ALL SAINTS' DAY

Year C

*This Bible study was written by **Kristen Ostendorf** for All Saints' Day (C) in 2022.*

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

7 In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon,
Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay
in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: [2] I, Daniel,
saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven
stirring up the great sea, [3] and four great beasts came
up out of the sea, different from one another.

[15] As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within
me, and the visions of my head terrified me. [16] I
approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth
concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose
to me the interpretation of the matter: [17] "As for these
four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the
earth. [18] But the holy ones of the Most High shall
receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom
forever—forever and ever."

Commentary from Kristen Ostendorf

Texts like this are confusing: We are dropped into an ancient conversation without a lot of context. In this case, Daniel, a prophet, is dreaming. He has an ominous vision: four great beasts come up from the deep, menacing the earth. Daniel asks the "attendant" in the story—perhaps a friendly heavenly being?—just what is going on. The message is hardly assuring; these beasts represent some kind of sinister rule over the earth, each monster representing a king.

And yet, this apocalyptic and cryptic image is hopeful: the story doesn't end with these beasts and a reign of terror. Instead, the attendant assures Daniel and us: "The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever."

Discussion Questions

What monsters lurk in the depths of your soul? How does it feel to acknowledge them?

What does the kingdom that the holy ones will inherit look like?

Who or what helps you interpret frightening dreams? How can you find hope even in the dreams and realities that scare you?

Psalm 149

[1] Hallelujah!
Sing to the Lord a new song; *
sing his praise in the congregation of the faithful.
[2] Let Israel rejoice in his Maker; *
let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.
[3] Let them praise his Name in the dance; *
let them sing praise to him with timbrel and harp.
[4] For the Lord takes pleasure in his people *
and adorns the poor with victory.
[5] Let the faithful rejoice in triumph; *
let them be joyful on their beds.
[6] Let the praises of God be in their throat *
and a two-edged sword in their hand;
[7] To wreak vengeance on the nations *
and punishment on the peoples;
[8] To bind their kings in chains *
and their nobles with links of iron;
[9] To inflict on them the judgment decreed; *
this is glory for all his faithful people.
Hallelujah!

Commentary from Kristen Ostendorf

The psalms collectively feel like an unwieldy romp through human emotions. However, Psalm 149 itself is a ride through joy, praise, and glory, to some of the uglier human emotions, such as a thirst for vengeance. This psalm makes a sudden shift in the sixth verse when it moves from songs of praise to calls for swords, punishment, and binding of enemy kings.

While the context may seem foreign to us, like the psalmist, we live in a confusing and chaotic world, with frightening national and international conflict. Swept up in fear and fervor, we also may call for our enemies to be bound up, or for those who hurt us to also suffer.

It can be comforting when thinking about challenging texts, like some of the psalms, to realize that the theology of the psalmist need not be our own. However, it is also comforting to know that God has been hearing about very human experiences like pain and revenge throughout time immemorial. By bringing all our prayers to God—even the ugly ones—we allow God to move through our fears and anxieties and create a new way for us.

Discussion Questions

What emotions are you scared to bring before God? Why?

What do you think would happen if you brought your whole self—including feelings you may be afraid of or don't like holding—into your prayers?

How do you think God feels when we bring ourselves honestly before God in prayer?

Ephesians 1:11-23

[11] In Christ we have also obtained an
inheritance, having been destined according to the
purpose of him who accomplishes all things
according to his counsel and will, [12] so that we, who
were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for
the praise of his glory. [13] In him you also, when you
had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your
salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with
the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; [14] this is the
pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as
God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

[15] I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and
your love toward all the saints, and for this reason [16] I
do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember
you in my prayers, [17] that the God of our Lord Jesus
Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of
wisdom and revelation as you come to know
him, [18] so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may perceive what is the hope to which he has
called you, what are the riches of his glorious
inheritance among the saints, [19] and what is the
immeasurable greatness of his power for us who
believe, according to the working of his great
power. [20] God put this power to work in Christ when
he raised him from the dead and seated him at his
right hand in the heavenly places, [21] far above all rule
and authority and power and dominion and above
every name that is named, not only in this age but
also in the age to come. [22] And he has put all things
under his feet and has made him the head over all
things for the church, [23] which is his body, the fullness
of him who fills all in all.

Commentary from Kristen Ostendorf

Churches often use today—All Saints' Day—as a time to remember those who have died in the past year. It's a time to look back on our losses and mourn those who are no longer with us. However, Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us that our inheritance with the communion of saints is greater than death.

Paul knew anxiety, and he knew the messiness of being in community. In fact, this letter to the Ephesians is often credited to Paul while he was jailed. Despite this letter traditionally being associated with Paul's imprisonment, Paul reminds us that we are subjected to and protected by powers greater than princes, principalities, and even death: the love of Christ Jesus. He writes that Christ has power over "every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come." We are unified in Christ's love through his resurrection. We may mourn those we see no more, but we also remain connected to them in his triumph over death.

Discussion Questions

What is your inheritance as a Christ follower?

When and how do you feel most connected to the communion of saints? Why do you think that is?

This passage says Christ is "all in all." What does that mean to you?

Luke 6:20-31

[20] Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
[21] "Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
"Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

[22] "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. [23] Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

[24] "But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
[25] "Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.
"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

[26] "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

[27] "But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; [28] bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. [29] If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. [30] Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. [31] Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Commentary from Kristen Ostendorf

Do you feel a little uncomfortable? This passage from Luke—known as the Sermon on the Plain—is this Gospel's corollary to Matthew's gentler Sermon on the Mount. While the concepts may seem familiar, Luke doesn't mince words; in this passage, Jesus' blessings are coupled with curses and leave little wiggle room for American audiences who may be rich, full, laughing, and spoken well of in their lives.

As we think about the lives of the saints who came before us—including those who led extraordinary lives of self-sacrificial love—Luke's Sermon on the Plain reminds us that to be a follower of Jesus is a blessing that may come at a cost. We may lose our wealth, our comforts, and our status. We are told to pray for and love those we may not like: something easier said than done. It's a reminder that the Kin-dom of God doesn't prize earthly markers of success, but instead relies on the teachings of the Golden Rule.

And yet, this Kin-dom is subversive. While Jesus says to "turn the other cheek," he is not requiring us to sit with injustice. Under Roman law, a person could strike another only with their right hand. A backhanded slap was how one disciplined those beneath themselves. To offer the other cheek is not to be submissive: it's to demand that someone strike you as their equal and be hit with an open palm rather than the back of the hand. In this Kin-dom, all claim equal footing as beloved creations of God.

Discussion Questions

What is your gut response to Luke's Sermon on the Plain?

How does "turning the other cheek" look in today's world?

What costs are you willing to pay to follow Jesus?

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