



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, Year B **March 25, 2018**

[RCL]: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

Isaiah 50:4-9a

As we begin Holy Week, this passage in Isaiah reminds us of God’s help in times of distress. This passage was likely written during the time of Babylonian exile in the 6th Century BC—a time of great suffering and disorientation for the Israelites. Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion would have been similarly devastating for the disciples. The Israelites experienced the destruction of their temple and physical exile to a foreign land; the disciples faced the death of their teacher and the fear and uncertainty of what the future might hold. This passage assures us that even in times of persecution and doubt, God is our help. Isaiah finds strength from God both in confronting his adversaries and in comforting those in need. We, too, can find sustenance from God this week and in our own moments of exile, pain, or uncertainty.

- Isaiah writes, “The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (v. 50:4). How have you been comforted by the words of others? How has God helped you to speak words of comfort to those in need?

Psalm 31:9-16

Psalm 31 is a particularly visceral depiction of the author’s pain and suffering. The author’s entire body—his eye, throat, belly, and bones—are consumed by affliction. The Psalmist also conveys a deep sense of loneliness, abandonment, and self-loathing. He writes, “I am forgotten like a dead man,” and “I am as useless as a broken pot” (v. 31:12).

At times, we may find ourselves in a similar state to this psalmist. We may know what it is like to feel as though our bodies and minds are completely overtaken by sadness and fear. Yet the Psalmist does not lose sight of God’s goodness, even in the midst of his pain. He calls on God to save him by God’s “loving kindness.” He affirms his trust in God and asks for God to rescue him.

- How do you find comfort and strength in times of sadness? What feelings—physical or emotional—does this Psalm bring up for you?

Philippians 2:5-11

Holy Week is an opportunity for us to confront the tension between Jesus’ humanity and his Lordship. In this passage, Paul reminds us that Jesus chose to journey alongside humanity. As part of that journey, he

endured the worst of human suffering, even to the point of death. This week, we will imagine what it was like for Jesus and the disciples in his final days; some of us will reenact aspects of Jesus' last acts on earth through foot washing, overnight vigils, and dramatic passion narratives. At the same time, we will anticipate the joy of Easter and the hope of the Resurrection that affirms our faith in Jesus, the Messiah.

Paul implores us to take on the "same mind" as Christ. We are asked to embrace humanity in its fullness and to appreciate the paradoxical proximity of humanity to God: the more we empty and humble ourselves, the closer we draw to experiencing the glory of God.

- How do you relate to Jesus during Holy Week? Which parts of Jesus' final days on earth capture your heart and imagination the most?

Mark 15:1-47

When we read the Passion in our services on Palm Sunday, we ask the congregation to identify with the "crowd" (v. 15:8). The congregation shouts, "Crucify him!" when Pilate offers to release Jesus. It makes sense that we would cast the congregation in this role—after all, it offers the congregation a speaking part and it gives us an opportunity to imagine that we might be responsible, in some way, for the brokenness of the world—but there are many other players in this narrative with whom we might identify. In the final verses of Mark's passion narrative, we learn that the women who have followed and provided for Jesus throughout his ministry were watching his crucifixion from a distance. The scripture does not tell us about the whereabouts of the male disciples; they seem to be absent from the whole scene, but several women have stayed to watch Jesus die and to see what will become of his body.

- Imagine what it would have been like to be one of the women who followed Jesus. Why do you think the women stayed after all the other disciples left?

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