



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 3, Year B
December 17, 2017

[RCL] Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28; Psalm 126

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Suppose I were to ask you what it means to be *saved*. Would you explain *salvation* as a fixed reality, a progressive ontological shift, or perhaps something more dynamic and fluid? In my younger years, if I had been presented with this question—my answer might have been something like this: “Salvation means that God has forgiven my sins and now I can go to heaven once this life is over.” While this may be a good answer, is it a complete one? More specifically, is the good news of the salvation that God offers us through Christ simply about having our slates wiped clean so that we can go to heaven when we die? This view of the good news of salvation diminishes its more immediate power and seemingly reduces it to an entrance ticket one only needs to obtain at some point, before passing from this life to the next. What would happen if we took the words of the prophet from Isaiah 61 seriously and began to reframe our understanding of salvation as something that takes hold of our lives in the here and now—dynamically transforming us progressively into the image of God?

- How has your view of salvation changed throughout your life?
- In what ways might changing the way you think of salvation transform your life in the here-and-now?

Psalm 126

Through the technological advancements of our modern context, we possess the unparalleled potential to be connected to others, yet often—even with the plethora of social media platforms and hand-held internet devices available to us, we are more disconnected than ever. This is especially true in the United States, where the culture places a high value on self-sufficiency and rugged individualism. So, it is not surprising—when we read a passage of Scripture like this Psalm that speaks to a corporate experience of sorrow, redemption, and joy—that we might find ourselves struggling to relate experientially. The Psalmist, however, challenges us to see ourselves as connected to others in the midst of our time of struggle and to seek out the restoration of God together in unity. Sorrow somehow becomes more bearable when shared with others. Likewise, the joy and celebration of overcoming become that much sweeter when shared.

- In your life, can you think of a time of great struggle that you finally overcame?
- Did you go through this time alone or was it shared with others?
- If it was shared with others, how did it change your experience?

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Love your enemy.” “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Scripture is full of tall orders and this exhortation is no different. The preacher urges the audience to “rejoice always,” “pray without ceasing,” and to “give thanks in all circumstances.” Just one of these biddings would be difficult enough for any of us to accomplish, but to attempt to live out all three would be seemingly impossible! The early Christians, however, believed that the return of Jesus was imminent and because of this, they wanted to frame their daily tasks and responsibilities in a way that would ensure they would always be ready for his return. Perhaps our expectations are, understandably, tempered after two thousand years of waiting, yet I wonder how our lives would change if we framed our lives and daily practices with the expectation that Jesus might return today—whatever that might look like. In the meantime, let us, as the preacher reminds us, “hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

- How would practicing a life of prayer “without ceasing” change the way we experienced and interacted with others?
- If you knew Jesus would return tomorrow, how would it change your behaviors or your view of the world?

John 1:6-8,19-28

One of my favorite parts of going to see a movie is getting to watch the previews of upcoming films that are not yet released. There’s something powerful about being given a partial glimpse of something that is coming but is not yet. Every now and then, a preview will really spark my interest, and as my anticipation builds, I’ll find myself doing online research about the film production and past works of the writer or director. Anticipation builds expectation, readying us to better receive the wholeness of the final product when it ultimately arrives. Likewise, John the Baptist was not the light, but he went down to the riverside daily to baptize those who were willing and to testify of the coming light that would change the world. At this time of year, we remember his testimony as we too await the coming of the light that has brought us the gift of salvation and changed our lives—forever.

- Have you ever known something good was about to happen but weren’t sure of when it would finally occur?
- How did living in anticipation and expectation of the coming good affect your daily life?

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