

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 18, 2018

Psalm 16 & Mark 13:1-8

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Psalm 16

(From *Homiletics*; “The Problem with Boundary Lines”, May 1, 2011)

The psalmist is nestled confidently and contentedly in God's goodness and providential care. Verse 1's prayer, "Protect me," comes from the Hebrew verb *shamar*, which has the flavor of guarding, keeping or watching over with care. NIV and NLT have "Keep me safe." The priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 (bless you and *keep* you) has the same verb, as does Psalm 121:4-5, 7-8. David anticipates that God will respond favorably to his request *because he takes refuge* in God. The same Hebrew root (which means to flee for protection/shelter, or metaphorically, to place one's trust/confidence in God) appears in Psalm 91:2, 4 and 9 (see also Psalm 5:11; 14:6; 61:3-4; 142:5; and especially Psalm 46:1: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble").

The psalmist says in verse 2: "I say to the Lord [*YHWH/Yahweh*], you are my Lord [*'adonai*]." Yahweh, the God of Israel, is alone his god (implicitly in vv. 1, 5-8 and explicitly in v. 4). David declares Yahweh to be '*adonai* (NLT translates "my master"), in analogy to a human master-servant relationship. Not only that, but David asserts that he has no good except what comes from God. This isn't a statement about the inadequate quality of his moral life; rather, "good" (*tobah*) comprises the good things in life he experiences, the goodness of God that results in his well-being.

Verses 3 and 4 have textual problems in Hebrew that require scholarly emendations to make sense. "Holy ones" (*qedoshim*) can be understood in two widely divergent ways, either as "saintly ones" or "pagan gods." *Qedoshim* has the core meaning of "set-apart ones." Most translations understand them as "holy ones" (NRSV), "saints" (NIV) or "godly people" (NLT); hence, NRSV translates verse 3 "As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight." But the New American Bible diverges considerably: "Worthless are all *the false gods* of the land. Accursed are all who delight in them." Similarly, the patriarch Judah uses the word *qedeshah* to mean pagan "temple prostitute" (literally, "set-apart/holy woman") in Genesis 38:21 (in the context of the whole chapter). "False gods" has the advantage of fitting well with verse 4. But if the NRSV's understanding is correct, it suggests that God's holy people are the true nobility, not people who otherwise achieve prominence; the psalmist takes great delight in God's people.

Verse 4 either corresponds with the NAB or contrasts with the NRSV translation of verse 3. "[C]hoose another god" can also be translated as chase/run after another god (see NLT and NIV). Similarly, the KJV of Judges 2:17: "[T]hey went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them. ..." Troubles increase/sorrows multiply for those who do so. David declares that he will not follow these pagan beliefs and practices. In contrast, he declares his allegiance to Yahweh, who provides well for David (see verses 5-11).

Verses 5 and 6 contain four expressions that are closely parallel: my chosen portion, my lot, boundary lines ... in pleasant places and a goodly heritage. They allude to the land the Lord gave to the Israelite tribes to settle on, after

the conquest of the previous inhabitants. Nuances of meaning exist between the terms, but don't press them, as the words are used metaphorically. Of most importance, David has the Lord: "You, Lord, are all I have, and you give me all I need; my future is in your hands" (16:5, TEV). "Cup" here is God's good destiny for him. Christian people characteristically believe in God's providence, not some indifferent force of fate.

To "bless the Lord" (v. 7) means to praise the God of Israel. See numerous psalms, including 103:1, 2, 20-22; 104:1, 35. See also 1 Chronicles 29:20 and Deuteronomy 8:10 ("You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you"). David blesses the Lord, who gives him counsel/guidance (v. 7a). He parallels this in 7b by saying, "[I]n the night also my heart instructs me." The God-directed/inclined heart will lead him. Similarly, see Psalms 42:8; 73:24; 77:6. Psalm 63:6-7 (TEV) says: "As I lie in bed, I remember you; all night long I think of you, because you have always been my help. ..." More literally the Hebrew of 16:7 says my *kidneys* (!) instruct/correct me in the night. This has nothing to do with aging bodies' nocturnal problems. The Hebrew is reflected by KJV's "reins" (an old word for kidneys, related to "renal"). In modern English, "heart" more effectively conveys the meaning; this can be understood as (a God-guided) conscience, will and moral sense.

To "keep the Lord always before me" (v. 8) means to acknowledge God's presence by keeping him in mind. "[A]t my right hand" is the position of prominence. To have God so close means the psalmist won't be moved (the niphath stem of the Hebrew verb *mot*, pronounced moat, means to be moved, shaken, upended, tottered or made to stagger). This is another way of saying that the psalmist rests securely with God; he will be made firm by God and before God. See such Psalms as 15:5; 16:8; 21:7; 46:5; 55:22; 62:2, 6.

The "Therefore" of verse 9 is significant (a principle of biblical interpretation is to "ask what the 'therefore' is there for"); i.e., in the light of everything mentioned in verses 5-8, "my heart is glad," "my soul rejoices" and "my body ... rests secure." Although some people try to analyze the three expressions into a modern trifurcation of human beings as disparate body, mind and spirit, they are more likely *parallel* in meaning. The noun *betah* (with a hard t and hard h) and the related verb mean *to trust*, in the sense of feeling safely confident in God's good hands. Similarly, see the NIV of Isaiah 26:3: "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you." The believer's "blessed assurance" comes from God. Gladness and joy abound.

God has kept David from an early death. Verse 10a would be better translated "You are not abandoning my life/my soul [a more poetic way of saying "me"] to Sheol." "Sheol" is the shadowy world of the dead or the grave; it appears 63 times in the NRSV. Verse 10a is paralleled by 10b: "[You are not letting] your faithful one [*hasid*] see the Pit." Pit can simply be an equivalent of Sheol. But some translate it as rot or decay, following the LXX/Septuagint Greek's understanding. Acts 2:25-28 exactly cites Psalm 16:8-11b via the LXX, in the context of God's raising Jesus from the dead. See also Acts 13:35. Even in Sheol, God is there (see Psalm 139:8). Verse 11 continues with "[Rather], [y]ou show me [or cause me to know] the path of life." In God's presence he experiences full joy (see v. 9) and pleasures (a.k.a. the "pleasant places" of v. 6). The one who trusts in God is fully satisfied.

Commentary on Mark 13:1-8

(From *Homiletics*; "Need-to-Know Basis", November 18, 2018)

Macular degeneration is a condition that degrades a person's central field of vision. Rather than seeing what is directly in front of one's eyes, an individual's sight is limited to the peripheral field. Similarly, Jesus' disciples in this reading suffered from a spiritual version of macular degeneration because their vision of the temple was acutely impaired. As such, they were looking at but not seeing the signs Jesus had accomplished before them.

According to Mark's gospel, this passage records Jesus' final departure from the temple at the conclusion of his third visit. As he was leaving, "one of the disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'" (v. 1). While this unnamed disciple was dazzled by the temple's striking façade and architectural scale, he had unfortunately failed to understand Jesus' teaching about what should have been the temple's heart and soul — selfless worship of God, insight into the true meaning of the Scriptures and promotion of godly virtues. His blindness is reinforced by Jesus' reply: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (v. 2).

Apparently stunned by Jesus' rejoinder, the anonymous disciple remained speechless. Mark's narrative moves abruptly from the temple departure to when Jesus "was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple" (v. 3a). There are no details about any intervening conversations, if they occurred at all, as Jesus and his disciples walked along. Rather, Mark's community is told that "Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'" (vv. 3b-4; on these four being the first disciples, see Mark 1:16-20).

In spite of all that had happened during Jesus' three visits to the temple, it is obvious that the disciples still weren't able to perceive the new reality. To be sure, Mark's readers — both ancient and modern — have the advantage of looking back after the fact. It is certainly easier for Mark's community to anticipate Jesus' pronouncement regarding the temple's demise than it was for the disciples — they were, after all, trapped in their own time. To employ the opening metaphor, the disciples suffered from temporal macular degeneration, limiting their vision to the periphery, to second things. And even though it's tempting to see oneself as an ally of Jesus and inadvertently belittle the disciples, a better interpretative approach is to identify with the disciples. Their vision — as is our own — was defective, which explains why they failed to recognize the signs that Jesus had already revealed to them during his temple excursions.

Earlier, Mark records that the first temple visit occurred late in the day and was brief — "he looked around at everything" and then returned to Bethany (11:11). Nevertheless, it was sufficiently long enough to make an assessment about the temple's corrupt nature, a conclusion that would have been easy for his disciples to miss due to the brevity of the visit. Besides, if they were weary from the day's activities, which included Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, their diminished vision is understandable.

During his second visit, Jesus "entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple" (11:15). Indignant at the misuse, Jesus censured the religious leaders for the inappropriate economic pursuits they had allowed on their watch. They were profaning God's sacred house with their marketplace improprieties (cf. 11:15-19). But once again the disciples apparently did not grasp the full gravity of the temple cleansing, which Mark highlights when he narrates Peter's surprise at the withered fig tree (11:12-14, 20-25).

Beyond this, the disciples witnessed Jesus' unrelenting repudiation of the chief priests and scribes during his third temple visit. Specifically, Mark emphasizes the religious leaders' repeated lack of interpretive aptitude and integrity: (1) they refused to acknowledge John the Baptist's and Jesus' legitimate authority (11:27-33); (2) they were unwilling to differentiate between loyalty to God and to the emperor (12:13-17); (3) the Sadducees misunderstood the meaning of the resurrection and thus God's power (12:18-27); and (4) the scribes were unable to explain how the Messiah was David's son (12:35-37). Besides the preceding events, the disciples apparently failed to recognize the enormous implications of the exchange between Jesus and the scribe about the greatest commandment, as well as the real value of the widow's offering (cf. 12:28-34, 41-44).

Despite all of these preceding signs, the disciples' query — "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" — indicates that they were shocked by Jesus' prophecy about the temple's ultimate destiny. Lacking unobstructed vision, they did not recognize the ramifications of Jesus' assessment of the temple. During that week they personified the words of the prophet Isaiah, "They may indeed look, but not perceive" (4:12a; cf. Isaiah 6:9).

However, Jesus neither ignores their question nor suggests that they ought to make their own way out of the apocalyptic trial that will eventually engulf the temple. Instead, he warns them of spiritual predators who will attempt to use that time of testing to lure his disciples away. He counsels them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray" (vv. 5-6). In addition, he exhorts his disciples not to be disturbed by the recurring conflicts between kingdoms and nations: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (vv. 7-8a). He also assures them that nature's catastrophic events are not precursors of the end of the world. He explains that "there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines." But he also points out that, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (v. 8b).

In sum, Mark's narrative suggests that if Jesus' disciples — both those who were with him as they left the temple and those in Mark's community — hope to avoid spiritual macular degeneration and the pitfalls associated with it, they must learn to perceive whatever signs are shown to them. As one proverb says, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near" (v. 28). In the same way, those who have eyes to see and ears to hear must learn to interpret spiritual signs no matter what form they take.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Psalm 16:

1. In v. 5 the Psalmist says, "The Lord is my chosen portion..." How does choosing to trust in God contrast to being at the mercy of fate/a victim of circumstances/caught in the web of life, etc?
2. In a culture that seems addicted to being afraid, this Psalm offers an alternative – trust in God. Do you buy it? If so, consider writing a psalm of your own using Psalm 16 as a model. If not, what gets in your way? Consider writing a contrasting Psalm of lament...
3. Compare and contrast this Psalm and the gospel text for today. How does each speak to our current condition and our hopes/fears of the future.

Reflection Questions on Mark 13:1-8:

1. This brief passage mixes both apocalyptic warnings of "doom and gloom" with a message of hope and anticipated new life. Do you resonate with one of these moods in the passage more than the other? If so, why?
2. From Samuel Cruz (*Commentary, workingpreacher.org, 11/18/2018*): *One of the challenges for us in the 21st century and living in one of the most affluent countries in the world, is that we cannot truly relate to what Jesus is saying [in this passage]. Jesus is suggesting that there is "sin" in our world and that a complete apocalyptic transformation is therefore required. The challenge for us is that "sin" has become a non-contextual spiritual construction with no relevance to our real lives. However, for Jesus "sin" is very contextual -- it means oppression, exploitation, abuse of the widow, orphan, migrant, transgender people. Therefore, the system that has been built from evil must be destroyed and made anew.* How do you respond to these thoughts? What do you think of the idea of systemic "sin"?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?