

Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary
Readings, Commentary, and Questions for Discussion for April 28, 2019
Second Sunday of Easter



THE READINGS

First Reading: Acts 5:27-32

²⁷ When they had brought them [the Apostles], they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.”

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Worth Noting: Obeying God rather than human authority: Does that lead to chaos? How does it jibe with Romans 13:1: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God”?

Psalm 118:14-29 *Alternative Psalm 150*

¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

¹⁶ the right hand of the LORD is exalted;
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”

¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.

¹⁸ The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Worth Noting: A Psalm of thanksgiving that sees the current situation (perhaps the return from exile in Babylon) as fulfilling the promises in Exodus (for example, Psalm 118:14 and 21b quote Exodus 15:2). Do you see God's promises of liberation realized in our days?

Second Reading: Revelation 1:4-8

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Worth Noting: The imagery and scriptural references flow easily and swiftly from the pen of the author. Of note in this passage: Christians are a nation of priests. Is that how you see your vocation? How might you be a priest? Is there something special about being a priest?

Gospel: John 20:19-31

¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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.”

²⁶ 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.”

²⁷ 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.”

²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ 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.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ 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.

Worth Noting: Preachers love to quote Anne Lamott: “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns” (Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, 2004 and 2006). Was Thomas “guilty” of holding out for certainty? Isn’t certainty a good thing?

CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Introduction to Revelation

Revelation may be the most controversial text in the New Testament. It certainly is the book that evokes strong feelings – either intense dislike or rapturous devotion (pun intended). The way careful readers understand Revelation has grown tremendously in the last several decades, as Jewish texts of the same period come to light and as the history of the late first century Roman empire is reevaluated.

Revelation is thought of first as an apocalypse: a revelation of the end times in which all injustices will be punished and the righteous will be justified. In this respect, it resembles a body of Jewish texts that includes part of the Biblical book of Daniel (chapters 7-12) as well as the non-Biblical texts 1 Enoch, 4 Esdras, 2 Baruch, and the Apocalypse of Abraham.

Revelation differs from typical apocalypses, however, in two respects. Firstly, it is a letter addressed to specific communities to be read in a liturgical setting. Secondly, Revelation not only condemns idolaters and others who oppose Christianity, it also chastises those Christians who make accommodation with the demonic powers of Rome (as in 1 Timothy 2:1-2). In this latter respect, Revelation resembles the prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

Historians of Rome have also rethought the setting of Revelation. Contrary to the view of even 50 years ago, it is now believed that the Christian communities addressed were not under severe persecution. There is no evidence of an imperially ordered suppression of Christianity. If not, then the long-accepted setting of Revelation of a writing while under persecution fails

Instead of this view, Journeying interprets Revelation as a statement by one John of Patmos (no relation to the author of the Fourth Gospel) urging his fellow Christians to resist any accommodation with the Roman empire and in particular with the growth in the divine cult of the emperors. John recognized that such resistance, even peaceful resistance, would be met with violence. Christians could take heart in that victory over Rome had already been won by the Cross.

John's message resonates through the centuries to today, as Christians struggle with the questions about "separation of Church and state," and accommodation to secular powers. For what cause and how must the Christian resist: an especially difficult decision in countries that claim a Judeo-Christian tradition.

Entering into the Scriptures

On what do Christians base their faith? Indeed, what does "faith" mean? The incident with Thomas in John 20 illumines John's understanding of faith.

First of all, faith in John is active. The noun *pistis*, "faith" never appears in the Gospel of John, but the related verb *pistuein*, "to have faith/to be faithful/ to believe/to trust," appears frequently. (The remainder of the New Testament writers use the two almost equally.) For John, to believe is not an internal disposition, but an active commitment of the whole person.

But on what would that commitment, that faithfulness, be based? In the Gospel, the signs or works that Jesus performs provoke differing levels of faith. The first includes those who refuse to see Jesus and his works with any faith. These are Jesus' opponents throughout the Gospel.

In the second level, some see Jesus' works as those of a miracle worker sent by God. This is the reaction of the crowd at the multiplication of loaves in John 6. John remembers Jesus saying to the crowd seeking him "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26). The crowd

has no inkling of the magnitude of what the miracle symbolized – that is, made present the reality of Jesus’ unity with the Father and Jesus’ role as the giver of life.

These first two stages of faith are clearly unsatisfactory as far as John is concerned. Third stage believers recognize that the signs point to the reality of Jesus’ unity with the Father. In John 20 all of the disciples, including Thomas, exhibit this kind of faith. Once they have seen the risen Jesus, they believe that he and the Father are one (John 20:19-28). Jesus claims that there is an even superior level, those that have seen no signs yet still believe in his unity with the Father (John 20:29-31). They are the women and men of the Johannine community, and us, who rely on the Christian Tradition, including the Scriptures, and on the evidence of the Word made flesh in those around us.

What’s in a Word?

The Gospel of John opens with “In the beginning was the Word.” Why would a word be at the beginning of creation? And what does it have to do with this week’s Gospel?

The Greek *logos* had many connotations including a single word, written or spoken, and a conversation, a dialogue. Thought about in this way, “In the beginning was the dialogue” emphasizes the nature of the Triune God as a relationship. God is not static but is always relating.

The Gospel of John is clearly heavily influenced by the Old Testament. There, the Hebrew *dabar* can mean “word” or “action.” The Hebrew *dabar* always has the sense of an activity, as witnessed strikingly in Isaiah 55:10-11:

⁻¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word [*dabar*] be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Jesus, the Evangelist tells us, is the Word who was with God from the beginning and whom God sent to accomplish God’s plan. Jesus invites his followers, as he invited Thomas and the Twelve, to commit to the same divine plan. It is a commitment made in faith, with doubts, with discomfort, with anguish.

Questions for Discussion

Enough of language lessons! How can these readings shape us? A very good question! Do these readings shape your day-to-day ordinary life? Does the Word of Scripture pierce your soul?

The apostles and John of Patmos demand resistance to unjust secular power. In a democracy, what constitutes “unjust secular power”? How do we know it?

Christians alive today have not had the experience of witnessing Jesus’ miracles. Then what has formed the basis for the beliefs – whatever they may be – that shape your life?



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Unless expressly stated otherwise, all quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

While every week's Journeying draws on many scholars, this week's owes special gratitude to the work of Raymond Brown and his commentary on the Gospel of John.

"Doubting Thomas" from the south wall of the narthex of the monastery Hosios Loukos.

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