



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Good Friday
April 10, 2020

RCL: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Chapters 40-55 in the Book of Isaiah describe the Babylonian exile and how a messiah will come to destroy Babylon, making Jerusalem the center of God's kingdom. This passage is one of four servant songs in this section of the Book of Isaiah. The servant remains unnamed, but here is what we do know about the servant from the text: he is transcendent, a prophet, and he undergoes profound suffering. God willed the suffering of the servant, "his life an offering for sin." By his wounds, the many are healed.

It's interesting to note that the servant is nonviolent and undergoes his oppression silently. The servant's burial among the wicked and the rich seems to be a great injustice because he transcended the "eye for an eye" mentality that perpetuates violence. The suffering servant is also a truth-teller and has knowledge of righteousness. This knowledge startles the nations and silences those in power.

- Examine the silence and the truth-telling of the servant. Are these things at odds with each other? Why or why not?
- Is there a relationship between suffering and trust? Why does Isaiah lift up a despised, suffering person over the wealthy and powerful?

Psalm 22

The psalm begins with the question of someone who has reached the deepest point of despair: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This question is later asked by Jesus on the cross in the passion narratives of Matthew and Mark. The psalmist feels he has been abandoned by God and has been dehumanized to the point of being more a worm than a man. His oppressors mock that he trusted in the Lord. The psalmist doesn't seem to be able to shake his faith though, and asks God, "Be not far from me."

Everything changes when the psalmist begins to sincerely pray by verse 18, and prayer is the highest expression of faith. All prayer arises out of human need, for humans can do nothing without God's help. The primary motive of prayer, though, is the glory and worship of God, and this is what the psalmist calls for. True faith tells us God drives and sustains creation. To be ignorant of this truth is to fall into despair. By faith and the grace of God though, the psalmist has entered into hope and worship.

- Did God abandon the psalmist? Did the psalmist abandon God?
- How does prayer and grace transform you?

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:1-9

The Epistle to the Hebrews centers on the theme of Jesus Christ as mediator between God and humanity. What makes the person of Jesus Christ remarkable and fitting for the role of the high priest is his ability to empathize with the human condition. Christ knows what it is like to love, suffer, and die as a human being.

Unlike the rest of humanity, Christ is without sin, and this is because of his complete obedience to God. In the wilderness, when Christ was tempted by the devil, Christ uses Scripture to ground himself in his faith and emerges victorious. By dying on the cross, an act of complete submission and obedience to God, Christ destroys the power of death and grants humanity eternal life. Christ teaches us that true freedom is obedience to God.

Contrary to what our culture of self-reliance and consumerism tells us, to submit to God and ask for God's help is an act of boldness, courage, and liberation.

- Why is Christ's ability to empathize with the human condition important?
- When have you approached the throne of grace with boldness to ask for God's help?

John 18:1-19:42

John's passion narrative begins and ends in gardens, which reminds readers of the disobedience in the Garden of Eden which brought the active force of sin into the world. In the hour of his death, we see Christ exercise complete obedience to and faith in the Father. He says to Simon Peter, "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" Like the suffering servant in Isaiah, Jesus is nonviolent. Violence is the territory of those who trust in themselves and not in God.

We also see the violence of social systems here, and not just that of individual people. Jesus is in the shadow of Roman occupation. Pilate's authority stems from empire, which the mob reminds him of when they tell him, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor." This authority, though, is empty, because it is not from God. Pilate has no true power over Christ and is merely a cog in a system that perpetuates sin and violence. Robbed of his freedom and trapped in a system with the idol of an emperor at its center, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

Despite the emptiness of empire, the narrative is not empty and has truth at its core, just as all of Scripture does. Jesus, as an embodiment of the truth, verbally proclaims it, tells it through his actions, and holds it in his silence throughout the narrative. Pilate's famous question, "What is truth?" is a question of someone without faith. When the Evangelist brings his voice into the narrative, it is to say that his testimony is true, and he knows it is true.

- What idols do you observe in your life and our social systems?
- Think about the passion narrative in the context of the other readings for today. What comes up for you?
- How would you respond to Pilate's haunting question?

Paige Foreman is currently in her second year of her Master of Divinity program at Yale Divinity School and Berkeley Divinity School. She has also studied interreligious dialogue and social justice activism at Pacific School of Religion as well as English and Philosophy as an undergraduate at Gallaudet University. She approaches scripture with the firm belief that God is on the side of the oppressed, often looking through the lenses of postcolonialism, disabilities studies, and feminism. In her spare time, Paige enjoys creative writing, martial arts, and open water swimming.