



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 5 (B)

March 21, 2021

RCL: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-13 or Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Jeremiah 31:31-34

This powerful passage speaks of God's promise of reconciliation and hope to the people of Israel. The Babylonian army had conquered Jerusalem, razed the Temple, and sent Jeremiah and many others into exile in Babylon. Many exiles believed that this traumatic defeat was God's punishment for their idolatry and their injustice towards one another. They knew they had turned away from God, and they believed God responded in kind, by turning away from them.

But Jeremiah here tells them that this is not the end of the story: even now, God is making the first move to restore their relationship. God promises to make a new and even better covenant with them—to forge an even more honest, open, and intimate connection with God's people. The people have sinned, yes; but God's forgiveness flows from an even deeper generosity, from the depth of God's longing to know and be known by God's people. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." God does not want outward signs of obedience or fear, but the love of hearts that are both just and genuine.

- All of us have turned away from God in one way or another. Be honest: when you think about repentance, do you imagine yourself having to earn back God's love? Or do you imagine God as eager to make the first move, to forgive?
- Have there been moments when you did right by someone, not out of duty or guilt, but out of authentic desire? What made that possible? How might you bring that possibility into other spheres of your life?

Psalm 51:1-13

This beautiful psalm contains some of the Bible's profound words of humility and penitence. Holding nothing back, the psalmist confesses to being "a sinner from my mother's womb," yet also confesses faith that "you look for truth deep within me, and will make me understand wisdom secretly." God will speak to the part of our souls that thrills to the truth—that pulses deep beneath our pride, our wild will to go it alone.

The psalm is a plea for God to help us "want what we want to want." That phrase from the philosopher Harry Frankfurt captures the reality that our desires often conflict or crowd each other out. The whole

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psalm is a cry to be brought again into the embrace of the parent who can calm and reorient us, upon whose presence we depend for nourishment, instruction, and care. “Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.”

- Can you name an impulse or desire that conflicts with “what you want to want?” What would it cost you to let go of that desire today?
- When do you find yourself trying to “go it alone”—to go without the help God is always offering? Where do you want to loosen your grip and let God shoulder some of the burden?

Hebrews 5:5-10

Melchizedek has the whiff of mystery about him. He appears for only a fleeting moment in Genesis 14; he blesses Abram and gives him bread and wine when Abram passes through his city on a mission to rescue his brother Lot. This was before Abram was Abraham – before God had called him and blessed him, promising to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. And it was before Melchizedek’s city, Salem, got a new name, too: Jerusalem.

In this complicated passage, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Jesus as the heir to this tradition of blessing and sharing bread and wine more ancient even than Abraham. It is a way of naming Jesus as one who brings us back to the deepest roots of the Israelite tradition in acts of sacred hospitality, and in solidarity with the most vulnerable. By describing Jesus as similar to this mysterious priest-king, the author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus used his power as God’s Son not to dominate or exclude, but to welcome, nourish, and bless.

- Can you think of someone who you met only in passing who nonetheless made an impact on you, who blessed you? Have you met a Melchizedek?
- Is there a small way you can channel your gratitude to them by being a blessing to someone passing through your life right now? What are some of the gifts you have to offer others?

John 12:20-33

This passage comes just after Jesus’ triumphal procession into Jerusalem, which we remember each year on Palm Sunday. In other words, we are beginning the most tragic chapter of Jesus’ life and ministry: his journey to the Cross. When Jesus speaks about a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies to bear much fruit, he is obviously speaking about his own impending death; that death will bring forth an explosion of life-giving grace, a life beyond death. But Jesus is also announcing that this paradoxical connection between death and life is at the heart of discipleship. He tells the Greek-speaking Jews who have come to see him—and he tells us today—that if we insist on holding tight to our lives as they are, everything we want to control and contain will eventually be taken away from us. But if we’re willing to let our lives crack open like a seed planted in the earth, we will witness an abundant outpouring of life: *in* us and *given through* us.

It is part of the mystery of life that we only enjoy that abundance by continually giving it away. Like Melchizedek, like Abraham and Sarah, we are blessed to be a blessing: to plant our lives like seeds in the earth and to share the fruits.

- Is there a part of your life, or a relationship, where you're holding on tight to "the way things have always been" amid change? What if that change isn't so much a loss as a breaking open so that God might grow something new—in you, and in the world?
- As we move into the season of spring, there are seeds stirring in the earth. Is there a part of your heart that has been lying still this winter, waiting for this moment to break open into shoots and blossoms? Is there a ministry in your community that could help that part of you grow, where you could share the beauty of God's work in you with others?

Carl Adair is a postulant for the priesthood in the Diocese of Long Island and a student at Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Meg, a radio producer and reporter. Before seminary, Carl worked in the restaurant industry and as a teacher's aide with students with disabilities; he also earned a Ph.D. in English Literature and taught college English in two New Jersey state prisons. He is the seminarian intern at Zion Episcopal Church in Douglaston, Queens, N.Y.