

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

ACNA Readings – 2 Kings 2:1-15; Psalm 114; Ephesians 3:14-21; Mark 6:45-52

Introduction. Belief in God usually is accompanied by obligations and some sense of accountability to God. Often people reject the idea of God to free themselves from any sense of morality or self-control. David reflects that only “the fool says in his heart that there is no God.” Belief in God is not an automatic mechanism for righteous living for, as John writes to a believing church, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). The good news is that God continues to renew our hearts daily through his very real presence in our lives.

Common Theme. Many of the readings this week show a truly powerful and wonderful aspect of God’s character: he makes all things right. When things are dark and all seems wrong, God brings his light, love and redemption.

2 Samuel 11:1-15. In this passage we recall the dramatic account of David and Bathsheba. The king with the epithet “man after God’s own heart” betrays and murders a friend. How could David do such a thing? Why does he need to have Bathsheba when he already has 17 other wives and concubines? Interestingly the writer of Chronicles omits this event altogether. The story opens with David deliberately remaining in Jerusalem as his nephew Joab leads the army to war against Rabbah. Jerusalem often gets a cool breeze from the Mediterranean in the evenings, bringing relief from the heat of the day. As David walks on his roof, he sees “a woman” bathing. The narrative implies he does not know her, as he has to “inquire” after her. However, later we discover that Bathsheba is the wife of one of David’s trusted lieutenants and that she is beautiful. One wonders how David had not seen her in the past? Did he not attend Uriah’s wedding nor host his family at feasts? I suggest that David already knew who Bathsheba was, as she is recorded as the daughter of Eliam, another of David’s heroes. David commits several foolish acts, first in his heart where he decides on the roof to seduce her, and then with his deeds as he carries out his adultery.

It is a horrible story where everything is wrong. How can God possibly redeem this situation, a story of murder, betrayal, adultery, plots and lies? We begin by asking a question: which of David’s wives should God use to produce the Messiah? If the question were asked to me, I would have responded with, “Wife number one.” Michal is a princess, the daughter of King Saul. She is royalty, so if you want to have a messianic king, she seems perfect! But God does not choose one of the other 17 legal wives. He chooses the wife where everything is wrong and in so doing demonstrates his forgiveness, mercy, redemption and makes it right again. Solomon will be the son from Bathsheba that will inherit the House of David and continue the messianic line. David’s prayer of confession and his repentance are heard. God can take that which is dark and make it beautiful once again. This is an incredible story of grace and mercy.

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Psalm 14. This psalm of David has both a personal reflective look at his own false heart and an external look at those who deny the existence of God. The “fool” is not one who simply abandons the idea of God’s existence through intellectual reasoning but one who also acts out their foolishness in immoral and corrupt behaviour. David did both on the roof of his house when he convinced himself in his heart that he could get away with it.

Belief in a divine being coincides with a moral code. Freedom in Christ does not mean that you can now do anything you want. Christian philosophers point out that morality demonstrates an argument for God. As the wise man has pondered, if there is no God and all is meaningless, how then can the atheist know that evil is indeed evil in a truly meaningless world? There are moral implications to atheism which, as David writes, lead to “corrupt and abominable acts.” David paints quite a depressing picture of mankind without God. While man might forget God, God does not abandon his creation! Darkness and hopelessness will not last forever. The good news is that, despite the decline in morality, “salvation will come to Zion.” The psalm concludes with the promise of restoration and the assurance that the people of God will rejoice in the future. God will make all things right once again.

Ephesians 3:14-21. These verses comprise a prayer by Paul for the Ephesian community to whom he is writing. Paul begins his prayer by bowing to the Father. The God of Israel was known as Father ever since the Exodus from Egypt, as Moses says in Deuteronomy 32:6, “Is he not your father, who created you?” There is a clever word play in the Greek text. Father in Greek is *pater*, and *patria* is the word for family. Thus Paul cleverly says that every family takes its name from God the Father. Paul prays for the Spirit and the Messiah to dwell in the hearts of the Ephesians as they are grounded in love. Love is not simply an emotion, but it is also an action. The sign of a truly spiritual community is when people say of them, “See how they love another.” Love is also something that can be seen. The love of Christ, as Paul says, “surpasses knowledge.” Belief in God is not solely an intellectual property but extends to an indwelling of the Spirit in our hearts which strengthens them. In terms of our theme, Paul writes that “God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.” There is no darkness, no despair that God’s love cannot overcome and no heart in which God’s love cannot dwell.

John 6:1-21. The Gospel portion includes the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. A crowd had gathered around Jesus, and he had spent the day teaching them and now they are hungry. As Psalm 23 says, “He makes me lie down in green pastures”; Jesus the Good Shepherd makes the people sit down in groups on the green grass. Jesus proceeds to start the miracle with what the disciples have, a mere five loaves and two fish. Jesus is showing us that he can work with small. God can work with faith even as small as a mustard seed.

Jesus then blesses the small humble meal. The blessing for bread is called **הַמִּצֵּיִא** (*hamotzi*). A generation before Jesus, it is recorded in *Sefer Brechot* that the sages Hillel and Shamai were debating when the blessing should be said and how many times. Is the blessing with each individual loaf of bread

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or one blessing for each meal? Thus we know that the words Jesus used to bless the bread were most likely these: “Blessed are you, the Lord our God, King of the Universe; you bring forth bread from the earth.” After blessing God, the disciples hand out the bread. Note, the blessing is to bless God for the bread, not to bless the bread itself.

The story that follows the miracle of the loaves and fishes is also found in this week’s ACNA reading in Mark 6:45-52. In both accounts, following the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus retreats to the mountain for some alone time. In Mark’s Gospel, it is Jesus who sends his disciples into the boat and onto the lake. No reason is given for why the disciples end up in the boat in John’s account, although I presume it is because their master instructed them to do so. A storm erupts on the lake, and the disciples are hard pressed by the winds. In Mark it is noted that Jesus observes the disciples struggling and straining with their oars, but he does not move to assist. While they wrestle the wind, Jesus walks upon the stormy sea. Mark notes that Jesus was going to pass them by, while John says Jesus was coming near the boat, not actually towards it. Jesus allows the disciples to continue to battle the storm for a while; he does not immediately rush to assist them. The disciples are terrified of the apparition they see and claim it is a ghost. The disciples are struggling; they are scared, and it is when they are in the midst of the darkness and storm that Jesus enters the boat and calms the winds. Recall that Jesus was the one who had sent them into the storm in the first place. There is no promise that the walk of faith will be an easy one. Who said it would be? Certainly not the prophets, nor the Psalms nor Jesus himself! What Jesus does tell us is not to be afraid. Jesus immediately makes the darkness better. Interestingly, the most common verse read and bookmarked on the YouVersion Bible app for 2020 was Isaiah 41:10: “Fear not, for I am with you, do not be dismayed for I am your God.” The world knows a lot of darkness and fear, and they need the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah. The good news is that the light of God always defeats the darkness.

ACNA Addendum

2 Kings 2:1-15. This portion of Kings narrates the transition of the prophetic role from Elijah to Elisha. Elijah is about to depart the world in a whirlwind and flaming chariot. In the beginning, Elijah is attempting to distance himself from Elisha, who refuses to leave his master's side. They travel to Bethel and are greeted by a company of prophets who reside there. We have to recall that Bethel was one of the major centres of Israelite idolatry. Golden calves had been established at Dan and Bethel since the post-Solomon kingdom split. Yet what we find in Bethel is not a mention of the idolatry but rather of a school of prophets. Out of all the places to establish a school of prophecy in Israel, why in Bethel? Did they challenge the false temple that was so obviously in front of them? The text doesn't give any details. We are left to ponder the role of this school of prophets.

Next, Elijah, the great opponent to the prophets of Baal, travels to Jericho, a city that God had cursed through Joshua during the initial conquest of the Land. Why would Elijah go to a cursed city? What was wrong with the other cities in Judah? In Jericho, this cursed city that God instructs not to be rebuilt (Josh

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6:26), we find a school of prophets. Again no information is given on their function and role in the community. Lastly, Elijah and Elisha journey across the Jordan River into the territory of their ancient enemies, Moab and Edom. It is in this land that the chariot and whirlwind come, and here that the mantle of prophet moves to Elisha. All this does not occur in the Kingdom of Judah or anywhere near the Temple of God in Jerusalem. Why not? What's wrong with holding a religious prophetic transition ceremony amongst the Jewish people and in Jewish lands? Why travel to pagan, enemy territory to do the handover from Elijah to Elisha? We see from these verses that God places his prophets where the darkness is greatest. The prophets of God are right next to the pagan false temples and the houses of rival worship. God sends his heroes into a cursed city that was forbidden and establishes a prophetic school. God places his heroes in the lands of mortal enemies. Elisha's first miracle occurs in the land of Moab. This depicts something wonderful of the character of God. Light shines brightest when the darkness is darkest. God never gives up on his people or the world he created. God is not afraid of the darkness. Into the darkness God will send his light to shine all the more brighter.

Psalm 114. Psalm 114 is one of the psalms that comprise the Egyptian Hallel, which are Psalms 113-118 said during Passover to commemorate the Exodus. Out of the six psalms in the Egyptian Hallel, this is the only psalm that actually mentions Egypt. The people of God are born from the Exodus, not from a time of peace and prosperity. Israel becomes the people of God having come from a land of slavery and darkness. The psalm comments that even the earth rejoiced at God's deliverance. The world is often given a voice in the Scriptures (Paul also notes that creation also groans for its redemption; Rom 8:22). In Egypt, Israel's situation had been dark for a long time. However, out of that darkness came redemption and a nation. What is it that brings redemption? What is it that chases away the darkness? The last sentence of this prayer says it is the presence of God. His presence brings water in a dry desert. His presence brings the light that conquers darkness.

Mark 6:45-52. This week's comments to the gospel readings of the RCL and ACNA lectionaries are combined in the notes for John 6:1-21 above.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.