



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Palm Sunday (A)
April 2, 2023

[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

Isaiah 50:4-9a

What could it mean to set one's face like flint? Why would one do it? Flint is hard and weather resistant. It has been used throughout history to make cutting tools. It has also been used as a construction material to build homes or walls. Second Isaiah has been a teacher using his words as food to help sustain (v. 4) his fellow exiles in Babylon. Isaiah believes that the Israelites are in this predicament living far from their land because the Israelites had turned away from God (Isa 1:2-4). They are described as rebellious. Here, however, the prophet is not rebellious against God (v. 5). The prophet is facing trials and is turning to God. And yet, the prophet is setting his face like flint. As flint can be shaped by the elements, are the people being shaped by their experience? As flint can be used to build walls, is Isaiah building a protective wall to help the people survive these trials, knowing that God is near, that God will not abandon them? Unlike flint, the cloth that his enemies are made from will ultimately wear out and disappear as it becomes food for moths (v. 9a). He is faithful in his waiting.

- Jesus as a Jewish man knew the writings from Isaiah. How might this Scripture have nourished him as his own trials drew near? What similarities and differences do you see between Jesus' and Isaiah's experiences in this text?
- Have you faced trials in your own life? In what ways have those trials shaped you or your community? How was God present or absent for you in those moments?

Psalm 31:9-16

The psalmist cries out to God to have mercy on them. This lament is a cry from the heart, a deep, guttural growl expressing more than the words themselves. Even though God already knows all of this, the psalmist is leaning into God. The psalmist feels like a disappointment to all – forgotten and useless. Oh God, hear me! It's not going so great. The psalmist is inviting God into their pain. It is a moment of catharsis and sharing. And, interestingly, in verse 15, there is a shift. The psalmist goes from being on the receiving end of woe to one who trusts in God: "I have trusted in you, O Lord. I have said, 'You are my God.'" The psalmist actively puts themselves in God's hands and asks for God's blessing (v. 16).

- Have you ever felt like this? How might you use this psalm when feeling down and out?
- What does this psalm say about what we can say to God and how we say it? Have you ever written your own lament? What was that experience like?

Philippians 2:5-11

Jesus had the same skin that we have, the same feet that we do. I wonder if he had a cowlick on the back of his head that didn't lie down, no matter how much he wet it in the morning! Christ, who existed before becoming human and who is equal with God, set that aside and became a human, a servant who lived life like we do, with all its ups and downs. And Christ did this out of love for humankind. The suffering servant theme is similar to what we read in Isaiah and the psalm.

Paul was sharing this hymn with the Philippians. He was writing to the community, the plural "you." And he is exhorting them to take Jesus as their example, that they might become servants to one another "in Christ." He is suggesting that as they perhaps face their own trials, and his advice is that they are called to live humbly and look out for each other, rather than only for oneself. Paul reminds the Philippians that all belong to Christ.

- As you approach Holy Week, what are the ways in which you observe the themes of humility and service in the liturgy of each service?
- What does it mean for you to be a servant of others? How are you living out that servanthood in Holy Week and throughout the year?

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Is it surprising to hear the entire Passion narrative on Palm Sunday, when one might think that it is the last joyful celebration of Jesus' life before the events of his last week unfold? Aside from pragmatically ensuring that all hear the Passion before Easter, hearing this text on this day prepares us for the Holy Week ahead.

The disciples in Matthew's gospel have been filled with fear, doubt, and little faith all along. The pain that Jesus experiences over the course of these events is not only the result of physical abuse (being spat on, slapped, whipped, forced to carry his own cross and ultimately, dying a shameful death of crucifixion) but also the psychological pain of having those closest to him both betray and desert him.

The worst of humanity is on display in this story: greed, envy, wrath, pride, and fear. And yet, so is some of the best of humanity: Pilate's wife intervening unsuccessfully for Jesus, Simon carrying the cross a moment for Jesus, the many women, including Mary Magdalene and Mary, who were witnesses at each step, and Joseph of Arimathea giving his own tomb for Jesus. We hold this tension in ourselves as we approach Jesus' death on Good Friday.

- Interestingly, neither Judas nor Peter is described as "in prayer" before making important decisions or statements. Jesus, however, withdraws in prayer to prepare himself. How has prayer, or the lack of it, been important in your own life? Going forward, how could it be?
- How can you honor the pain and suffering of the Passion this week? Where do your own Good Fridays connect to Jesus' story?

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