

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Advent 1, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said to his disciples, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Background and general observations

This Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. We are now four Sundays away from the celebration of Christmas. Probably by now, holiday preparations are underway in earnest for many families; some are eagerly anticipating family gatherings, and some are dreading them. Some have an impending sense of celebration, and others, especially the recently bereaved, have an impending or increasing sense of deep sadness and loss. The lesson appointed for this day focuses on wakefulness and spiritual attentiveness in a season when cultural and emotional "noise" can distract us from the presence of grace, holiness, and newness of life. While some will focus their attention on the lesson specifically, others might use this beginning of a new Church year to ponder the invitation to an observance of a holy Advent and Christmas.

The beginning of this new Church year moves us in our three-year lectionary cycle from Year A to Year B; each of the three years in the lectionary cycle focuses on a different Gospel. Year A is devoted mostly to Matthew, Year B to Mark, and Year C to Luke. The Gospel According to St. John is read at various times throughout each of these three years, with the effect that one hears the majority of all four Gospels read in worship over each three-year period.

The Gospel According to Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, and it is commonly assumed to be the earliest written. Mark has no birth narrative but begins instead with the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. There is a sense of urgency or immediacy about this crisp Gospel, as it conveys good news of pressing importance.

The verses we are pondering here are the concluding verses of Chapter 13 in Mark's Gospel. This chapter begins with Jesus coming out of the temple and one of his disciples marveling to Jesus about what a grand and beautiful building the temple is. Jesus' reply is simple: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Thus, this chapter begins with Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple, which would happen in 70 AD, and continues with Jesus' foretelling the end of all things.

This is typically how the Church begins a new year: we start with the end. Mindfulness of the end can bring about a sharpened awareness and engagement with the present, and this seems to be a major theme for Jesus—“Keep awake” lest you sleepwalk through life.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Themes of Advent include waiting, anticipation, and expectancy. Consider a time in your life when you were waiting for something, particularly something wonderful. You knew this wonderful thing would happen, but you did not know when. How did you feel during such an anticipatory time? How would you describe the quality of your life when you live in a state of hopeful and joyful expectancy? What does this state of mind have to do with your life of faith?

Is your faith a quiet compartment of your overall life, a state to which you return for rest and reassurance? Is your faith something that infuses your entire life with a sense of expectation and confident trust? How does your faith affect the way you go through the motions of everyday life?

2. What do you know about a time of suffering and tribulation in your life, when suddenly it seemed as if, in the midst of the trouble and turmoil, God were sending messengers to “gather you up,” to save and protect you from it all?

Ponder the nature and character of your faith in God. Do you believe that, come what may in our world of changes and chances, triumphs and failures, God will care for you? How confident are you in your “wakefulness”?

3. Think of a time when all the lights of your life (your sun, your moon, your stars...) suddenly seemed to go dark and the foundations upon which your life rested suddenly seemed shaken.

It is important to note that such times of darkness and unsettling uncertainty are not signs of moral or spiritual weakness. The Bible and human history are full of examples of spiritual giants who endure dark and tormented nights of the soul. It seems as if we should expect these times, and it seems, too, that very often these dark times ultimately lead us to deeper and richer experiences of beauty, faith, and holiness.

Perhaps it would be helpful for others to hear how you get through such dark times. Do you keep yourself distracted? Talk to someone? Stay quiet? Go shopping? Take medication? Is there something to be said for simply enduring such times or allowing oneself to experience the darkness without distraction? (Note: this is certainly *not* to suggest that medication for depression or dark times is a lesser choice. Very often, it is an important and life-saving choice to take medication that can keep us from wandering too far from our true selves.)

What is our role with someone we love who is experiencing such devastating darkness? What are some of the lessons you have learned from having survived such darkness? Where—and how—did you find your strength, your light, your hope?

What causes you to lose a sense of hope and expectancy about your life and to go on “automatic pilot” or, perhaps worse, to slip into your despair? And what helps you to break out of a spiritual malaise or deep darkness and become more watchful, more spiritually conscious, more hopeful?

4. As we anticipate the coming of Jesus, we might be mindful of ways in which we miss or overlook the Lord in our everyday lives. Consider the following reflection on a painting by Brueghel entitled, “Numbering at Bethlehem.”

The artist’s warm, earthy bourgeois browns combine with white winter snow to render a December scene in a Flemish village. What we see is an ordinary day in the life of the little town. In the foreground someone butchers and bleeds a squealing pig. A woodman struggles with a load of firewood. Children cavort on a frozen pond. A young man makes an obvious pass at an obviously unwilling maid. All in all, it is an ordinary, mundane winter day with nothing save the wreath to suggest anything extraordinary, anything beyond the expected.

But then if we look more carefully at the scene, down toward the bottom of the canvass we see, moving toward the census takers at the inn, an inconspicuous, thoroughly ordinary young woman on a donkey led by a stoop-shouldered, bearded peasant who carries a saw. Here is Mary, with Joseph the carpenter, come to town to be counted. They are so easily overlooked in the midst of ordinariness. . . . Brueghel understood Emmanuel, God with us. The Flemish painter knew how we trudge by epiphanies with barely a shrug of the shoulders. . . . The Presence goes un-noted as we thumb through the evening paper.

Someday God may break into this world, we say. But for the time being, it is best to work, eat, pay taxes, fill out government forms, and mind our business. . . . But sometimes. . . something steals silently across the canvas of our dull lives, unnoticed, unheralded, unexpected. The One whom we await becomes present. And we, anticipating the trumpet blast of angelic messengers or the rending of heavens, sometimes miss God’s advent before our very eyes.

(W. Willimon, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*)

Perhaps the question here is straightforward: Where is God in the canvas of your life?

5. So much of our lives can lapse into unconscious routines. One way of dealing with busyness and information overload is to compartmentalize our lives and develop routines that allow us to meet our obligations without having to think too much or reflect on what we are doing or why we are doing it at all. In this sense, we can go through some days—months, years— as if we are sleep-walking.

What changes would you have to make if you were to heed Jesus’ urgent plea to “stay awake”?

Another way of pondering this idea might be to consider when in your life you have felt most “awake”—most alive, most engaged, most present?

Some say in answer to this question that it is when they are with someone they love very much, perhaps someone they have missed for a period of time and have eagerly anticipated their reunion. But even the most passionate and joyful relationships can become ordinary-feeling.

When Jesus says we should “keep awake,” perhaps one thing he is suggesting is that we should stay present and alive and attentive, especially in our relationships with each other. What might you do in order to become—and remain—more present in this way?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Advent 2, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Background and general observations

Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the four canonical Gospels, opens with the stark declaration of “good news.” There is a sense of urgency and immediacy about this Gospel, as if to say, ‘Here is the beginning of something you have long hoped and desired!’ Indeed, here is the “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark then connects this good news to the prophecy from Isaiah—this has all been being prepared for a long, long time—and the reading here shows how an exceptionally popular preacher, John the baptizer, has come to fulfill the prophecy, preparing the way for the one who bears the good news himself. And although John was tremendously popular, with all of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside coming to hear him, John makes it clear that if his hearers think he is a powerful figure, they should prepare to be transformed by “one who is more powerful than I.”

The description of John the baptizer would likely conjure up the figure of Elijah. (See 2 Kings 1:8) Elijah marked the end of all prophecy, until the coming of the Messiah, and his appearance now would heighten expectations about God breaking into the world. John's role is to prepare the way for this in-breaking of the Divine, and he fulfills his role not only by proclaiming that something powerful is about to happen, but also by preaching the importance of repentance and baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins. As we move deeper into the season of Advent, a season of preparation and expectancy, this Gospel passage invites us to consider the possibility of “good news” on the horizon of our own lives, the importance of preparing ourselves for it and for the in-breaking of God into our world.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Mark begins his Gospel eager to share “the good news” of Jesus Christ. Yet, some people who have been reared as Christians do not necessarily think of Jesus as “good news.” Some people, in fact, have grown up with a sense that Jesus is often bad news, that he is a judgmental and disapproving figure. When they did something wrong as children, for example, a parent might have said, “What a terrible thing you've done! What would Jesus say about that?” The

implication, of course, is that Jesus would be sorely disappointed in the child, and the child thus grows up with an image of a stern and critical Jesus, a dissatisfied Jesus.

Is Jesus “good news” for you? If so, how?

If someone who did not know much about Jesus were to ask you about him, would you be eager to tell this person how Jesus is good news for him or her, also? How would you describe, in a nutshell, “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”? Do you find a description of the good news difficult to articulate yourself?

2. What do you know about repentance and forgiveness in your life?

Think of a time when you sincerely repented, or made an important spiritual turnaround in your life. Think also of a time when you have experienced deep down, unequivocal forgiveness.

Why do you think repentance and forgiveness of sins might be such important preludes for a deeper spiritual life? How is it that repentance and forgiveness of sins allow a person to perceive the Presence and activity of God more clearly in his or her life?

3. What might be blocking or getting in the way of the Divine in your life?

In this season of Advent, how might you benefit from a careful examination of your life and a willingness to repent, in order to prepare the way for God to come through to you more powerfully and clearly?

Some find it helpful to image their life as a tree, or a vine, which the Vinedresser lovingly tends. And in our branches there may be blocks—or sin—which simply prevent the free-flowing sap of the Divine to enter us fully and flow through us entirely. So, how might you benefit from an examination of your “blocks” in order to prepare the way for God’s loving sap to nourish you completely?

4. Why is it significant that John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness?

Consider your own experiences of “wilderness.” How can times of wilderness, desolation, and dryness be especially rich and meaningful in the spiritual life?

How are wilderness times helpful in preparing you to see God and your life more clearly? Have you ever had a sense that God shows up in particularly powerful ways in your wilderness? When have you experienced important messages coming to you in your times of wilderness?

Yet, what do you know about trying to avoid or get out of the wilderness? What does it take to be more non-anxiously present to your times of wilderness, trusting that God might be even closer to us here than on our mountain tops?

5. Who has been a John the baptizer person in your life, someone who has helped to prepare the way for God, someone whom you may have encountered in your wilderness? How did this person minister to you? Have you been a John the Baptist for someone else?

How can we better “prepare the way for God” for each other?

6. Preparing for the holidays and preparing the way for God are often two very different things. At this time of year, our culture and media give us plenty of tips and promptings to prepare for the holidays, but we often do not have nearly the same support and encouragement to prepare for a deeper spiritual life.

Consider the challenges you face in observing a holy Advent and Christmas. Are you sensing some opportunities to be more spiritually intentional in this season?

How can we encourage and support each other as Christians during this holy season? Consider how your witness of spiritual attentiveness and centering might be an inspiration to others who, deep down, long for something deeper and more lasting than the usual holiday tinsel and festivity.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 1, Year B

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Background and general observations

This is the first Sunday after the Day of the Epiphany. The word "epiphany" means a revelation or manifestation of the divine in our world. The arrival of the wise men at the scene of Jesus' birth on the Day of Epiphany, January 6, signifies that the revelation of God in Jesus is for the nations (the gentiles), as well as for the Jews. Throughout Epiphany, we are going to be hearing stories of various ways in which the divine is revealed or manifest among us. Every year on the Sunday following January 6, we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord.

Jesus came into the world at a time of heightened expectation on the part of the Hebrew people. They were looking for and expecting the imminent arrival of a Messiah who would save God's people from political destruction and lead them into a future in which God's rule would be firmly established. Given this atmosphere of expectation, it is not surprising that many of the faithful would look at John the Baptist, notice the drama and popularity of his ministry, and conclude that John was the promised Messiah. The fact that all four Gospels are intent on making it clear that John was not the Messiah indicates that there may well have been some argument and controversy about this.

The "epiphany" here seems to be both visual and aural, as the heavens were opened to Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, and a voice proclaims that Jesus is God's son, the beloved, with whom God is pleased. A similar epiphany occurs at the transfiguration in Chapter 17 of Matthew, with a heavenly command to the disciples who are present to "listen to him," and this affirming/confirming voice is later noticeably absent in Chapter 27 when Jesus cries out, "Why have you forsaken me?"

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Other accounts of Jesus' baptism note that "the people were filled with expectation...." Here at the beginning of a New Year, with what expectations are you filled? What are your hopes and expectations concerning God's role in your life? What are your hopes and expectations for yourself?

2. Jesus got in line with crowds of sinners who came out to hear and be baptized by John. Yet, as one commentator has pointed out:

...too often we may send the message that respectable, successful folks are the ones we need to build up our [church] communities. Time and again people who encounter difficulties in life drop out of our churches, seek help from other caregivers, and return to church only after they feel they can be re-certified as respectable, churchgoing people. Jesus got in line with sinners and was baptized with them.¹

Does this ring true for you? If so, how can a church become a place that sinful and troubled people seek out, rather than a place that people avoid when they are feeling like misfits or sinful failures?

3. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This is the voice Jesus hears from heaven. We all need to have a sense of belonging, a sense of being cherished. While we can understand why God would speak words of such affirmation and assurance to Jesus, many of us suspect that God feels very differently about us. If God were to speak a word to you from heaven, what do you imagine God would say? Is God most interested in “improving” or “correcting” you, or is God trying to communicate this same sense of love and belonging to you?
4. Sometimes we inadvertently ignore or take for granted the very people whom God has given us to cherish and affirm with unconditional love. We fall into unconscious patterns of life that keep us from being spiritually and emotionally attentive to each other. If we are God’s body in the world, how might God want to use you to convey love, belonging and assurance to someone in your life?

¹ Robert M. Brearley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 238

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 2, Year B

The Gospel: John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Background and general observations

All three of the lessons appointed for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany are rich in meaning, with common and complementary themes. For example, the first lesson from 1 Samuel, tells the well-known story of the calling of the boy Samuel. You'll remember that Samuel is lying down in the temple when he hears a voice calling him, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel leaps up and runs to Eli in a nearby room and says, "Here I am, for you called me." Eli tells the boy to go lie down again, for he did not call him. Samuel hears the same call three times, and continues to mistake the voice of the Lord for the voice of Eli, because "Samuel did not yet know the Lord," we are told. But on the third time, Eli "perceives" (though his eyesight has grown dim) that the Lord is calling Samuel, so he tells the boy to go lie down again, and when he hears the voice again, he should say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:1-10)

Interestingly, the Epistle appointed for this day includes Paul's teaching about our bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:12-20) One connection to the first lesson is the idea of God speaking in the temple where Samuel is ministering with Eli, and God speaking in the temple of our own bodies.

In the Gospel lesson above, we have the calling of Philip and Nathanael. This passage comes at the conclusion of the first chapter of John's Gospel. Immediately before this passage, John the Baptist points out to his disciples who Jesus is, and two of them follow Jesus. When Jesus turns and sees them following him, he asks them, "What are you looking for?"—an important question we might all ponder for ourselves. When the two disciples ask Jesus where he is staying, Jesus responds by saying, "Come and see," which of course is an invitation repeated in the passage above. One of the two disciples is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and Andrew goes and gets Peter to come along with them. There is a sense in these opening verses of people seeing and experiencing something that they want to tell others about.

Running through all three of these lessons is the idea of God's presence going unrecognized in our world. At times it seems as if God is calling us repeatedly or trying to make God's presence known, but we mistake God's voice for something else (Samuel and Eli), or we go about unaware of the extraordinary presence within us (Paul to the Corinthians), or we have our preconceived notions about God that prevent us from seeing how God might be doing something new (Nathanael: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?").

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "Come and see."

One way of thinking about the Christian life is to say that being a Christian is not about having the right *ideas* about God, but about having a *genuine experience* of God and then showing forth the fruits of that experience in your life. In other words, Christians are people who have been changed by an encounter they have had with God, much as the disciples are changed by their encounter with Jesus. Then, when we want others to know about our encounter or experience of God, we tell them, "Come and see." We do not simply try to convince others with our ideas about God and our theological arguments; we simply introduce them to what we have experienced and invite them to see for themselves what a difference this makes.

- Have you tended to think of the Christian life as a system of beliefs *about* God or as a divine encounter *with* God that results in a changed life?
- Has someone in your life ever invited you, in effect, to "come and see" how God was a part of his or her life?
- If you were to ask people to "come and see" your life as evidence of God's presence and activity, what would they see? And how would you respond if someone asked you in return to "come and see"?
- When we invite people to "come and see" in our church, what do they experience, and what is our role in the experience of newcomers?

2. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nazareth was a small, isolated town of little consequence. Nazareth might represent all of those ne'er-do-wells in your life, all of those people who amounted to nothing or who have consistently caused trouble, and any place, situation, or relationship that clearly has come to no good. And yet: it is precisely from this place that God emerges in Jesus.

- Who and what are the Nazareths in your life? What are those situations or relationships or people whom we have written off and from which, we are convinced, no good can come? In other words, where have you excluded God or dismissed God when in fact something God-given may be trying to emerge?

- In his book *Your God is Too Small*, Biblical scholar J.B. Phillips asserts that we have preconceived notions about God that box God into something much smaller than God is. We are not able to see how God is at work in the world, because God doesn't always fit within our preconceived notions; God is beyond what we are capable of imagining. Where might God be at work in your world and in the world around you, but you're either not looking, not paying attention, or are reluctant to accept that God could be beyond what you can perceive?
3. Philip calls Nathanael, Andrew gets Peter to come along, Samuel needs Eli to help him understand what is happening in his life, and we all need Paul's reminder that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to see ourselves the way others see us; quite often it is *their* perception that is more generous and more aligned with the way God sees us. Who in your life do you believe sees you as God sees you? Who points you to the presence and activity of God? Are you able to help and see others in this way?
 4. After Nathanael speaks disparagingly about Jesus' origins to Philip, we find Jesus complimenting Nathanael as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael is astonished that Jesus knows him. What does this encounter suggest about Jesus? Do you have a personal sense of being known by God? If so, how do you describe the feeling of being so known?
 5. It is often said that one must "see to believe." Concerning faith, this could be a complicated prerequisite. And then, in Nathanael's case, we are led to think that because he is *seen*, he believes. It's an interesting shift in how we might ponder the idea of witnessing (or being witnessed ourselves). How do you respond? Is your experience of knowing God rooted in your having "seen" God, or is it rooted in your being *seen by* God?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 3, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Background and general observations

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Gospel of Mark is its brevity and sparseness of language. This account of Jesus' life does not impress with flowery and beautiful prose but with terse and sudden action. This Gospel is not meant to be savored in the salon over sherry, along with a volume of Proust; instead, this is a muscular story, meant to incite decision and to provoke action. There is something immediate about Mark's Gospel and its "in your face," matter-of-fact tone seems to state that the time for a decision is now.

Nowhere is this more evident than in this account of Jesus calling Peter and Andrew, James and John. Peter and Andrew were casting their nets when Jesus called them, and immediately they left their nets. James and John were working with their father Zebedee in the boat when Jesus called them, and immediately they left their father.

What we know is that these men found Jesus more compelling than the two things many of us cherish the most: our livelihood and our family. Somehow in Jesus, these men felt a call that simply overwhelmed and overshadowed everything else in their lives. They made a decision to follow Jesus, and they made their decision without hesitation.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. In your own words, what is "the good news of God" that Jesus invites people to believe in?
2. Episcopalians are often known as paragons of stability, moderation, and propriety. So many of us might ask, "What in the world could make me feel so passionately that I would drop all that is familiar to me, all that defines me, and all that currently provides me with a sense of security, in order to do this new thing?"
 - a. Can you imagine making such a momentous (or seemingly reckless!) decision to drop everything in order to follow Jesus?
 - b. What in your life is too precious to let go? What are your nets or boats, those things that have gotten you this far but that you might need to relinquish, in order to embrace a promising new opportunity?
3. What are you fishing for at this stage of your life? Is God calling you to make a decision of great importance right now? Do you have a sense that something has come near and could change everything, if you only decided to accept it? What is holding you back? What do you fear the most?

4. Of course, we are all sensitive to tone—it matters a great deal not only *what* is said, but *how* it is said. It may be interesting to realize the effects and consequences of tone in terms of spiritual direction, perhaps the difference in being “told” versus being “led.” How do you respond to the tone in this particular passage? Does its straightforward directive feel inviting to you, or does it invoke some anxiety? What might your response be saying about your own spiritual life, your own needs and desires?

5. Jesus’ invitation to follow in this passage is immediately preceded by a command to repent and believe in the Good News. The Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which means more accurately “to turn around.” In this way, this passage connects the life of faith to a life of particular movement—turning, following, coming or moving forward. Do this language of movement resonate with your life of faith? What sort of movement best characterizes your own journey of the Good News?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 4, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Background and general observations

Immediately after calling the first disciples, Jesus enters the synagogue to teach. Thus, it could be said that his first act of public ministry in Mark's Gospel is in this story. Jesus is beginning with the religious structures of his day, ministering within accepted religious customs (Sabbath, local synagogue). The dominant theme here is the way in which Jesus teaches, "for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." This raises good questions for us to ponder concerning the nature of authority.

We also see here a stark contrast between Jesus and the man with an unclean spirit. The Holy One (Jesus), on the holy day (Sabbath), in the holy place (synagogue), meets the unclean one. For those concerned about ritual purity in Jesus' day, the presence of an unclean person like this can have the effect of defiling a place. Jesus does not seem fazed by this encounter, however. This has led some to question what sort of person would not be welcome in their own churches. One writer recommends sitting in a mall or a public park and watching people pass by—which of these, do you think, would not be welcome in our church?

It has been pointed out that demons identify who Jesus is, and his enemies recognize his power. However, especially in Mark, those closest to Jesus seem to have trouble recognizing the extent of Jesus' power and coming to terms with who he is. At the end of Mark's Gospel, the centurion correctly identifies Jesus as "God's Son," after watching Jesus suffer and die. Could it be that Mark wants the reader to understand Jesus' true identity not through Jesus' miracles but through the example of Jesus' suffering and death? Instead of seeking signs and miracles, perhaps we are to be drawn more to Jesus' offering of himself.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. At the center of this lesson is the question of authority. Of course, the scribes had a particular kind of authority: they were acknowledged scholars whose authority came from a detailed understanding of Scripture and Tradition. But Jesus' authority is different; his seems to come from within. Perhaps we could say that Jesus' authority does not come from his having information *about* God, but that Jesus' authority comes from a union *with* God, a knowledge *of* God. The scribes' authority was in a sense derivative while Jesus' knowledge, and thus his teaching, was from union with the Source.

What, if anything, might this say about sources of authority in your own life? Perhaps it is our human nature to desire knowledge and correctness of thought, to seek affirmation, but this may somehow impede our spiritual growth and our abilities to imagine, to wonder, and to question.

If you reflect on your spiritual journey, are you able to notice when you were concerned with attaining information about God and when you were seeking deeper union with God? How has the difference between knowledge *about* and knowledge *of* influenced the way you worship, the way you pray, the way you think about the Divine?

Consider a couple of different kinds of authority: a policeman has an official kind of authority; Mother Teresa has a different kind of authority. How would you describe the difference? Where does Mother Teresa's authority come from? Who are the people in your life, whether or not they have any worldly power, whom you would identify as having the deepest kind of authority?

2. Consider how Jesus never seems to be worried about fraternizing with “unclean” people, or disruptive and disreputable people. What do you think this says about Jesus and the example he seeks to set? How is this evidence of his ability to feed people and to heal them? Do you know others who act this way? What would be the cost and reward if you were to model your own life in this way?
3. Now, consider what kind of presence you are in the lives of people around you. What sort of authority do you think you have in the lives of others? What kind of authority would you *like* to have, and what changes have to take place in order for that to happen?
4. What are some of the unclean spirits inhabiting people today? Is there a kind of unclean spirit inhabiting *you*? What are some of the spiritual diseases that infect us?

Encounters with God in Jesus help us be relieved from spiritual disease. Sometimes these encounters happen in moments of connection with another person, perhaps a friend, perhaps even a stranger. How can we be agents of feeding and healing for one another, especially those with an unclean spirit? Who has been an agent of healing for you, and how did it happen?

5. “They were all amazed” at what they witnessed of Jesus in the synagogue. Are people so deeply amazed today by Jesus or by the church? Or, are people just interested? mildly curious? unimpressed? bored? Are you able to describe a time when you have been astounded? What is an experience that amazed you? What would it take for people to be amazed and astounded by Jesus and his Body, the church?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 5, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 1:29-39

Jesus left the synagogue at Capernaum, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Background and general observations

Word travels fast, especially if something extraordinary has happened. That's what we see happening in these verses from the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. In the verse immediately preceding this lesson, we read, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." (v.28) Jesus was a person who spoke with an unusual authority and one who had performed a miraculous healing in the synagogue. Word was traveling fast indeed.

This lesson begins with Jesus and the disciples leaving the bustle of the synagogue and city, as they enter Simon and Andrew's house. There, Jesus performs another healing, and this turns out to be a small prelude to a great mass of people being brought to Jesus. "The whole city was gathered at the door," we are told. Is this a sign of success? Is this incredible popularity a sign that things are getting out of control? Whatever it is, great numbers of people are discovering in Jesus an amazing power to which they want to draw closer.

One might imagine that the disciples were feeling very good about all of this. After all, they had left everything to follow Jesus, and whenever we take risks of this magnitude, we often wonder whether or not we have done the right thing. But now they can see the incredible power and authority that seem to emanate from Jesus, along with his enormous popularity. "Yes," they must have thought, "we did the right thing in following this man, Jesus!"

We might further imagine that the next morning, after such a tremendous gathering of people and outpouring of the Spirit, the disciples anticipated another full day of miraculous goings on. So with smiles on their faces, they go to awaken Jesus, only to discover that he has disappeared. Frantically, they search for him, most likely expecting him to be in some public place with a mob of admirers. Instead, they find Jesus in "a deserted place" praying alone.

When the disciples tell Jesus that “everyone is searching for him” and that it’s time to get started on another day of miracles with the crowds who obviously adore him, Jesus responds by saying it’s time to pack up and leave for another town. For most of us, a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush, so we wonder if the disciples would have preferred to stay put and build on the success they’ve already realized. Whatever the case might have been, they do indeed leave that place for new encounters elsewhere.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. It might be useful to begin your approach to this Gospel lesson by closing your eyes and imagining the scene. Let the scene come to life, as you imagine “the whole city” gathered at the door to Simon and Andrew’s home. How do you feel, as you imagine yourself in this scene? When Jesus cures people or casts out demons, what does that look and sound like? How do the cured people respond? How do others respond? Then, the next morning, can you imagine Jesus getting up before all the others, “while it was still very dark,” and going to a deserted place to pray? How does Jesus look as he makes his way from the house? What is the deserted place like? How does he settle into a posture of prayer? Sit with this scene for a while and let it all come to life. How are you affected by being both an observer *of* and a participant *in* this scene?
2. What would bring you to the door of the house where Jesus was staying? What demons within yourself would you hope and need to be drawn out, what sickness might need to be cured? What would you say to Jesus if he met you at the door? Why would you come with the whole city to this place?
3. This lesson shows one of the many times when Jesus would remove himself to a deserted place or to “a lonely place apart” where he can pray. It is as if Jesus is regularly keeping an appointment with God, regularly making time simply to be still in God’s presence, to open himself and surrender himself to God. Why is this so important to Jesus? What do you learn from Jesus’ example here, and what changes might this be calling for you make in your life?

If it is not already your practice to do so, consider making an appointment to be alone with God, at a set time and place, each day in the coming week. In your own way, open yourself, surrender yourself, or give yourself to God as you would give yourself to someone who loves you deeply and who wants simply to be with you. Notice what difference this practice makes in how you go about the rest of your day. Notice what might be lightening, or what might be healing inside you.
4. There are many more people to be cared for in the city, many more people to be healed and tended in various ways. Yet when the disciples tell Jesus that “everyone is searching for him,” Jesus responds by saying it is time to leave and press on with his work elsewhere. What do you know from your own life about being surrounded by needs, about being surrounded by many people and situations calling for your time and attention? In effect, Jesus walks away from many needy people and situations that are right there before him. What do you learn from Jesus’ example here, and what changes might this be calling for you to make in your life?

5. Consider the following poem by Mary Oliver and how it might relate to this lesson, particularly perhaps to ideas presented in question 4 above. Even if you have spent time with this poem before, reconsider it—the world is always shifting and the same words may feel very different depending on the circumstances of your life today.

“The Journey,” by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

The Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year B

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Background and general observations

The season after the Epiphany concludes with one of the most powerful epiphanies of all – the Transfiguration. This story comes at the center of Mark's story, between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. Jesus takes his "inner circle" of disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain. As we know, a mountaintop is understood to be a place for divine encounter – Moses received the Ten Commandments and covenant there; Elijah experienced God in "a still small voice" there; and Jesus of course delivered the "Sermon on the Mount" there.

It is here, up this "high mountain apart," where Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples. There is an other-worldly quality to this event, as we read that Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, "such as no one on earth could bleach them." The appearance of Moses and Elijah perhaps symbolizes the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Their appearance with Jesus clearly places him in a position of prominence, and some have suggested that this event symbolizes the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment or summary or goal of all of the Law and the Prophets. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

The often impetuous Peter can't contain himself and speaks first, proposing that they build a memorial or dwelling places on the sight. Is this the all-too-human attempt to institutionalize that which cannot be institutionalized?

Then, from a cloud comes a voice, saying in effect the same thing that was said at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved"; but with the additional command, "listen to him!" We might remember that just before going up the mountain with Jesus, Peter had rebuked Jesus for saying that Jesus must undergo suffering, be killed, and then rise from the dead. (Mk 8:31-33) Now, Peter is being told clearly to "listen," perhaps pointing out that Peter has done enough inappropriate talking.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The fact that even Jesus' inner circle of disciples do not seem to understand divine occurrences, sometimes say very inappropriate things, and even let Jesus down when the going gets tough (falling asleep in Gethsemane), might give us some relief – when we blow it with regard to God, we might remember that even the inner circle or cream of the crop failed miserably at times. But the fact that Jesus had an inner circle at all might remind us of just how important it can be to have an "inner circle" ourselves – special people we love, trust and rely upon. Who

might be in your “inner circle”? What makes a person the right one to be in such a trusted and important position in one’s life? How might you be such a person to someone in your life?

2. Some have said about the Transfiguration that this event is an “unveiling,” that the disciples are simply able to see Jesus clearly for who he is in all of his glory. It’s not that something has happened to change Jesus, it’s just that the disciples are seeing things, for a brief moment, as they really are. The veil has been lifted for a moment, and what used to seem quite ordinary now is seen as it really is.

When have you experienced such an unveiling? Have you gone through much of your life thinking of the people and places around you as being “ordinary” and unremarkable but then saw things differently? Out of the blue, have you been filled with wonder and gratitude at the splendor and beauty of your life and of the people and places around you? What do you think of the possibility that such moments of splendor that inspire our awe and gratitude are really just an unveiling of the deeper truth about our lives that we unfortunately miss all too often? How can we more often position ourselves to see the world aright, in all its glory, instead of going through our lives with a feeling that things are humdrum or ordinary?

3. The Greek word that Mark uses for the transfiguration is the same word that Paul uses to describe the change that is to take place within ourselves: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (transfigured) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2) What do you think this transformation or transfiguration of yourself is all about? Is this the point of being a Christian – that we pattern our lives in such a way and turn our attention to such divine things, so that we are transformed? Do you sense yourself being so transformed at times?
4. An Episcopal monk once wrote: “Almost everyone I know in the church complains about being too busy. We know being busy probably isn’t very good for us. Most of us have been so busy for so long and accomplished so little that we are quick to admit to the futility of all of this activity. But I wonder how often we see all of the busyness as sin. I wonder how often we see it as a kind of avoidance of being drawn into the real worship of God. I wonder if we realize how much our prayer suffers because of the lack of space in our lives. Not that we don’t make time for prayer. We may be quite faithful about carving out the time for prayer. But how often are we willing to surround the prayer with the solitude and leisure which is so important for listening to God?” (From an old newsletter published by the Society of St. John the Evangelist, written by Thomas Shaw, now deceased, who was the order’s Superior then, and later served as Bishop of Massachusetts.)

It has been said that God gave Ten Commandments on the mountain top in the Old Testament and only one commandment in the New Testament: “Listen to him (Jesus).” Do these reflections help you understand the importance of listening? Is your busyness an unconscious attempt to avoid this kind of listening? What keeps you from devoting more time to quiet and listening?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 1, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Background and general observations

Here at the beginning of the season of Lent, we return to the beginning of Mark's Gospel. The three basic parts of this lesson are Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation, and Jesus' call for repentance and proclamation of the good news.

In his baptism, Jesus experiences a powerful affirmation of his identity as the barrier between heaven and earth is torn open for a moment, and Jesus receives the gift of hearing a declaration about who he is and whose he is, and the gift of learning and knowing that he is deeply loved. Given that the ministry of John the Baptist was to administer "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," we might surmise that Jesus' baptism represents Jesus very publicly turning from the destructive ways of the world to the life-giving ways of God. The reward for this is immediate, "just as he was coming up out of the water."

Just as immediately, Jesus finds himself "driven" (a strong, forceful word) into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. There are several associations with the Hebrew Bible that we might make. For example, Jesus coming up out of the water of baptism might reflect the people of Israel coming up from the water of the Red Sea. Then, Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness might represent the people of Israel who wandered for 40 years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Many biblical scholars suggest that Mark is trying to help us see that Jesus is reliving and even undoing some of the events of the past, in order to set the stage for a new relationship between human beings and God. Some have even suggested that the presence of the wild beasts might conjure for us the first Adam naming the wild beasts in the Garden of Eden. Jesus is now the second Adam.

In the final section of this lesson, Jesus emerges from his time of testing with a powerful and urgent declaration that "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near," and we are invited to repent, to turn and change our ways, and entrust our lives to the "good news." Without trying to restate what we think we are "supposed" to believe this means, we might spend some time pondering for ourselves what we believe Jesus is trying to say to us. There is clearly a sense of something important at hand right here and right now. What is it? How are we being called to respond to it? What keeps us from turning to this new reality and the possibility of a new life?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. At his baptism, Jesus has a miraculous experience of God's love for him. Have you ever experienced such a clear and powerful sense of love and affirmation? What effect did this have on you? How might you be one who could provide such an experience for someone in your life?

2. Immediately after his powerful experience of God at his baptism, Jesus is “driven” into the wilderness where he experiences temptations. This is a frequent pattern in human life: times of affirmation or spiritual highs are followed by times of testing or desolation. What role does this kind of testing, temptations, or even failure play in our spiritual growth and maturation? In these moments, when have you sensed that angels were ministering to you in your wilderness experiences? What has that ministration felt like?
3. What is your experience of spiritual wilderness? Have you had a sense of being ministered to when you were in the wilderness, or a sense of company even when you were alone? What is it like trying to minister to others who are in their own wilderness? How can we love people through their wilderness?
4. The season of Lent is our 40 days. Where do you stand spiritually, here at the beginning of this Lent, your 40 days? How might God be calling you or “driving” you to use this Lenten season?
5. The word “driven” is a provocative one. Are you driven? What is it that drives you? What desires, hungers, or temptations drive you? What are some healthy ways in which you are driven, and what are some unhealthy ways? How do you know the difference?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 2, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 8:31-38

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Background and general observations

Remembering the context for this lesson is helpful. Jesus has just asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers correctly when he says, "You are the Messiah." (8:27-30) Yet now, in this passage, we seem to get a dramatic change in tone and substance. With everything going so well, it must have come as a shock to the disciples when Jesus began talking about his having to undergo great sufferings, be rejected, and be killed. Peter expresses his shock by rebuking Jesus for talking this way, and Jesus turns right around and rebukes Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Pretty strong words.

Another interesting thing about this lesson is that it fits a kind of pattern we see elsewhere in Mark's Gospel. In the first chapter of Mark, a voice from heaven affirms Jesus as God's son, the beloved; after that, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. Here in the 8th chapter of Mark, Peter affirms Jesus as the Messiah; then, Jesus is tempted by Peter as Satan. Finally, just after the Lord's Supper, Peter affirms vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all the disciples affirm the same thing with Peter. (14:26-31) After that, Jesus is tempted in the Garden of Gethsemane. You might notice that in each case, the temptation is to avoid what God seems to have planned for Jesus. In the final example, Jesus expresses so humanly, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me;" and then he adds the part that we frequently omit, "yet not what I want but what you want."

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. We all make plans for our lives. Yet remember the old Yiddish proverb, "Man makes plans, and God laughs."

The context for this passage might lead us to believe that the disciples have been making some big plans: with the various miracles Jesus has been performing and the crowds he has been attracting, the disciples might well have believed that enormous and virtually invincible things were in store for them and their leader.

So, when Jesus suddenly tells them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed, we can understand a lashing out of sorts, for this is not at all what they had planned or hoped.

The reading today invites us to consider our own lives: how have you handled things when the plans for your life have changed—or, worse, been ruined? How open are you to the possibility that your plans, hopes and dreams are very different from God's? How difficult is it to add, "yet not what I want but what you want" to your prayers habitually?

2. When Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" perhaps he is saying, among other things, "Stop trying to lead. Get behind me; let me lead; you follow." Do you sometimes sense that you are seeking to get out ahead of God, or to somehow subvert God's plan for you? Do you need to "get behind" God? If so, what kinds of changes might you need to make in your life in order to become a better follower of the Lord?

3. What are "divine things"? What are "human things"? How do you tell the difference?

In some of our confirmation preparation small groups, confirmands have watched and discussed the following video, concerning "God's space" and "our space":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zy2AQIK6C5k>.

It is probably helpful to all of us, even longtime Episcopalians, to ponder the things and places that belong to the kingdom of God only, the things and places that belong only to earth, and then the things and places where earth and the kingdom of God overlap.

One question to consider is this: of the things and places that belong only to earth, which one(s) really pull at you? Which are you most attached to? And, of those human things to which you feel wedded, which might be leading you away from a closer relationship with God?

4. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

What does it mean for you, a modern day follower of Jesus, to deny yourself and take up your cross?

It has been said that our culture is one that prizes personal fulfillment and personal success. This might be true even in the realm of religion and spirituality—the ego loves to think of itself as spiritually advanced or mature.

But Jesus is talking plainly about denial and loss. It sounds very counter-cultural.

Perhaps it is difficult work to consider the ways in which you have prized personal success and fulfillment. What do you hear Jesus saying to you now about your life and your core values?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 3, Year B

The Gospel: John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Background and general observations

It is important to know that those who were selling animals and changing money in the temple precincts were merely doing what was customary for Jewish worship. That is, animals were made available and sold to worshipers for temple sacrifices. And the money changers were doing worshipers a service by changing Roman coins that were stamped with the image of Caesar into imageless coins that would be acceptable for the temple tax. In other words, those who were selling animals and changing money were performing important, customary functions for worshipers in that day.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, there is a suggestion that price gouging was going on. Jesus refers to these people by saying that they have made the temple a "den of robbers." Although that phrase is missing in John's Gospel, it is possible that this is at least part of the reason that Jesus overturns the tables. However, it is probably more important to note that Jesus' actions are highly symbolic. In just a couple of chapters, Jesus will tell the Samaritan woman that the hour is coming when it is not going to matter where people worship, because God is spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. One interpretation of Jesus' symbolic overturning of the tables in the temple is that he is declaring the medium of sacrifice and imageless coins unnecessary. God may now be worshiped "immediately," that is, without anything between us and God. The fact that the curtain of the temple was torn in two at the time of Jesus' crucifixion (recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke), would reinforce such an interpretation. The curtain separated the people from the holiest place; thus, its rending would symbolize immediate access to God for all.

Still another interpretation is that this well-entrenched system of sacrifices and temple taxes had become so rote or corrupt that people were no longer open to fresh revelations from God. Jesus is overturning everything, upsetting everything, as a way of jarring people into a new state where they might be able to perceive God's presence and God's actions afresh.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. For many of us, settling into a routine feels good and healthy, a way to structure our lives. But perhaps it is important to think about the difference in a routine and a rut.

What do you know about simply going through the motions in your spiritual life? Are there elements to your relationship with God, with the church, with Scripture, that need freshening? When have you sensed that your religious practices had become rote or mechanical and no longer served as a means to open your life more completely to God? What rituals or ceremonies no longer have meaning for you or even get in the way of your relationship with God and how can old practices be infused with new meaning? Where, or with whom, does the responsibility fall for reviving what is stalled?

2. From the New Interpreter's Bible:

Christian faith communities must be willing to ask where and when the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and, therefore, closed to the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal. The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own institutions with the presence of God.

One pastor comments, "In system theory, past successes often stay on long past their usefulness. 'Wrecked by success' is a slogan I've seen used. Past actions that failed are quickly discarded. Past actions that work tend to be used over and over and over again. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,' is another motto. (The latest form of this that I've seen is the title of a book: 'If it ain't broke, break it.' The author argues that if you are not constantly improving your product, your service, etc., the company down the road will pass you by.)" (Brian Stoffregen in CrossMarks)

How might you apply these insights to your feelings about church? about your life?

3. Have you ever tended to think of God as a kind of vending machine or wish granter—put in good works, pray regularly, etc., and God will grant you blessings? What is the difference between thinking of our religious practices as acts that bring about favors from God, versus understanding our religious practices as acts that open our hearts and minds to the reality of God's blessings already with us?
4. Some have pointed out that Jesus is pretty harsh, even violent, in making his point—whip of cords, overturning tables, driving people out of the temple... He could have chosen instead to be more diplomatic, gentler, calmer; he could have sat down with temple leaders and talked over the situation, for example. When in your life have you found that diplomacy just wasn't going to work, so you had to use more drastic measures? What effect has this had on you and your relationships? What are the risks and

rewards of a more dramatic approach to making your point or having your voice heard? How do you think Jesus felt just after this scene? With whom are you most able to identify in this passage?

5. Consider the following quotation by Bill McNabb from an issue of *Wittenburg Door*:

I had an old seminary professor who began and ended his apologetics lecture with one sentence: “You defend God like you defend a lion—you get out of his way.” God, it seems, has never had much trouble with his enemies—it’s his friends who give him fits. . . . The theologian Karl Rahner put it this way: “The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and deny Him with their lifestyles is what an unbelieving world finds simply unbelievable.” Perhaps the best defense of God would be to just keep our mouths shut and live like He told us to. The Gospel would then have such power and attraction that we wouldn’t have to worry about defending it.

When have you hindered God or gotten in the way of God? Jesus drives out of the temple people who are coming between God and God’s people. It could be important to recognize if, and when, we are the ones who are coming between God and others. That is, when are we helping God and other people draw closer together and when are we widening the divide?

Do you believe that being consumed with zeal for God can become a bad thing? Or, is a zealous Christian somehow more virtuous? Have you ever become so zealous for God that you neglected some of the people in your life?

6. Jesus’ talk about the temple suggests that the dwelling place of God will no longer be in temples of stone but in human beings. Consider for a moment that you are a temple and that God, holiness, and sacred beauty, dwells in you. How does such a realization change how you go about your day-to-day life? If Jesus were to enter the temple of your body, what would he want to drive out of you?

As some have suggested, the ultimate blasphemy is to abuse another human being. If you believed that all human beings were temples of God’s presence and that all people were dwelling places for God, how would you behave differently?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 4, Year B

The Gospel: John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Background and general observations

The context for this Gospel reading is the story of the learned Pharisee, Nicodemus, coming to Jesus by night. Jesus responds to Nicodemus by saying that in order to see or enter the kingdom of God, a person must be born again. Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is telling him, and the passage appointed for today, John 3:14-21, is Jesus' way of expounding on his conversation and teaching with Nicodemus.

The passage begins (v. 14) with Jesus foretelling his crucifixion and comparing that “lifting up” of the Son of Man to a story about Moses and the Israelites from the Book of Numbers, in which Moses “lifted up” a bronze serpent attached to a pole as a life-saving remedy for Israelites who had been bitten by poisonous snakes (Numbers 21:4-9). The Israelites had started to complain in the desert again, and God had sent poisonous snakes to plague them. Many Israelites died as a result. The Israelites saw the error of their ways and repented, and they pleaded with Moses to pray to the Lord to save them. The Lord responded by telling Moses to make a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole; then, whenever someone was bitten by a poisonous snake, they could look up at the snake on the pole and live.

The story from the Book of Numbers, in other words, prefigures the crucifixion: “. . .so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (3:15) In the case of the serpent on the pole, the people only had to look at it to be saved. In the case of the crucifixion, it is those who “believe in” him or who trust in him who are saved.

The prologue to John's Gospel identifies Jesus as the life that was the light of all people, “the true light, which enlightens everyone.” (John 1:4, 9) In today's passage, however, Jesus talks about people who love darkness more than light, and people who are drawn to the light. From this passage we are provided an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of our human nature—how each of us contains both light and dark, good and bad—and the ways in which our multitudes of emotion, motive, and experience affects our understanding of God.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

The great reformer, Martin Luther, called this verse “the Gospel in miniature.” For some Christians today, however, this verse has become overly familiar, even cliché. For others, this verse calls to mind zealous people who seem more concerned about correct beliefs than about God’s love. And still for others, this verse indeed conveys the power and force of “the Gospel in miniature.”

How do you respond to it? Does it inspire you? Tire you? How would you restate this verse and its teaching in your own words?

If you could pick another verse to be summarized as “the Gospel in miniature,” which would you choose and why?

2. Although we often tend to think in terms of “us versus them,” good guys versus bad guys, forces of light versus forces of darkness, etc., we might consider how each of us contains both light and dark, good and bad. We are all complex beings, complicated mixtures of motives and forces, shaped by experience; no one is one-dimensional.

How does it feel to consider yourself as a creature of darkness? What do you know about loving and preferring darkness over light? When have you chosen darkness—to be distinguished, perhaps, from choosing evil—instead of light? When has darkness felt more comfortable, safer, or somehow more manageable than light?

What do you know about being drawn to the light of God and coming *out* of a comfortable darkness?

3. C. S. Lewis writes in his book, *Mere Christianity*, “We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know him can be saved by him.”

Lewis seems to say that the saving, healing action of God might well reach us in ways that are beyond our understanding or awareness. And he suggests that God might well know and reach even those who themselves do not know God. (That is, God’s love is not necessarily a reciprocal act: God can love and know those who do not know and love God.) This is sometimes called “prevenient grace,” because it is about the grace of God coming to us before we do or know anything ourselves.

What is your experience of being so changed or transformed by God, even if by a single degree? What do you know about being touched or changed by God in ways that surprised you, without your asking for—or even being aware of—such divine transformation? When have you had an experience of being known and loved by God before you yourself knew and loved God?

4. Just as the Israelites had to contend with poisonous snakes in the wilderness, so many of us have sometimes felt as if we were being bitten by poisonous events and circumstances in our everyday lives: danger, illness, a mistake, a bad decision, a giving-in to temptation or indulgence, etc.

Is it your experience that Jesus offers simple answers and instructions about how to live well that we must learn to either accept or reject? Does Jesus give us straightforward guidelines by which to govern ourselves that we either obey or disobey? Or, is it your experience that Jesus

acknowledges our complexity and raises ideas and questions that transform us often slowly and over time as we live with them or grow into them?

Simple does not always mean easy and what is straightforward is not always without complexity. Are you able to name something of Jesus' teaching that is at once very simple yet also very difficult? Something seemingly uncomplicated and clear that is actually much harder to understand or practice?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 5, Year B

The Gospel: John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Background and general observations

This reading is set during Jesus' third and last visit to Jerusalem in the Gospel of John. He and his disciples have come for the festival of Passover. This passage follows those in which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfume, and Jesus makes the entry into Jerusalem that we remember on Palm Sunday.

The dramatic intensity is increasing: the raising of Lazarus has set Jesus on a collision course with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem; his triumphal procession into Jerusalem as the "Kings of the Jews" has put him at odds with the Roman rulers. As we read these passages we feel the wonder and excitement of the crowd, but also the foreboding that lurks between the lines.

Then we are confronted with this curious passage. What is the point of the Greeks asking to see Jesus? Why does this set Jesus saying, "The hour has come...?"

It seems that the approach of Greeks (i.e., non-Jews) wanting to meet Jesus is an indication of an important development. In John 10:16 during his discourse about "The Good Shepherd," Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." The Greeks seeking Jesus are the signal that his message is reaching beyond the Jewish community and that the other sheep are being drawn in.

As for the significance of his statement, "The hour has come," earlier in the Gospel, at the wedding in Cana, Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." (John 2:4) Now 10 chapters and some three years later, he says his hour has come. That hour is for the glorification of the Father, and through the Father, the glorification of the Son of Man.

Jesus follows this with the curious analogy of his life to that of a grain of wheat. His death/glorification will bear much fruit. Apparently his death will bear even more fruit than his life, for from it more life will spring. Jesus further tells his listeners that it is not he who will be glorified, but that it has been Jesus' work to glorify the Father.

Once again, as in last Sunday's reading, Jesus speaks of being lifted up from the earth. In the previous reading the lifting up was so "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." This time he states that the lifting up, the crucifixion, "will draw all people to [him]." Jesus' encounter with the cross is close at hand, but, at least in John, that encounter is in his hands. Jesus' death is not ignoble, but a glorious raising up of the Son of Man that draws all people to him and thus to the Father, and brings salvation to all who believe.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The Greeks play a pivotal role in this reading simply by asking to meet Jesus. Who might be the Greeks in our lives who set us to talking with other disciples and who prompt us to seek and better understand Jesus ourselves?

How would you respond to someone who approached you seeking to know Jesus? Have you had this experience? Do you believe that you managed it well?

In Trinity Church in Boston, Tom Smith notes, there is an inscription inside the pulpit that only the preacher can see: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." What do you make of this?

2. Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled." But he seems to brush it aside. His response seems easy and even fatalistic. Does that seem human or superhuman or ...? In John, Jesus seems to know little about our personal "dark nights of the soul," as if this darkness were somehow beyond him or perhaps were but an inevitable part of the human experience on earth. What about honest-to-goodness existential doubt that we live with every day? Does Jesus seem available to you in these times?

Has there been a time when you felt troubled or grieved and also felt that your life was preparing you for something, perhaps something inevitable, even if that trouble and grief were not easy to bear?

In one of his songs from the '80s, James Taylor sings about the trials and losses of his friends, following each account with the chorus, "That's why I'm here/Got no better reason/That's why I'm standing before you/That's why I'm here." Not to trivialize the Gospel, but is it possible each of us is here for reasons that are not about self-glorification or self-gratification? If so, what does that mean for how you live?

3. We remember Archbishop Romero on the church calendar later this week. There are some for whom this correlation is undeniable: in 1980, Romero preached on this very passage minutes before being murdered by a death squad in El Salvador. Was this "the hour" for which the archbishop was born, or is it something more? Romero gave his life for the Gospel and his people, with particular attention to the poorest and most marginalized. What would you give your life for?
4. What do you make of the agricultural parable of the seed that must die to produce fruit? Many people may come to regard their darkest hours and their most intense pain and suffering as incredibly valuable and transformative experiences. Some may even believe that their deepest agony inspired their richest and clearest experience of God. Are there certain "deaths"—if not literal deaths, then metaphoric trials, darkness, torments—that you have experienced that have

been fruitful or that have led you to a closer union with God that may not otherwise have been available?

In this passage Jesus states, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” This is a perplexing saying. What do you make of it in relationship to your own life and spiritual journey? Does this make sense to you now in ways that it might not have earlier in your life or vice versa?

5. Jesus says that he “will draw all people to myself.” What do you know of being *drawn* to Jesus? Have there been times when you have felt ignored, if not repelled by Jesus?

In his book, *The Desert: An Anthology for Lent*, John Moses quotes St. Augustine, “Yesterday, you understood a little; today, you understand better; tomorrow, you will understand better still: the light of God is growing in you.” In your experience, is being “drawn to Jesus” the same as “understanding Jesus,” or is it something else? Could being drawn to Jesus also be a growing and unfolding process similar to what St. Augustine is saying, even if it is not about understanding? Is it possible that our desire to understand could get in the way of our being drawn to Jesus?

6. Who are the rulers of this world that Jesus speaks about? Likely, there are many forces that rule our lives, and some may be dangerous, unhealthy, or burdensome; others may be life-giving and inspiring; still others may feel inevitable, rulers we resign ourselves to living with, or living for. Who and what are some of the rulers of your life? How might you categorize them?

How do you feel about the church being one of the rulers of the world, or of your life? Is it one that feels helpful, if not essential? Is it a burden? Does it help drive out other rulers? Where does God stand in relation to all these rulers?

7. A voice from heaven speaks and while Jesus states it is for the benefit of the crowd and not him, it seems that he is the only one who hears anything other than thunder. If God speaks for our benefit, how do we make ourselves ready to hear and comprehend? Or are we doomed always to hear incomprehensible thunder?

Have you ever had an experience during which you believed you could hear what others could not, or that you perceived something that others could not see? Have you ever felt you were the only one *not* able to hear or understand what others could? What do you think it means and why might it be valuable that each of us receive the language and presence of God in different forms and by different means?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter Day, Year B

The Gospel: John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Background and general observations

It's probably a good idea for us to take stock of the fact that the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection vary significantly in their details. For example, how many women were there? How many angels? What was the message to those who encountered the empty tomb? Was Jesus himself there, or not?

Such variations in the telling of the Easter story are disturbing to some. If you are counting on the Gospel accounts serving as reliable, historical accounts about precisely what happened when, then you might find the variations unsettling. But if you think of the Gospel accounts as being different ways of communicating the same, extraordinary truth—that Jesus was raised from the dead—then you might find the variations interesting and even helpful in sorting out what all this might mean for you and your life.

Some of the differences in detail might reveal different understandings of the same truth and experience. Each of us brings different needs, insights, and ways of perceiving to our experiences, so our way of describing the same experiences will understandably differ. And much has been made over the centuries of different literary allusions in the Gospel accounts. For example, in John's account, Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Is this an allusion to that original garden, the Garden of Eden, and the effect the resurrection has of restoring humanity to our intended relationship with God? Is it an allusion to a parable Jesus told about the patient gardener who forestalls judgment? You can see how various interpretations like this might reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about the Gospel account itself.

It is also interesting to note about John's account that those who look inside the tomb seem to see different things. Peter and "the other disciple" both see grave clothes, and Peter, at least, sees the cloth that had covered Jesus' head "rolled up in a place by itself." (The reference to the head cloth could be an allusion to the veil which Moses would remove when he entered into the presence of God—perhaps we are being shown a clue that Jesus has entered into God's presence?) After the men see these things, they returned to their homes. Mary, on the other hand, sees two angels and speaks with them. Then, Mary turns around and sees a person she believes to be the gardener but whom she recognizes as Jesus when he speaks her name. Did the angels suddenly appear after the disciples left? Or, had the angels been there, and the disciples simply were not able to see them? What keeps us from seeing Divine activity in our lives, and what allows us to see Divine activity?

We might also wonder about Mary mistaking Jesus for a gardener. Do we similarly mistake or overlook the presence of Jesus, the presence of God, in our lives today? What is it that allows us to see the deepest truths of our lives more clearly, and what blinds us to such truths?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The first witnesses at the tomb on Easter Day see and experience different things. Although the men seem to see only grave clothes, Mary sees angels. Then, when she turns around, she sees one whom she supposes is a gardener. When he speaks her name, however, the gardener turns out to be Jesus himself. It is a strange scene—you might think that Mary would recognize instantly the one whom she knew and loved.

One interpretation of these varying perceptions and *misperceptions* is that we are dealing here with human beings encountering Divine reality, and this requires the "eyes of our faith" to adjust. Some might see gradually, and others might not see at all.

What do you know from your own experience about the difficulty of perceiving the presence and activity of God in your life? When have you been, like Mary, slower to recognize the presence of the divine? Consider what allows you to see clearly and also what prohibits your clarity.

2. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'"

Have you ever experienced God "calling you by name"? Have you ever had an experience of being "known," in the most intimate way, by God? Perhaps God did not call you by name but called you in some other way...

In this version, there is an exclamation point after Mary's name and she, in turn, exclaims, "Rabbouni!" Imagine how Jesus spoke—or exclaimed—Mary's name...the tone and volume of his voice...the sharpness or softness of his voice....

And then imagine how Mary's voice may have sounded—was it alarmed? fearful? relieved?

If you are inclined, sit quietly, close your eyes, and imagine Jesus speaking, even exclaiming, your name.

3. "Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold onto me...'"

What do you know about trying to "hold onto" God, as opposed to "being held" by God?

4. Imagine the difference between that first Easter Day and today. The followers of Jesus are in disarray. They are mourning his death and wondering what it all means and what they will do next. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb in darkness. There is no body in the tomb. The only sound is the sound of running feet. There is confusion and concern among the followers. Mary Magdalene is so distraught she does not even recognize Jesus until he says her name.

Today we mark Easter with brass and timpani, “Hallelujahs,” bright clothes, feasting, and the greeting, “Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.” How does it feel to experience the resurrection as Mary Magdalene, Peter and the beloved disciple did?

Are the uncertainty and confusion threatening? Liberating? How could the uncertainty paradoxically help you feel more at ease in your own spiritual journey?

5. What is it like to expect one thing and find another? Look at the responses of three followers of Jesus who expected to see a body and instead found an empty tomb. Mary Magdalene tells her friends, and then stays in the garden persisting in her attempts to find Jesus. Peter runs to the tomb looks around and goes home. The Beloved Disciple also runs to the tomb, sees the burial clothes, “believes,” and goes home.

How do you imagine you would respond in this situation? What response would you *want* to have? How are they different and what makes one response preferable to you?

6. When Mary Magdalene speaks to Jesus as the gardener he asks her, “Who are you looking for?” This question is simple yet profound. On your own spiritual journey, who or what are you looking for? What surprises have you found in that search? Has the object and nature of your search changed over time or as you make new discoveries or meet other seekers?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 2, Year B

The Gospel: John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Background and general observations

Easter is not one day but a season, 50 days long. The Easter season culminates on the Day of Pentecost (Pente = 50), when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many regard Christmas Day, Easter Day, and the Day of Pentecost as the three greatest feasts of the church year.

The Second Sunday of Easter is the day on which we traditionally read the account of "Doubting Thomas." Many people think that it's unfair to label Thomas as "doubting." After all, he not only ended up believing, he ended up believing profoundly—"My Lord and my God!" That is a response that is very different from, "Well, it is you, Jesus."

Some like to point out, as well, that Thomas in fact confesses his belief without having to test the evidence, as Jesus invites him to do ("Put your finger here..."). We might also wonder if the other disciples would have needed some sort of visual or even tactile confirmation of Jesus' presence after his death, if they (like Thomas) had not been present when Jesus appeared to the others in that locked room a week earlier.

*This leads to a very general question for all of us. What kind of experience must **we** have, in order to believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead? What kind of experience must we have, if we are going to believe that God is a real, living and active presence in our lives?*

This passage contains the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus. The first appearance, of course, was to Mary Magdalene in the garden. The fourth appearance occurs in the next chapter of this Gospel, when Jesus appears to the disciples on the beach, directs them in their fishing, and then has breakfast with them.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus enters a locked room where his disciples are gathered in fear. These disciples are the people who had the benefit of Jesus' companionship, of hearing Jesus' teachings, and of witnessing Jesus' miracles. Yet they are also the people who scattered and ran away in Jesus' hour of greatest need.

We might expect Jesus to give the disciples a hard time, "What happened to you guys?! Where were you?!" Instead, he simply says, "Peace be with you."

- a. If this is the way Jesus treats these disciples who failed and who abandoned him in his misery, even though they had been privileged to be with him intimately, why do you suppose many believe that God is inclined to punish us so severely when we fail? What can we learn about God from this passage and the ways God responds to our shortcomings? And what can we learn about ourselves and the way we treat others when they, too, have failed?
- b. How might the "locked room" be working as a metaphor? Is it a symbol for the human heart? Our truest self? The soul?

To what or to whom have you locked the door? In this passage, Jesus enters the room in spite of it being locked. Have you ever felt something similar, that a door had been symbolically pried open or broken down even when you attempted to keep it shut? If so, what was that experience like?

C.S. Lewis writes in *The Four Loves*, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." How do you respond?

2. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This is a powerful statement. We are to be like Christ to one another, sent by God to each other.

Who or what in your life has been a "God-send"?

In what ways might you be a "God-send" to someone else?

3. The common phrase "you have to see to believe" feels particularly relevant as Thomas says he needs tangible evidence of Jesus' wounds in order to believe that Jesus has indeed been resurrected. In many ways, Thomas' doubt is a very human reminder of our own skepticism concerning matters of the Divine, of mystery, and of that which exceeds our rational understanding.

In what ways do you—or don't you—identify with Thomas? What do you make of the relationship between his doubt and his profound faithfulness?

What kind of experience must *you* have in order to believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead? What kind of experience must any of us have, if we are going to believe that God is a real, living, and active presence in our lives?

Anne Lamott writes, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” Do you agree with her?

4. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

This is another powerful statement. It seems that Jesus is saying we have not only an enormous power over one another but an incredible responsibility *to* one another.

Do you feel you have sins that are being retained by people? What kind of damage does this do? And what sins of others are *you* retaining? At what cost to yourself?

5. The Episcopal priest and New Testament scholar, Robert Capon, says this of the primary calling of the church and of Christians:

The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things considered. The history of the world’s moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As C.S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all different should be locked up in a library and be made to read three days’ worth of them. He would be bored silly by the sheer sameness.

What the world cannot get right, however, is the forgiveness business—and that, of course, is the church’s real job. She is in the world to deal with the Sin which the world can’t turn off or escape from. She is not in the business of telling the world what’s right and wrong so that it can do good and avoid evil. She is in the business of offering, to a world which knows all about that tiresome subject, forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice. But the minute she even hints that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game, she instantly corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.

The church becomes, not Ms. Forgiven Sinner, but Ms. Right. Christianity becomes the good guys in here versus the bad guys out there. Which, of course, is pure tripe. The church is nothing but the world under the sign of baptism. . . . (Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology*)

How do you respond to this idea that we are, first and foremost, people who have been sent to forgive sins?

How are you doing in that vocation? What do you need in order to do your job better, to forgive easier?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 3, Year B

The Gospel: Luke 24:36b-48

While the disciples were telling how they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Background and general observations

This passage follows the well-known and much-loved story of the disciples who encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). You may remember that these disciples walked and talked at length with Jesus, but did not recognize him until they urged Jesus to stay with them at the end of their journey. "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." (Luke 24:30-31)

After reflecting how their hearts had "burned within them" while they had talked with Jesus, these disciples got up and returned to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, they found the 11 disciples and told them what had happened on the road to Emmaus and about how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of bread. This is where our passage begins. "While the disciples were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'"

It is interesting how this story unfolds. It is almost as if Jesus "materializes" in their midst. They are talking about the Emmaus experience, and suddenly Jesus is standing among them. But as odd as this "appearance" is, it is clear that Luke is taking great pains to point out the physicality of the resurrected Jesus. The disciples thought they were seeing a ghost, and we might wonder what sort of presence this resurrected Jesus is. He might be a physical, corporeal presence, but something about him is clearly different.

Even so, Luke wants to make it very clear—this is not a ghost or pure spirit. This resurrected Jesus invites the disciples to touch him. He shows them his hands and feet. He asks them for something to eat and they gave him some broiled fish. Such detailed recounting of the physicality of the appearance is surely intended to tell us something important.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. How do you encounter or perceive the Divine in your life?

Many people note that when we are confused, depressed, or anxious, we are not likely to sense God's presence and activity in our lives; in other words, our eyes are kept from seeing and we are, in a sense, blind to certain truths because of our suffering. This particular blindness might be especially acute when we are fearful, when we have been treated poorly, or been disappointed, or when we realize we have fallen short of our own expectations, or somehow failed other people. However, quite often in hindsight, we can look back on such difficult times in our lives and see how God in fact was present and at work, even though we were kept from seeing so at the time.

What do you know about the experience of not recognizing the Divine Presence in your midst? What are some of the things that hinder you from seeing what God desires you to see?

2. When we say that someone is a very "spiritual" person, do we mean that that person is otherworldly somehow, or is a spiritual person one who is deeply engaged with the world? Or, both? Would you say you are a "spiritual" person? If so, what would you mean by that?
3. Do you prefer an incorporeal Jesus—that is, an intangible, ethereal, even ghostly Jesus—to one who seeks to meet us in the touchable, lovable people in our everyday lives?

Both this story and the story of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus should remind us that Jesus promised he would be with us always. And though it is sometimes easy to lose sight (literally and figuratively!) of how and where Christ is present in certain situations (particularly difficult ones), it is helpful to stop, return our attention to God, and ask ourselves, "Where is Christ now?" It almost always makes a difference.

4. "...see that it is I myself. Touch me and see..."

Jesus conveys an eagerness to be known and even touched. Where do you experience that same longing in your life? Do you know anything about pretending that you do not need such recognition, acceptance, and even physical signs of affection from others?

This story illuminates the idea that we are most likely to recognize, discover, or encounter God in tangible acts of love. When has love been a catalyst for encountering God in your life? Can you think of other examples—either from your own life or from scripture—that illustrate ways in which "God is love"?

Consider the difference between an attractive person who is easy to embrace and a less attractive person whose presence and demeanor might be off-putting to some. Ponder the importance of a "rocking ministry" in which volunteers are recruited to rock newborns in the hospital, babies whose parents perhaps have abandoned them...consider the calming effect of human touch for anyone experiencing anxiety or isolation. And think about people whose experience of being touched triggers fear of being used or manipulated, people who suspect that when someone touches them, the one touching probably has ulterior motives, often sexual.

How do you reflect on your experience of touching, your decision to refrain from touching, and your experience of being touched? Where is God in all of this?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 4, Year B

The Gospel: John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Background and general observations

The Fourth Sunday in the Easter season is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." The Collect of the Day speaks to the power and action of God-as-shepherd:

"O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Since neither shepherds nor sheep are part of our everyday experience, it can be helpful to recall some of the routine practices of shepherds in Jesus' day. One common practice was that of combining flocks at night, so that shepherds could take turns keeping watch for predators. In this way, shepherds who had worked all day could get some sleep without having to worry about the safety of their sheep. Then, in the morning, each shepherd could stand in a different part of the field surrounding the pen and call to his sheep with his distinctive voice. The sheep all knew the call or voice of their own shepherd and would follow the one who, they knew, kept them safe.

It is also interesting to note the difference between cattle herding and shepherding. Whereas cattle are often herded by "driving" them from behind on horseback, with whips and loud, threatening calls, sheep need to follow their shepherd. If the shepherd were to get behind the sheep and try to drive them like cattle, the sheep would all run to get around behind the shepherd. As some have pointed out, sheep don't need to be threatened and driven by whips and yells. Instead, sheep seem to think of their shepherd as one of them, as one of the family, so to speak.

Thus, we can see why the collect of the day for Good Shepherd Sunday is so appropriate—we pray that we may know the one who calls us (that is, recognize his voice or call), and we pray that we may follow where he leads (as opposed to being whipped and driven). With so many "voices" calling out to us each day, we might ask ourselves, how do we recognize the voice of God?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Some have seen this portion of the lesson as indicating God's desire to draw all people to God. Jesus says elsewhere that when he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. Jesus also

speaks in Luke's Gospel about the shepherd's willingness to leave 99 sheep in order to go after one sheep that is lost.

How does this strike you? Do you think of God as One who actively seeks you and wants to embrace all people? Or, do you think of God as One who passively waits for people to look for God?

2. Do you believe God is constantly calling to us? What can we do to cultivate an ability to recognize and understand God's call? What voices do you spend the most time listening to and attending to? Are you an expert in hearing and interpreting certain voices that are not of God?

With so many different voices calling to us daily, how do we discern those that are the most important, so that we can focus our attention there, instead of wasting our time on unimportant voices?

Continuing with the theme of voices or callings, which are the voices that give you life, and which are the voices that take life away from you? Can you discern the voice of the Good Shepherd in those voices, people, activities that put life into you (give you a sense of abundant life)? And can you discern the voice of the hired hand who might call to you and promise to lead you, but in the end will let you down and forsake you?

How can you tell the difference between a divine voice (or prompting, or call) and any other voices in your life? When is it that you are most likely to hear God's voice? What do you know of positioning yourself, and your life, so that you are most receptive to what is distinctly divine?

3. Jesus' use of shepherding is a compelling metaphor especially when we realize the particular behavior of these animals, their desire to walk with their shepherd. What do you think Jesus hopes to teach us? Are we people who need to be "driven" or threatened, whipped and prodded by God to go in the right direction, or are we people who need to listen and be attentive in order to follow God?

In thinking about your own spiritual journey, are you able to distinguish when you were walking with God or following God—in trust, by faith—and when you felt you were being prodded or whipped, perhaps in fear of punishment or abandonment?

4. It is helpful to remember that John's Gospel has several different "I am" sayings of Jesus. For example, "I am the Bread of Life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the door or gate," "I am the vine, you are the branches," "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life".... So when Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, we might surmise that this is just one more facet of his relationship to us. (It's worth noting that to say, "I *am* the Good Shepherd" is a very different assertion than to say "I am *like* the Good Shepherd.")

John is proclaiming Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal God, so it is not surprising that multiple symbols and metaphors are needed to tell us more completely who Jesus is. Some people find it helpful to ponder which images or metaphors are most meaningful or strike a chord. It might also be useful to spend some time with those metaphors that do not seem helpful at first. Could it be that these images communicate something about the nature of God and God's relationship to us that might expand our understanding of God and deepen our faith? What do you hear God saying to you about your relationship to God in these "I am" sayings?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 5, Year B

The Gospel: John 15:1-8

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Background and general observations

The image of the people of God as a vine, or as a vineyard, is a common image in the Hebrew Bible. God's message to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah reads, "I have planted you as a choice vine." (Jeremiah 2:21) Other prophets use a similar image, and in the Psalms we read, "You brought a vine out of Egypt." (Psalm 80:8). So, in this lesson, Jesus is appropriating an image that would be well-known to his Jewish audience.

Interestingly, though, the Old Testament use of the vine as an image for the people of God is almost always negative. That is, the vine has grown wild and out of control; it has not been cultivated and pruned, so it does not bear fruit; and the soft wood of a vine is useless—it is not even suitable to be brought to the temple to be burned for altar sacrifices. A fruitless vine, therefore, is good for nothing except to be thrown away or heaped onto a bonfire.

Jesus takes this image of the vine that is so often used negatively in the Hebrew Bible and gives it a new twist: Jesus is the vine. And we are fruitful to the extent that we remain connected to him and "abide" in him. One has the impression that it is the vine's relationship to the vinegrower that makes the vine fruitful. In other words, Jesus stays in constant contact with the Father—he dwells in him—which makes Jesus who he is. Therefore, when we remain in such a relationship with Jesus, we are fruitful; we are productive, worthy, helpful, imaginative.

The problem, of course, is that some of the branches do not bear fruit; these are pruned, so that the useless branches do not drain life away from the rest of the vine. This passage may have us thinking metaphorically about those things that have been pruned out of our life in order that we become more fruitful—more generous, more loving, more forgiving. What in your life needs pruning now? What is stifling the flow of God's life, love, and energy into you and preventing fruitfulness?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. When this passage is read in the context of the chapters which immediately precede it—Chapter 14, which emphasizes loving Jesus, and Chapter 13, which emphasizes loving each other—we understand that love is the fruit which is expected of the branches. In other words, our true life is a life that is connected to and draws its energy, growth, and vitality from love. We know that the First Epistle of John says, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone

who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 John 4:7, 16)

Does this amplify the image of the vine and branches for you? Have you had the experience of “dwelling” in love (not momentary romantic love, but a more mature, self-giving and self-forgetful love) and sensed the presence of God in this experience? How can one remain connected to that kind of love?

2. Consider what it means to “abide” in another person, and for another person to “abide” in you. Who has been such a powerful influence that he or she has “abided” in you? Do you have a sense that you “abide” in someone else? How do we cultivate and nourish such abiding presences? Consider what Jesus might have meant about us abiding in him. How do we cultivate Jesus’ abiding presence in us?
3. Jesus made a point of regularly staying in touch with God, removing himself to a lonely place for prayer and quiet communion with the Divine. This constant contact with God—this dwelling, this abiding—is what made Jesus who he was. How do you attempt to stay in constant contact with the vine?

When have you attempted to go it alone, only to discover over time that you were withering, like a branch that has been cut off from the vine?

What have you had to prune from your own life in order to be a better version of yourself? How have you managed this pruning? Some pruning may be painful—pruning your anger, for example, may prove as difficult an exercise as pruning your drinking, or pruning your impatience. How have you found support and strength? What do you need in order to sustain your new growth?

4. Think of a time when you fell to temptation, or perhaps a time when you experienced depression or darkness or isolation, and your life seemed to spiral downward. Was there someone who reached out to you and rescued you? Did you have a sense that as long as you stayed close to this person (that is, “abided” with that person), you were being healed or coming back to life? Was there a sense that your nearness to this loved one meant hope?

Consider how our lives are shaped for the better by staying connected to certain people or groups. A mentor, for example, reminds you of what it means to be a good person, so you keep a picture of that person in your home or office. That person “abides” with you and in you. Or consider how somehow in recovery from addiction sometimes feels as if he or she can stay clean, sober and healthy as long as he or she stays connected to their recovery group, as long as that person “abides” in those that support him or her.

We might say that our lives remain lovely, as long as we stay close to loveliness or abide in loveliness. Our lives remain healthy and strong, as long as we stay connected to others who are healthy and strong.

Where must you “abide,” or who must “abide” in you, in order for you to stay healthy and whole, fruitful and loving? Do you have a sense that you are living your life in such a way that you can be

the sort of person others want to keep close—or remember or “abide” in—so that they, too, can be as loving, as generous, as kind?

5. This lesson might be summarized this way: “Those that bear fruit bring glory to God.” It might also be said that those who bear fruit serve as examples and attract the attention of others who want to be fruitful also, so that they might bring glory to God, too. It seems a rich opportunity to consider our responsibilities to one another, particularly as Christians.

How could Jesus’ teaching on pruning apply to a church community? How do you see our parish being pruned—or do you?—in order for us to bear more fruit as a community? How are we modeling our fruitfulness for others? How can we be better?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 6, Year B

The Gospel: John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

Background and general observations

This passage, with its emphasis on "abiding" in Christ's love and "bearing fruit," continues and elaborates on the metaphor of the vine and the branches. Jesus emphasizes the importance of staying connected to him, abiding in him, and drawing our life from him, just as branches are connected to the vine and draw their life from the vine.

Most biblical scholars believe that the Gospel according to John was written toward the end of the first century, a time when the early Christians were experiencing increasing hostility from the Roman government and from the Jewish authorities. One might detect in John's Gospel, and certainly in this passage, the growing awareness of how important it is for a persecuted community to stay together, to remain committed to each other, and to be clear and steadfast about the source of their true life. The imagery of bearing fruit could refer to the disciples growing in love for each other, and it could also refer to the making of other disciples; that is, drawing others into their fellowship of faith and love.

In this passage, Jesus commands us to do something that he enables us to do: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Jesus first gives this commandment in chapter 13:34, and he repeats it here for emphasis. Our Lord's love for us enables us to love each other; our staying connected to God's love allows that same love to flow through us to one another and to bear much fruit. One might say that prayer is all about opening ourselves more completely to the divine love in whom we live and move and have our being, the divine love that abides in all of us. The more we turn our hearts and minds to this love and to this true source of our life, the more God's love and life flows through us, inspires us, and animates us. On the other hand, the more we ignore or remain distracted from God's life-giving presence, the more apt we are to forget God, remain closed to God, or block the free flow of divine love into our lives.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus says he no longer calls the disciples "servants" but calls them instead "friends."

What is the difference between thinking of Christ or God as your master or lord and thinking of Christ or God as your friend? How do you tend to think of Christ? Do you sense the kind of intimate connection that comes with friendship, or a less personal and perhaps more distant

connection such as a servant has to a master? What does this say about the nature of your relationship with God?

2. “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

Our culture prizes self-autonomy and personal choice. We might even talk about choosing our religion or even choosing our God. But what difference would it make if you believed deep down that God chose you?

Do you think of yourself as the initiator of your relationship with God, or do you think of God as the one who initiates the relationship? When you are moved to prayer, was that your idea or God’s prompting? How is your relationship with God affected when you think of God as one who is not just passively waiting for you, but as one who is constantly initiating, seeking you, and knocking on the door of your heart?

3. Continuing with this idea of “choosing” vs. “being chosen,” think about how this idea might be applied to the life of a church community. What is the difference between choosing and being chosen? For example, if you are new to a church community, consider what it feels like to have an array of choices you might make about how to get involved. Now, consider what it feels like to have someone approach you and “choose” you. What responsibilities does a church have to balance choosing with being chosen? How can the church issue an invitation for fellowship without inadvertently being its own “block” by assuming choices that are someone else’s to make?

If we are called to love one another as Christ loved us, might that include a calling to “choose” one another, as Christ “chose” us? What are some of the ways we might choose others, especially those who are new to us or perhaps even those who currently have no relationship with us?

4. One way of thinking about our role as “friends” who have been “chosen” by Jesus is to say that he has chosen us to be partners or collaborators in the work he has begun. We are not servants or slaves taking orders from a master. Instead, we are friends of Christ who turn to him regularly in prayer and with thanksgiving. In a sense, we are asking or pondering with Christ, what is my role in continuing the life and good work of Christ on earth?

Think of your life as if it were a book. Some of the chapters have already been written. You can look back over the course of your life so far and re-read those chapters. Much has happened already. But right now, and every day, you are beginning a new chapter. This page and the pages ahead are blank. Christ is your friend and co-author (if you allow him to be) of your life going forward. Turn to Christ in prayer and ponder with each other, “How shall we write this next chapter together?” What do you hear Christ saying? What do you say in response?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 7, Year B

The Gospel: John 17:6-19

Looking up to heaven, Jesus prayed, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."

Background and general observations

This passage from John's Gospel is in the section involving the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing to leave the disciples, and this entire passage is Jesus' prayer to God. Jesus is asking God to protect the disciples, much as we might pray that God take care of people whom we love. But Jesus' prayer also acknowledges that serious challenges are ahead.

*As Jesus prays, we are reminded that Jesus was sent by God, just as Old Testament prophets were sent by God. When prophets spoke, they spoke with the authority of the One who sent them. So, they could say, "Thus says the Lord..." With Jesus, this sense of authority is magnified—he not only **spoke** the word of the Lord, but he embodied it. In his life and person, not just in his speech, Jesus has revealed God (the Word became flesh).*

Having been reminded that God sent Jesus into the world in this special way, to embody and make known the Divine Presence in the world, we now hear Jesus praying, "As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." This is a powerful statement about the nature of the Christian life and might be an important thing to ponder: we are to embody and reveal Jesus, just as Jesus has embodied and revealed God.

This is a time of bewilderment for the disciples who are undoubtedly feeling anxious and uncertain about what will happen next. But in Jesus' prayer, he notes that the disciples are close to his heart and that the disciples have much in common with Jesus, and thus they have much in common with God. They have God's word, just as Jesus has; they are being sent into the world, as Jesus was sent into the world; they do not belong to the world; and they are hated by the world. Jesus prays that the disciples "may be one" as he and the Father are one.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus prays that God will “protect the disciples in God’s name.” Jesus says that he has protected the disciples “in God’s name” until now. But now Jesus is coming to God, and he commends the disciples to God’s keeping, God’s protection, and God’s care.

What kind of confidence or faith do you have that God will protect your loved ones, and what do you even mean when you ask that God keep and protect them? Although we surely pray that God will keep our loved ones safe from bodily harm, Jesus must have known that his disciples, hated by the world, would suffer bodily harm and perhaps even death. Perhaps Jesus was praying that the disciples would be protected from following or succumbing to the destructive ways of the world, that they be kept in the love of God, no matter what the world might do to them.

What do you make of the idea of praying that God will protect your loved one, no matter what the world does to him or her? What does that mean? Can you pray for your loved ones in this way, confident in the protection of God, regardless of what might befall them in the world? What other kinds of harm are we praying against?

2. “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world,” Jesus says. Yet, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....

What do you know about not belonging to the world, yet loving the world? What do you know about wishing you could escape the world or be taken out of it? How can we be “at home and at peace in God,” even “joyful” in God, when we are suffering, or are in hostile or adverse circumstances?

Consider talking with your group and learning from each other about strategies we can use for remaining at peace in God even when things and people around us are anxious or out of control.

3. Jesus revealed God to the world. Now, we are sent into the world in the same way that Jesus was sent. It may be difficult to think of yourself in this way, as Christ-like, responsible for revealing God. How do you think you are doing?

It may be helpful to think of others in your life who support you in this godly work and who reveal God themselves. How do they do it? What are you learning from being in relationship with these people?

4. Jesus says in this prayer that he is glorified in the disciples. He speaks as if the disciples are a great gift to him and Jesus is deeply grateful to God for them. Yet, as we know, the disciples were often a bungling lot who sometimes misunderstood Jesus, and ultimately they would fail him and betray him.

Consider what we learn from this prayer about the importance of cherishing our friends and those who love us. How often do we take our friends and loved ones for granted? Yet, the fact that our friends care for us, treat us in a kindly fashion, remain loyal to us...this is a tremendous gift. What difference would it make in your life and in your friendships if you

thought of your loved ones as great gifts, even though they might fail you? Every human being needs to know that he or she is cherished by someone.

Whom do you cherish? Who cherishes you?

Do you assume that this person *knows* you cherish him or her, or are you intentional about speaking your love and calling attention to the ways in which you value and treasure the relationship?

Have you known someone in your life who made a point of noting what made you so special in his or her eyes, who spoke about you as a gift from God? What difference has that person made in your life?

How can we be better friends to one another?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

The Day of Pentecost, Year B

The Gospel: John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Jesus said to his disciples, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But, now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Background and general observations

The Day of Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit 50 days after the Resurrection. We had 40 days of Easter resurrection appearances, then 10 days of Ascensiontide (a kind of in-between time, when Jesus has ascended into heaven and is no longer appearing as he had been), and now the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Day of Pentecost is one of the three major feasts of the church year, along with Christmas and Easter and is sometimes called "the Birthday of the Church," as it marks the transformation of timid and fearful disciples into empowered and enlivened apostles who end up being the catalysts for the transformation of the world.

As long as Jesus remained present in bodily form, even in resurrected bodily form, he could be present only to certain people at certain times. Now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Lord can be present to all people and at all times. Perhaps this is one reason Jesus emphasizes in this Gospel lesson that "it is to your advantage that I go away."

The only writer in the New Testament who tells us about the Day of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit is Luke in Acts 2:1-21. Paul and others talk about the Holy Spirit, but only Luke talks about the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. In the Gospel According to John, it is on Easter Day, not Pentecost, that the resurrected Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). This recalls the creation story from Genesis in which God breathed life into the human being.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "...it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Jesus is saying that the bewildered and grief-stricken disciples will actually benefit from his going away. Jesus' leaving will allow the Holy Spirit to come.

When have you benefited from a parting that you had feared and dreaded?

Think of a time when, against your will, someone whom you loved left you. Or think of a time when you had to leave someone whom you loved. What unexpected gift or spiritual revelation ultimately came from your being separated from one another? If you had not been parted, would you have received this same gift or spiritual revelation?

2. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

Do you tend to think of faith and the spiritual life as something that a person “gets” all at once, or as something that evolves and changes over time?

How has your faith changed over the years? How has your religious understanding changed?

Are there some aspects of faith that are very important to you now, but that you could not have handled years ago?

3. The experience of the Holy Spirit moving in our lives can be difficult to describe or imagine until we actually encounter it—or perhaps only in retrospect. How and in what contexts do you imagine the Spirit to act? Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind. You can’t see it, but you can see its effects or signs of its presence (as in the movement of leaves in a tree). What are some of the signs that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in a person or in a group of people?

4. “[The Advocate, the Spirit of truth] will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify....”

The language here is awkward, but Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit will lead us into a deeper knowledge of Jesus. The Spirit will come and will even, in effect, make Jesus present. And we are also to “testify.” That is, our lives are to give others a deeper knowledge of Jesus and, in effect, make him present.

Share how you have sensed the Spirit drawing you deeper into truth—truth about Jesus, about God.

How has the Spirit been revealing the presence and activity of God, or Jesus, in your life over the past few weeks?

How have you witnessed or testified to the people in your life about Christ?

5. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you....”

The disciples are sad and perhaps frightened about Jesus’ leaving. Jesus has been an important guide to them. But Jesus says that they will continue to be guided by the Spirit. Elsewhere (Matthew 10:19, Mark 13:11, and Luke 12:11), Jesus tells the disciples that they do not have to worry about what they will say when they are later handed over to the authorities, because “the Holy Spirit will teach you what you are to say.”

When have you had the experience of being guided? Have you ever had the experience of being given the words you needed to say at a certain time?

Do you have a sense of the ongoing presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in your life today?

How can you be more attentive to the promptings and guiding of the Holy Spirit, and less worried about what you need to say or do about a particular situation?

6. The great reform theologian Martin Luther explained the third article of the creed (about the Holy Spirit) this way:

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Commenting on Luther's explanation, a modern pastor has said:

I have frequently described the content of faith as "tentative absolutes." This is what I am absolutely sure about now; but I am open for the Spirit to give new revelations, new insights, new information which might change me and my beliefs tomorrow.

How do you respond? Do you need to have the content of faith and the spiritual life a bit firmer and less paradoxical? Or, does this make some sense to you?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Trinity Sunday, Year B

The Gospel: John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Background and general observations

*Is it irony, grace, or both, that the only Sunday in the church year set aside to celebrate a church doctrine, Trinity Sunday, follows the major feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of timid disciples into emboldened leaders? Some might say that the day on which we celebrate disciples speaking in many different tongues and appearing to bystanders to be drunk at mid-day stands in sharp contrast to a day on which we celebrate the carefully crafted and sober doctrine of the Trinity. Of course, the Trinity is not so much the **object** of faith, as it is the **explication** of faith. The experience of God is ineffable and multifaceted. We hardly know what to say, but we feel compelled to say something. The doctrine of the Trinity is the central dogma of Christianity that, among other things, gave words and concepts for people to use in talking about something that strained the limits of language.*

In a way, it makes sense then that dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus in the third chapter of John's Gospel is the lesson appointed for Trinity Sunday. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, is drawn to Jesus, but many have conjectured that he comes to Jesus "by night" because he is afraid of others knowing that he is drawn to this rabbi. Nicodemus seems to indicate that religious officials have found some merit in Jesus' teaching. "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," Nicodemus says, "for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Yet, in the two verses that immediately precede this story, we read that many believed in Jesus “because they saw the signs that he was doing.” (John 2:24) But Jesus “would not entrust himself to them.” So, when Nicodemus asserts confidently that they “know” Jesus has come from God because of the signs, perhaps we are seeing up front that Nicodemus’ approach and understanding are suspect.

Jesus makes it clear that his focus is not on signs or teachings but on a complete transformation that can be described as a rebirth “from above.” “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above,” he says. The magnitude of this idea is difficult to understand (kind of like the Trinity), and Nicodemus presses Jesus to say more, by asking how this could be. But whereas Jesus had spoken about being born “from above,” Nicodemus asks how one can be born again in the earthly sense, by “entering a second time into the mother’s womb.”

This precipitates Jesus’ discussion about being born “of the flesh” and being born “of the Spirit.” Of course, where you are born is where you are “from” and where you “belong.” And Jesus speaks of his own origins when he says that the Son of Man is the one who “descended from heaven.”

Throughout this dialogue, we have an interweaving of the divine persons of the Trinity: God, who gave God’s only Son; Jesus, the Son of Man who descended from heaven; and the Spirit, who is the giver of life. And by saying that we must be “born from above,” Jesus is inviting us into this divine, eternal life.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. John Calvin suggested that Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus. This is the reason he comes at night. Calvin used this story to coin a word, “Nicodemites.” Nicodemites were the people in France who were evangelicals at heart but Roman Catholics in practice. They were people who could not bring themselves to show forth in their lives what they believed in their hearts.

In what ways might you be a Nicodemus-like character?

In the words of Parker J. Palmer, how is your “soul,” your truest self, sometimes at odds with your “role” in life? Is your nighttime or more private truth sometimes at odds with your daytime public practice?

2. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

This is the John 3:16 that you might see held up on poster board near the end zone at a football game. It’s been painted on bridges and overpasses and printed on shopping bags; it’s one of the most popular verses in the Bible and what Martin Luther called “the Gospel in miniature.”

Some have heard this verse quoted by people, likely earnest evangelicals, who interpret it to mean that one must believe what they believe in order to have eternal life. Sometimes, that doesn’t sound like good news at all. How do you hear this verse? What does it mean to you? Is there another verse that rings true to you as “the Gospel in miniature”?

3. The Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—is a way of naming God. We say that God exists as three persons—three elements—but as one single, divine nature and that no one of the three is more powerful or more active or more correct than the other. That is, each is understood to have the identical essence, the identical nature of God.

In thinking about your private life of prayer, do you imagine yourself praying to God the Father? God the Son? Or to God the Holy Spirit? We are always, *in essence*, praying to one God but what might such a personal distinction reveal to you about your relationship with the Divine?

4. “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

What would you say might be signs that a person has been “born from above”? How does that person live or conduct herself in such a way that you know she has been “born from above”? How is that person different from other people?

5. “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen...”

For many, an experience of God may be an unspeakable experience. And yet most feel compelled to say *something*—to testify, to make meaning, to record and document. We all *use* language even when talking about things that are beyond the limits *of* language simply because it is our human nature to want to understand our experiences. But there are, simply put, some things for which there are no words.

What are some ways you have found to manage profound experiences, such as an experience of the Divine? How have you reconciled a desire to speak of God with an acceptance that perhaps there is no vocabulary sufficient to do so? What can you do instead of speak? How else can we testify?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Mark 3:20–35

The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Background and general observations

In a sense we have two stories in one here. One story is about Jesus and his family and the other is about Jesus and the scribes. Both revolve around how Jesus is being revealed as the Son of God through his works and teachings. In chapters 1 and 2 of Mark, Jesus has performed many healing miracles—a man with an unclean spirit, a paralytic, Simon's mother-in-law, and lepers. He has also been preaching throughout Galilee. Some of his preaching and teaching has been challenging to the Pharisees. In particular: “The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath.”

Now he has returned home to Nazareth and he is once again surrounded by crowds. His family hears of this and they try to get to him and take him away, because “people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” It seems his teaching and healing are an embarrassment to the family. The only thing they know to do is to “restrain” him. While what that specifically means is not clear, they do want to get him out of the public eye and quell the talk about him.

The scribes also learn that Jesus is back in his hometown and they go to confront him. (Scribes were people with writing and copying skills which were essential to preserving sacred text. They were granted some authority for interpretation of scripture, but were not on the same level as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests in Judaism.) They charge that Jesus is healing in the name of “Beelzebul” (a variation of Beelzebub, a name for the devil). Jesus' retort to this accusation gives us a familiar saying later paraphrased by Abraham Lincoln, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” Once again Jesus puts his antagonists in their place by using their own words against them. If Jesus were truly acting from the devil's power he would not use it to banish evil spirits. He goes on to state that there are many sins in the world but blaspheming the Holy Spirit, that is, the power that works within him, can never be forgiven. The scribes are not only undone, but damned by their own words.

This scene with the scribes ends and Jesus' family returns to the picture. They are now at the door to try to carry Jesus away. Jesus uses this confrontation to redefine "family." Family is no longer blood relations for Jesus. Rather, Jesus' family are those who do "the will of God." In one short statement Jesus gives us new meaning for who he and we are to call family. Doing the will of God is what binds us in love. Those who do God's will—not those who worry about appearances, embarrassment, social standing and so forth—are our parents, our brothers and sisters. What we will come to call the church is our family because it is doing the will of God.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. What does the word "family" mean to you? Who are your family members? Can your family, or does it, include people to whom you are not related by blood or marriage?

The world is filled with all kinds of "families." The traditional family—husband, wife, and their biological children—is only one expression of family. How do other types of families help us understand what God intends for us? Do they shed light on what might be the Kingdom of God as Jesus proclaims it?

2. Scribes enjoyed a certain level of authority and it seems that they liked to wield that authority when something came up that they did not understand. Jesus' healing and teaching challenge them. Rather than attempting to understand, it seems that they react out of their authority and thus get caught up in their own accusations.

Who are the scribes in your life? How do you respond to them?

Are you a scribe in someone else's life? What can you learn from these scribes about your own behavior?

"Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," goes a well-known saying. While the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests are not necessarily "bad guys," but people trying to keep the Jews faithful to scripture, they seem to have been corrupted by their power. How do we get corrupted or misled when our sense of rightness is challenged?

3. Lincoln used part of this scripture in his "House Divided" speech saying, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." The rancorous level of public discourse suggests that our national house is divided against itself. How are we as Christians called to witness and live out our faith in such a milieu?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 22, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Background and general observations

By this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has already attracted significant crowds. Predictably, he has already attracted significant opposition, too. In this passage, some members of the crowd ask Jesus a question to "test him." The motivation for questioning Jesus about the permissibility of divorce is not because the questioners truly want an answer, but because they want to entrap Jesus — however he answers this one, he is sure to offend somebody!

Jesus begins his answer by asking them what they think. And after his questioners answer, Jesus changes the discussion from pondering what is permissible concerning the dissolution of a marriage (clearly, divorce was permitted by Scripture) to what God originally intended in marriage. Jesus strengthens the case for marriage, inviting his hearers to imagine God's intent that husband and wife should constitute a deep, irrevocable bond. The two are to become "one flesh."

One thing Jesus seems to be doing here is inviting his hearers to an understanding of marriage that is much deeper than a legal contract in which some things are permissible and others are not. Instead, Jesus speaks about marriage as a condition of being, in which two humans have become one. Here, Jesus evokes the theology of covenant: the spiritual, social, and practical commitment between two parties meant to bind them to one another forever. Jesus' listeners would have known about God's covenant with the people of Israel, and would have understood the enduring and transcendent nature of that promise. In this passage, Jesus uses very intense language to get his point across—language which causes this passage to sit uncomfortably for many who read it. How do we account for his pointed statements here?

Perhaps Jesus' language is a sign of his conviction or passion—perhaps he uses the strongest words possible to compel us to understand marriage as a true covenant of two people, a transcendent commitment of love. Furthermore, perhaps Jesus sought to compel his listeners to adopt first and foremost a posture of care, mercy, and compassion toward not only spouses or family members, but their entire community. Jesus' invitation to love and concern for the vulnerable is evident in many places throughout the Gospel—including in his indignation in the concluding verses of this passage, when he saw that children were being prevented from coming to him.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Imagine the kind of conversation that might have taken place if Jesus' questioners had approached him with sincerity and loving concern for their friends and neighbors: "Rabbi, we know that all marriages have their challenges. How can we best support husbands and wives in their marriages? And how can we best care for husbands and wives who are going through the pain of separation? And when a marriage fails, how can we help ex-spouses to overcome shame or guilt, help them to realize that we love them, and help them to move on with their lives in healthy ways, knowing they are loved and not judged?" What sort of answer would Jesus have given them?

How does the motivation behind a question change the discussion that follows? Consider examples in your own life.

What might be the effect in your life if you were more attentive to the motives behind your engagements with others?

2. Marriage trouble is a topic which many people classify as "taboo" or unfit for public, polite conversation. What are other topics that you feel uncomfortable discussing publicly? What makes you shy away from these conversations?

When I think of my dream Christian community, it is a brave space in which no topic is off-limits for vulnerable, gentle, reflective dialogue. Is this how you experience your own Christian community, or other communities to which you belong? Can you think of a time you have participated in a conversation like this, where a seemingly "taboo" topic was safely, non-judgmentally discussed? How did that feel? How can you cultivate those conversations and brave spaces in our community? How do you help yourself and others share vulnerably about your struggles or failures in life?

3. Notice the contrast between Jesus arguing with adults who are focused on questions of the law, as opposed to Jesus taking little children in his arms and blessing them. As he conversed with the Pharisees, mothers brought little children to him for healing and care, but Jesus' disciples kept the children away. What might their motivation have been to prevent the children from approaching Jesus? What was their focus in this moment?

Consider the following quotation:

Time and again the Gospel tells this same story. People look for truth, while Jesus embraces children and the outcasts of his day. And Jesus simply says, "The truth is not in a book or a code. The truth is in my arms."

How does this Gospel passage challenge or inspire you, as a follower of Jesus? How might you orient yourself more and more toward love and toward those in need? What gets in the way of your ability to do that—what pulls your focus?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 23, Year B

The Gospel

Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Background and general observations

This story is one of the best known from the Gospels, perhaps because it speaks so poignantly to us and sometimes unsettles us. In Mark's version of the story, the person who approaches Jesus is simply "a man." In Matthew's version, the person is a "young man," and in Luke's version, the person is a "ruler." And in all of the versions, the person is rich. Our usual reference to "the rich, young ruler" is a conflation of all of the versions.

This story also follows the story of Jesus welcoming little children and teaching that the kingdom of God belongs to "such as these." This is a marked contrast — helpless and powerless children to whom the kingdom of God already belongs vs. a rich and powerful ruler who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Interestingly, in the verses which follow our present lesson, Jesus begins teaching the twelve what will happen to him in Jerusalem — he will be "handed over" to authorities who will mock him, spit on him, kill him. It is a frightening picture of a powerless adult. And the next thing we know, James and John are asking Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

This precipitates teaching about the greatest being the one who serves. We are receiving important teaching about the kind of life to which Jesus' followers are invited

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The passage about the rich man asking what he can do to inherit eternal life immediately follows the passage about Jesus welcoming the little children and saying, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Consider the difference between the rich man asking what he can *do*, and the children who are simply in a position to receive a free gift. These represent two different ways of living life, and two different ways of understanding how we humans experience God’s grace” by earning it through good works, or by receiving that which is freely given. Which of these experiences resonates with you? Is it both? Can you think of a time you lived one way or the other?

Consider also the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Does this prayer convey a certain posture or approach to daily life?

2. “...a man ran up and knelt before Jesus...” Notice how this man approached Jesus. “He ran...” – it seems he approached Jesus with excitement and enthusiasm, and then he knelt.

How do you tend to approach Jesus?

Do you approach Jesus running with excitement and enthusiasm? Or, do you approach Jesus with fear? With joy? Caution? Gratitude? Skepticism? ...

Do you approach Jesus with a sense of familiarity, as if you were friends? Or, do you approach Jesus with a sense of unworthiness on your part?

What does your way of approaching Jesus say about who Jesus is for you?

3. Notice that the man asks Jesus about what he must do in order to gain something for himself, but Jesus answers with a series of commandments that all have to do with how we are to be in community, in relationship with each other.

What is the relationship between eternal life and communal life? In your own experience, do you sense a connection between your relationship with God and your relationships with the people in your life?

4. A common response to Jesus’ words, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...then come, and follow me” is a feeling of guilt. A few in history (e.g. St. Francis of Assisi) have heard Jesus saying these words to them, and they have responded by giving away everything they own and devoting themselves to a life of poverty.

Consider the following quotation: “...new life in the Kingdom of God does allow for new behavior, new first steps. Maybe folks should *not* give away all they have at once, but life in the kingdom is about caring and sharing. It should not be business as usual.”

Do you hear God issuing you an invitation through this Gospel story?

What “first steps” might you take toward a new life in the kingdom, a life that will not be “business as usual”?

5. “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” One way of understanding Jesus’ teaching is to say that the way to salvation or eternal life is not so much a way that requires personal effort or good works, as much as it is a way of personal surrender and release of our lives to God.

What do you need to surrender, in order to draw closer to God and life in the kingdom? How does your life need to change, or what new attitude or approach to life will you need to adopt, if you are going to live more fully the life God has created you to live?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 24, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Background and general observations

In Mark's Gospel, this story follows Jesus' third prediction of his suffering and death (10:32-34), and it is the third time Jesus' disciples have failed to understand, as well as the third time that Jesus has instructed the disciples on the peculiar nature of discipleship, what it means to follow him. Clearly, Mark is concerned to show just what sort of messiah Jesus is, to demonstrate that this was not easily accepted or understood, and to show what kind of life Jesus' followers were being invited to live.

James and John were among the first disciples called by Jesus. Along with Peter, they constitute a kind of "inner circle" of disciples and sometimes seem to represent the twelve. There is obvious pride and considerable irony in the request of these two disciples, that they be granted to sit on Jesus' right and left in his glory. After all, Jesus has repeatedly spoken of servanthood as the mark of greatness in the kingdom, and the two who ended up on Jesus' right and left at his crucifixion were criminals. It has been suggested that this brash request of James and John must have been embarrassing. In Matthew, it is the mother of these two disciples who makes the request (blame the mother), and in Luke, the whole episode is simply referred to as "a dispute" about who was the greatest.

But have you noticed how wealth and exalted position have a way of separating us from others? Jesus is concerned about connecting us to others, and there is no more intimate connection than that which comes from serving one another — knowing and tending to the needs of the other.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. What is the root of James and John's desire to sit at the prized seats next to Jesus? Is this desire unusual to you, or have you also found enjoyment in having status or recognition? Are these desires something you talk about openly, or are they more secret aspects of you? Consider your own striving and longing. In what ways might you be considered a "child of Zebedee," like James and John?

2. Have you ever noticed how wealth or exalted position have a way of creating division between the exalted and those around them? What does this division look like? Have you experienced it yourself—on either side of the divide?

Jesus' main concern is about connecting us to one another—he says that greatness is related to servanthood rather than fame or fortune. There is a very intimate connection which arises out of knowing and tending to the needs of the other. Have you experienced this kind of connection? How does it help to bridge the divide we reflect on above?

3. Using your own experience, compare the feeling of “greatness” you have felt when you have found yourself in a position of honor or privilege with the “greatness” you have felt when you have found yourself in a position of serving others.
4. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

One interpretation of this well-known sentence is that Jesus paid the ultimate price, the sacrifice or gift of surrendering even his own life. Today we need not get bogged down on various theories about to whom the price was paid—for now, it suffices to notice that this sentence has a beautiful way of pointing out that love has certain costs. Freedom comes at a price. Grief and sorrow can be a price of loving, and freedom sometimes comes at the cost of sweat and blood.

Perhaps, then, this idea of ransom is a means of pointing out that Jesus paid the ultimate price of love and freedom, and the result is that the way is now opened for us to be united with God.

The central symbol of the Christian life is the cross. When you look at the cross, how does it function for you as a sign of the way to God and eternal life?

5. Do you see servanthood as the way to “abundant life,” true “greatness” in the kingdom of God, and blessedness? If so, what changes do you need to make in your daily life to live more completely as a servant to others?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 25, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Background and general observations

It was the custom for rabbis to teach as they walked with their disciples, and one can imagine this taking place in this scene. It would also be likely that people who were unable to attend the Passover would be lining the main road through Jericho, wishing pilgrims well. On this particular day, word had likely traveled that the bold rabbi from Nazareth was on his way, and many would have been interested to see and perhaps hear him.

In this great mix of people – devoted followers, hostile authorities, and curious bystanders – there was a blind beggar "sitting by the roadside." When he asked people around him who was passing by, he began to make a scene and cause a commotion. "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet," the story says, and we can imagine the same sort of thing happening today.

Blindness, both physical blindness and spiritual blindness, plays an important role in Mark's Gospel. In the present case, the healing of Bartimaeus caps a section of the Gospel that begins with Jesus healing a blind man in chapter 8 (by making mud with his saliva and touching the man). Subsequently, in chapters 9 and 10, Jesus deals with the spiritual blindness of his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples that he is about to undergo suffering and death; Peter's reaction is to rebuke Jesus. Jesus then tells the disciples that he will be betrayed and given into human hands, and the reaction of the disciples is confusion – they are afraid to ask anything. Then, the disciples fall into an argument about who is greatest; and right after that, James and John tell Jesus that they want to sit on his right and left in glory. Thus, one can see how this section of the Gospel begins and ends with physical blindness, with recurring spiritual blindness in between.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "What do you want me to do for you?"

Imagine Jesus asking you this question. Take some time to let the question sink in. What would you say?

2. Bartimaeus "shouted out," and after many were sternly ordering him to be quiet, Bartimaeus "cried out even more loudly."

Ponder Bartimaeus' eagerness, his persistence, and his boldness in calling out to Jesus. Consider, also, his belief that Jesus can make all the difference in his life; Jesus can give him what he needs and wants most of all.

How do you tend to approach Jesus? What do you believe about the kind of difference Jesus can make in your life? How might your way of approaching Jesus, and your beliefs about him, help to determine what happens in your encounter with Jesus?

3. When you consider the world today, who is sitting by the roadside in need, calling out for help and being silenced by society?

Who in your personal life is the roadside beggar calling out for help? How is this person being treated?

Consider how you are the roadside beggar. While the procession of life goes on in front of you, how do you feel consigned to a place at the side of life's procession? What are the deepest needs or most secret longings of your heart that are going unnoticed, but about which you would like to call out for help?

4. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

This is reminiscent of the ancient Jesus Prayer so vitally important to Eastern Orthodox Christians and which many are finding helpful in their prayers today. The Jesus Prayer has various forms, but a commonly used one is this: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." This prayer is often repeated silently like a mantra, in sync with one's breathing – "Lord Jesus Christ," on the inhale, and "have mercy on me" on the exhale. This way of prayer has been helpful to Christians for 1500 years, as a way of stilling the mind, opening the heart, and bringing the pray-er more fully into the Presence of God.

What role, if any, does such meditative prayer have in your spiritual life? What sort of discipline(s) do you observe that help to cultivate stillness, quietness, and a trusting posture of belief before God? If you are discussing this lesson in a small group, consider sharing some of your practices or disciplines that you find especially helpful, and tell why.

5. Bartimaeus asks Jesus to "let him see again." Clearly, then, Bartimaeus has not always been blind. What do you know about "seeing" your life more clearly in the past, but gradually losing your vision? How have the many cares and occupations of your life dulled your sight and perhaps your relationships? If you could see your life clearly again, how would your life change?
6. In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, theologian Ched Myers reminds us that Bartimaeus' cloak "is [the blind man's] sole element of livelihood," that it was the beggars' practice to "spread out their cloaks to receive alms." When he heard a crowd coming—perhaps as he heard Jesus and the disciples coming in today's story-- Bartimaeus would spread his cloak out on the road around him, smoothing it down, and would call out for donations from the passers-

by. Perhaps he would lift his hands in a posture of request. And, God-willing, those walking by would toss their coins and loose change down onto the street in front of Bartimaeus, where his beloved cloak would catch and keep them for his collection.

Bartimaeus' cloak was a tool necessary to his survival, a vital piece of the way in which Bartimaeus was able to navigate his place in the world. It was also his means of shelter, warmth, and protection as he lived his life on the road outside of Jerusalem. And yet he throws it away! After being invited to see the Son of God himself, Bartimaeus leaps to his feet, casts down his cloak, and approaches the Lord.

What an act of faith! What trust that Jesus would, in fact, deliver him, to toss down his cloak before even knowing if Jesus would grant his request. In the “act of [Bartimaeus] throwing off his cloak, we see the image of one who leaves his former life behind” and he does so even before he is healed.

As you consider Bartimaeus' bold act, can you remember a moment in your life when you cast away stability in order to trust God or take a big risk? What did that feel like? How did you experience God in the midst of that step of faith?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 26, Year B

The Gospel

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Background and general observations

This passage, though placed toward the end of the Church calendar's season of Pentecost, is set in the midst of Mark's account of Jesus' passion. This narrative setting amplifies the force of Jesus' response to the inquisitive scribe. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem at the height of his popularity; Jewish crowds would have associated his arrival with the manifestation of David's long-promised kingdom. This conversation in Jerusalem serves as a final proof-text for Jesus' indisputable authority.

Throughout Mark's narrative, Jesus demonstrates that he has the same kind of authority that King David once held and is presented as a teacher incapable of impeachment—and so we ought to carefully consider his response to the scribe's query. He first answers that the "first" commandment is to love God entirely, and then to love one's neighbor as oneself—language that might be familiar to us as the "Golden Rule." These two commandments are inextricably interconnected in Jesus' worldview. The love of God motivates God's people to dedicate their heart, soul, mind, and strength—sentiment, piety, thought, energy—to living life as God has instructed. Moreover, this is an inherently social activity. It is impossible for one who loves God to fully follow the Lord without the companionship and support of her fellows in Christ; it is impossible to love God fully without dedicating oneself to serving one's fellows.

Finally, Jesus' blessing to the scribe ("You are not far from the kingdom of God") maintains Mark's presentation of the kingdom as an intangible object of eschatological hope. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the kingdom is mysterious and somewhat far-off, though it is clear that those to whom it has been handed will see it before their own death. Essentially, most people are in ambiguous relationship to the kingdom as they wait for its arrival—with the notable exception of Jesus, who demonstrates his unassailable authority and nears the kingdom more and more as he travels toward the cross.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Imagine Jesus saying this to you. Does this feel like a blessing? Does it resonate with your own sense of the kingdom's nearness? How close does the kingdom feel to you in your everyday life?

2. Jesus' commandments to the listening crowd center on love: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. You may have heard the word *agape* used to describe a particularly Christian kind of love. Here, we understand that *agape* love toward God is wholly responsive, while *agape* love toward neighbor does not require reciprocation but rather stems freely from one's heart like a gift. Neighborly *agape* demands that we believe our neighbors are inherently valuable simply as a fact of their being. Do you ever struggle with this? Have you ever had an experience with a particularly challenging neighbor? How did you express love to them even in the face of that challenge?
3. Jesus also commands that we love ourselves, which is the basis for the way that we love our neighbors. Our culture speaks of self-love often, and it can seem that secular self-love is actually at odds with neighborly love because it emphasizes oneself over and above anything or anyone else. However, Jesus seems to tell us that we must first love ourselves before we can correctly love our neighbors ("Love your neighbor as yourself").

Do you ever struggle with the love of self? When you hear self-love in today's culture, does the idea fit into your expression of faith? What are your practices for remembering you are loved by God, and learning to love yourself in the same way?

4. In his response to the scribe, Jesus quotes Moses' own words in Deuteronomy. He also makes an addition. Where Moses tells the people of Israel to love God with heart, soul, and might, Jesus adds that we ought also to love God with our minds.

It can seem as though the Church either overprioritizes or underprioritizes the mind in the pursuit of God. We either rely solely on our own intellect to guide us on the path to relationship with God, or we remove intellect from the faith journey altogether.

How do you include your mind in your journey toward communion with God? How do you integrate your mind with your heart, soul, and strength? What do each of these facets of self mean to you, especially as aspects of your life of faith?

5. Jesus opens his discourse with the scribe by reciting the *shema*, a passage known in Judaism by this first word, which means "hear." The *shema* is found in Deuteronomy and reads "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." In the context of first century Jewish life, these words call Israel's attention to the complete commitment due only to God.

Theologian Lincoln Galloway reminds us that "as we deal with dialogue across diverse religious traditions and perspectives, or even within our own faith communities, this text reminds us that the impetus for radical new direction is rooted in the foundational tenets of our faith traditions," such as the *shema* in the Jewish context. What are similar foundational tenets that root you in the midst of radical change or transformation?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

All Saints' Sunday, Year B

The Gospel: John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Background and general observations

All Saints' Day is one of the major feasts of the church year. While we are accustomed to thinking of "saints" as people of extraordinary virtue and Christ-like lives, people who end up in stained glass windows and on church calendars, the more ancient understanding of a saint is different. In the earliest days of the church, all baptized Christians were referred to as "saints." The word means "sanctified" or "set apart." Christians are people who have been consecrated or sanctified in baptism and called out to live lives devoted to the Way of Jesus.

St. Paul, for example, begins his letter to the Colossians this way: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae..." And he begins his first letter to the Corinthians, introducing himself and then saying, "...to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..."

In other words, if you are a Christian, you are a saint. You might not be an especially good or obedient saint, but you are set apart, sanctified, in the world but not of the world...you belong to Christ. And after Paul greets all the saints in Corinth or wherever, he will at times go on to chastise them for their bad behavior. We might put it this way: Paul is reminding all Christians that they are saints, and he is calling them to become who they already are.

The story of Lazarus' death and resurrection begins at the first verse of chapter 11 in John's Gospel. It may be helpful to read the story in its entirety: in the preceding chapter, some people pick up stones to stone him (10:31) and a few verses later, "they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands."(v. 39) Even in the midst of such conflict, more and more people are coming to Jesus and believing in him. (10:40-42) The story presents us with an interesting contrast. On the one hand, Jesus seems unconcerned about Lazarus' illness. When he receives word that Lazarus is ill, he decides to stay where he is for two more days, instead of going to Lazarus immediately (11:5). On the other hand, as we can see in the present passage, Jesus' encounter with Mary elicits deep emotion from Jesus.

One might ponder the tensions between the idea of a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and transcendent, with the idea of a God who is close at hand and deeply engaged, even on an emotional level, in the affairs of human beings. Perhaps we have had experiences in which we have sensed the majesty and magnificence of God as the Holy Other, and we have also had experiences in which we have sensed the tenderness and intimacy of God as a personal Presence.

That we read the story of Lazarus' death and resurrection on All Saints' Sunday provides us with rich material to turn over in our minds and think about with renewed attention. Some see in this story an illustration of the fact that Jesus is indeed "the Word of God" who brings eternal life. The raising of Lazarus is "for the sake of the crowd" so that they might fully believe the truth about who Jesus is. In this way, the story might inspire an awakening in us, as well, toward a new understanding about what it means to live a life in Christ.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. All Saints' provides an opportunity for rich discussion and deep personal reflection about those in your life, living or dead, who come to mind on All Saints' Day. Saints are not only those who are famous or revered in some way—they are also those who embody grace in our day to day lives. Call to mind particular people who do this for you. What made or makes that person so special? How does that person's influence in your life inspire you to live? How might you be a saint to others?
2. William Wordsworth said, "The best part of a good person's life are his little, unremembered acts of kindness and love." Surely we can all agree that God is at work in the world in ways that we often do not see, notice, or remember. But even these unnoticed and unremembered acts of kindness and love have an important effect on the world. Jesus used a mustard seed to show how something small can bring about something enormous, and he spoke of the importance of becoming like children in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Mother Teresa spoke of not worrying about doing great things, but doing small things with great love.

How do you think God wants to use *you*, perhaps even in "little, unremembered" or mustard-seed sized ways, to embody God's grace and love in the world?

3. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Have you ever experienced a sense of frustration with God—that if only God had been present or paid attention to a situation in your life, things would have turned out differently? Has that frustration shifted, transformed, softened or disappeared over time? How do you respond to that kind of change (or lack of change)? What are the ways you are able to identify with Mary?

Notice how Jesus responds to Mary. How, if at all, do you sense God responding to your frustration, or to your grief, or to your impatience?

4. Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

Imagine Jesus being "greatly disturbed in spirit" and "deeply moved." Imagine Jesus weeping. Is this difficult?

How do these images affect your beliefs and understanding about Jesus or about God? When you imagine Jesus weeping, for example, do you feel nearer to or further from God? Are you

accustomed to thinking about Jesus as one who is thoroughly human and given to human emotions? Or, are you accustomed to thinking about Jesus as one who is *sort of* human? How does your concept of Jesus affect the way you approach him and communicate with him?

5. “Lazarus, come out!” ... “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Imagine Jesus calling out to you in a loud voice this way. What are the ways you are able to identify with Lazarus? What part of you needs to “come out”? How might you be in a tomb or a dark place? Can you hear Jesus calling you out into the light of day and to a new life?

Another way to think about such darkness is to consider what might be binding you, preventing you from living the life God gave you to live. Recall the saints in your life, those living or dead who inspire you. Who or what in your life would help to unbind you, or would you have to do that yourself? Is there someone you know who wants and needs your help in being “unbound”?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 28, Year B

The Gospel: Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

Background and general observations

We all know that appearances can be deceiving, and one way of approaching this lesson is to ponder how Jesus is often trying to get his followers to see the deeper truth and deeper reality of their lives. A disciple seems to marvel at the magnificence, grandeur and beauty of the temple building. It was, indeed, a grand building that was meant to impress even the wealthiest rulers. The Roman historian, Tacitus, refers to this mountain of white marble adorned with gold as a "temple of immense wealth." But Jesus wants his followers to ponder the impermanence and fragility of the structure that inspires the disciple's awe. There is something greater.

It is also important to remember that Jesus has returned to Jerusalem and is now approaching the cross. On the way into Jerusalem from Bethany, Jesus spots a fig tree in leaf. He approaches the fig tree because he is hungry, but he finds no figs. He curses the tree, and it withers and dies. Some have seen in that strange incident a parallel to the temple, a place that has become barren and will eventually die.

Jesus' apocalyptic words here at the beginning of Chapter 13 are just an introduction to a long apocalyptic discourse. In fact, this is Jesus' longest discourse in Mark's Gospel. Such apocalyptic thinking was common among Jews of the first century. God's people expected that the world had become so corrupt that only God could save things; and God would, after a period of turmoil, make all things new. The important thing for the faithful to remember, especially in times of catastrophe or distress, was that God was in charge.

Finally, the temple was a massive, opulent, and seemingly permanent structure. It was also thought to be the dwelling place of God, the closest point of contact between God and human beings. The thought of such a building being destroyed would have been shocking to many of Jesus' hearers.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus' language of "birth pangs" conjure images of infants and new life. Some women who have experienced the pain of childbirth marvel that, once the baby is born, they forget the pain and feel only love—and most would gladly go through it all again.

When in your life have you experienced such “birth pangs”?

2. When have you felt as if your world was coming to an end? When have you experienced the loss or destruction of something that you had just assumed was permanent, something that was precious to you and that you believed would always be there? It could be a possession, such as a house or bank account; or it could be a relationship, a job, or even a particular person, such as a spouse, parent or child; it could even be a cherished belief, something you knew was sure and certain.

Where was God at that time of loss or destruction? Where has God been, since that time?

3. One interpretation of this passage is that Jesus was showing the disciples a way to live that will survive and even thrive, in spite of the most devastating destruction. However, in times of great distress or disaster, we sometimes focus our lives entirely on the calamity; our lives can become centered on the devastation, so that that is all we can see.

When have you experienced this? Who or what helped you to refocus and re-center? Who or what brought you back to life?

4. Simone Weil, a noted 20th century theologian, once taught that our attempts to console a person in times of devastation can keep that person from experiencing the full force of God’s presence and the deepest consolation that only God can provide. We are prone to latch onto the well-meaning consolations of other people, who keep us from descending to the depths where God awaits us with a whole new life.

What do you make of Simone Weil’s idea? Based on your own experience, is there a ring of truth here?

If so, how can you be lovingly present for someone who is in distress, while allowing that person to make a difficult but necessary journey, instead of trying to “make it all better” for that person?

When, if ever, have you sensed that only God could “make it all better” for someone, and that anything others tried to do only got in God’s way?

5. “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.”

The work of spiritual discernment, discerning where God is, what God is doing, and how God might be calling or speaking to us, can be difficult. How do you discern what is of God and what is not? How can you know when you are being “led astray”?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King, Year B

The Gospel: John 18:33-37

Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Background and general observations

Before we make observations about the Gospel lesson appointed for Christ the King Sunday, we might note that this is the last Sunday in the Christian church year. We "crown the church year," so to speak, with Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday, November 29, will be the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the Christian new year, and four Sundays prior to Christmas Day.

Now, concerning the Gospel lesson, the context for this passage is important. "The Jews" (simply a designation for Jesus' opponents, not meant to breed anti-Semitism) have brought Jesus from Caiaphas' house to the Praetorium, where Pilate (Rome's highest authority in Palestine) now questions Jesus. Pilate goes back and forth, between questioning Jesus' opponents and questioning Jesus. One might get a sense that this whole business is annoying to Pilate, who feels as if he is being drawn into a dispute that has become far too disruptive and in which he has no personal interest — "I am not a Jew, am I?"

Pilate senses that Jesus' opponents have not made a clear case against Jesus, so he sets about the task of discerning what is going on. An easy way to get this over and done with would be to discover that Jesus is a self-proclaimed political threat to Rome's authority. Therefore, Pilate asks if Jesus is "the King of the Jews." The ensuing discourse is unique to John's Gospel.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Pilate asks Jesus if he is king of the Jews, and Jesus simply says, "You say so." But in John's Gospel, the two get into a more elaborate discussion. One of the primary themes of John's Gospel is the theme of "Truth." Jesus is the Truth, and Jesus reveals the truth, not only about God but about us human beings, as well. And although Jesus says that his kingdom is "not of this world," his later remarks seem to indicate that his kingship and his kingdom are evident in the lives of those who "listen to his voice."

The climax of this whole encounter, of course, is the mock coronation of Jesus and his elevation on the throne of the cross.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. As we often do when approaching the calendrical New Year, there is merit in taking time this week to consider how we might make a good beginning of the new year that is just around the corner, when the community of faith will be entering into a time of listening and quiet, and the larger culture will be entering into a time of noise and celebration. What are the challenges we face as Christians at this time of year, and what are some of the sources of support for living faithfully and intentionally in these days?
2. What does it mean for Christ to be king? In what way does Christ rule in your life and in your world? What is the Kingdom of Christ, and how do you (and we, communally) live in it?
3. “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Consider the question of “belonging.” To whom or to what do you “belong”? How does your manner of life convey that you “belong” to the people or institutions where you are a member (a family, a school, a church, a club...)?

How might a Christian’s life demonstrate that he or she belongs to God? What might be the signs that someone is a person who “listens to Jesus’ voice”?

4. Some have suggested that Pilate is in a bind. He is the most powerful person in Palestine. He is wealthy and has thousands who look up to him. But people in his region are being stirred up. How is it going to look to his colleagues and superiors if Pilate comes across as ineffectual, as weak or not in complete control?

But Pilate knows that Jesus poses no real threat. If he were to be honest, Pilate would have to let Jesus go. That would cause a ruckus, however, and Pilate would have to call out the troops to restore order. A much simpler and less messy solution would be to cook up some charges against Jesus, or at least get Jesus to say something that would be enough evidence to dispose of him and quiet the mob. So, Pilate begins his questioning of Jesus. “Are you the King of the Jews?”

But Jesus knows what is going on. He knows that Pilate is in a bind, and he offers Pilate the opportunity to live with integrity, to confront the truth that Pilate knows in his heart, and to live by the truth. So, Jesus responds, “Are you asking this on your own, or are you just repeating what others have said about me?”

This, it has been suggested, is a scene in which Jesus is reaching out to Pilate, inviting Pilate to live authentically and own the truth. This is what Jesus offers all of us.

But Pilate has much to lose, if he chooses to live by the truth. Pilate’s reputation is on the line. There are simply certain things Pilate has to do, if he is going to keep his position of power and wealth. And Pilate will ultimately dismiss Jesus’ offer by scoffing, “What is truth?”

What might be threatened in your life, if you were to accept Jesus’ invitation to see and act on the truth about who you are and how God is calling you to live? How is Jesus’ invitation to live the truth and listen to his voice a costly threat to your current way of life?