

EPIPHANY 4B – 2018; The Good Book Club

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

Psalms 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1: 21-28

In Christ your Son, O God, you impart to us a new teaching from one who speaks with authority, for Jesus is the unique master of wisdom, and our only liberator from the forces of evil. Make us convinced and courageous in professing our faith, so that by word and deed we may proclaim the truth and bear witness to the happiness enjoyed by those who center their lives and put all their trust in you. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.¹

The Gospel lesson today is from the Gospel of Mark, but I want to talk about The Good Book Club and our project to read the Gospel of Luke during the Lenten Season. You are invited to be part of the Jesus Movement, reading about Jesus' ministry and the church that He planted. It's a 50-day project which begins on February 11. Next week, we have Cub Scout Sunday and the following week, Deacon Rich is going to give his long-awaited Transfiguration sermon. So, we're giving you plenty of warning about the Good Book Club. You will have time to pray about being part of this international Lenten discipline. Instead of giving up chocolate or alcohol, I am strongly requesting that we do this reading of the Gospel of Luke together during Lent. We will read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the stories

about Jesus from the twenty-four chapters written by Luke. After Easter, we will read the twenty-eight chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Together, these two books tell the story of Jesus and the story of the earliest Christians who established the church.

We will do this project for several reasons:

1. Everybody else is doing it!!! This project involves Episcopalians and Anglicans from around the world. The Good Book Club will be a uniting, reconciling moment for many in our church who rarely do anything together or in the same way. Partners in this project include: The Episcopal Church itself, The Episcopal Church Women, The Episcopal Church Foundation, ChurchNext (who brought you last year's Lenten study), and many others. We're in good company here! During coffee hour, we'll hear a three-minute video of our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, encouraging us to participate in this project.

Turn in your prayer book to p. 853. Let's read what we believe about the scriptures from our Catechism.

Q. Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God?

A. **We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.**

Q. How do we understand the meaning of the Bible?

A. We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures.

When we read the Bible together and wrestle with its meaning, the Holy Spirit moves among us and guides us. We will be with God in the process and God will be with us. We will be with our brothers and sisters in Christ and they will be with us.

2. God's Word Changes Us!!! Lent and Easter will be a time to read the Bible in a way that will let us hear the story of Jesus and the story of the Church in a short period of time. We pray to be touched and transformed by these stories. Each week, I try to connect you to the Gospel and help you learn to love God, who first and always loves you. But the Bible is not a straightforward text. It takes time and effort. Discussion with other people often helps. Today's Gospel is a good example. Jesus encounters someone whose mental or emotional problems have overcome him. People reject this man. Jesus accepts and heals him. As we hear this story, we are drawn into the deepest questions of human life. With strangers, but more so with people we know and love, our reactions to this story range from admiration for Jesus' healing power to guilt and fear and resentment.

We hear the questions in our mind—If there is a God, why does God allow this person to suffer so? If God has healing power, why is my beloved person not healed completely? Has God withdrawn His love and care? Is this a punishment for some human action? Why do I have to suffer as I watch my family member, or my friends, suffer? These eternal questions, raised by illness and suffering, get to the very essence of what we believe about God. As you read Luke thoughtfully, you may become clearer about what God is doing, or what God is asking you to do.

On a direct level, we all encounter people who are suffering with illness that affects their behavior – addiction, depression, manic episodes. What did Jesus do when confronted with disturbing sights and sounds that result from human illness—be it physical, emotional or mental? Jesus did not withdraw in fear or discomfort; nor did Jesus ignore the man. Jesus treats the human being with respect and treats the illness with authority and, through it all and above all else, represents God’s compassionate love to those around him—to the madman and to the crowd. Jesus represents divine love to those around him by his firm words and actions. As love is expressed in Jesus righteous actions; lives are changed and the community is

transformed. Reading scripture, especially the Gospels is the most straightforward way to encounter Jesus and learn to do what Jesus did.

3. Reading the Bible is a key catalyst for healthy congregations. Most studies show that, if the people in a congregation grow and strengthen their faith, they attract other people. There is something about taking Scripture seriously that makes other people take notice. A study was released this week on the strengths and weaknesses of Episcopal churches. RenewalWorks surveyed 12,000 people from more than 200 Episcopal congregations.ⁱⁱ It talked about the journey that Christians are on to grow in Christ.

The report emphasizes what churches can do to support Episcopalians' spiritual journey from one stage to the next. Four key catalysts are:

- *engagement with scripture,*
- *the transforming power of the eucharist,*
- *a deeper prayer life*
- *and the heart of the congregation's leader.*

"If we want our congregations to be places where spiritual growth is happening, we need to teach and to nurture spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, study, and service," the Rev. Scott Gunn, executive director of Forward Movement, said in the press release.

This is an opportunity for us to help one another along our spiritual journeys and to help this congregation.

We need to do this NOW.

What's our plan???

- **Forward Day by Day** – This daily meditation on Scripture, which we have available each quarter, will focus on the readings through Luke and then through Acts. They have produced other materials which we have, like the bulletin insert which outlines the readings. Examples of them are in the Parish Hall. If we do not have enough, we'll order more. Some of them are available as apps, for your computer or phone. You can do this anywhere, anytime!!! But, only you can find a system of self-discipline that works for you.
- **Kick-Off Webinar** – On Wednesday, January 31, at 3:30 there is an introductory webinar to give us some background on Luke and to help get us started. You are welcome to sign up to watch at home or to join me here in the Library.
- **Video Studies of Luke the Liberator** – This five-week video class from ChurchNext focuses on the major themes of Luke. The teachers vary week to week and the format is short videos alternating with discussion. The first week is an introduction to what scholars think about why and when Luke was written. Others

explore the liberating attitudes of Jesus toward women and wealth. These studies will help you interpret what you are reading in the Bible and to deepen your relationship with others as you share your responses to the reading. We will offer group studies of this class several times a week during Lent. We can give you the information, so that you could show the ChurchNext video lessons on your computer at home or on your web-enabled TV. Get a group together in your neighborhood to watch and discuss.

- **Continue with Acts in Eastertide** - After Easter, we will shift to the study of the Acts of the Apostles, the book that describes the formation of the early church from the Gospels who were left wondering “what’s next?” after the Ascension. It’s the perfect question for us at this time of our life together. What’s next for the church? The Acts of the Apostles will give us a Biblical answer to this question.

We need to get grounded in the word of God to go forward; confident that we are headed in the direction Jesus taught. This Lenten discipline can be fun! As we move toward Lent; think and pray that you will join us and let’s do this together. God is calling us and has given us resources to help us. Let’s learn to use them

together and move forward. I am confident that you will grow in Christ and grow in fellowship with one another if you participate. Let us pray a prayer you will find in this month's newsletter:

*Take away, O Lord, the veil of my heart while I read the Scriptures.
Blessed are you, O Lord: teach me your statutes: give me a word.
O Word of the Father: enlighten the understanding of my heart:
Open my lips and fill them with your praise.
Let me show forth your truth in my life by the life-giving power of your Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱⁱ*

AMEN.

ⁱ *From Prayers for Sunday and Seasons, Year B, Peter J. Scagnelli, LTP, 1992.*

ⁱⁱ <http://news.forwardmovement.org/2018/01/groundbreaking-research-on-episcopal-spiritual-vitality/>

ⁱⁱⁱ After Lancelot Andrewes, The Bible Challenge, ed. Marek P. Zabriskie