



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Epiphany 2 (A) January 19, 2020

RCL: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Isaiah 49:1-7

In this passage the author answers three important questions: What is the nature of the servant's origin? What is the nature of the servant's work? And who are the benefactors of the servant's work?

First, the nature of the servant's origin is identified. According to the text, before birth, the servant has an intimate relationship with God. And while in the mother's womb, God equips the servant with tools (verse 2).

Second, the passage outlines the nature of the servant's work. The servant's work is to save Israel from further destruction, and to restore her to God. As a result, the servant's work might be described as prophetic and salvific.

Finally, the passage gives us clues about the benefactors of the servant's work. The servant's first attempts are to save Israel – primarily the tribes of Jacob (verse 6). However, the author suggests that the servant's attempts have fallen on deaf ears (verse 4). In response to Israel's resistance to the servant, the author paints a picture of God stepping in (verse 6) and telling the servant to preach the message of salvation to non-Israelites.

In summary in this text, we see a movement from the traditional image of God's salvation being solely offered to the Israelites, to an image of a God who shares salvation with all people.

- Reflect on the servants in your community who represent God's salvation. What does God's salvation mean for you? And how do you recognize it?
- What obstacles might get in the way of recognizing and ultimately accepting God's saving grace?
- What does it mean to you to have God's saving grace extended to all people?

Psalm 40:1-12

This is one of my favorite psalms. Right away, the first verse speaks to my experiences.

For example, I remember an evening when I crying because I had just lost a dear friend, and I remember hearing in a hushed voice: "I am here with you." God saw and heard my cry; I needed this reassurance.

The pain of loss did not go away immediately, but in that moment and subsequent moments, I imagined God with me.

Another reason why I love this psalm is because of the non-traditional images of God in relation to people. Before discovering this psalm (and similar texts), I had always felt disconnected from the God who required burnt offerings as sacrifice, and evidence of commitment. But in these verses, the psalmist imagines a new kind of relationship between God and people. It is a relationship that appears unattached from the traditional sacrifices and offerings (verse 7), and one predicated on recognizing God's love (verse 5) and sharing God's love with others (verse 11). What good news!

- Describe biblical images of God that are disconnected from your experiences. Describe biblical images of God that resonate with your experiences.
- Take a few moments throughout the day to reflect on images, old and new, that draw you closer to God.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

In his introduction, Paul writes an upbeat greeting to the church in Corinth. First, Paul gives thanks and celebrates how God has enriched the lives of the Corinthians. Specifically, Paul acknowledges how God's grace has empowered the message of the church in Corinth, and how, through grace, the Corinthians are filled with all spiritual gifts.

Second, Paul encourages the Corinthians to remain faithful to the message of Jesus Christ. Paul believes that their faithfulness to this message will grant them the necessary strength and patience as they await the return of Jesus Christ.

And finally, Paul reminds the Corinthians of God's faithfulness to them. Paul reminds the Corinthians that their commitment to and love for Jesus Christ is a result of God's invitation. Paul believes that their success in believing and sharing the good news is a result of God's faithfulness.

- In effect, Paul's introductory remarks seek to encourage the Corinthians never to forget the centrality of God's grace and faithfulness in their ministry. Why might Paul think this message was an important one to share with the Corinthians?
- Reflect on and describe the gifts of the Spirit that are present in your life.
- How do these spiritual gifts empower you?

John 1:29-42

In this reading, John the Baptist is portrayed retelling his first adult encounter with Jesus, and what he believes distinguishes his ministry from Jesus' ministry. While John the Baptist acknowledges the significance of his work (verse 31), John declares that Jesus, unlike he, has the power to take away sins. Consequently, he calls Jesus the Lamb of God. This description of Jesus is unique to the Gospel of John, and shows the author's desire to further illustrate the differences between John the Baptist and Jesus. In

addition to describing Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist recalls the evidence that he witnessed as proof of Jesus' stature and significance (see verses 32-34).

Finally, in the latter verses of this passage, we are given a unique description, unlike any account in the other gospels, of how Jesus met and called his first disciples, including Simon Peter and Andrew. It is interesting that Jesus' first two disciples are described as first being disciples of John the Baptist. It was on John the Baptist's instructions that his disciples left him to follow Jesus. This scene further illustrates the author's intentions of privileging Jesus' ministry over the ministry of John the Baptist.

- The author describes Jesus as one who can "take away sins." What does it mean to you to have your sins taken away? What does it look like in your life?

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