

Bible Challenge July 3 - 9, 2016

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 are 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

July 3 is celebrated as the Feast of St. Thomas, the apostle also known as "the twin." He is perhaps best remembered as the apostle who questioned the truth of Jesus' resurrection because he had not seen the risen Jesus with his own eyes (John 20:25), earning the nickname "Doubting Thomas." Although doubt is sometimes thought of as the opposite of faith, our readings indicate God welcomes honest questions and diversity as paths to greater faith.

DAY ONE: Judges 6:36-40

Gideon's story actually begins with a description of him hiding in fear of the Midianites who had conquered Israel. He responds skeptically to a visit by an angel who tells Gideon, "The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior." When his questions are answered, Gideon becomes one of Israel's most famous judges.

³⁶Then Gideon said to God, 'In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.' ³⁸And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.' ⁴⁰And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

Adventure Challenge: Judges 6:11 – 40.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Read Judges 6 – 8, to hear the whole story of Gideon. Note the interplay between faith, doubts, and signs.

Option B. If you are not familiar with the book of Judges, read an introduction or summary.

DAY TWO: Psalm 136: 1-4, 23-26

This hymn praises God's wonderful acts. The second line of each verse, probably a refrain sung or spoken by the people, affirms that, despite any doubts and questions we might have, God's love is unfailing.

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- ² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- ³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- ⁴ who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- ²³ It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- ²⁴ and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- ²⁵ who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- ²⁶ O give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Adventure Challenge: Psalm 136.

Explorer Challenge: The verses of Psalm 136 that are not included in our reading summarize God's role in creation and God's protection of the people of Israel. *Option A.* Research Sihon (v. 19) and Og (v. 20) and any other name or incident you don't recognize.

Option B. If you were to "modernize" this psalm, what evidence might you cite (from nature, history, or your personal experience) to demonstrate that God's "steadfast love endures forever"?

DAY THREE: Ephesians 4: 11-16

Ephesians affirms that people are different; those differences are vital to God's purpose. We mature--not by losing or suppressing our differences--but by using our differences in love to become joined together.

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Adventure Challenge: Ephesians 4.

Explorer Challenge: Is the list in verse 11 meant to be complete or exemplary? Compare Romans 12: 6-8 and Corinthians 12: 28-30. What "Christian gifts" might you add to this list?

DAY FOUR: John 14:1-7

In response to Jesus, Thomas bluntly says, in effect, "I don't get it." Jesus responds not with chastisement, but with a gentle reassurance.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Adventure Challenge: John 14.

Explorer Challenge: This exchange with Thomas is part of a longer discourse in John 13-17. Read through at least the first part of this section of John to see how Thomas's question fits into a larger pattern of questions and answers.

DAY FIVE:

PRAYER OF THE DAY: Ever-living God, you strengthened your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in the resurrection of your Son. Grant that we too may confess our faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION: You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (*Acts 1:8*)

Explorer Challenge: Research what is known about the life of St. Thomas and his role in proclaiming the gospel.