



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Palm Sunday (A) **April 5, 2020**

RCL: Matthew 21:1-11 [The Liturgy of the Palms]; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14- 27:66

Matthew 21:1-11

The Liturgy of the Palms

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is full of hope, joy, and anticipation. Riding on a donkey, Matthew is quick to show us how this too fulfills prophecy: the King comes to them, humble, not with the appearance of a conqueror, but the same way that the poor travel. Jesus' procession, humble and greeted by the masses crying, "Hosanna!" is a direct affront to another procession that these people would know quite well: the procession of Pilate. Marcus Borg, in his book *The Last Week*, describes how Pontius Pilate and other Roman officials would establish dominance over Jerusalem during holy days. Pilate entered the city especially for Passover, to keep the peace and subdue the people—to be a presence of occupation on the day when they remembered being set free from bondage. When Jesus rides in on a donkey, he is subverting this message of power—when the people cry *Hosanna*, they are invoking an ancient and powerful memory of being saved from Pharaoh. By invoking David, they are calling for Jesus to establish them as a free nation, no longer under the control of Herod the puppet king or the corrupt high priest.

Yet, this story will hardly play out the way they expect. The humble king riding on a donkey will not amass an army, nor will he bring down fire from heaven to destroy the religiously wayward, like Elijah once did.

Reading the joy and elation that the crowds feel at this moment may help us recall a time when we felt overjoyed at the arrival of salvation. It may also serve as a cautionary tale: we must always challenge our own assumptions of what salvation might look like. The salvation we hunger for is not under the control of our own stories or our own expectations, and it does not come in the form of power over others. It comes in humility, vulnerability, and the transformative story of God. Only God knows how our stories of salvation will *really* go, how we will *really* be transformed by the road ahead.

- How has God changed your understanding of salvation over your lifetime?
- In what ways do you notice acts of humility subverting cultures of domination, power, and prestige?

Isaiah 50:4-9a

In this passage, the author of what is known as “Second” Isaiah pairs his ability to “sustain the weary with a word” with his ability to listen and be instructed by the ways of God. The language of being stirred to a new call, to words that transform and instruct the hearer, is beautiful and powerful. The prophet is able to listen not only because he has chosen to do so, but because God has awoken something in him. Being attentive to the Word, however it is being spoken, allows the prophet to confidently withstand pain and suffering because he knows that God is with him. His adversaries and his contenders cannot put him to shame.

- What has God woken your ear to lately?
- How has listening deeply changed your relationship with God, another, or yourself?

Psalm 31:9-16

The psalms put words and song onto universal experiences of our relationship with God—from the greatest joys and praise to the deepest pits of rage, sorrow, and lament. When we do not have words to describe how angry, lost, or outcast we feel, the psalms give us a window into that same experience from thousands and thousands of years ago. Our passage from Psalm 31 this week cries out for mercy: consumed with sorrow, wasted with grief, useless, consumed. Sometimes the final piece of this passage is read as conviction and assurance on the part of the suffering person, yet it can also be read as a plea—resignation, and yet more loss. Where is this God that the psalmist trusts in? Dwelling in this psalm may help free of us of expectations about how we are “supposed” to suffer, and what our beliefs “should” be when we are in the pit. These verses can invite us to feel the true depth of our grief, loss, and even anger, knowing that our God is strong enough to handle all of it.

- Have you ever experienced grief and suffering like the psalmist has?
- What has sustained you in moments of grief like these?

Philippians 2:5-11

This ancient hymn tells the story of God’s subversive justice. God’s power is not the kind of power that exploits or dominates; God’s power is the kind of power that empties itself, humbles itself, and goes into death in order to transform death. Paul is writing to the Philippian church during a time when conflict between them is grave. He includes this hymn to remind them of what unites them as Christians—this story of Christ’s emptying of himself, of the transformative glory within the deepest sorrows and darkest pits. This passage is an important reminder of who we really are in our Christian story. The passage also provides a much-needed hopeful outcome in contrast to the gospel reading, which leaves us at the point of Jesus’ death.

- Are there any conflicts going on in your life or community that need the perspective of what unites us as Christians?
- Where have you seen God’s power of humility at work in the world around you?

Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

Matthew's narrative of the passion begins with Judas deciding to betray Jesus. It tells the story of the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, a lesson on violence, Jesus' trial, Peter's denial, Judas' repentance and death, Jesus' crucifixion, and Joseph of Arimathea. It is a complex narrative full of emotional moments for all of us who read it. We may identify with Peter, the women who see him die, or anyone in the crowd who jeers, "Let him save himself!" There is a bit of desperate, ironic, heartbroken hope to all these condemnations. Did they not hope that he would be the Messiah, that he would transform their city and their lives? How much of this vitriol is from dashed hopes? How often do we do the same—lashing out at someone or something because it has not brought us the redemption that we expected?

Though this story is familiar to most Christians, it is so complex that it can be read extensively over an entire lifetime and still give new insights. This year, as you approach this story, perhaps you might consider approaching it with an eye for compassion. Consider using these questions to help you enter the story more fully this year:

- What characters do we often cast as antagonists in this story, and what do we have in common with them? What might their motivations have been? How can we cultivate compassion for them, as God does?
- Have you ever noticed yourself punishing someone for not being who you hoped they would be? What might be a more compassionate response?

Maggie Nancarrow was ordained to the transitional diaconate in June. She works as the Director of Intergenerational Ministries and Sunday Evening Ministries at St. Matthew's in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is completing her formation for the priesthood with the School for Formation in the Episcopal Church in Minnesota. She meets God in the woods, at the lake, and occasionally in the desert—usually on a bicycle.