

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
19th Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

ACNA Readings – Genesis 32:3-8, 22-30; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Introduction. The spring-fall cycle of the seven Feasts of the Lord (Lev 23) closes with the end of Sukkot (Feast of Booths) this Sunday. The holiday Simchat Torah (Rejoicing with the Torah) immediately follows Sukkot, marking the end and restart of the Jewish Torah lectionary, finishing Deuteronomy and beginning again with Genesis.

Common Theme. In the RCL, the psalm and Paul's exhortation to Timothy speak of the value of Torah/the Scriptures. Torah (God's catechetical instruction) is so important for us that he promises to write it on the hearts of his people as part of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. In the ACNA, most of the readings point to wrestling with God in prayer and trusting that he, in his goodness, will bless us when we do.

Jeremiah 31:27-34. "How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews" is a mocking line attributed to Norman Ewer in the 1920s, to which there have been several Jewish retorts: "Not quite so odd. / The Jews chose God", or more light-heartedly by Leo Rosten: "Not odd of God. / Goyim annoy 'im." A rejoinder by Cecil Browne goes, "But not so odd / As those who choose / A Jewish God / But spurn the Jews."

This passage in Jeremiah 31 is taken as a proof text by Christians for the promised new covenant that will not be like the covenants of old (31:32) since God promises "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (31:33). This is the covenant context to which Jesus refers at the Last Supper with the bread and wine being signs of a new covenant. The writer of Hebrews in chapter 10, speaking of Jesus' perfect sacrifice, directly references Jeremiah 31:33-34. Christians read this as the new covenant replacing the old covenants, hence we have even inserted two main headings in the Bible – Old Testament and New Testament. What Christians tend to gloss over or ignore is the framing of the entire new covenant in 31:27, "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." The new covenant is not a radical departure from the so-called old covenants but stands in perfect continuity.

How odd of God, but we are not told why God chose Abram. But God does and makes a covenant with Abram (later renamed Abraham) and his descendants. It is an exclusive covenant, yet also contains the promise that all nations will be blessed (Gen 22:17). This pattern is repeated again in the Mosaic covenant. God chooses the Hebrew people for his own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deut 7:6). The intention again is for God's chosen people to be a blessing and a light to the nations (Ps 67, 97, 117; Isa 42:6, 49:9, 60:3). When Jesus ushers in the new covenant, his focus is unashamedly and almost exclusively on the houses of Israel and Judah. When he sends out his disciples, he commands them "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6). To the Canaanite woman he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24), yet he goes on to heal her daughter. He goes out of his way to go through Samaria and stops to talk to a

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Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:1-26). He heals the servant of a Roman centurion (Matt 8:5-13). Such is the new covenant that is made in and through Messiah Jesus that while it is for the houses of Israel and Judah, the cup runs over (Ps 23) in abundant blessing for all peoples and all nations – the entire world. Paul holds this understanding in perfect tension when he says that he “is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom 1:16).

Psalm 119:97-104. Herman Charles Bosman was born on 5 February 1905 in the Cape Colony and died at aged 46 on 14 October 1951. He is regarded as one of South Africa's greatest short-story writers. He developed a style that was heavy in satire. Any reference to Psalm 119 conjures to mind (for a South African preacher) Bosman's humorous story called “A Bekkersdal Marathon” in which *Dominee* (Afrikaans for Pastor) Welthagen announces to his congregation that they will sing Psalm 119, but nods off to sleep before announcing which verses. The organist launches into the opening bars, and so the congregation begins to sing from verse one. As the verses progress, church deacons give encouragement to the congregation by walking up and down the aisle. The organist begins to flag and calls for more “medicine” for his hip flask. The verger, whose task it is to pump the organ by hand, becomes completely exhausted so one of the deacons, who was also a warden at the local prison, comes back with several convicts to take over the pumping. The story builds up through the verses and things go from bad to worse until the congregation makes it to the end of singing all 176 verses. In the sudden silence, Welthagen wakes with a startle and unsure of where he is in the service, announces “We will sing Psalm 119”.

The full scope of Psalm 119 can have that effect. It can be too much to take in at once. The psalmist circles again and again to walking in the ways of the Lord by meditating and immersing oneself in God's instruction (Law, Torah, decrees, statutes). The person who does this will become wiser than their enemies (119:98), will have more insight than their teachers (119:99) and greater understanding than their elders (119:100). God's word when dwelt on and digested will be sweeter than honey (119:103)! The fact that this is the effect of God's word should not be a surprise for it says in Psalm 34:8, “Taste and see that the LORD is good.” The LORD is good and so is God's instruction.

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5. Paul's charge to Timothy is troubling and inspirational at the same time. In verses 10 to 13 he reminds Timothy of his, Paul's, own teaching, way of life, purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – a long list of mixed blessings. Things will go from bad to worse with godly people being persecuted (3:12) and evil people deceiving and being deceived (3:13). Paul exhorts Timothy to continue in what he has learned from a young age from the holy Scriptures (3:14-15). These are the Hebrew Scriptures, the Bible of the synagogue, that Paul asserts are “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ [Messiah] Jesus” (3:15). He reinforces his very Jewish and high view of Scripture by saying it is God-breathed (3:16).

At Mount Sinai God spoke the immortal words of Torah that cascaded down the mountain and rumbled throughout the camp of the Israelites. The Hebrew text says that the gathered people saw the voice of God that day: “And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar,

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and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar” (Exod 20:15). Seeing a voice seems like an oxymoron. Yet Rashi comments “They saw what was audible, which is impossible to see elsewhere.”¹ The spoken word of God manifested so that it was seen as well as heard. In an even more startling claim, John writes that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) and unpacking this further says in 1 John 1-3:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.

Paul charges Timothy, in view of who Messiah Jesus is in God (the Word made flesh), to preach the Word at all times (4:1-2). This comes with a strong warning that there will be those who will undermine the importance of Messiah Jesus and, worse still, people will draw to themselves teachers who tickle their ears telling them only what they want to hear to suit their own desires (4:3-4). Notwithstanding this, Paul encourages Timothy to persevere (4:5). Hence this passage is both troubling and inspirational at the same time.

Luke 18:1-8. The Parable of the Persistent Widow is scrutinized in detail by Brad Young in “*The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*”. What follows is a summary of his main discussion points. The parable of the Persistent Widow is closely related to another one in Luke 11:5-8 in terms of word pictures, humorous mini-drama, and the major theme that emerges from both plots. They serve as situation comedies from first-century Jewish life that convey a powerful message about God and his ways with his people. Both parables use role reversals or exaggerated characterisations of actions (by a contemptible friend and a corrupt judge) that are so unlike God as to make the listeners understand God’s actual nature better. Young writes:

The exaggerated behaviour of the person who refused help to a friend in need and the judge who did not care about a helpless widow is reversed in the divine character. Yet when it came to prayer, the disciples prayed as if God were like an untrustworthy friend or an evil judge, unconcerned about their needs. The parables challenge one’s concept of God while they teach expectancy in prayer.²

In what is perhaps, therefore, better named “The Parable of the Corrupt Judge”, a widow deals with a judge who neither feared God nor cared about people (18:2). Justice is clearly not his concern, and

¹ Rashi commentary on Exod 20:15, *The Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi Commentary*, Chabad.org. Retrieved 6 Oct 2022. https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/9881/jewish/Chapter-20.htm/showrashi>true

² Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2012). For this and the following quotes, see chapter 2, 41ff.

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he is consumed instead with self-interest (18:5). God, on the other hand, in ancient Jewish thought is viewed as the righteous judge who vindicates the widow and orphan. Ben Sira, for example, in Sirach 35:14-18 says:

He [God] will not ignore the supplication of the fatherless, nor the widow when she pours out her story. Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek as she cries out against him who has caused them to fall?...the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds.

Prayer is an important theme in both these teachings. God hears the prayers of people in need. However, in Jesus' skilled story-telling this lesson about prayer punched home. Young explains:

The central message of the parable is never far from the minds of the listeners. If an unscrupulous magistrate will be moved to act justly because of the unrelenting tenacity of a helpless widow, how much more will the one good God answer persistent prayer? If a corrupt judge can be influenced for good by someone of little importance of no worldly clout, how much more can the person created in the divine image pray expectantly to the compassionate God.

The parable ends (18:8) with a messianic-loaded question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" The faith portrayed in this parable is tenacious persistence or chutzpah. It is to be found in the friends who break a hole open in a roof to lower their paralyzed friend in front of Jesus. It is the brazen tenacity of the woman with bleeding who grabs the hem of Jesus' garment or the woman who breaks into Simeon's home to anoint Jesus. It is also the blind man in Jericho who shouts for the son of David, despite being rebuked by the crowds. Thus a seemingly very negative parable conveys something highly positive.

ACNA Readings

Genesis 32:3-8, 22-30. Jacob's life is one of constant struggle. He was born struggling with his brother Esau, holding onto the older brother's heel (25:26). He won a struggle using food to get Esau's birthright (25:39-34). With the assistance of his mother, he even won for himself the blessing from Isaac intended for Esau (27:1-29). Perhaps not surprising, Jacob must flee from a furious Esau intent on revenge (27:41). Yet even in the struggle of this fraught departure, Isaac blesses Jacob (28:1). Jacob's struggles continue as he tries to find a wife, grow his family and increase his flocks (chs. 29 and 30), yet even as he struggles, he is blessed by God. Another key family relationship deteriorates and Jacob has to flee from his father-in-law, Laban (ch. 31), which brings him around to having to confront his much earlier struggles and his (vengeful) brother Esau. Jacob is not overly optimistic about the outcome. He forewarns his brother that he is returning, that he has thrived while being away, and appeals to find favour in his brother's eyes (32:3-5). Esau's response is menacing as he comes to meet Jacob with 400 (presumably armed) men (32:6). News of Esau's pending arrival sparks great fear and distress in Jacob (32:7), which he has to struggle through.

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Jacob hopes for the best and plans for the worst. He divides his main group and all his wealth into two groups so that if one group is attacked by Esau the other will have time to escape (32:7-8). He prays to God, humbling himself, asking God for help and reminding God of his promises (32:9-12). He sends several generous trains of gifts ahead to his brother to try to sweeten and soften him (32:17-21). But before Jacob and Esau's two groups properly meet up, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man throughout the night (32:24). Jacob refuses to let go until he receives a blessing from his struggle (32:26). The figure says to Jacob, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (32:28). Israel means "he struggles with God". Jacob names the place where he had this ultimate struggle Peniel (which means "face of God"), saying "It is because I saw God face to Face, and yet my life was spared" (32:30). All his life, Jacob's struggles had given rise to blessing and this was no different.

Psalm 121. Psalm 121 is one of fifteen songs of ascents, which start at Psalm 120 and end with Psalm 134. Each of the psalms in this collection begins with the title "A Song of Ascents." As Jerusalem is a city in the mountainous interior of Israel, many scholars believe these psalms were sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem for one of the three Pilgrim Festivals, namely Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. The Mishnah in Sukkah 5:4 and Middot 2:5 makes a link between the 15 psalms and the temple's fifteen steps (between the Israelite's court and the women's court). One theory is that the Levite singers would sing these psalms as they ascended the 15 stairs.

A straightforward reading of Psalm 121 is about a pilgrim looking at the difficult and dangerous journey ahead of them to Jerusalem up in the hills, with them naturally wondering how they were going to make it there safely (121:1). They would face rough and uneven paths where they could slip and do themselves an injury. They would be subjected to harsh elements out in the open – searing heat by day and cold by night. There was the constant threat of violent brigands in certain regions for those journeying between cities, towns, and villages. The pilgrim trusts God for each of these aspects: God will steady their feet (121:3), provide shade (121:5), and prevent harm (121:7). This is a faith-filled psalm, sung to bring comfort in fear and uncertainty.

About the author. The Rev. Canon Peter Houston is the national director of CMJ South Africa. He is an Anglican priest and canon theologian in the Diocese of Natal. He holds an M.Phil. in Environmental Management and an M.Th. in Church History and Polity. He is a research associate with Stellenbosch University and has a particular interest in church history and historical theology. He lives in Kloof, South Africa, with his wife and two children.