

## Bible Challenge August 14 - 20, 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 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

*The word of God is a refining fire. Jesus is the great divide in human history. He invites our undivided attention and devotion. Today, in the assembly, we are surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses." In the word and in the holy communion we are invited yet again to look to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."*

### DAY ONE: Jeremiah 23:23-29

*Because Jeremiah preaches the unpopular message of God's judgment, he suffers rejection. Today's reading distinguishes between the true prophet, like Jeremiah, who speaks God's word, and the false prophet who misleads the people through dreams. One is like wheat; the other like worthless straw.*

<sup>23</sup>Am I a God nearby, says the LORD, and not a God far off? <sup>24</sup>Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. <sup>25</sup>I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" <sup>26</sup>How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? <sup>27</sup>They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. <sup>28</sup>Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. <sup>29</sup>Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

**Adventure Challenge:** Jeremiah 23. (Be prepared to read some very harsh words.)

**Explorer Challenge:** *Option A:* Use a Bible commentary or other reference to learn of the historical context for Jeremiah's declarations.

*Option B:* Jeremiah compares the word of God to wheat, fire, and a hammer. What do these three images mean to you; how would you explain these comparisons?

**DAY TWO: Psalm 82.** *The psalmist imagines a courtroom of heavenly judges where God rises to demand justice for the weak and the needy.*

<sup>1</sup>God stands to charge the divine council assembled,  
giving judgment in the midst of the gods:

<sup>2</sup>"How long will you judge unjustly,  
and show favor to the wicked?

<sup>3</sup>Save the weak and the orphan;  
defend the humble and needy;

<sup>4</sup>rescue the weak and the poor;  
deliver them from the power of the wicked.

<sup>5</sup>They do not know, neither do they understand;  
they wander about in darkness;  
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

<sup>6</sup>Now I say to you, 'You are gods,  
and all of you children of the Most High;

<sup>7</sup>nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,  
and fall like any prince."

<sup>8</sup>Arise, O God, and rule the earth,  
for you shall take all nations for your own.

**Adventure Challenge:** Psalm 82.

**Explorer Challenge:** *Option A:* Compare the call for justice in this psalm with the call for judgment in Psalm 83. They seem to represent two different perspectives.

*Option B:* The opening image of this psalm, a picture God speaking to a divine council of other gods, contrasts sharply with the picture of God in the Day One reading, especially Jeremiah 23: 23-24. Use a Bible commentary or other resources to research the historical and social background of the psalmist's image and compare it to a similar description in 1 Kings 22:19-23.

### **DAY THREE: Hebrews 11:29—12:2**

*The author of Hebrews presents us with rich stories of faith. In a long list of biblical heroes, we find examples of trust in God that enabled them to face the trials of life faithfully. In addition to this "cloud of witnesses," we have Jesus, the perfect model of faithful endurance.*

<sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—<sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—<sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

<sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

<sup>12:1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

**Adventure Challenge:** Hebrews 11:23 – 12:12

**Explorer Challenge:** Research any of the examples or names mentioned in this reading that you might not be familiar with (for example: Rehab, Gideon, Barak, or Jephthah).

### **DAY FOUR: Luke 12:49-56**

*Jesus delivers harsh words about the purifying and potentially divisive effects of obedience to God's call. The way of the cross often leads followers to encounter hostility and rejection, even from those they love.*

[Jesus said:] <sup>49</sup>"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>they will be divided:

father against son  
and son against father,  
mother against daughter  
and daughter against mother,  
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law  
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

<sup>54</sup>He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it

happens. <sup>56</sup>You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

**Adventure Challenge:** Luke 12.

**Explorer Challenge:** *Option A:* Jesus uses the images of fire and baptism in unusual ways. Use a commentary to explore what these images represent.

*Option B:* With a dictionary or other research tools, explore the meaning(s) of *hypocrite*, a word that occurs often in the New Testament; use a concordance to learn where it most often appears and to whom the term is applied.

## **DAY FIVE:**

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

O God, judge eternal, you love justice and hate oppression, and you call us to share your zeal for truth. Give us courage to take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed, and, following your servants and prophets, to look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

### **GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. (*John 10:27*)

**Explorer Challenge:** Meditate on how we are like sheep who hear and follow (hoping God will lead us to lie down beside quiet waters); yet we are also pray to share God's zeal for truth and to have courage to stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed.