

Lenten Devotionals

**Based on the Daily Gospels Reading from
the Revised Common Lectionary**



Part 3: February 26 – March 3, 2018

**Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel
Rev. Don McCallum**

Reading: Genesis 21:1-7

“Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’”

In Genesis 18 Abraham and Sarah received three angelic visitors. On that occasion the Lord renewed his promise that Abraham and Sarah would soon have a son. Sarah, understandably, thought that the prophecy was silly since she was almost ninety years old. Out of sight in the tent she broke out laughing, but when confronted the angel she denied doing so. Her laughter was an expression of doubt and she was afraid of God's punishment.

Three chapters later, the prophecy comes true and their son is named Isaac, which meant ‘he laughs’. Sarah declared, “God has brought me laughter!”

There was a twofold reason for Sarah's joy. First, of course, she had finally been given her longed-for child. It was an amazing blessing from God. Secondly, God had done this in spite of her earlier doubt and bitterness. God might have decided that her cynicism deserved judgment. Instead, God forgave her. He confronted her doubting, but he did not hold it against her.

Sometimes we may feel that we have forfeited God's blessings. We know that our faith has not been great enough, that we have not been what we should have been or done what we should have been. We may very well be right.

But God's grace is greater than our sins and shortcomings. He delights to give good gifts for which we are not worthy. Like Sarah our response may be joyous laughter at God's goodness mingled with humble laughter at ourselves. For Sarah, Isaac was a constant reminder of both and both are good.

Reading: Genesis 22:1-19

“Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’”

The ‘sacrifice of Isaac’ was the definitive moment in the life of Abraham. His willingness to trust God by putting his beloved son to death was the ultimate test of faith.

Modern readers may feel that Abraham was dangerously deluded. How could he possibly think that God would ask him to do such a barbaric thing? However in Canaanite culture two millennia before Christ, child sacrifice was a common phenomenon. Archaeologists have found the burial sites of many children offered to Baal. It was barbaric and it was the reason God ‘cleansed’ the Canaanites from Palestine. Abraham was familiar with the practice so it was not as outrageous as it sounds to us.

The ground of Abraham’s faith was that God had promised him a multitude of descendants through Isaac. God had to keep that promise. If Isaac died, God would have to bring him back. God could be trusted to keep his promises.

Through this incident we learn two things about God. First, God is the ‘anti-Baal’. He stopped Abraham in the nick of time and revealed that such practices were abhorrent to him.

Secondly, with benefit of hindsight, we see that what God was not willing to demand of Abraham, God actually did himself. In Christ, God provided the sacrifice. He gave his beloved Son that we might have eternal life. God demonstrates that he understands the most painful things that we can experience because he has been there.

Wednesday, February 28

Popular with Whom?

Reading: John 12:36-43

“...they loved human praise more than praise from God.”

We tend to think that the leaders among the Jewish people were unanimously opposed to Jesus, but that was not actually the case. The apostle John tells us that, *“many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God.”*

The Pharisees were a minority group in ancient Israel, but they were narrow-minded, self-righteous and very outspoken. They were quick to demonize their opponents and repress dissenting points of view. People feared and acknowledged their religious fervour. Religious leaders like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus believed in Jesus, but did so in secret because such views were politically incorrect. You crossed people like the Pharisees at your peril.

Although we ought to know better, intolerance is on the rise in North America and ironically, some of those who practice it do so in the name of tolerance and diversity. Jesus makes sweeping claims about his uniqueness and authority. Those who concur by acknowledging him as Lord can expect to be unpopular.

As we draw closer to Holy Week we are reminded that a desire to be approved by the powers that be in this world often conflicts with loyalty to Christ. Are we ‘hiding our light under a bushel’ or standing courageously with Christ? Will we openly stand with him in unpopular times or fearfully deny him? The pressures are difficult and very real. God calls us to be popular with Him rather than with the self-appointed arbiters of right and wrong.

Thursday, March 1

Chosen – for Others

Reading: Exodus 19:1-9

“Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously assured her students: ‘Remember, you are unique – just like everybody else!’ Her tongue in cheek remark was apt for modern first world citizens who have a strong sense of self-importance and entitlement.

However, in Israel’s case it was and is true. God himself declared that the descendants of Abraham were his own special, chosen people. But they were not to view their status with a sense of superiority. They were not chosen to be some sort of elite one percent. They were chosen to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Priests live to intercede for others. They offer sacrifices and prayers. As ‘holy’ people they are to model what it means to live God’s way. They ask God to bless others and they invite others to draw close to God.

In a rebellious world, Israel was chosen to be a ‘light’ to the rest of us. Their holiness, faith and devotion to God and his blessings on their lives were to be exemplars to people of every race and nation. The vision articulated in the prophets was that people would come to find God in Jerusalem from every corner of the planet. Israel was to be a gathering place for prodigals. Every Israelite was to welcome them home.

I Peter 2 tells us that Christians are now that chosen nation of priests. We are God’s children. We are special. But this should not incite us to a sense of self-righteousness. We are chosen to be intermediaries between others and God. We are chosen – for others.

Friday, March 2

A 'Bespoke' Gospel

Reading: Acts 7:30-40

*'This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words,
'Who made you ruler and judge?''*

'Bespoke' is an old English word derived from 'bespeak': 'to speak for' or 'arrange beforehand'. Today it is used exclusively to describe suits created by a tailor for a specific customer.

The Book of Acts contains a number of presentations of the gospel. On the surface some of these messages may seem the same. They often contain a review of Old Testament history. But each proclamation of the gospel is different. They are custom made for the audience.

Acts 7 contains Stephen's proclamation of Christ when he was on trial in Jerusalem. His review of Old Testament history speaks boldly to Israel's pattern of rejecting God's will. The leaders and rulers of the people are especially centered out as the ones who rejected and arranged for Jesus to be crucified. Rather than soft-peddling the truth in front of a hostile audience, Stephen drives home their guilt in a call to repentance.

A few chapters later, when Paul is preaching to an audience of Gentile believers in Judaism, the focus is on the gospel throwing open the door of the Kingdom to all people. And in Athens, Paul quotes Greek poets to invite them to know the Creator who invites us to himself through Christ.

God encourages us to share the good news with sensitivity and understanding. His 'bespoke' gospel is designed to touch each person where they live. With the help of the Spirit we can partner with him in this.

Saturday, March 3

Endorsing Jesus

Reading: Mark 9:2-8

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

If the ancient Israelites had collected sports cards of the greatest religious leaders, Moses and Elijah would have been the equivalent of Wayne Gretsky and Bobby Orr.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus appeared bathed in brilliant light. Consulting with him were Moses and Elijah. Peter, James and John were star struck. There they were in the presence of the greatest heroes of the faith! If they'd had cell phones they would have been taking selfies! In the absence of such devices, Peter started to babble about building tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah – presumably to prolong and commemorate the event.

At that point the two Old Testament heroes disappeared and the voice of God the Father boomed from heaven: *“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!”*

The disciples were filled with awe at the appearance of Moses and Elijah. But they were just the warm-up act. God was shining the spotlight on Jesus alone. He was endorsing him, blessing him and placing him far above all others. The call was to tune out competing voices and listen to Jesus.

There are a great many sources of wisdom in the world around us. Some of them are very good, godly people. But God wants his people to listen directly to his Son. We are to seek his voice in the Scriptures and in the leading of the Spirit. There was and is no one to compare with Jesus. Listen to Him!