

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - August 20-26, 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

In Isaiah we hear that God's house shall be a house of prayer for all people and that God will gather the outcasts of Israel. The Canaanite woman in today's gospel is a Gentile, an outsider, who is unflinching in her request that Jesus heal her daughter. As Jesus commends her bold faith, how might our church extend its mission to those on the margins of society? In our gathering around word and meal we receive strength to be signs of comfort, healing, and justice for those in need.

DAY ONE: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

The prophet calls upon Israel to do justice in view of God's imminent intervention to save. Righteousness and obedience define who belongs to the Israelite community—not race, nationality, or any other category.

¹Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. ⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. ⁸Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Adventure Challenge: Isaiah 56. (Note the stark contrast between verses 1-8 and verses 9-12.)

Explorer Challenge: Scholars attribute this passage to *Third Isaiah*. Research *Third Isaiah*; learn who was the original audience for this passage? Was their situation similar to ours today? Does that make a difference in how we understand the passage?

DAY TWO: Psalm 67

Let all the peoples praise you, O God.

¹May God be merciful to us and bless us;
may the light of God's face shine upon us.
²Let your way be known upon earth,
your saving health among all nations.
³Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁴Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide all the nations on earth.
⁵Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁶The earth has brought forth its increase;
God, our own God, has blessed us.
⁷May God give us blessing,
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe.

Adventure Challenge: Psalm 67.

Explorer Challenge: There seems to be a tension between the opening request for mercy and the assertion in verse 4 that God judges the peoples with equity. (Note also the closing verse.) How do you understand or respond to this tension?

DAY THREE: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

God has not rejected Israel. Rather, the call and gifts of God are irrevocable, so that while all have been disobedient, God has mercy upon all.

[Paul writes:] ¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Adventure Challenge: Romans 11.

Explorer Challenge: Consider how Paul's own life and early faith journey might be a basis for his assertions in Romans 11 about Israelites? (If necessary read a summary of Paul's life.)

DAY FOUR: Matthew 15:10-28

Jesus teaches his disciples that true purity is a matter of the heart rather than outward religious observances. Almost immediately, this teaching is tested when a woman considered to be pagan and unclean approaches him for help.

¹⁰[Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Adventure Challenge: Matthew 15.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Research any word or name that you would like to know more about; examples: *Tyre, Sidon, Canaanite.* *Option B.* Read Exodus 30:17-21 and Leviticus 15 to gain some understanding of the source of Jewish rules and traditions about cleanliness.

DAY FIVE:

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of all peoples, your arms reach out to embrace all those who call upon you. Teach us as disciples of your Son to love the world with compassion and constancy, that your name may be known throughout the earth, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom and cured every sickness among the people. (*Matt. 4:23*)

Challenge: We are often quick to condemn individuals or groups with whom we disagree; pray or meditate on God's love for all peoples and Jesus's compassion for outcasts.