

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 21 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

ACNA Readings – Numbers 11:4-6, 10-17, 24-29; Psalm 19:1-14; James 4:7-5:6; Mark 9:38-50

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). However, throughout the year there are also smaller feasts. September 29 marks the feast of Saint Michael and All Angels. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. But God is on our side. He also has sent ministering angels who help and defend us here on earth.²

Common Theme. We are more easily filled with desire, jealousy, and pride than we are with humility. God doesn't only work through me. He is known through His own creation as well as His testimony and Torah. He provides other workers who serve Him where I cannot. We cannot know all the plans of God but we can "be at peace with one another". We cannot fight against Satan and his angels alone, but we can be humble before God and among all those He has called.

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29. A single period of forty years showed the power of God to a single nation more than any other period of history nor to any other nation. And yet, neither the punishment of God nor the blessing of God brought the response we might think would come about. How could a people who knew the presence of God—who saw His awesome might and power, heard His voice, and eaten of His bountiful provision—still complain? And yet they constantly complained. Even as we ourselves so often do.³

However, it wasn't just towards the Israelites that God had shown His blessing—nor His punishment. There was another group with the Israelites who came with them from Egypt, who stood at Mount Sinai and heard the voice of God, and were given manna to eat each day. These people came for their own reasons, likely because they recognized that the God of Israel was not like their own gods, the gods of the Egyptians. But they had not been oppressed and ruthlessly made to work as slaves. They had not been crying out for help, groaning in their slavery. Some of them may have been rich, others poor, many would have been Egyptians, some would have likely been Asiatic, Canaanite, or Nubian. And they would have been used to the plenty they had before they joined themselves to this foreign God of these Israelites.⁴

¹ Alternate RCL Readings: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124

² See Hebraic Perspective on the spiritual realm.

³ Each of us should be able to give a testimony of God's provisions, His blessing, His miraculous intervention, and yes, even His chastisement in our lives. Yet when we are faced with a new challenge, we can quickly lose the assurance we once had of God's presence and help.

⁴ The term "rabble" used in Numbers 11:4, ῥοσοα (asaphsuf), is only found once in the Bible. ῥοα (asaph) general means to gather or collect while ῥο (suf) are the reeds, such as cattails, found in place such as the "sea of reeds" where many Egyptians lost their lives, but where some also were brought into the

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It was these who started to complain. Sure they had manna, which tasted like a pastry with oil,⁵ but the Egyptians were used to fresh fish and vegetables. But the blame didn't lie with the foreigners alone, for the Israelites were quick to complain along with them. Even Moses began to complain (although his complaint wasn't regarding the food but the people). It was the Israelites who asked, "Who will give us meat?"⁶ God's reaction to their lack of gratitude and thanks reveals some of His character, for God provided in two separate ways. He was also quite angry.

First, God provided leadership.⁷ Moses alone could not take care of all the difficulties that arose from the people.⁸ Nor could he teach all the people.⁹ Seventy elders were chosen to join Moses to share in the Holy Spirit and to serve the people. Like Elisha and Elijah, the 70 elders received the Spirit that was on Moses and they prophesied, but unlike Elisha, it was only on this one occasion. In addition, two elders who had not been at the Tent of Meeting with Moses and the rest also received the same Spirit and also began to prophesy.¹⁰ Rather than chastising the two

wilderness as they travelled with the Israelites. The term may have also been derived from a foreign, if related, language. The LXX uses the term, επιμικτος (epimiktos), using the preposition επι (on, upon) and μικτος (mixed, often in regards to ethnicities or a mixing of foreign law, culture, or rule with local practices).

⁵ In Exodus, the manna was said to taste like a pastry with honey. This discrepancy led to a saying in Yoma 75b.5 that God's provision was not just bountiful but also had a varying taste according to the desires of those that ate it: For the youth, it tasted like good bread, for the children, it had the sweet taste of honey, and for the elderly, like bread made with oil.

⁶ This is an odd question, not only because God had been providing for them whenever they had a need, but also because God had preserved the flocks and cattle of the Israelites during the plagues. Israel had left Egypt with large flocks that would provide both milk and wool, but also, if needed, meat and leather—although, as Moses pointed out in Numbers 11:21-22, that would be a huge waste of resources. The request for "meat" may have been metaphorical, as what they would not have had were the fish and vegetables specifically mentioned.

⁷ In the verses following our reading, we will also discover that God would provide the physical food that the people requested. However, His anger would also be hard to bear.

⁸ Jethro noted that Moses needed help to judge all the disputes that the people had (Exodus 18:13-26). But it wasn't simply judgements that Moses needed help with. Numbers doesn't directly state what the job of the 70 elders was, they were probably all to serve in different ways and to different people to ease the burden of leadership on Moses and serve the people—both physically and spiritually.

⁹ The many people who left Egypt would not have known much about God. The Israelites, at least, had a few stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their God. The multitude that walked out of Egypt with Israel would not have even known that as not even Joseph was known among them. Hearing (and seeing) a voice thunder over Mount Sinai was terrifying, receiving bread from heaven was life-giving, but the Egyptian magicians had also been able to perform some miracles. God is much more than a miracle machine. Israel was to hear the words of God, have them on their hearts, and live by them—the question, as always, is "how are they to hear without someone preaching?"

¹⁰ While the seventy elders were gathered at the Tent of Meeting and the Holy Spirit fell on them, the Holy Spirit wasn't confined to that location only but also fell on two who were not present. It is unclear if the

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elders who had not been at the Tent of Meeting, Moses stated that it would be better for all the people to have the Spirit of the LORD be upon them.¹¹

Psalm 19:7-14.^{12 13} David spoke of two great witnesses in this Psalm that could help him (and us) be blameless before our redeemer. The first great witness is the heavens themselves—they declare the glory of God. In poetic form, the expanse of creation has a voice that sends forth a message of the greatness of God. Verse 2 says that, day after day they utter speech. The Hebrew word used is יָבִיעַ (*yava*) and gives an image of a continual forceful gushing spring—such as the Gihon Spring in Jerusalem—(Proverbs 18:4) or the continuous gushing of a boasting fool (Psalm 94:4, Proverbs 15:2). Day by day and night by night the heavens give voice to the evidence of a glorious God. Although they do not speak in human language, or perhaps because they do not speak as we do, David declared that the glory of God is evident to all the world and not only to the people of Israel.¹⁴

In verse 7 we move from the witness of creation to the revelation of God's word. The heavens have declared the glory of God and so too have the Scriptures. While the existence of a divine creator can be seen in creation, it does little to tell us who God is. Knowing that God is real is not the same thing as knowing God—the Word of God reveals God's character.

The glory of God is seen in the purity, holiness, goodness, and righteousness of the Torah. There is nothing contained in the sacred writings of other religions that can compare to the commandments that God gave. The law of the Lord is perfect and is of the highest value that people should seek to obtain.¹⁵ Hearing these two witnesses of God's greatness is of utmost

total number of elders was 70 or 72. Luke 10 may have reflected this unknown number as some manuscripts stated that 70 were sent out and others state that it was 72. This doesn't mean that Luke was unable to do basic math, but rather that he (and the scribes after him) was trying to reflect an important quality of leadership—creating disciples who are filled with the same Spirit of God given to you and able to serve in like-manner to the way the master serves.

¹¹ See also Mark 9:38-39

¹² ACNA reading includes Psalm 19:1-6

¹³ Psalm 19 is composed by David for the overseer (חַנּוּכָּהּ), often translated as chief musician. Exactly who this person is remains unclear. It could be one of the choir leaders (Asaph, Heman, or Jeduthun) or someone else. Some Jewish commentators take this to mean God Himself from the word נָצַח (*netzah*), perpetual. (Thus some of these songs, such as are found throughout Psalms and even Habakkuk 3:2-19, might be written as a direct prayer to the perpetual overseer).

¹⁴ Paul quoted David in Romans 10:18 as he too recognized that the voice of God was sent out to all people.

¹⁵ Law often has a negative connotation in Christian, particularly Protestant, exegesis. This is, perhaps, because of an (incorrect) assumption that law, faith, and grace are opposed to each other. First, the word *Torah* in Psalm 19:7 is not the word for law but rather a verb meaning to teach, guide, and instruct (הָקִיחַ, *hok*, is the Hebrew word for law). The *Torah* does contain laws, and those laws were given by God for our

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importance, “by them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” For David, the Word of God was greater than all material wealth¹⁶ and the experience of applying the words of God in his life was better than any experience¹⁷ that the world could provide. In listening to the warnings in the heavens and the Torah, David could be found acceptable in the Lord's sight.

James 5:13-20. Having just finished speaking about misused wealth and power and that the afflicted must look to God in patience (for He will be the Judge), James concluded his letter to the twelve tribes in the diaspora with an urge to pray. Specifically, James spoke of the appropriateness of prayer in suffering, in praise, and in sickness.

When times are difficult, we must turn to God. Gold and silver corrode while luxury and self-indulgence are fleeting. Hopefully we aren't the ones misusing our wealth and power (if God has been gracious enough to give that particular gift to us) but rather the church has, historically, been persecuted for their righteousness—even as Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John declared and Luke showed.¹⁸ Prayer—turning fully to God in love, hope, and faith—helps us remain steadfast in living according to the calling of the Gospels for we must be fully dependent on Him.

Getting into a pattern of prayer is something we should do before we encounter difficult times. It can be true that our prayer life increases in fervour during times of trouble but James also urged us to pray when times are good. We should depend no less on God when life is going well. Forgetting God during times of blessing will neither help us be steadfast when trouble comes nor recognize the grace of God when it comes. If we are happy, let us sing psalms of praise. It is in prayer, including praise, worship, and thanksgiving, that we are grounded in our relationship with the living God—for we live in His mercy and grace.

good, but it contains so much more than simply laws. The *Torah* reveals God's heart, what He does and doesn't like. What He has done, what He is doing now, and what He is going to do.

The *Torah* being good and perfect, for it is the instructions and teachings from a perfect God, isn't simply a Jewish or Old Testament ideal. Paul too says, “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” This should not be a surprise as the *Torah* comes from God and to break them or teach others to break them would make us “the least in the kingdom of heaven”.

¹⁶ Gold is a precious metal that forms the basis of all economic wealth. Our reward does not come from wealth, it comes from the keeping of the teaching and instruction of God.

¹⁷ Honey is delicious! Unfortunately, many wars, deaths, and pain have happened because of the desire to obtain worldly pleasures—one example revolves around sugarcane while others examples can be seen in the spice trade.

¹⁸ Persecution of the righteous wasn't a new idea for the Church, II and IV Maccabees spoke at length about the persecution of the righteous along with the Book of Wisdom (The Wisdom of Solomon). Persecution comes against anyone that God chose out of the world, for the world hates God. This is why anti-semitism has never ceased over the past three millenia—there is no one event that should garner such animosity and hate except that God chose Israel and the world hates God.

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Finally, James urged us to pray for the sick, together with the anointing of oil, and confession of sins. “The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.” Does that mean that we only need to pray and our loved ones will be healed? To save, in the Greek σωσει (sōsei), is both future and active (or continuous) but it is also used in all five other uses in the New Testament to speak of salvation of the soul from sin (including James 5:20). This might be why James connects our prayer for the sick so strongly with confession—particularly as being sick was closely related to death until modern medicine.¹⁹ It is also hard to pray in faith and righteousness if we do not confess. Many of our liturgies include a public confession which is followed by a public pronouncement of the assurance of forgiveness. Confession is very powerful, and we do well not to ignore it.

In the end, we are called to pray but it is the Lord who raises the sick up.²⁰ But that doesn’t mean we do nothing. Oil was considered in the ancient world to have healing properties and was used for all sorts of anointing, ceremonial as well as medicinal.²¹ Caring for the sick in times of plagues, resulting in the death of many Christians but salvation (both physically and spiritually) of many families was something the church was well-known for in history.²² It was also the church that often established hospitals all over the world and sought cures for many diseases. These characteristics of care for the sick should not simply be part of our past but also our present and future.

Hebraic Context. When we think of Biblical covenants we usually think of agreements between peoples and God bound by sacrifices, typically the sacrifice of animals (although grains were actually the more common offering in the Temple and several covenants in the Bible did not involve animal sacrifice). Rarely would we think of the common table ingredient known as salt in connection to everlasting promises.²³ Yet the Davidic covenant from which the Messiah would

¹⁹ In Shabbat 153a.5 it states, “Rabbi Eliezer said, ‘Repent one day before your death.’ Rabbi Eliezer’s students asked him: ‘But does a person know the day on which he will die?’ He said to them: ‘All the more so... one should repent today lest he die tomorrow...’ By following this advice one will spend his entire life in a state of repentance.”

²⁰ To raise up, εγερει (egerei), is used both in the context of eternal salvation and physical help. For instance, in Matthew 12:11, Jesus (when commenting on Shabbat) spoke of saving a sheep from a pit by raising it up. On the other hand, Paul reminded the Corinthians (in II Corinthians 4:14) that the same one who raised Jesus from the dead would also raise them up into His presence.

²¹ In the story of the Good Samaritan, both oil and wine were used with bandages to clean the wounds of the beaten man.

²² Eusebius, in *Ecclesiastical History* VII.22.7-9 mentions one such occasion.

²³ While salt is extremely common today, it was incredibly valuable throughout history. Without refrigerators, salt served as both the primary means of preservation and flavor enhancer. Salt was so valuable that the myth that Roman soldiers were paid in salt became a commonly accepted truth. They weren’t. They were paid a *salarium* (which may or may not be directly related to the Latin word for salt, *sal*) in silver Denarii. The term “worth his salt” may also have come from this term

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arise was sealed by salt. 2 Chronicles 13:5 says, “Ought you not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?”

The term “covenant of salt” first appeared in Numbers 18:19 in relation to offerings presented to the Lord but eaten by the priests. Leviticus 2:13 further commands that all sacrifices presented to the Lord are to be seasoned with salt. Salt is an ingredient that is used in cooking and food preparation all across the world. Sacrifices are also a prepared food, in that they are roasted on the altar and consumed by both the priest and the worshipper as part of the worship, thus salt would have been added as part of the cooking process.

Salt also became a very important element in the sacrificial and worship life of the Jewish community. The Scriptures do not provide explanations for the addition of salt to offerings.²⁴ Nonetheless, the value of salt and its popular use as a physical reminder of God's covenant, its use in sacrifice and worship, and its use in food preparation served as the background for its use in New Testament by Jesus.

Mark 9:38-50. Jesus took His disciples north, away from their homes, and while in Caesarea Philippi Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah. It is likely that while in the north Peter, James, and John had heard God declare that Jesus was His beloved Son and that they should listen to Him.²⁵ Unfortunately, also while in the north, Peter did not listen to Jesus (instead he took Jesus aside to rebuke Him) and the disciples had failed to cast out a demon from a possessed child.

Now the disciples had finally returned home but they had also been rebuked (although not for failing to cast out a demon, but rather because they had been acting selfishly). John came to Jesus and declared that someone other than Jesus' disciples was casting out demons and the disciples tried to prevent it.²⁶ The disciples were likely frustrated, a little bewildered, and perhaps

²⁴ The Bible already described the covenants God made with Abraham, Moses, David, and Israel as eternal covenants, so the inclusion of salt to signify the perpetual nature of the covenantal promise may seem redundant but its use as a preservative may have served as a physical reminder of the theological reality of God's enduring covenants.

²⁵ The traditional site of the transfiguration of Jesus is at Mount Tabor, southwest of the Sea of Galilee, but it is much more likely to be somewhere on Mount Hermon, right above Caesarea Philippi. Jesus travelled north, after six days Jesus went up on a high mountain (Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel), and then Jesus and His disciples passed through Galilee on their way back home.

²⁶ There has been speculation on who was casting out the demons: John the Baptist's disciples, itinerant Jewish exorcists (a rare but known profession in Judaism in the 2nd Temple Period), or one of the many disciples of Jesus not commonly included in the 12. Neither Mark nor Luke spoke to who the person was, instead they focused on John's comment and Jesus' response. What is clear is that, unlike in Acts 19:13-16, the demons are getting cast out in the name of Jesus.

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even jealous.²⁷ From the way Luke and Mark present this scenario, it seems like John and the disciples assumed that what they were doing was good—defending Jesus. They would have done well to remember what Moses said in Numbers 11. “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!”

Jesus’ rebuke wasn’t harsh, as with Peter, but He still told John “Do not stop him... for the one who is not against us is for us.” As Jesus had just told the disciples, we are called to be servants—not dictate who is and is not allowed to serve. Even doing simple tasks, like giving a cup of water, is good and will be rewarded. If someone else is given a different or even, to our mind, a greater task it should not cause us to be jealous.²⁸

Jesus then used hyperbole to shock His disciples (Mark 9:42-49). “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.”²⁹ Jesus was not advising people to actually self-mutilate, although there have

²⁷ There is certainly plenty of evidence that the leaders of the church today can be overcome with jealousy when someone else’s ministry appears to be more successful than our own. The proper response should be joy and thanksgiving that God is doing wonders through our brothers and sisters.

²⁸ There are certainly times when people will use the name of Jesus falsely to their supposed advantage. In Mark 9, these unnamed people cast out demons in the name of Jesus. To do something in another’s name should denote loyalty to the one in whose name you speak—demonstrated through service. If they did not have loyalty to Jesus then, as in Acts 19:13-16, it is possible that they would have been dealt with by their own lack of loyalty, faith, and service.

There are, of course, also passages in the Scripture that speak towards those who seek leadership, fame, or money through deception of the followers of the Messiah. The Didache, an early church manuscript, deals extensively with how these people should be examined and treated. God knows who is truly for and who is against Him. But Mark 9 does not seem to be speaking of that particular case.

²⁹ While most Christians declare that they take the Scriptures literally, this should not ignore that people (including Jesus and the writers of Scripture) often speak in hyperbole, metaphors, similes, parables, poetry, etc. and with specific points that they are trying to make that has a context, culture, and language. It also can explain why, though we often both claim to take Scripture literally, two Christians can come to different conclusions about something spoken two-to-three thousand years ago in multiple different languages and a culture that is often largely unknown to us.

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been some segments of the church that have engaged in misguided self-flagellation.³⁰ It was in the context of serving and teaching (particularly children) that Jesus chose such an incredibly strong and graphic teaching regarding sin.

The disciples were just that, disciples of Jesus. As He served, so should they. As He loved, so should they. But also as he taught, so should they—they were to make their own disciples and serve them. A disciple was to watch their teacher and emulate them. If the teacher sinned, it would undermine not only their authority, but also the one who sent them.³¹ And so, sometimes it is better to sacrifice all that is hindering us. What are we prepared to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, salvation, and the Messiah? This isn't a question to be ignored, Jesus included the potential destination of hell for those unwilling to sacrifice.

Sacrifice is necessary, and Jesus' reference to salt with fire emphasized the sacrificial nature of His teaching. Salt was used in the temple sacrificial system, in fact, all sacrifices were to be seasoned with salt (Leviticus 2:13).³² This was important both for the reminder of the covenant of God but also for the practical aspect that the priests and Levites (along with the family offering the sacrifice) would actually eat the sacrifice and, without salt, bread (and meat) are

³⁰ Origen, one of the early church fathers (185-253 AD), was said to castrate himself in his youth according to Eusebius (260-339 AD),

“At this time while Origen was conducting catechetical instruction at Alexandria, a deed was done by him which evidenced an immature and youthful mind, but at the same time gave the highest proof of faith and continence. For he took the words, ‘There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake,’ Matthew 19:12 in too literal and extreme a sense. And in order to fulfill the Saviour’s word, and at the same time to take away from the unbelievers all opportunity for scandal – for, although young, he met for the study of divine things with women as well as men, – he carried out in action the word of the Saviour. He thought that this would not be known by many of his acquaintance. But it was impossible for him, though desiring to do so, to keep such an action secret.” Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.8.

Origen, in his later writings, refuted the need to take such action literally and vigorously argued against self-mutilation in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Book 15.1-5.

³¹ In so many parts of the world, young people have abandoned the church and so many in the church are asking, why? Perhaps the youth are foolish, or addicted to their media, or the world is corrupting. Or perhaps it is the church, the parents, and the family of God that are too easily corrupted, preaching one thing but acting completely contrary. “Be the servant of all” is the message but we are neither humble nor serving. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

There are places where the church is growing, hallelujah! Often those are the places where pastors are killed or thrown in jail for their faith—where churches are persecuted but are faithful and will be called “He who overcomes”.

³² It is common, even to this day, to put a pinch of salt on Shabbat bread every Friday evening when reciting the blessing of bread given by God.

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quite tasteless—or if the salt doesn't act in the way it was intended to by God.³³ Significantly, after using such shocking language concerning death by drowning, self-mutilation, and hell, Jesus' conclusion was actually incredibly simple, “be at peace with one another.”

Hebraic Perspective. The Scriptures first introduced the concept of the divine spirit from the beginning—the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. The term Spirit of God, רוח אלהים (Ruach Elohim), is the most common term in Hebrew Scriptures. In contrast, the term Holy Spirit only occurs 3 times.³⁴ Nonetheless, the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature preferred to use the terms Holy Spirit and Shekinah to describe God's interaction, divine force, or presence in and amongst the world.

The various accounts of the work of the Spirit of God in the Hebrew Scriptures served as the basis for future elaboration of the spiritual realm during the 2nd Temple period. Prior to the first century, Judaism already had a well developed understanding of angelology, demonology and the realm of the spirit. Angels had been given names, organized into ranks, and separated by function or task.

2nd Temple period literature often described angels, demons, and the Spirit interacting with (and against) each other and humans.³⁵ The involvement between angels, demons and men was a two way street—that is, while demons might affect humans, humans could also affect demons. This led to the rites of exorcism in Judaism.

Evil spirits are rare in the Hebrew Scriptures with the first allusion to an interaction with one being David, who played for King Saul to calm an evil spirit that had taken possession of king Saul. However, the first actual recorded removal or exorcism of a demon is found in the book of Tobit, part of the collection of literature known as Apocrypha. Nonetheless, the Jewish people were engaged in spiritual warfare long before the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles.

³³ Early Christianity had a traditional use of “blessed salt”—most often with prayers, catechesis and baptism, and communion and the altar. John the Deacon, (5th-6th century) said, “The catechumen receives blessed salt also, to signify that just as all flesh is kept healthy by salt, so the mind which is drenched and weakened by the waves of this world is held steady by the salt of wisdom and of the preaching of the word of God...” *Letter of John the Deacon to Senarius* (Translated by E.C. Whitaker).

This practice seems to have been preserved in later works, such as the *Rituale Romanum* in 2.1.55, “Sal, quod in os baptizandi immittendum est, sit benedictum sua peculiari benedictione,…” (Salt, which is placed in the mouth of the baptizer, should be blessed with its particular benediction.) A blessing for salt can also be found in some Books of Occasional Offices.

³⁴ Isaiah 63:10, 11 and Psalm 51:11

³⁵ The Dead Sea community in 1QM, the War Scroll, described a great battle between angels and demons, along with humans fighting on both sides. Revelation 12:7-9 also described a battle between Michael and his angels against the dragon and his angels. Jude 1:9, although it is not mentioned in Deuteronomy, also describes a battle between Michael and Satan

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The rites of exorcism that developed in Judaism involved prayers, incantations, application and use of water, incense and musical sounds.³⁶ Literary archeology provides lots of material demonstrating that exorcisms were a small but functioning part of Jewish culture at the time of Jesus. Josephus, in *Antiquities* 8.2.5, described a Jewish sage exorcizing a demon in the presence of Vespasian and his family.

In the gospel reading we encounter Jewish people performing the exorcising of spirits using the name of Jesus who were not among the known followers of Jesus. Their precise relationship and use of Jesus' name as their authority over the demon is not clear. Although, it was not enough to simply use the name of Jesus as Luke pointed out in Acts 19:13-16.

The reality of the spiritual realm was not ignored by Jesus or the Apostles as the battle between God and Satan (such as it is, with God already victorious) was well known. We too should take care to pray that God would indeed “save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from the Evil One.”

Optional Context 1

ACNA Readings

James 4:7-5:6. One of the common themes throughout the epistle of James is his urge for practical action and attitudes from the community of faith. We consistently are focused on ourselves, “You desire... you covet” but God urges a completely different focus. Satan isn't a far-off concept, he is nearby and to resist him we must submit to God. As we draw close to God, He too will come close to us.³⁷ But what are the practical ways we can humble ourselves?

There is something very personal between ourselves and God. James seems to return to the Sermon on the Mount, the Psalms, and the Prophets. Jesus said, “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted”. Joel 2:12-23 states that mourning, with fasting and weeping, can lead to comfort and joy as we fall before God in repentance—for He is gracious and merciful. Psalm 30:11 (along with Psalm 126:5-6) states that it is God who brings joy out of mourning. It is not something we bring to ourselves.

³⁶ The Dead Sea Scrolls, in its collection of the psalms (11Q5), records four hymns for coercing demons to depart.

³⁷ Isaiah 55:6 says that we are to “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.” Does this mean that God will not always be found? That God is not always near? Isaiah soon follows this statement by speaking of the shepherds who are supposed to care for Israel, shepherds who instead are eating all they can and going their own way for their own gain. James speaks on the same topics in the verses to come.

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But humility doesn't only exist between ourselves and God. It also extends into our community as James urged the community to maintain an attitude of humility with each other. We are not to gossip or slander our brothers and sisters in Jesus. These actions fight against the law, namely to love our neighbour.³⁸

The tension between the rich and the poor can also allow the devil a foothold to sow discord within the community. James particularly singles out the wealthy who are so arrogant as to place their security more in their own supposed wealth than they do in God. Money, in and of itself, is not evil. However, the inappropriate use of money—to harm others or to rely on it as our idol above God—certainly is. James highlights how the desire of wealth had caused the retention of honest wages through fraud. This is also a clear violation of Leviticus 19:13 “You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning.”

If we humble ourselves before God then He will sustain us, He will defend us, and Satan will flee from us. But if we don't humble ourselves, then we too may weep and howl. God does allow the consequences of our actions to come about. It is better to mourn now, to be humble now, and to fall before God's mercy today, even as our brothers and sisters must do the same.

³⁸ Taken alone, or in conjunction with Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” James 4:11-12 is often used to state that we, as Christians, must never judge another person. We are to be humble and know who it is that judges, but Matthew 18:15-20 does explain how we are to judge. I Corinthians 5:9-12 also speaks of judgment within the church of those who sin against the law of God. And in many places throughout the epistles we are to discern who is false or in sin and we are to warn them in order that they might come back to the truth and be our brother.