

PENTECOST 3

Proper 6 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Daniel Woods of St. Andrew's Theological Seminary in the Philippines in 2017.

Genesis 18:1-15

18 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰ Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?" ¹³ The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Commentary from Daniel Woods

In the Book of Genesis, chapter 18, verses 1-15, the ever-faithful Abraham, first of the Hebrew patriarchs, unexpectedly plays host to God and two angelic companions at an oak grove near his home

in the Hebron neighborhood, a township nestled in the Judean Mountains of Palestine. While these three visitors do not appear as anyone special, Abraham immediately recognizes his divine guests and offers them the best hospitality he possibly can. While Abraham and his wife Sarah are already very old, God informs Abraham that he will pay them another visit at an appointed time and on his return, will enable his wife to become pregnant and produce a son. Overhearing the conversation from their tent and recognizing her advanced age, Sarah is doubtful of this prospect and laughs. When she realizes that God has overheard her laughing, she is afraid to admit her lack of faith and unsuccessfully tries to deny that she had laughed.

In our contemporary world surrounded by scientific and technological advances, how often do we use these advances to justify our lack of faith in the ability of God to intervene in our lives, rationalizing that the people of biblical times were somehow different than ourselves? The reaction of Sarah in this story shows us that just as in our contemporary era, these biblical characters were no different: they also doubted the unimaginable. Sarah is already advanced in age and she knows it is biologically impossible for her to have a child at her age. Nonetheless, her ever-faithful husband Abraham responds without doubt, only faith. He had even recognized the divine origin of his anonymous visitors without question, unlike Sarah who had not realized until sometime later.

Discussion Questions

Do we allow our doubt to blind us to the divine presence in the world? What can we do to awaken ourselves and be more aware of this presence?

Are we afraid to acknowledge our doubt to God or to others? What can we do in our church communities to make it safe to acknowledge our doubt and thereby enable ourselves and our church communities to grow in faith?

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

- 1 I love the Lord, because he has heard the voice of my supplication, *
because he has inclined his ear to me
whenever I called upon him.
- 10 How shall I repay the Lord *
for all the good things he has done for me?
- 11 I will lift up the cup of salvation *
and call upon the Name of the Lord.
- 12 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord *
in the presence of all his people.
- 13 Precious in the sight of the Lord *
is the death of his servants.
- 14 O Lord, I am your servant; *
I am your servant and the child of your
handmaid;
you have freed me from my bonds.
- 15 I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving *
and call upon the Name of the Lord.
- 16 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord *
in the presence of all his people,
- 17 In the courts of the Lord'S house, *
in the midst of you, O Jerusalem.
Hallelujah!

Discussion Questions

Have you ever experienced this kind of overwhelming thankfulness to God after overcoming hardship or suffering? How did you express your thankfulness?

What are some other ways we can express our thankfulness to God?

Commentary from Daniel Woods

In Psalm 116, the psalmist expresses his relief and overwhelming feeling of thankfulness to God after recovering from illness. His faith has been strengthened and he expresses his thankfulness by committing himself to openly living out his faith, thus glorifying God.

In our contemporary age with many medical advances in technology and medicine, it is easy to overlook God's part in our successful recovery. Just as the psalmist, we must faithfully remember God's presence in our lives and the healing he offers us when we are suffering illness or other difficult circumstances. Let us always be thankful for God's healing presence and always offer the best of ourselves to him as an expression of our thankfulness.

Romans 5:1-8

⁵ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Commentary from Daniel Woods

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he sends a message of encouragement to the Christians there that they have been made right with God and are at peace with him simply through their faith in Christ. Suffering persecution was part of life for the early Christians and so Paul encourages them to see their suffering as helping to strengthen their faith and remember that God's presence is always with them. Perhaps Paul draws on his own experience of suffering for his faith. He continues by attempting to ease any doubt in their minds about God's love for them by reminding them that Jesus had sacrificed himself out of love for them even before they were right with God and undeserving—so how much more is his love for them now that they have faith in him?

Often, we feel we must do something to be worthy of God's love for us, but Paul assures us that our faith is enough. Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for us even before we had faith in him, so just as Paul assures the Christians in Rome thousands of years ago of Jesus' love for them because of their faith in him, so too can we feel assured. Faith always comes first, and any good works that we do are an expression of that faith. They are not requirements to be loved by God.

Discussion Questions

Have you ever felt suffering for your faith? Do you feel this suffering has strengthened your faith and did you feel God was present with you in your suffering?

Are you convinced of God's love for you? How can you convince others of this love?

Matthew 9:35-10:8

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

10 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” ⁸ Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Commentary from Daniel Woods

In this selection from the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus is fulfilling his mission of teaching, preaching, and healing throughout the entire Galilean region of Israel. Motivated by compassion for the people whom he had realized were in great need of healing and leadership, and also realizing the task was too great for himself alone to fulfill, he gathers together twelve of his followers, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, to assist him in his task. He delegates his authority to them. These disciples were a diverse group from all walks of life and Jesus would often complain about the lack of faith shown by the apostles he had chosen, but nonetheless, they were faithful enough to accept the task Jesus had given

them, even to the point of leaving their former lives behind and experiencing suffering. Jesus, in asserting his messiahship over his own people, while also knowing they were in great need of healing and spiritual guidance themselves, made the priority of his new apostles to go first to the Jewish people. They would provide healing to them and announce the coming of the Kingdom of God, for which John the Baptist had long been preparing them. However, while they were to accept whatever the people gave them to provide for their basic needs, they were not to request payment in the same way that Jesus himself had not requested payment from them. God’s unmerited, merciful love and healing were already payment in full.

How often do our church communities expect leaders to fulfill the mission of the church while being unwilling to actively assist in this great task? Do we see simply attending church on Sundays and perhaps participating in a Bible study session as enough of a burden in our busy lives? If we do offer to assist, do we expect something in return, even payment, before we are willing to do it? As Jesus himself realized, while there is much to do and people are in great need of healing and spiritual guidance, there is an even greater need for all of us to actively assist in this work. Let us be generous with our time and talent, even if we believe our faith is insufficient for the task, and simply offer ourselves in faithfulness and allow God to work through us.

Discussion Questions

In what ways does your church community fulfill its mission in the world? Do the church members actively assist in this mission?

In what ways can you use your time and talent to assist in the mission of your church?