

Pentecost 13A - Comments/questions on the lessons for August 23, 2026

Isaiah 51:1-6

- We remember again that these words are written to the Israelites in exile who need a word of hope. The prophet calls them to remember their heritage, to remember that Abraham and Sarah began as one but God blessed and multiplied them. Similarly, the ones in exile are called to not despair in their lack of numbers but to trust in the God who has called them. We are called to have that same trust in God. But this is not a simple declaration of belief. It is a living out of God's justice and deliverance. How are we called to live out that justice today?
- Two times we hear God say, "Listen to me." We are called to listen to God. We listen in prayer. We listen in Scripture. We listen to other people. We listen in silence. What helps you to listen and discern the voice of God?
- From listening, we next hear the call to look, by which God calls the people to focus their attention, as they "pursue righteousness" – figuring out the "right" way to live, seeking God. In other words, if you want to know how to live, focus on the God who formed you ("the rock from which you were hewn") and focus on the ones who have gone before you ("to Abraham and to Sarah who bore you"). In other words, tradition helps inform us, as long as we also keep a focus on God.

Psalms 138

- This psalm invites the people to praise God for who God is and what God has done, for what God has done for the people and for what God has done for the individual. If you were to write your own psalm of praise to God, what would you thank God for?
- When we read the phrase, "before the gods I will sing your praise," it seems to imply that other gods exist. Other translations change the word to "idols" or "angels." If it were the first – "idols" – then it is a declaration of faith over against other things that we worship. If it were the second – "angels" – then it invites us to see our praise and worship here on this earth having an effect in the heavenly realms.
- Note how the psalmist understands God's answer to prayer: he does not say that God solves the problem or heals the illness or takes away the suffering. Rather, he says, "you increased my strength within me" (Amplified Bible says, "You made me bold and confident with renewed strength in my life."). The NRSV has the line, "you increased my soul." How might understanding God increasing our strength help us in the midst of our struggles?
- Note also the emphasis on humility: "The Lord ... cares for the lowly, perceiving the haughty from afar." Whenever we think that we "know better" than others or think we are better than others, we recall that God looks and cares for those who are lowly. Does this mean that we are to think down on our ourselves? Absolutely not. See the second lesson and the comment below on humility.
- The psalmist concludes by saying, "You will make good your purpose for me," a way of saying that God has something in store for us – a purpose, a plan – which God will accomplish and complete. The Message says, "Finish what you started in me, God." What purpose does God have in store for you? How are you letting God complete that purpose?

Romans 12:1-8

- In light of Paul's argument in Romans 9-11 about God's mercy toward the Jews, what does it mean that he appeals "therefore" to have them present their bodies as a living sacrifice?
- How are we called today to not conform to this world but to be transformed? What does it mean for our minds to be renewed?
- As in the psalm, Paul calls us to humility, "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think." But such humility recognizes the giftedness of each person. In his explanation of humility, the Jewish theologian Martin Buber expressed it this way: "Every [one] shall know and consider that in [their] qualities [they are] unique in the world and that none like [them] ever lived... [BUT] the uniqueness of [each person] proves itself in [their] life with others." In a similar way, Paul calls us to see our gifts but to understand those gifts in service to God and to the Body of Christ.
- We are all called to use our gifts in service to God? What are your gifts? How are you using them in service to God?

Matthew 16:13-20

- It is difficult to speak about this passage without speaking about next week's gospel lesson. On the one hand, Peter understands who Jesus is: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Jesus praises Peter for this declaration. On the other hand, it will become apparent next week that Peter does not truly understand what the Messiah means as he rebukes Jesus when Jesus talks about his coming suffering and death.
- This passage has been used in the history of the church to support the primacy of the pope with Peter as the first. But is the "rock" that establishes the church the person of Peter or the declaration of Peter? If it is the declaration, then Jesus is declaring that everything about the church is to flow from this understanding of Jesus. Then, even Peter's incomplete understanding becomes a part of that "rock" the church is founded upon, because the church is established upon our human-ness, our incompleteness, even our brokenness.
- Perhaps Jesus foreshadows what he will say about the suffering of the Messiah when he calls Peter, "Simon son of Jonah." This designation could have at least three levels of meaning:
 - "Son of Jonah" could simply identify Peter's biological father.
 - "Son of Jonah" could emphasize the relationship of Jesus to the prophet Jonah, as Jesus has already declared twice in Matthew that he will only give the people "the sign of Jonah" (12:38-42, 16:4), by which Jesus signifies his death and resurrection. By calling Peter "son of Jonah," Jesus could signify that Peter is to be shaped – as are all disciples – by the suffering, death and resurrection of the Messiah.
 - "Son of Jonah" could emphasize the relationship of Peter to the prophet Jonah, recalling more fully the story of Jonah. As Jonah is the prophet who doesn't quite "get it," so Peter is about to show that he doesn't "get it" either. If the "rock" that the church is founded upon is made up of people who don't quite "get it," that gives us hope that God will use us despite our imperfections – or even because of them.