

Daily Bible Readings (Unit 2)

December 27

Genesis 1:9-13

December 28

Job 12:7-10

December 29

Luke 12:22-28

December 30

Isaiah 40:6-8

December 31

Isaiah 40:12-17

January 1

Isaiah 40:21-26

January 2

Psalms 19:1-6

January 3

Genesis 3:6-8

January 4

Jeremiah 23:23-24

January 5

Psalms 34:17-19

January 8

Genesis 28:10-17

January 9

Isaiah 6:1-13

January 10

Luke 15: 8-10

January 11

Daniel 10:5-9

January 12

Revelation 4:1-11

January 13

Revelation 6:12-17

January 14

Micah 6:6-8

January 15

Acts 16:25-31

January 16

Mark 9:2-8

January 17

John 1:14, 16-18

January 20

Ezekiel 1:26-28

January 21

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

January 22

Numbers 6:22-27

January 23

Exodus 24:29-35

January 24

Psalms 150:1-6

January 25

Ephesians 5:19-20

January 26

Psalms 98:1-9

January 27

Luke 2:8-20

January 28

Psalms 95:1-5

January 29

Revelation 5:6-10

January 6

Psalms 16:7-11

January 7

Matthew 5:8

January 18

Habakkuk 3:2-4

January 19

Deuteronomy 5:23-27

January 30

Revelation 19:1-10

Unit 2

Wonder

In this five-lesson unit, we explore various ways human beings have experienced God's sublime glory, filling them with awe and wonder. We are a busy people rushing from place to place and task to task as the hands of the clock chase each other around the dial. We get caught up in the mundane reality of ordinary life, and if we do not stop, we can so easily miss the extraordinary and sublime experience of entering into God's presence. These lessons call us to slow down, observe, and experience God in our midst.

In Lesson 5, we examine Psalm 19 and consider how God is powerfully and profoundly revealed by the beauty of creation that surrounds us. It

begins, "Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

The text for Lesson 6 is from Isaiah 6, where we read about Isaiah's call to be a spokesman for God and reflect on our own divine call. At the beginning of the prophet's holy encounter, the winged creatures shouted, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God's glory!" (Isaiah 6:3).

Lesson 7 leads us to explore Mark's version of the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. This narrative, along with the others in this unit, is a valuable reminder that an encounter with God can change our lives forever.

Few people have likely had the relationship with God that Moses had. Lesson 8 encourages us to think about our own relationship with God, how carefully we listen, and how faithfully we obey.

Finally, in Lesson 9, we will once again examine a passage from the Book of Revelation. This lesson encourages us to continually offer praise and adoration to the God of all creation. Only God is worthy of our worship.

January 2

Lesson 5

In Awe of God's Creation

Focal Passage: Psalm 19:1-6

Background Text: Psalm 19

Purpose Statement: To affirm God as the Creator and Sustainer of everything

Psalm 19:1-6

¹Heaven is declaring God's glory;

the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.

²One day gushes the news to the next,

and one night informs another what needs to be known.

³Of course, there's no speech, no words—

their voices can't be heard—

⁴ but their sound extends throughout the world;

their words reach the ends of the earth.

God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.

⁵The sun is like a groom

coming out of his honeymoon suite;

like a warrior, it thrills at running its course.

⁶It rises in one end of the sky;

its circuit is complete at the other.

Nothing escapes its heat.

Key Verse: "Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

In the sixth century BC, the ancient Israelites found themselves in captivity in Babylon, where they faced a major dilemma. Should they continue to worship Yahweh, or begin to worship the whole pantheon of Mesopotamian gods, including Marduk, the patron deity of the city of Babylon? Even the Israelites who worshiped Yahweh had generally believed Yahweh was the God of Israel, not the universal, one and only God of the universe. Moreover, most people at the time, including most Israelites, believed the army with the most powerful god or gods won the battles, and Babylon had indeed conquered Judah and pretty much destroyed Jerusalem.

We can see this dilemma voiced in Psalm 137: "Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our lyres up in the trees there because that's where our captors asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy: 'Sing us a song about Zion!' they said. But how could we possibly sing the LORD's song on foreign soil?" (Psalm 137:1-4).

In the midst of their pain and hardships in captivity, the religious leaders began work to renew the Jewish faith. They came to believe Yahweh had allowed them to be conquered by the Babylonians as a punishment for their sin. They came to understand Yahweh was not only the God of Israel, but rather the one and only God, Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The challenge was to make sure they never again were so disobedient that God would allow something like captivity to happen.

If they were going to make sure they never again so flagrantly broke God's laws and failed to do God's will, they needed to have a clear understanding of what those laws were. To address this problem, the priests began to compile what became much of what we call the Old Testament. That document began, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, KJV). This was an affirmation that the God the Israelites worshiped was indeed the one and only God of all creation, including Babylon.

Can you imagine how important this belief became to the Israelites living in captivity? They must have felt a great deal of encouragement and hope, especially when they remembered Yahweh's prophets had predicted their captivity would happen if they didn't turn from their sin.

Now what they needed to do was ask God's forgiveness and return to faithful obedience. If God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, God can surely keep promises to watch over us and care for us, even in the midst of captivity or a pandemic.

Of course, we are always living in the midst of captivity and pandemics of one sort or another, aren't we? We are captive to our materialistic culture, to our personal prejudices, to our addictions. There are always diseases of the body, mind, and spirit. Our daily existence is filled with the stresses of life that bring anxiety and fear. We all have our bad habits, hurts, and hangups.

Like Psalm 19, the old hymn "Never Alone" reminds us God is the Creator and Sustainer of everything. God is in control of our world and has promised never to forsake us.

An Anthology of Hebrew Religious Poetry

The Psalms of our Old Testament were first the book of hymns and the

prayer book of the ancient Jews. Perhaps we might more accurately call the Psalms their anthology of religious poetry. An anthology is simply a collection of poems or writing, and the Book of Psalms is a wonderful, rich collection including many hymns of praise and thanksgiving.

The Bible is, of course, a collection of smaller books written over many hundreds of years. What we Christians call the Old Testament is, in reality, the Hebrew Bible. Jews call this collection of books the *Tanak*, also spelled *tanakh*. This name is actually an acronym that comes from the way the Jews divide the book. The Torah is the book of Law, which is made up of the first five books.

The second division of the Tanak is the *Nevi'im*, the book of prophets. The *Nevi'im* are divided into two groups. The Former Prophets consist of the narrative books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, while the Latter Prophets include the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets.

The third and last section of the Hebrew Bible to be written is the *Kethuvim*, that is "the writings." While most Jews consider these books to have been divinely inspired, they don't assign as much authority to them as the other books of the *Tanak*. This widely diverse third division of the Old Testament includes the poetic books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job; the books referred to as the festival scrolls of Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Esther; the apocalyptic Book of Daniel; and the priestly histories of Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The Book of Psalms is a compilation of 150 wonderful poems that were collected over a period of centuries. These psalms are sometimes divided into seven different types: psalms of wisdom, meditation, and/or instruction; psalms of lament and petition; psalms of blessing and cursing; royal or

messianic psalms; psalms of thanksgiving; and perhaps the most prominent, hymns of praise. Psalm 19, the source of the focal text for this lesson, is one of these hymns of praise.

Do you find comfort, peace, and hope when you read the Psalms? How can you more effectively use the Book of Psalms in your devotional time with God and perhaps find even greater comfort and hope?

Finding God in Creation

Psalm 19 has traditionally been divided into two sections. The first six verses praise the glory of God's creation, while verses 7-14 exalt the righteousness and wisdom of God's law. The second section is sometimes further divided, the final four verses of the psalm focusing on the psalmist himself.

The psalm comes together in a beautiful way and makes a profound point. The righteousness of God's laws is built right into God's creation.

The apostle Paul made this point in his letter to the church in Rome. He argued that everyone will come under God's judgment. Everyone is without excuse. "Gentiles don't have the Law. But when they instinctively do what the Law requires they are a Law in themselves, though they don't have the Law. They show the proof of the Law written on their hearts, and their consciences affirm it" (Romans 2:14-15).

Anyone who observes God's magnificent, orderly creation surely must realize there is a Creator and an order to the universe. "Heaven is declaring God's glory," the psalmist affirmed (Psalm 19:1). But this psalm is not the only one that calls attention to God's majestic creation.

Many people consider Psalm 8 to be the first psalm of praise. It, too, celebrates God as Creator. "When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers

made—the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place—what are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?" (8:3-4).

Psalm 104 is another song of praise that focuses on God's creative work. It begins, "Let my whole being bless the LORD! LORD my God, how fantastic you are! You are clothed in glory and grandeur! You wear light like a robe; you open the skies like a curtain. You build your lofty house on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot going around on the wings of the wind" (verses 1-3).

From one day to the next, the psalmist declared, God's creation speaks of God's glory "throughout the world" (19:4). Speech and words are not necessary; "their voices can't be heard" (verse 3). God's creative work is so magnificent, so grand, so unsurpassed, only God can be praised for it. And God has promised to be with us always. This is especially good news when we are facing adversity, affliction, and grief and are full of anxiety.

Where do you see God in the physical world around you? Do you find comfort and hope in the beauty of God's creation and as signs of God's presence?

Worship God, Not Creation

A few years ago, my wife and I took a vacation visiting many of the national parks in our Western states. We spent one night near Carlsbad Caverns. This area has some of the darkest skies in the country. That night, we drove out into an isolated area where there were no lights anywhere around us. We were amazed by the brightness and beauty of that night sky. I had not seen such a brilliant Milky Way since I was a child living in a rural area of Mississippi.

The psalmist, of course, lived long before electric lights and other distractions that pollute and obscure the sky. People in those days were far more familiar with the moon and stars than most of us today. That night, looking at the gorgeous array of stars shining over the Guadalupe Mountains of southeastern New Mexico, I thought of Psalm 19:1: “Heaven is declaring God’s glory: the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.”

Of course, people in Old Testament times were even more impressed with the closest star. Many ancient cultures worshiped the sun, with archaeological evidence of this going back as early as the Neolithic age. The Egyptians famously worshiped Ra, their sun god. Early Mesopotamians worshiped Utu, who later became known as Shamash, as their sun god. Early Hinduism had Surya, their sun god. In Aztec religion, extensive human sacrifice was demanded by the sun gods Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca.

The Old Testament includes numerous admonitions against worshipping the sun and other objects of the creation rather than the Creator. For example, Deuteronomy 4:19 warns, “Don’t look to the skies, to the sun or the moon or the stars, all the heavenly bodies, and be led astray, worshipping and serving them.” Job defended his faithfulness by insisting, “If I’ve looked at the sun when it shone, the moon, splendid as it moved; and my mind has been secretly enticed, and threw a kiss with my hand, that also is a punishable offense, because I would then be disloyal to God above” (Job 31:26-28).

The psalmist was well aware of those warnings. The author of Psalm 19

didn’t worship the sun; he worshiped the One who created the sun.

After acknowledging how beautifully God’s creation points to its Creator, he said, “Honoring the LORD is correct, lasting forever. The LORD’s judgments are true. All of these are righteous! . . . No doubt about it: your servant is enlightened by them; there is great reward in keeping them” (Psalm 19:9, 11). He closed with words many of us probably know by heart: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (verse 14).

The lessons in this unit encourage us to nurture and develop the spiritual practice of singing or meditating on hymns and songs of praise. In addition to the psalms mentioned in this lesson, you may want to explore some of the other psalms of praise and thanksgiving, such as 23, 24, 34, 46, 93, 96–100, 103, 114, 115, 118, 145, 114, 115, 118, 131, 136, 139, and 150.

Online searches can provide resources and helps in singing the psalms. You might enjoy singing some of them to already familiar tunes or to tunes you compose. If you weren’t familiar with the hymn “Never Alone,” you can search for it online and listen to it.

Dear God, we see your majesty, wonder, beauty, and power in all of creation. Help us feel your presence when we look carefully at the world around us, and help us proclaim your glory by the lives we live; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

The Spiritual Practice of Singing

In my decades-long service as a pastor, nothing has caused as much conflict in my churches as the music we sing in our worship services. Nothing else even comes close. Many people want to sing the old hymns they grew up singing. Others want a contemporary worship service with more current musical styles. There are even great differences of opinion about what is good or appropriate music within these genres.

We will all probably never agree on what comprises appropriate music for worship, but most of us do agree that music is an important part of our worship experience. God's people have always sung songs of praise and worship.

Exodus 15 tells us after escaping from slavery in Egypt and crossing the Reed Sea, the Israelites sang to the Lord. "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand. All the women followed her playing tambourines and dancing. . . . Sing to the LORD, for an overflowing victory!" (Exodus 15:20-21).

The Old Testament includes numerous references to singing. For example, 1 Chronicles 6:31-32 reads, "David put the following in charge of the music in the LORD's house after the chest was placed there. They ministered with song before the dwelling of the meeting tent, until Solomon built the LORD's temple in Jerusalem."

Matthew's Gospel indicates Jesus and his disciples didn't forsake this tradition. Jesus ended the Last Supper this way: "Then, after singing songs of praise, they went to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30). We know the early church often joined together in music. For example, Paul wrote to the Colossians, "The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (Colossians 3:16).

Developing the spiritual practice of singing songs of praise is not simply about audible singing, it is about praising God. Even those who insist they "can't carry a tune in a bucket" can meditate on hymns and songs of praise to God.

This week, select a favorite hymn or chorus. Spend time each day replaying it in your head. Sing aloud if you are comfortable. Think about it throughout the week, and allow it to guide your personal worship of God.

January 9

Lesson 6

Coming Into God's Presence

Focal Passage: Isaiah 6:1-13

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To respond affirmatively to God's call on our lives

Isaiah 6:1-13

¹In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. ²Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. ³They shouted to each other, saying:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of heavenly forces!

All the earth is filled with God's glory!"

⁴The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke.

⁵I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the LORD of heav-

enly forces!"

⁶Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed."

⁸Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?"

I said, "I'm here; send me."

⁹God said, "Go and say to this people:

Listen intently, but don't understand;
look carefully, but don't comprehend.

¹⁰Make the minds of this people dull.
Make their ears deaf and their eyes blind,
so they can't see with their eyes
or hear with their ears,
or understand with their minds,
and turn, and be healed."

¹¹I said, "How long, Lord?"

And God said, "Until cities lie ruined with no one living in them, until there are houses without people and the land is left devastated." ¹²The LORD will send the people far away, and the land will be completely aban-

done. ¹³Even if one-tenth remain there, they will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, which when it is cut down leaves a stump. Its stump is a holy seed.

Key Verse: “Then I heard the Lord’s voice saying, ‘Whom should I send, and who will go for us?’ I said, ‘I’m here; send me’ ” (Isaiah 6:8).

A preacher friend of mine is well-known for saying “Context is everything” as a way to stress the importance of context when studying Scripture. There are indeed many passages in the Bible we will never correctly interpret unless we understand their context.

In the preceding lesson, we sought to place Psalm 19 in its proper context. Doing this will also help us understand and fully appreciate this week’s text from the Book of Isaiah. Like last week’s lesson, this lesson gives us a front-row seat into an individual’s personal experience in God’s presence.

Isaiah is the first book of what we sometimes call the Latter Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. There were earlier prophets, but not until the eighth century did the prophets’ disciples begin to collect and record their oracles. The Latter Prophets is a collection, mostly written in poetry, that claims to be the oracles of individual, particular prophets.

The significance of the ancient Israelite prophets was in direct proportion to the political and ethical conditions of the Jewish people. In fact, most of what is found in the Latter Prophets seems to have been recorded in response to three major crises: the Assyrian threat, the Babylonian threat, and Jewish struggles during the postexilic period.

The earliest recorded prophetic writings came during the tremendous threats posed by the Assyrians in the latter half of the eighth century BC.

The prophets Amos and Hosea first warned the people and their leaders in the northern kingdom of Israel that their lack of faithfulness to God and their failure to practice social justice would lead to divine retribution. Their warnings came to pass when Assyria conquered Israel and took the people into captivity. Just a few years later, Isaiah (sometimes referred to as Isaiah of Jerusalem) and Micah delivered a similar warning to the people of Judah.

In 612 BC, the Assyrian empire fell to the Babylonians, who became the new threat to Judah and the holy city of Jerusalem. This led to another group of important prophets. Among these were Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Many modern scholars also include a prophet often called Second Isaiah.

In 539 BC, the Persians, under the leadership of Cyrus the Great, conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus had a more lenient attitude toward conquered people and so allowed any Jews who wished to return to their homeland to do so. The third great crisis that seems to have led to a major prophetic response was the Jews’ difficult period of readjustment after their return. This is the setting for Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, Malachi, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the prophet many scholars call Third Isaiah.

While the early Israelite prophets were sometimes called seers, we should understand Old Testament prophets were not primarily prognosticators of future events. Their primary task was to speak to the people on behalf of God. This is in contrast to the role of the priests, whose primary task was to speak to God on behalf of the people. While the prophets sometimes predicted what would happen in the future if the people disobeyed God, their challenge was to hear and understand God’s will for the present, and to communicate that divine will to the people.

The man we read about in Isaiah 6 lived in turbulent times. God called him to stand up and be counted, to risk his life to make a difference, to warn

his people about the coming catastrophe if they didn't turn back to God. He was called to condemn their greed and insensitive indifference to the poor.

Many would describe our age as an age of chaos and turbulent times. I certainly feel that way at present as we shelter at home in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. Whatever the situation around us, we all are called by God to make a difference. Will we respond like Isaiah of Jerusalem by saying, "I'm here; send me?" (Isaiah 6:8).

The Book of Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than any other book. Traditionally, it has been assumed the entire book was written by the eighth-century prophet Isaiah. However, most modern scholars now believe different sections were written over a period of several hundred years.

Most of the first 39 chapters of the book are usually attributed to the prophet who lived in Jerusalem during the latter half of the eighth century. The major themes of this section are justice and righteous obedience to God. At times, Jeremiah was a close advisor to the Judean kings and continually advised them to depend on God and not more powerful allies.

Many scholars believe Chapters 40–55 were written during the Babylonian exile by a prophet sometimes referred to as Second Isaiah. This section expresses the hope Cyrus the Great would eventually allow the Jews to return to their homeland. It also repeatedly declares the monotheistic view of God that had so recently become a central tenant of the Jewish faith. Yahweh is not only the God of Israel; Yahweh is the one and only true God, Creator and Sustainer of all that is.

Chapters 56–66 appear to contain oracles from throughout the prophetic

period. This includes the work of a postexilic prophet referred to by some as Third Isaiah.

Biblical prophets like Isaiah clearly lived in different times and under vastly different circumstances than we do. Their experiences with God as recorded in Scripture are probably unlike anything we have experienced.

What do you think we can learn from the prophets? How does understanding the context in which they lived and prophesied better help you understand their message?

Isaiah of Jerusalem

The eighth-century prophet Isaiah was also a priest who was probably serving in the Temple when he heard his call from God to be a prophet. He was active during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah and may have prophesied for as many as 64 years. As a prophet, he advised the Judean kings during three major crises: the Syro-Ephraimite War (around 735–734 bc), Hezekiah's struggles with Assyria and his temptation to seek alliance with Egypt (around 701 bc), and the Assyrian invasion (at the turn of the century).

Isaiah was vitally concerned about Judah's unfaithfulness to Yahweh and believed this would lead to harsh consequences if they did not repent. He was also deeply concerned about issues of social justice. He repeatedly insisted God was not interested in their empty rituals or their meaningless religious professions. They needed to walk their talk.

Both of these themes are found prominently in Isaiah 1, which serves as an overview of the entire book (Isaiah 1:10-20): "I'm fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I don't want the blood

of bulls, lambs, and goats,” God told the people through Isaiah (1:11). God was clearly fed up (verses 15-17, 19-20).

What do you think God might say about our religious rituals and practices? Can you think of any practices or injustices to which God might respond, “Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed”?

Sights, Sounds, and Sensations

Isaiah 6 describes Isaiah’s encounter with God and the specific and difficult call to him. Isaiah clearly saw God “sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple” (verse 1), which suggests God’s presence was so great, Isaiah was standing in the doorway looking in.

Around God’s throne were “winged creatures” who, because they were in God’s presence, had to cover their eyes and their feet with some of their wings. They used their remaining wings to fly around, all the while shouting affirmations of God’s holiness and greatness.

Coming into God’s presence, in fact, means encountering and experiencing God’s holiness. What could be more awe-inspiring? “All the earth is filled with God’s glory!” the winged creatures shouted (verse 3). God is so radically other, and the whole earth is full of God’s powerful presence. The shouting of the winged creatures was such that the doorframes shook and “the house was filled with smoke” (verse 4), adding another layer of drama and intensity to Isaiah’s divine encounter.

All of the sights and sounds and sensations pointing to God’s holiness served also to point by contrast to the sin and guilt of the people. As a priest entering the Temple, Isaiah would’ve been ceremonially clean, but he mourned his own “unclean lips” (verse 5). God’s holiness and majesty were

so great, Isaiah saw himself as being in the same condition as the people he represented.

The seraph’s ritual of purification assured Isaiah his guilt [had] departed, and [his] sin [had been] removed” (verses 6-7). That put Isaiah in the position of hearing and responding to what would happen next.

When have you been keenly aware of God’s unique holiness? What were the circumstances? How did you respond?

God Speaks

Although Scripture does not suggest God spoke directly to Isaiah at this point, God did, in fact, speak: “Whom should I send, and who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8). Without knowing any details, Isaiah responded, “I’m here; send me.” It was only after saying this that Isaiah received any details about his assignment.

It sounds strange to our ears. God told Isaiah to tell the people to “listen intently,” but not understand; look but not comprehend. And “make the minds of this people dull. Make their ears deaf and their eyes blind, so they can’t see with their eyes or hear with their ears, or understand with their minds, and turn, and be healed” (verse 10).

What, exactly, was God asking Isaiah to do? Essentially, Isaiah was to prevent the people from repenting. Repentance at this point was not possible. Without the context of all of Isaiah 1–39, this sounds incredibly harsh. But the people had been repeatedly warned. They had had plenty of opportunities to turn back to God, and they had refused. Now they must face the consequences of their choices.

“How long?” Isaiah asked God. The answer was shocking. Not until cities had been “ruined” and were deserted, the land was “devastated,” and the people were sent to live “far away,” God said. Isaiah’s encounter with God in the Temple was so moving and powerful, he said yes to God’s call before he had any idea what it would involve.

Do you think Isaiah would have so readily responded to God’s call if he had known the message God wanted him to deliver? Have you ever responded to God with an open-ended yes without knowing any details? What were the results of that response?

Our Response

The same God who called Isaiah calls each of us to follow Jesus Christ, to become his disciples, to live by his teachings and example, and to lead others into that relationship. Each of us has a place in God’s divine plan, a role to fill in growing God’s kingdom on earth.

Paul wrote, “He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God’s people for

the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God’s Son. God’s goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

The spiritual practice we are encouraged to engage during this unit is singing (or meditating on) a hymn of praise. We have already seen the psalms repeatedly encourage us to use music to praise God. However, there are also many other passages of Scripture that encourage this spiritual practice. Consider: Chronicles 5:13; Amos 6:5; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; Revelation 14:3-4. You might also want to continue to read or sing some of your favorite psalms.

What specific things has God called you to do in building up the body of Christ?

Dear God, we live in chaotic times. Forgive us when we fail to hear and respond to your call on our lives and when we fail to live by your laws. Show us how to live faithfully each day; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

January 16

Lesson 7

The Transfiguration

Focal Passage: Mark 9:2-8

Background Text: Mark 9:2-13

Purpose Statement: To understand how listening to God can radically change our lives

Mark 9:2-13

²Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, ³and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. ⁴Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. ⁵Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Rabbi, it’s good that we’re here. Let’s make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He said this because he didn’t know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

Key Verse: “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the

cloud, ‘This is my son, Whom I dearly love. Listen to him!’ ” (Mark 9:7).

A parishioner once talked to me about an adult son who had had a lifetime of struggles with psychological issues. He expressed frustration that his son would seek his advice but then ignore it if it didn’t align with what he wanted to hear. The son would get angry, curse him, and often even refuse to speak to him for months. It seemed to me in those situations, the young man was not seeking the father’s advice but the father’s affirmation and approval.

Sometimes we treat God the same way. We claim to be listening, but we just want divine approval and the benefits God provides. We want the inheritance, but we don’t want God to tell us how to live. We would rather do it our way.

My former parishioner’s son continues to struggle with failed marriages, and he has little to no relationship with his child. He has trouble keeping a job, and at times he has had to live out of the car his father helped him purchase. But he still insists he knows best, largely ignoring God and those in his life who could help him make better decisions. Imagine how different his life might have been had he formed the habit of listening to his father and to God.

We ignore God at our own peril. Our Scripture text for this lesson, the account of Jesus’ transfiguration, is an important reminder of Jesus’ unique relationship with God and an explicit directive to listen to Jesus’ teachings and God’s voice.

A Pattern of Prayer

Numerous Gospel accounts report Jesus going off by himself and spending time in prayer, listening to the divine voice. Luke's Gospel tells us Jesus spent a great deal of time alone with God seeking guidance in the midst of the heavy demands made on his life: "News of him spread even more and huge crowds gathered to listen and to be healed from their illnesses. But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places for prayer" (Luke 5:15-16). Before Jesus chose his inner circle of disciples, he spent all night seeking God's direction (Luke 6:12-13).

In Luke's account of Jesus' Transfiguration, he tells us it was for the very reason of prayer that he went up on the mountain where he was transformed: "About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning" (Luke 9:28-29).

But we don't need to leave Mark's Gospel to see how important prayer was to Jesus. In the first chapter, Mark tells us, "Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer" (Mark 1:35). Jesus seems to have done this, at least partially, in response to the increasing demands being made upon him.

"Simon and those with him tracked him down. When they found him, they told him, 'Everyone's looking for you!' " The busier Jesus became, the more important it was for him to spend time alone with God, seeking strength and direction.

After a busy time of healing, "Jesus went out beside the lake again," likely needing some time alone with God. But the crowds followed him there. On another occasion, after dismissing the crowds and sending his disciples ahead of him toward Bethsaida, "Jesus went up onto a mountain

to pray" (6:46). Just hours before facing the cross, "Jesus and his disciples came to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, 'Sit here while I pray' (14:32).

Jesus could do God's will only if he knew it, and he could only know God's will if he spent quiet time listening. The same is true for us. In order to live the way God wants us to live and do with our lives what God wants us to do, we must spend time in prayer, listen for God's voice, and seek to discern and understand God's directions.

God not only spoke to Jesus. Scripture reveals God speaks to us. God not only spoke to Jesus on the mountain that day of the Transfiguration; God also spoke to Peter, James, and John who were with him that day. Jesus invited them to go with him to the mountaintop because he was training them, mentoring them, and teaching them by his example. One important lesson they needed to learn was to listen for the voice of God.

Do you have specific times set aside for prayer? When do you pray? How much of your prayer time involves you talking to God? How much involves you listening for the voice of God?

Why These Three?

It's important to note, according to Mark, Jesus' transfiguration took place "six days later" (Mark 9:2), following a time Jesus and his disciples had spent in "the villages near Caesarea Philippi" (8:27).

On that occasion, Jesus asked his disciples about his identity: "Who do people say that I am?" (8:27). After they reported what others had said, he asked, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Notice that Peter answered perceptively and correctly, saying, "You are the Christ" (8:29).

It was Peter, along with James and John, Jesus took with him “to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone” (9:2). These were the same three disciples who were with Jesus when he healed Jairus’s daughter (5:37).

Why these three? Were they exceptionally insightful or faithful? Not always. Peter had, just prior to this experience, been scolded for rejecting the idea Jesus had to suffer (8:33). Only a short time later, James and John would request that Jesus allow them to sit on either side of him when he entered his glory (10:35-37), showing that their concern was not for service but for greatness.

Only a few chapters later in Mark’s Gospel, we read that all three of these disciples could not stay awake and pray with Jesus during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane (14:33-41). We may wonder then, if the divine instruction they received on the mountaintop that day with Jesus came back later to trouble them (9:7).

Why do you think Jesus took only Peter, James, and John with him to the top of the mountain and none of the other disciples?

Awe-Inspiring Transformation

More so than either of the other two Synoptic Gospels, Mark’s Gospel moves quickly, even urgently, toward the cross and Jesus’ resurrection. Bible scholars have noted it uses the word “immediately” some 40 times. We notice this straightforward, hurried approach in Mark’s report of Jesus’ Transfiguration. In just two short verses, Mark succinctly described what happened after the trio of disciples and Jesus got to the top of the mountain: “He was transformed in front of them, and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white” (Mark 9:2-3).

The KJV, the NIV, the NRSV, and the NASB all use the word “transfigured” to describe what happened to Jesus, while the CEB uses the word “transformed.” Both are accurate and indicate that Jesus’ external appearance dramatically changed, causing him to become stunningly bright.

But that was not all. Mark had been careful to note that Jesus, Peter, James, and John were alone on the mountain-top (verse 2). But, suddenly, Moses and Elijah “appeared and were talking with Jesus” (verse 4).

Scripture doesn’t tell us what they were talking about. Jewish tradition expected that one or both of these figures would return to earth when God’s kingdom arrived. And as most scholars have pointed out, Moses represented the Law, while Elijah represented the Prophets. While Moses and Elijah were the only people in the Old Testament who saw God’s full glory, they were both prevented from seeing God’s face. Here, they saw God’s face as Jesus, right in front of them.

True to his often impetuous nature, Peter immediately came up with a plan. “Rabbi,” he said to Jesus, “it’s good that we’re here. Let’s make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” And Mark just as immediately tells us that Peter “said this because he didn’t know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified” (verses 5-6).

Throughout Scripture, theophanies—visible manifestations of God—usually happen on mountains. Have you ever had a close experience with God while on a mountain? What happened, and how did it change you and your relationship with God?

Divine Instruction

As if the disciples were not terrified enough, what happened next most certainly created more fear in them. A “cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, ‘This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!’ ” (Mark 9:7).

Clouds in Scripture often symbolize God’s presence, and should there have been any question in the disciples’ minds about what was happening, God spoke to them from the cloud with an affirmation of Jesus’ identity and a specific instruction: Listen. Listen to Jesus. Implicit in the meaning of the word used for “listen” is “to comprehend, to understand.” And then, seemingly just as quickly as these awe-inspiring events had happened, the three disciples discovered as they looked around that they were again alone with Jesus (verse 8).

Jesus had been deliberately and carefully preparing his disciples for the fact that he would face suffering on the cross and reassuring them of his identity as the Messiah, God’s Son, the Savior. How would this experience affect these disciples in the coming days and weeks? How did it change their understanding of Jesus and their relationship to God through him? The divine instruction was simple yet profound: Listen.

Sometimes when I teach or preach about listening to God, someone will complain that they try to listen, but they don’t feel that God ever says anything to them, or perhaps they can’t hear God. In response, I usually ask them a question: “Have you done the last thing God asked you to do?”

Often the individual never answers that question. They may ignore it, or they may say they have never heard God ask them to do anything. A few will honestly admit they probably haven’t. I then ask another question: “Why

would God speak to you if you consistently ignore what God has to say?”

Like many Christians, years ago, I began using a journal that included, among other things, an extensive prayer list. Each day during my prayer time, I would go over this list in detail with God. After several weeks of doing this, I began to feel God was well aware of everything on my list. I had a strong feeling God was saying to me, “I know about you and your list. How about just sitting still for a moment and listen to me.”

Over time, I learned if I sat still and quiet for a while I could hear God’s voice as I had never before. Through this, I’ve learned I don’t have to be talking all the time, and I am not frustrated if I don’t always hear anything in particular from God. Sometimes I simply sit with an awareness of the divine presence and listen carefully in case God does have something specific to tell me.

Certainly, in our relationship with God, we have many things we think we need to tell God, and God stands ready to hear us. But as the disciples learned on the mountain-top with Jesus that day, we also need to listen to God, to develop a sensitivity to God’s voice, and to respond to what God says to us. We need to listen.

Which do you find it easier to do: talk to God or listen for God’s voice? What are specific things you can do to better hear when God speaks to you?

Dear God, help us open our hearts and minds to sense your presence, to feel your love, and to hear your voice. Help us comprehend the mission you give us and renew our commitment to your call; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

January 23

Lesson 8

Beholding God's Glory

Focal Passage: Exodus 34:29-35

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To strengthen our resolve to make listening to God a priority

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two covenant tablets in his hand, Moses didn't realize that the skin of his face shone brightly because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw the skin of Moses' face shining brightly, they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called them closer. So Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²After that, all the Israelites came near as well, and Moses commanded them everything that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴Whenever Moses went into the LORD's presence to speak with him, Moses would take the veil off until he came out again. When Moses came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see that the skin of Moses' face was shining

brightly. So Moses would put the veil on his face again until the next time he went in to speak with the LORD.

Key Verse: "After that, all the Israelites came near as well, and Moses commanded them everything that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai" (Exodus 34:32).

If you have attended church most or all of your life, you have probably picked up on some of the vocabulary. We use words and phrases such as *faith*, *grace*, *mercy*, *salvation*, and *eternal life*; and we have pretty good ideas about what we mean when we use them. The word *glory* is like that. We hear it regularly in church. "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory," we say as part of our Communion liturgy. "All honor and glory is yours, almighty Father."¹

"For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever," we pray in the Lord's Prayer.

The word *glory* is woven throughout our hymns and worship songs. "Glory Be to the Father," and "Glory to God in the Highest," we sing. "To God Be the Glory," we affirm. "Give him the glory, great things he hath done."²

But what is glory? What do we mean when we talk about God's glory? How would you explain it to someone who was new to our insider vocabulary?

Fellow ADULT BIBLE STUDIES writer Randy Cross explains it this way: "Glory describes the presence, the radiance, the total environment surrounding God. Glory is the unbridled holiness and sacredness of God, something we can only wish to reflect, but are unable to claim ourselves. True glory is a singular expression only of God's being."

Biblical writers described or referred to the glory of God in a number of ways. “To the Israelites, the LORD’s glorious presence looked like a blazing fire on top of the mountain,” we read in Exodus 24:17. “Heaven is declaring God’s glory,” the psalmist wrote. “The sky is proclaiming his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). “The Word became flesh and made his home among us,” declared John in his Gospel. “We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Glory, we must conclude, is powerful, and it points to and reveals God! Often, in the biblical narrative it is associated with light and brightness. It signifies the holiness and mystery of God entering into human experience. And glory has an amazing effect on those who come in contact with it.

That was the case for Moses, and in turn, for the people of Israel. Beholding God’s glory, being in the presence of God in all God’s holiness, changed everything for them. And it changes everything for us.

A Little Context

While our Focal Passage comes from Exodus 34 and begins when “Moses came down from Mount Sinai” (Exodus 34:29), it’s important we understand why he had made this particular trek. You probably remember the story. Moses had previously gone up the mountain, where God gave him a number of instructions. “When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, God gave him the two covenant tablets, the stone tablets written by God’s finger” (31:18).

But Moses stayed on the mountain longer than the Israelites were willing to wait. “The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Come on!

Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him’ ” (32:1).

And you probably know what happened next. To appease the people, Aaron fashioned a bull calf out of their gold jewelry, which the people worshiped. God, of course, was furious: “Let my fury burn and devour them,” God said to Moses (32:10). After Moses pleaded with God to spare the people, “the LORD changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people” (32:14).

Moses went down the mountain, carrying the tablets on which God had written the divine instructions. But when he saw the people worshipping the gold bull calf, he was outraged. He threw down the tablets, breaking them into pieces.

Exodus 32:35 declares, “Then the LORD sent a plague on the people because of what they did with the bull calf that Aaron made.” Exodus 33 opens by saying, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go and leave this place, you and the people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt. Go to the land I promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. . . . But I won’t go up with you because I would end up destroying you along the way since you are a stubborn people’ ” (33:1-3).

Recall much earlier in Exodus when Moses had the encounter with God at the burning bush. There, God called the future lawgiver to go back to Egypt and take the Israelites out of bondage. Moses responded, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (3:11). God then promised, “I’ll be with you. And this will show you that I’m the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain” (3:12).

Moses must surely have remembered this promise when God said, as reported in Chapter 33, “But I won’t go up with you.” It was vital to Moses to know God was with him and would guide him in all he did. The following verses in Chapter 33 tell how Moses set up a tent where he continued to meet with God to receive instructions. There, he pleaded with God to “show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me” (33:13). God finally said, “I’ll go myself, and I’ll help you” (33:14). What a relief that must’ve been for Moses!

Do you have a place where you regularly meet with God, seeking his instructions and help?

Another Mountain Trek

Exodus 34 opens by telling us, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Cut two stone tablets like the first ones. I’ll write on these tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke into pieces’” (Exodus 34:1).

God further instructed Moses to return to the top of the mountain, and “the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him” (verse 5), proclaiming more of God’s character to Moses, offering forgiveness, and renewing the broken covenant. “Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He didn’t eat any bread or drink any water. He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten words” (verse 28).

It was when Moses came down from the mountain that something amazing, something awe-inspiring happened! “The skin of his face shone brightly because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw the skin of Moses’ face shining brightly, they were afraid to come near him” (verses 29-30).

It was just too much! The people responded in fear, having never seen anything like this before. They were accustomed to God speaking to Moses and Moses reporting to them what God had said, giving them the divine commands and instructions. Those exchanges involved God speaking, Moses listening, then Moses speaking and the people listening. But never had they had a visual effect such as this!

Something had happened to Moses, something now reflected from his face. Moses saw God’s glory and in turn, the people of Israel saw it, too.

When have you seen something that affirmed God’s presence with you? What did you see, and how did it affect your understanding of God?

The Veil

In spite of their initial fear, Moses convinced “Aaron and all the leaders of the community” to come closer to him so that he could tell them “everything that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai” (Exodus 34:31-32). Then “he put a veil over his face” (verse 33). Bible commentators are uncertain as to the veil’s purpose. Was it to protect the Israelites? Or was it to shield God’s glow from common things that would seem to lessen its significance? Perhaps it was both.

While we’re uncertain as to its significance, it’s clear the veil was part of the communication process between God and Moses, and Moses and the people. Each time Moses spoke with God or with the people, he removed the veil, then put it back on until another time of communication (verses 33-35). The absence of the veil clearly conveyed in visual form the presence, power, and authority of God, in whom Israel found her identity. Without God, Israel would not be Israel.

One of the lessons the people of Israel had to learn, and one we must also learn, is while God is gracious, compassionate, and loving, God also makes arduous demands and requires total allegiance. An important part of their ongoing relationship with God was confession, repentance, and forgiveness.

When Moses discovered the people had worshiped a golden image, he said to them, “You’ve committed a terrible sin. So now I will go up to the LORD. Maybe I can arrange reconciliation on account of your sin” (32:30). When Moses returned, as we have already seen, he informed the people that God was so upset with them, he had refused to go any further with them. We are then told, “When the people heard the bad news, they were sorry” (33:4).

One of the things that became clear to the people, and becomes clear to us, is that when we are in God’s presence, we become acutely aware of our sins, our shortcomings, our disobedience. The brightness of God’s glory invades the darkest corners of our lives and exposes those things we may try to hide. Whatever those things might be, God stands ready to forgive us and restore our relationship so we can listen to and walk into the future God has prepared for us.

In what areas of your life does the brightness of God’s glory need to shine? Is there something you need to confess to God and for which you need to seek forgiveness?

Entering God’s Presence With Singing

The spiritual practice our lessons encourage during this unit is singing or meditating on hymns of praise. Many people find that singing or listening to music helps them enter into God’s presence.

It’s easy, unfortunately, for us to drift away from a close relationship in which we acutely feel God’s presence. Instead of treating our faith as business as usual, our relationship with God requires intentionality. Each day offers us a new opportunity to enter the light of God’s glory and presence, give ourselves fully to God, listen to what God is calling us to do, and ask God to use us to reflect the divine glory to those around us.

The Psalms, the worship book of the people of Israel, offers us songs and hymns of praise that can take us more fully into God’s presence. Select a different psalm of praise each day this week to read, pray, or sing. Enter into God’s presence through the Psalms, and ask God to reflect the divine presence to those around you so they will know you have been in God’s presence.

Dear God, we thank you that you do not hide yourself from us and that you know us and want us to know you. Expose the areas of our lives that need your forgiveness. Help us to listen to you more closely and walk with you more faithfully; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

January 30

Lesson 9

Joining the Choir of Angels

Focal Passage: Revelation 19:1-10

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To acknowledge that only God is worthy of our worship

Revelation 19:1-10

¹After this I heard what sounded like a huge crowd in heaven. They said,
“Hallelujah! The salvation and glory and power of our God!

²His judgments are true and just,
because he judged the great prostitute,
who ruined the earth by her whoring,
and he exacted the penalty for the blood of his servants
from her hand.”

³Then they said a second time,
“Hallelujah! Smoke goes up from her forever and always.”

⁴The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and
worshipped God, who is seated on the throne, and they said, “Amen.
Hallelujah!”

⁵Then a voice went out from the throne and said,
“Praise our God, all you his servants,

and you who fear him, both small and great.”

⁶And I heard something that sounded like a huge crowd, like rushing water
and powerful thunder. They said,

“Hallelujah! The Lord our God, the Almighty,
exercised his royal power!

⁷Let us rejoice and celebrate, and give him the glory,
for the wedding day of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.

⁸She was given fine, pure white linen to wear,
for the fine linen is the saints’ acts of justice.”

⁹Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Favored are those who have been
invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb.” He said to me, “These are
the true words of God.” ¹⁰Then I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said,
“Don’t do that! I’m a servant just like you and your brothers and sisters who
hold firmly to the witness of Jesus. Worship God! The witness of Jesus is
the spirit of prophecy!”

Key Verse: “Then I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said, ‘Don’t do that!
I’m a servant just like you and your brothers and sisters who hold firmly
to the witness of Jesus. Worship God! The witness of Jesus is the spirit of
prophecy!’ ” (Revelation 19:10).

If you are a member of a choir or an ensemble that helps lead worship
music, you know the important role music plays in worship. Even those
who claim they “can’t carry a tune in a bucket” can appreciate the beautiful
sounds that help focus our minds and hearts on God, the object of our wor-
ship. Imagine what worship would be like if music were not a part. Certainly,

the spoken word and silence are important in worship, but music brings something to worship such that we notice when it is absent.

For many people, nothing is more moving than the familiar “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah.” Throughout the chorus, the word *hallelujah* resounds, calling us to joyful praise of God. As some who have sung the chorus with massive choirs affirm, you can’t sing it loudly enough!

Leading up to the chorus, members of the audience fill with anticipation as the full-bodied choir sings its way through the story of the prophets foretelling the Messiah’s coming, the annunciation to the shepherds of Christ’s birth, Christ’s passion and death, his resurrection and ascension, and the spreading of the gospel throughout the world. Then the chorus brings everyone to their feet, a triumphant declaration of God’s power, glory, and authority.

Perhaps other songs have a similar effect on you, such as “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise God all creatures here below: Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise God, the source of all our gifts! Praise Jesus Christ, whose power uplifts! Praise the Spirit, Holy Spirit! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”¹ Can’t you hear the melody, even as you read the words?

Music in our worship reminds us God alone is worthy of our worship. Calls to worship run throughout both Testaments of Scripture, from the Psalms and the prophets of old to the apostle Paul, to the author of Revelation. This lesson is the last of five that look at awe-inspiring biblical events that call for the praise and worship of God.

We first considered by exploring Psalm 19 how taking in the beauty of creation brings us closer to and calls us to worship God. Then we saw Isaiah awed by God’s presence in the Temple, humble worship the only appropriate response.

The following lesson led us up the mountain with Jesus, where we experienced through Peter, James, and John the mystery and majesty of Jesus’ transfiguration. Lesson 8 reminded us God’s radiance and glory can be mediated to us through other people, and how we can, in turn, reflect God’s presence to others. In this lesson, we will “join the choir of angels” as we offer praise and worship to God.

Reason to Rejoice?

Most people agree that understanding the Book of Revelation is challenging, but don’t let that stop you from reading it. The fact is Revelation offers us important lessons about how to live faithfully in a world that, in many ways, is just as troubled as the world in which John, identified as the author, wrote.

Such faithful, even joyful, living is possible when we recognize that our God is more powerful than the circumstances in which we find ourselves, even the most difficult and troubling ones. Those circumstances do not have to define us, and they will not have the last word. God will.

Most scholars believe Revelation’s author to have been a John other than the apostle John. He received and was instructed to write down a series of visions during the time of the Roman emperor Domitian, who reigned from AD 81-96. Domitian severely persecuted Christians, charging them with all kinds of crimes, including failure to support the worship of the Roman emperor. Finding hope was difficult for them, and rejoicing was even harder.

John’s visions raised questions these Christians certainly had concerning God’s justice, when God would punish the wicked, and how God would prove the innocence of those who are righteous. John’s visions reveal God indeed

punishing those who aligned themselves with the dragon (Satan) and showing that those who are righteous are victorious.

At the same time, the visions reveal ongoing heavenly worship that praises God's unrivaled authority and justice. This lesson focuses on a few verses toward the end of the book that show us "a huge crowd in heaven" (Revelation 19:1) raising their voices in praise to God.

When have you struggled to find hope? What circumstances have you faced that have made it difficult for you to offer praise and worship to God?

Praise God!

John's vision recorded in Revelation 19:1-10 seems to be in response to the call of the angel in Revelation 18:20. There, the angel tells God's "saints, apostles, and prophets" to "rejoice" over the destruction of Rome. At its core, this is a call to recognize God's supreme authority. Not even the mighty, wealthy, arrogant Roman Empire was a match for the almighty God.

"Hallelujah!" the heavenly chorus sings, praising God for "true and just" judgments. *Hallelujah* is a Hebrew phrase that means "Praise God." The reference to "the great prostitute" in Revelation 19:2 is to Rome. You may recall Old Testament writers used the imagery of prostitution to warn and judge those who were led astray by idols and great wealth.

Then the huge crowd "said a second time, Hallelujah!" (Revelation 19:3), and John reports he saw "the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures" fall down in worship to God, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah" (verse 4).

Another call then came from a voice on the throne to "praise our God, all you his servants, and you who fear him, both small and great" (verse 5). This was followed by "something that sounded like a huge crowd, like

rushing water and powerful thunder" (verse 6) that praised God and God's sovereignty. They called for rejoicing and celebration and announced the "wedding day of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" (verse 7).

Prophets—including Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea—employed the image of Israel as God's bride (Isaiah 54:6; Ezekiel 16:7-8; Hosea 2:16). New Testament writers refined that image so Christ is the bridegroom and the church is the bride (Mark 2:19-20; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25). Here in John's vision, God gives the bride a "pure white" wedding gown made of linen, symbolizing "the saints' acts of justice" (Revelation 19:8).

When have you been filled with the urge to offer praise to God? Was it when something delightful or good happened? Maybe it was at the birth of a child. Or perhaps someone you love was mercifully and miraculously healed from a life-threatening health condition. It could've been as a result of something in nature, like a beautiful sunrise or a sunset.

But perhaps your urge to worship God came as a result of a terrible experience, maybe a personal failure when you realized God's mercy, love, and forgiveness. It could have come following a devastating personal loss, when you unmistakably felt God's presence with you.

Certainly, life hands us experiences of both kinds—good and bad. And in everything, we have the assurance of God's love, presence, power, and sovereignty. In the end, God is triumphant and deserves our worship and praise. That realization causes us to join the heavenly chorus and sing, "Hallelujah!"

When has someone or something outside of you compelled you to worship God? What were the circumstances? How did you respond?

Worship God!

This vision of John ended with instructions from the angel to write, “Favored are those who have been invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). So moved was John, he “fell at [the angel’s] feet to worship him” (verse 10).

“Don’t do that!” the angel admonished him. “Worship God!” (verse 10).

Perhaps John thought the angel was some kind of divine figure, since earlier he had heard a voice from the throne. We can’t be sure. But the angel refused to accept John’s attempts at worshipping him. “I’m a servant just like you and your brothers and sisters who hold firmly to the witness of Jesus,” the angel told him.

The angel’s words to John to worship God are words for us, too. God alone is worthy of our worship. God alone deserves our praise.

The spiritual practice we have been developing during these lessons involves singing or meditating on hymns of praise. This week, allow these words to lead you as you worship God.

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!

O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!

All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near;

Join me in glad adoration! . . .

“Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!

All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!

Let the amen sound from his people again;

Gladly forever adore him.”²

Dear God, help us recognize your power and authority and sense your presence and protection, even and especially when circumstances around us cause us to doubt. Remind us you alone are worthy of our worship; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

¹Hymnal, 94.

²Hymnal, 139