

A Contemporary Journey with the Bible Toward Community

ON BEING A BIBLICAL COMMUNITY: A LENTEN JOURNEY 22 March 2018

Biblical Community: Pros and Cons

In thinking on the five communal activities we have looked at this Lenten season, what are some of the positive and negative aspects of “biblical community”? What can you affirm as something important about biblical community for you (and St. Paul’s or...) today? What aspects of biblical community activity are difficult to see as pertinent or appropriate?

Reading the following texts may help to raise up some answers to these questions.

Proclaiming Partisan Visions of the Future

Biblical communities often express these visions of the end through apocalyptic discourse. They look toward the end because things aren’t good right now (oppression; conflict; loss of autonomy, influence, voice; etc.) and they can’t fix what’s wrong by themselves. God, however, is (or soon will be) in control—after a cosmic battle against the devil or evil—that ends all that we know now, bringing new heavens and a new earth. The apocalyptic biblical community often feels itself to be a minority, but a minority that will ultimately be delivered, though not in this world.

Daniel 12:1-4 The Resurrection of the Dead

‘At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.’

Mark 13:9-27 Persecution Foretold

9 ‘As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. ¹⁰And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.

¹¹When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. ¹²Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ¹³and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

The Desolating Sacrilege

14 'But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; ¹⁵someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; ¹⁶someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. ¹⁷Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! ¹⁸Pray that it may not be in winter. ¹⁹For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. ²⁰And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. ²¹And if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "Look! There he is!"—do not believe it. ²²False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³But be alert; I have already told you everything.

Searching for Wisdom

Biblical communities search for wisdom, for keys to skillful living and the good life (prosperity, success, comfort, stability, predictability, "milk and honey," etc.). This search is often associated with a created "order," which we have been given the ability to discover and to live in accordance with. Teachings about this order usually reflect a moral polarity between good and bad, right and wrong. Proponents of wisdom are quite often establishment people, affirming the status quo (the given order). There is, however, another biblical perspective on this search that isn't always sure that wisdom can be found or that order is manifest in the world. Sometimes, in worship or other settings, it is possible to move toward the more optimistic and affirmative wisdom sought, sometimes not.

Psalm 73 Plea for Relief from Oppressors

¹ Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.
² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.

³ For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
⁴ For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.
⁵ They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.
⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them like a garment.
⁷ Their eyes swell out with fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
⁸ They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹ They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues range over the earth.
¹⁰ Therefore the people turn and praise them,
and find no fault in them.
¹¹ And they say, 'How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'
¹² Such are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
¹³ All in vain I have kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
¹⁴ For all day long I have been plagued,
and am punished every morning.
¹⁵ If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way',
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.
¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end.
¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.
¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!
²⁰ They are like a dream when one awakes;
on awaking you despise their phantoms.
²¹ When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
²² I was stupid and ignorant;
I was like a brute beast towards you.
²³ Nevertheless I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterwards you will receive me with honour.
²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.
²⁷ Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
you put an end to those who are false to you.
²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
to tell of all your works.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18 The Riddles of Life

15 In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. ¹⁶Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? ¹⁸It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both.

Building Community with a focus on Values and Structure

Biblical communities are concerned with how best to live out their faith and special relationship with God. Attention is often given to a place for worship, to structures of authority and functionality, and to the values that govern ways community members relate to one another, to their particular context, and to the world at large. Everything from biblical laws to genealogies to stories about places and persons provide rationale and direction for community building—together with the practical realities of time and space.

Ezra 9:1-4 Denunciation of Mixed Marriages

⁹After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, ‘The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ²For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.’ ³When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. ⁴Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Mark 12:1-12 The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

12Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ²When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. ³But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. ⁵Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. ⁶He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." ⁷But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." ⁸So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰Have you not read this scripture:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

¹¹ this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?"

12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Testifying and Shaping with Stories

Perhaps the most important activity associated with stories in biblical communities is remembering. Biblical stories, whatever their original intentions or settings, call us to remember acts and actors of old, heroes, villains, peoples, gods, and God. The stories have reasons for being told and remembered: some of them (seemingly!) still crystal clear today, others lost in a long ago time. For those stories that continue to have obvious intentions (e.g. the explanation or justification for a praxis continuing to be important—like the explanation for Purim in Esther), the reasons for telling and remembering today are clear. For many biblical stories, however, radically different times and cultures, as well as learnings from new (subsequent) revelations make the rationale for telling and remembering biblical stories more challenging. Continuity with biblical communities of times past, however, calls for us to tell the stories, to debate their value and pertinence, to claim a relationship with communities of faith in the past as well as being open to new stories (and missions) in the future.

Esther 8:1-14 Esther Saves the Jews

8On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. ²Then the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. So Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

3 Then Esther spoke again to the king; she fell at his feet, weeping and pleading with him to avert the evil design of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. 4The king held out the golden sceptre to Esther, 5and Esther rose and stood before the king. She said, 'If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favour, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote giving orders to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. 6For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?' 7Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to the Jew Mordecai, 'See, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he plotted to lay hands on the Jews. 8You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.'

9 The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. 10He wrote letters in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed them with the king's ring, and sent them by mounted couriers riding on fast steeds bred from the royal herd. 11By these letters the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods 12on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 13A copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree in every province and published to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies. 14So the couriers, mounted on their swift royal steeds, hurried out, urged by the king's command. The decree was issued in the citadel of Susa.

Acts 4:1-22 Peter and John before the Council

4While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, 2much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. 3So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy

Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹This Jesus is “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.”

¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶They said, ‘What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.’ ¹⁸So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.’ ²¹After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. ²²For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

Worshiping Through Lament and Praise

Worship is the culmination of being a biblical community, the most distinctive and important activity of the people. The Bible contains prayers of many types—from doxology to meditation to laments. In all of this prayerful activity remembering God, and relating to God and one another are central. Worship—through praise and lament and much more—lifts up the “common” for biblical folks, providing a context for sharing relationships with God, for stories that bind us to God and one another, for searches for wisdom that promise good living, for structures that organize and reflect our priorities and allegiance, for visions that testify to our inability to do it all and to the One in charge.

Psalm 137 Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'
⁴ How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.
⁷ Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'
⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Luke 1:68-79 Benedictus

⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

St. Paul's, Benicia, and Biblical Community

Which of the biblical activities of community we have studied this Lent are most important for and characteristic of St. Paul's? Which are done well? Which not so well? How does a snapshot of St. Paul's as a biblical community help distinguish and differentiate this group of Christians from others?