



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Pentecost 18**  
**Proper 22 (A)**  
**September 27, 2020**

**RCL: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46**

### **Exodus 20:1-4,7-9, 12-20**

When the people are led out of slavery and into the wilderness, they become free of the rule of Pharaoh. But what will they do now? What does it mean to be a free people? While it may be easy to see the Ten Commandments as an imposition of constraints—a series of extensive “you shall nots,” they might instead be boundaries for a new, whole life in freedom. People emerging from great oppression often have only the experience of that oppression to construct their own identity. God is showing them what is expected of them in their freedom, the boundaries of their new life to help them live into their true identities.

What is curious then, is not just what God tells the people they shall not do, but the three commandments that are statements of what they *will* do. A free people remembers the God that brought them out of their slavery. A free people does not seek God in something of their own creation, but out of their experience of deliverance. A free people honors those that gave them life. And, what seems most important for 2020, a free people remembers the Sabbath day. God explicitly instructs these people to observe a day of rest and to labor only six days a week.

- What has your practice of Sabbath been like during the Covid-19 pandemic? Have you been able to keep an entire day free of work? Have you practiced small moments of Sabbath?
- How might you incorporate even 30 seconds of Sabbath-keeping into your day today?

### **Psalm 19**

Much of the northern hemisphere is, at this moment, experiencing the explosive wonder of fall color season. Reds and yellows and oranges hang in the sky. Canopies of gold hang over our neighborhoods. If your congregation has been worshipping outside, you may be experiencing this wonder in your new, makeshift sanctuary. Psalm 19 is a beautiful meditation on the wonder of God’s creation and how it tells the story of God’s glory. The sun and the moon have personalities, run with joy through the heavens, and declare the order of the world as a testament to God’s creative power. The psalmist experiences a sense of smallness and wonder in this magnificent world, concluding the psalm with a plea to be kept from “presumptuous sins.”

- Have you ever realized how grand the world is – and simultaneously how small you are within it?
- Have you ever experienced God in the natural world, only to wonder how you fit into such a magnificent creation?

### **Philippians 3:4b-14**

Paul has every reason to believe that he has accomplished righteousness. Every aspect of his religious life until this moment has been “right” – his rituals, his lineage, his practices, even his hatred of those who disagree with him. However, Christ has come to him and Christ has transformed his knowledge of all those righteous things. He did not, as it turns out, have control over his goodness before God. Christ has now shown him another path to understanding who he is and how he must be in relationship with God. All his practices of right-religion could not truly prepare him for the reality of resurrection.

It may be easy to imagine that Paul is putting down the Judaism of his pre-Damascus road life, but this is a dangerous direction to go. Instead, is Paul putting down all obsession with right-religion that makes us believe we have control over our relationship with God? Is his message universal, encouraging Christians today to also look critically at our own concern with “doing religion right”?

- Where might Christ be calling us to look beyond our ownership of righteousness and instead toward the work of resurrection, through which God has claimed us?

### **Matthew 21:33-46**

Over the last few weeks, we’ve shifted the setting in our gospel: from “on the way” to in Jerusalem. Because this is early fall and not Holy Week, we’ve skipped over the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but it is essential when approaching this passage that we know that where we are in the arc of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus’ teachings here are charged with the same intensity and danger that surround that week of triumph and betrayal—he is preaching directly to the Pharisees, chief priests, and other temple elites who, in the same chapter, he cursed for turning the Temple into a den of robbers.

Jesus presents here a parable to the elites, asking them: what would *you* do if you were disrespected in such a way? Then he flips the tables on them, saying, “What do you think God will do when disrespected in such a way?” This is a useful rhetorical tool, a tool that makes the chief priests and Pharisees see themselves in an unforgiving light. After all, throughout the Hebrew Bible—throughout the history of all religions—religious elites have often become threatened by the voices of true prophets, prophets who speak about justice, mercy, and peace. These things tend to threaten the religious establishment that has become so good at claiming to speak for God.

The struggle, of course, with this text is: *Do* we believe that God acts retributively against those who fail to follow? To get into the technicalities here, Jesus does not necessarily claim that God will put them to a miserable death: he only asks them what they would do. He does say that the cornerstone, rejected by those who could not see its value, will be a weight too heavy to bear for those who could not see its worth. Perhaps that is the point for us as well: if following Jesus’ way of love seems too heavy a burden to bear

now, what will it feel like to bear when wealth, power, and prestige are stripped away and we are met with the reign of God?

- What aspects of the way of Jesus feel especially hard to bear these days? What small practices can you build in your life to create a way for these things to take root and grow?
- Where have you seen the voice of God rejected in your context today? What do you think the consequences will be for the community as a whole because of that rejection?

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