

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 2:10-17; Psalm 89:1-18; Romans 6:1-11; Matthew 10:34-42

Introduction. The excitement and promise of Pentecost has come and gone and the next major season to think about will be Advent! In the meantime, there are another twenty-one *Sundays after Pentecost* where the Bible readings will reveal important truths about God, his character and attributes, and his salvation work through Jesus, and we can explore them.

Common Theme. The theme this week is God's reliability even in seemingly impossible and questionable situations.

Genesis 22:1-14. Our first reading is known to Jewish people as the *Akedah* - the binding of Isaac. Consider Abraham's life so far – according to Genesis 12 he was called by God to leave his homeland in Ur (modern-day Iraq) and go to an un-named destination. He was married to Sarai but had no children at this time; he was wealthy and came from a family of idol worshippers. His travels took him from Ur in Iraq, to Haran in Turkey, to Egypt, and finally to Canaan – Israel.

During that time, God promised that he would have children and be the father of many nations. He had close contact with the pharaoh in Egypt and many local kings in the Negev desert. There was an unconditional promise (Gen 12) and a covenantal promise (Gen 15) from God that his final destination would become a homeland for his descendants – who would be many. He had his name changed from Abram – exalted Father – to Abraham – father of a multitude – but still no children.

His wife's remedy was to let him sleep with her maid Hagar who gave him a son – Ishmael – who was not the promised line. In old age, Sarah became pregnant, and Abraham and Sarah had their own promised son Isaac. A life of adventure and uncertainty seemed to be behind Abraham by the time we get to Genesis 22. Isaac is a young man, Abraham is well-settled and the promises of God seem to be being fulfilled.

Then Abraham gets another message from God, "Take your only son Isaac – Ishmael is off the scene by this time – to a place I will show you and there you will offer him as a burnt offering." Burnt offerings were not yet Jewish practice as of course there were no Jews yet, so the Levitical sacrificial system was not yet in place. However both Abraham and Isaac are clearly knowledgeable in some sort of sacrificial practice, and Abraham knew exactly what God meant and set off to this mystery place with all the proper sacrificial equipment and his son, who hasn't been shown that he is to be the offering. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for a burnt offering is related to something that goes up in smoke.

We can only imagine what Abraham thought and felt. On one hand, it must have seemed to him that all of God's promises were about to go up in smoke, and yet his experience was that God had never reneged

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on a promise even when it seemed impossible for it to happen. There is a lot of debate among Bible scholars over whether Abraham knew all along that God would not actually require Isaac's life and he just needed to obey instructions or whether he believed God's promise enough that even if Isaac was killed, God would bring him back to life.

Suffice it to say that we read that God considered Abraham to be righteous before him because of his faith. He was obedient to the point of raising the knife to kill Isaac. Even at this moment, there is another divine promise. Isaac asks where is the sacrifice and Abraham replies that God himself will supply a lamb for the burnt offering. On being told to stop the sacrifice, Abraham turns and there is a ram. Devout Jewish people still await the Lamb of God, but Christians look to John the Baptist's declaration about Jesus in John "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Psalm 13. In this Psalm, David's heart cry is "How long?" How long will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul? How long must I have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemies be exalted over me?

If we read the other Psalms of David and his speeches in I and II Samuel, we will find every one of these doubts addressed. David knows that God is completely reliable and never breaks a promise. In verse five, he says "I have trusted in your steadfast love and my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." In spite of what seems to be happening around him in Psalm 13, David reminds himself again that God can be trusted to deal bountifully with those to whom he has made promises.

Romans 6:12-23. As we move to our New Testament readings we find Paul deep in theological discourse. Chapter six begins "What shall we say then?" even with only a passing familiarity with Paul's writings we know that he is about to sum up some deep discussion – in this case the relationship between the law, sin, and grace.

He has spoken about the goodness, the advantages, the value, and the potency of the grace of God. He has rubbished the idea that to increase grace we should sin more, and in verse 12 he commends us not to let sin rule in our mortal bodies. We are not to present any part of ourselves as "instruments of unrighteousness," because we have a promise from God that we are no longer under law but grace and so sin no longer has dominion over us.

The thrust of Paul's argument is that we are fallen human beings with a built-in default to disobey the commandments of God; that we all feel weak and inadequate and it often feels like sin still has dominion over us, but we have a promise that holds good. We are actually no longer slaves to sin, but slaves of God. Sin's recompense is death, but free from sin we bear fruit that leads to sanctification – separation from our natural inclinations which allows us to do good things – and the end of sanctification is eternal life with God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He promised that for all who believe.

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Matthew 10:40-42. The words from Matthew's Gospel speak of rewards. In an early training session with his newly called disciples, Jesus gives them a short list of righteous acts – acts of prophecy, acts of righteousness, and acts of kindness. In doing one of these acts for another person, Jesus promises that it will be as if the disciples had done it for him and they will be rewarded accordingly. As Jesus commissions his disciples, he gives them his authority, and in acting on his authority the disciples have the delegated authority to pass on all of Jesus' promises.

These three summing-up verses follow a whole teaching conversation about what happens on becoming a disciple. Jesus makes clear that there will be persecution – they will be brought before authorities and questioned, mistreated, tortured, and possibly killed but God's promises will prevail they will receive their reward.

The whole Bible is filled with images of a covenant-keeping God. Each time we read about God's covenants in scripture the model is - God acts and reveals himself, the other covenanting party responds with a promise of loyalty, worship and praise and God swears to provide, protect and reward. We do well to follow in the steps of our Biblical heroes in being faithful in our service to God because he will be faithful in enacting his side of the covenant promises he has made. The final reward is eternal life with him in Jesus our Lord.

ACNA Readings

Introduction. During this long green season – which is known by many names in the church – the church focuses on the growth of the church and on encouraging growth in the lives of Christians. This season after Pentecost is ripe with readings showing and encouraging church growth as well as a growing and thriving Christian life.

Common Theme. The theme that is being brought to light with these four readings is the glory of God and the people's worship of him. In Isaiah, the glory of the Lord is prophesied as coming to the people and this will cause the people and creation to *bow down* and worship the Lord. The Psalm shows the great and mighty works of God throughout the centuries in the provision and protection of his people and the psalmist tells how he will “sing of the steadfast love of the Lord.” Romans extols the glory of God in the resurrection of Jesus and thereby of all creation which is joined with him in baptism. Matthew wraps up all of the readings by showing how we respond to God's glory by following Christ and his example in the world.

Isaiah 2:10-17. The prophet Isaiah foretells the day of the Lord's judgement and his coming glory. Isaiah begins this chapter by showing a picture of what the world will look like after God's glory has been revealed on the earth and after his presence is established in the land. Once this picture is given,

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Isaiah shows the people how they are not where they ought to be or who they believe themselves to be in the sight of the Lord. He shows them the ways in which they have turned their back on God and how they should repent and return to him. “The imperative verbs in 2:5, 22 call for change and suggest that the prophet hoped his words might transform the thinking of the audience so that they would not be so proud and self-absorbed.”¹

Verse ten begins with a call to hide in the rocks and the dust. While this is an imperative in the text, many scholars have seen sarcasm in the words of Isaiah. It would be helpful for us to not only realize that none can hide themselves from God and there is no place that we can go where God cannot find us (Ps 139:7-12). The command to hide in the rocks can remind us of how God hid Moses in the cleft of the rock (Exod 33:22-23). God is going to reveal his glory to his creation and there is a call for people to hide themselves from God's glory and for the Lord to protect them as he did Moses.

Isaiah is clear that everything will respond to the glory of God. There are multiple double uses of *all* and *every*, and he shows how the largest things in nature and the largest objects made by man will all witness the glory of God and respond to his glory.

Many translations show that the actions of the haughty people and great things in nature and the world will be *made low*. While this is not an inaccurate translation, there is nuance here that is not being brought out. The word can also mean *bow down* as in worship. Therefore, there can be read an omen of destruction or a prophecy of the coming worship of God by all people, all of creation, and even the things made by human hands.

Either way, the Lord will be exalted. The statement “the Lord alone will be exalted” is seen in Jewish thought and midrash as a reference to the coming of the Messiah.²

Psalm 89:1-18. Psalm 89 tells of the mercy and kindness of God. This mercy and kindness of God is his glory revealed to creation. A Hebrew midrash of Psalm 89 says that this is the understanding that was revealed to Eitan the citizen – or Ethan as our English translations say – which he is now revealing to us.³ This revelation and the psalm that conveys it tell us that everything is dependent upon the lovingkindness and mercy of God, by which he sustains the world and all that is in it.

Verse three gives the foundation of the trust in God, how we know him to be faithful and how his lovingkindness and mercy are known and understood by Israel, which is shown to be the covenant made

¹ Gary V. Smith, Isaiah 1–39, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 125.

² Derashot HaRan 7:34 and Eichah Rabbah 2:17.

³ Midrash Tehillim 89:1.

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between God and David. Verse six foretells the continued gathering of the faithful which is established and sustained by the mercy and lovingkindness of God alone.

This portion of the psalm is split into two sections with the first section (vv. 5-8) telling of the greatness of God in heaven and the second segment (vv. 9-18) telling of the greatness of God on the earth. These two sections together show the supremacy of God and reiterate his power over all of creation – in heaven and on earth.

Romans 6:1-11. Romans is considered by many to be the *fifth gospel* account as Saint Paul begins his letter by saying the word three times in only nine verses.⁴ In Saint Paul's Gospel to the church in Rome, he is reminding them of the importance and purpose of the gospel.

Therefore, Paul spends time in chapter six reminding Christians that the power of the cross, the resurrection, and baptism is freedom from sin. But what are they freed to do? They are freed to love, serve, follow, and worship God.

A common theme in Pauline writing is that of slavery, specifically slavery to sin and death. Chapter 6 reminds us that we have been freed from this slavery for God's purpose in the world. This theme of slavery is common in the Scriptures and can be seen throughout the Scriptures as the people of God are enslaved by other peoples in the world and God frees them to worship him and to spread his glory among the nations (see Exod, Ezra, Neh, and Dan for further instances of captivity).

Matthew 10:34-40. The first section of Matthew's Gospel account is a reference to Micah 7:5-7. In which the prophet says,

Put no trust in a friend,
have no confidence in a loved one;
guard the doors of your mouth
from her who lies in your embrace;
for the son treats the father with contempt,
the daughter rises up against her mother,
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
your enemies are members of your own household.
But as for me, I will look to the LORD,
I will wait for the God of my salvation;
my God will hear me.

⁴ It should be noted that others consider nature, the Holy Land, or other books of Scripture to be the *fifth gospel* as well.

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This reference to Micah shows how the *sword* that is brought by Christ is here to encourage the worship of God even in discourse and difficulty.

The word used for worthy in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew is the same word that is said at the ordination of an Eastern rite priest. *Axios* is the Greek word for *worthy* and here it shows that our worth is only by God's grace and through the power of Christ on the cross. When we "take up our cross" to follow God, we are joined in Christ's cross and made worthy by him – who is the only worthy one among us. (This participation in and joining to Christ can be seen in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans as well.)

About the RCL author. Paul Hames became a follower of Jesus in 1979 and became Pastor of an independent fellowship in Leicester, England after 17 years in Procurement Management in the UK gas industry. In 2000 he was appointed CMJ's Regional Advisor in the English Midlands. He also spent two years as Deputy Director with Prayer For Israel in the UK. Between 2005 and 2010, Paul and his wife, Janey, managed CMJ Israel's Christ Church Guest House working closely with the Hebrew, English, Romanian, and Arab congregations and the Heritage Centre. Since 2010, he has worked in the UK as part of CMJ's field team with special responsibility for the Bible Comes To Life Exhibition and CMJ's archive heritage, along with representation work in churches, new age outreach, and leading tours to Israel with his wife, Janey. They have three grown-up children and two grandchildren with one more due soon!

About the ACNA author. Krystal Hustead joined CMJ USA at the beginning of 2023. She has a Master of Divinity and is finishing a thesis for a Master of Sacred Theology, both of which are from Trinity School for Ministry. She and her husband live in Ambridge, PA with their three children.