



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 5 (C)  
April 7, 2019

[RCL] Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

### Isaiah 43:16-21

Water. It is life-giving, and the offer of it in the desert is literally hope bubbling up or flowing from the ground. In the context of the Babylonian Exile, this prophetic oracle of Second Isaiah, the image of water in the midst of the desert that would need to be crossed in order to return to Judea, it was both a metaphorical image of hope and a very practical way that God would save God's chosen people and ensure their very survival on their return from exile. The prophet hearkens back to not only remind the Israelites about their deliverance from Egypt and the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, but also to put into context that this deliverance would be something new. God will provide a way out of Babylon for the Israelites via Emperor Cyrus of Persia, and God will also ensure that the path home is one that the people will be able to survive. This message is needed to strengthen the people because of their collective memory of the exilic march to Babylon and their experiences over the intervening period.

The connection to the Exodus is important; it recalls the unique relationship between the Israelites and God, but also shows how this situation is different than before. In Egypt, the people had Moses, they stood up to Pharaoh, and they could claim ancestry to Joseph. They escaped, but they were a different people then. Now they are a defeated and humiliated people who are broken and have lost their identity in many ways. God meets them where they are. The path to deliverance and salvation is what they need at this moment instead of following the pattern of what was needed during the Exodus. God is present in their distress and turmoil, which is a promise to also be present for us and our specific needs.

While we are prone to addressing our current challenges by relying on what has worked in the past, God is not bound by this thinking. This is an incredibly important lesson for us, not only in that God will be present for us, but also as an example for both individuals and the Church. We should be present with those in distress and meet them where they are, not assuming and not necessarily relying on a prescribed response. This is especially important for the institutional church, as we seek to reimagine ourselves as a church that speaks to the needs of today and not the needs of generations past. We should emulate this pattern and seek to understand the needs of our communities now—and respond to those needs in new ways. God's faithfulness is not conditional on what has come before, and we would be wise to understand that as communities of faith.

- Can you name a time when you felt a hope equivalent to that of finding water in the middle of a desert?
- What has happened before informs how we view the world, yet Isaiah calls on us to not remember that which has come before and to not consider that which is old. Identify a time when it was helpful to ignore what came before, but also identify a time when ignoring what came before was problematic.
- What are some things that the Church does that we would be better served to leave behind and forget?

## Psalm 126

One way of understanding this psalm is through its place in the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) and as one of the psalms to be prayed on the fifteen steps into the Temple. It is a song of going up to meet God. The theme of restoration that we heard in the reading from Isaiah is echoed here. That which has been torn down and those who have been humiliated and disenfranchised will be restored, renewed, and exalted. While the original text speaks to the restoration of the Hebrew people after the destruction of Jerusalem, their Temple, and their society at the hands of the Babylonians, we can also hear as Christians how Jesus' resurrection will wipe away our sorrow and our fears that accompany us on Good Friday to be replaced by the joy of Easter.

The image of the steps of the temple, which mirror the poetic form of the Hebrew text, presents a useful pattern for us to emulate in our Lenten journey. Each day and week of Lent, we take steps towards Holy Week, the cross, and finally Easter. Each day offers the opportunity for reflection to accompany each step and an opportunity to inspect a different aspect of our lives and our hearts. It is also an opportunity to take another step towards turning our hearts to God.

- The restoration of Israel was joyous and life-giving, but it also involved reflection and repentance to address where the Israelites had fallen short in their relationship with God. Where are you on your Lenten journey, and where are there still opportunities for repentance that will lead to true restoration with God?
- Can you describe a time when you were filled with sorrow, regret, or loss and your joy was restored? How did that feel? Have you shared that journey with anyone recently?

## Philippians 3:4b-14

Privileges can come in many forms, whether inherited or pursued, and they can be very challenging to both identify and give up. Paul outlines some of the privileges that he has experienced and how emptying himself of these privileges has brought him closer to Christ. While the specific privileges that Paul outlines may not resonate with us in the same way as in Paul's day, emptying ourselves of our privileges is a critical component of our faith journey as Christians as they separate us from each other and therefore Christ.

What really resonates here is the depth of Paul's humility. We can speculate on what changed for Paul in his conversion, but the impact is profound, and it is a model for us on what is possible as we seek to empty ourselves and come closer to Christ. This is a lifelong journey, as Paul articulates at the end of this passage, but it is one where we are accompanied and empowered by Christ. As we empty ourselves, the space is filled with the Holy Spirit and our trust in resurrected life in Christ.

In light of our Lenten journey, this passage invites us to inspect our own lives in order to identify those areas where our privilege inhibits our journey towards resurrected life in Christ. As we identify them, our possessions, our social, racial, or economic privileges, or even our privilege of being a Christian in this country, we examine not only what they are, but how we can empty ourselves of them.

- What privileges equivalent to Paul's do you hold?
- What does "becoming like [Christ] in his death" mean to you?
- What would it take to empty yourself to be more like Christ in his death? What is one concrete step that you could take on that journey before Easter?

## John 12:1-8

There is something disconcerting about Jesus' response to Judas, because Judas' question is one that many of us might ask. One would think that we would hear exactly the opposite from Jesus—that all of our resources should go to the poor. This is especially disconcerting when we see such disparity around income inequality that we do today. These moments when Jesus' answers do not meet our expectations force us to continue to examine what discipleship means.

The timing of this passage is important as it comes right before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of his passion. Mary anoints Jesus just as a king would have been anointed, foreshadowing his entrance and Jesus' turning of this expectation on its head by washing the feet of his disciples, thereby reframing our concept of kingship and leadership.

On the surface, Judas' critique meets our expectations and Mary is indeed being wasteful, but John makes it clear that even if Judas is saying the "right" thing, his motives are impure and Mary's actions are those of a true disciple. Where Judas uses the plight of the poor to enrich himself, Mary serves God through the abundance of creation and seeks a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Discipleship is about love and service to God, not saying the right thing in service to our own ends. The critique, like many of the difficult teachings of Jesus, is not about what we say, but why we say it and what is in our hearts. When we are discerning how best to utilize the resources of creation or how we can best use our time, talents, and treasure to further the mission of God, we must examine ourselves as much as we examine what happens around us. We are quickly approaching Holy Week, where our deepest flaws, sinful tendencies, and outright sins will be laid bare. As painful as this type of reflection can be, we take heart that the work of Lent and Holy Week culminates in the redemptive work of the cross and Jesus' resurrection – good news indeed.

- Reflect upon your Lenten journey so far. Have you identified any areas where there is a need for repentance and restoration? If so, what are they?
- Can you name a time where you have faced the difficult decision of how to use your own resources or those of your faith community? How did the community come to a decision? Upon reflection, are you comfortable with that decision and the motivations?

*The Rev. Patrick Burke is a newly ordained priest in the Diocese of Indianapolis and recently completed a Master of Divinity degree at Bexley Seabury Seminary in Chicago. Patrick served for two years as a seminary intern at All Saints Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, and currently serves as curate at Good Samaritan Episcopal Church in Brownsburg, Indiana, focusing on community engagement and building innovative faith communities. Patrick lives in Fishers, Indiana, with Cheryl, his wife of eighteen years, daughter Alexis, and their dog Fezzik.*