explorer Challenge: *Option A:* This is a *psalm of assents*; research what that means.

Option B: Research definitions for the word *evil*. Which definition(s) seem(s) most appropriate for verse 7?

DAY THREE: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

In the person and example of Abraham we discover that a right relationship with God does not involve earning a reward from God but entails trusting God's promises. Abraham is the forebear and model for both Jews and Gentiles, because we too trust that ours is a God who gives life to the dead.

¹What are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Adventure Challenge: Romans 4.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A:* Research *justify* (and *justification*), a key term or concept in this passage.

Option B: The same Greek word is translated *believed* in verses 3 and 17, but *trust* in verse 5. Consider how important the difference between these two English words is for your understanding.

DAY FOUR: John 3:1-17

A curious Pharisee visits Jesus by night to learn from the teacher his friends reject. Jesus speaks to him about life in the Spirit and the kingdom of God.

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Adventure Challenge: John 3.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Research *Nicodemus*.

Option B: Read Numbers 21 to learn the background for verse 14. What similarities and differences are there between the story of the bronze serpent and the story of Jesus? Why would Jesus recall this story in responding to Nicodemus?

DAY FIVE:

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O God, our leader and guide, in the waters of baptism you bring us to new birth to live as your children. Strengthen our faith in your promises, that by your Spirit we may lift up your life to all the world through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (*John 3:14-15*)

Adventure Challenge: Consider how you would explain to a non-Christian what Jesus says to Nicodemus. What does *new birth* or *born from above* mean to you?

Explorer Challenge: Review what Martin Luther says about baptism in the small or large catechism.