

Bible Study
Palm Sunday, Year C
March 20, 2016

[RCL] Psalm 31:9-16, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:14-23:56 or 23:1-49

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Isaiah is the most-quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. Its stirring speeches about judgment, exile, and restoration captured the imagination of people during Jesus' day. Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, declaring he was fulfilling it. Gospel writers noted that he set his face "like a flint" toward Jerusalem, which is a quotation from our text today. Like the prophet in Isaiah 50, Jesus experienced a confrontation with "adversaries." He was given over to these adversaries. The cruel soldiers struck him, taunting him, and questioning his prophetic powers. The reference to pulling out his beard led many Christians to believe that the soldiers pulled out Jesus' beard during the abuse, even though the Gospel writers never mention this detail.

As I read Isaiah 50 I notice the innocent person's face. On this face is the tongue of a teacher that spoke words of encouragement to the weary. The ears on this face listen for good words in the morning. But suddenly, cruel hands strike this face. Bones crunch, welts begin to appear. This face's sacred beard, symbolizing the dignity of manhood, is pulled out like a weed. This face is insulted and spit upon. In spite of this abuse, this face does not turn away in shame or fear. It is set hard like a flint, bearing witness to innocence in the face of condemnation. The face is alone as no one but God stands with him. This face is black and white, male and female, young and old, and it has borne this abuse since the dawn of time. The physical abuse goes hand in hand with unjust accusations of wrongdoing. The courts of the world declare the innocent guilty and the prophets are led away to be killed. No one comes to their aid.

- Say the name of a modern day prophet whose face you know because they were killed unjustly.
- Are Jesus' followers expected to be prophetic? Are they expected to suffer?

Psalm 31:9-16

A late night phone call wakes him up. With a voice groggy from sleep he says, "Hello?" "Dad? I'm in trouble." Parents never want to get this call. We dread it, worry about it, and hope it never happens. But sometimes it does. Our child, alone, desperate, and in pain, stirs the strongest feelings in us and we drop everything and help. The Psalmist is calling out to God, like a child in trouble. Sorrow, pain, grief, and a mountain of shame engulf him. He laments his current condition. He pleads for rescue. The Psalmist's problems are both internal and external. He suffers from inward affliction as his "bones are consumed." He also suffers from rejection by the community. His own people shame him and seek to eliminate him. God is the only one he trusts. Jesus' final week is full of passion, full of feeling. The feelings of a lifetime are crystalized in this timeless text. Jesus laments in his final week, blessing this ancient practice. Lament is simply turning suffering into art. In our veteran's groups we often have a time of Lament. Veterans will bring poems, songs, or other objects (one brought a crocheted rug he made!) that crystalize their experiences in war.

- What particular moments of Jesus final week echo in this psalm?

- What do you need to lament in your life? What medium or art form will you use?

Philippians 2:5-11

Scholars often identify these words by St. Paul as an early Christian hymn. Sadly, he did not include the tune. The hymn captures the cosmic dimension of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. The hymn points to the Christ's exalted origin and his exalted conclusion. The narrative arc of Jesus' storyline takes an infinite dip in the middle. This is a riches to rags to riches story. This hymn is a beautiful song, and no doubt many early Christians sang it joyfully. It is a fine work of art, but that is not its whole purpose. The hymn was written so that the mind of Jesus would be in you, the singer/reader. So, is it?

- What areas of our lives are we resisting the riches to rags to riches storyline? In what areas are we accepting this storyline?
- How could you empty yourself today?

Luke 22:14-23:56

Luke's account of the passion contains just a few tiny details not found in Matthew or Mark. One of these moments happens in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is praying. Luke alone tells us that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground." The Greek text for these verses is "bracketed". Some ancient witnesses include it, some exclude it. The Greek is also somewhat ambiguous. Did Jesus truly sweat drops of blood or did his sweat appear to be as if he had bleeding wound? Medical journals document the rare condition of hematohidrosis, where blood will ooze through the skin, often for no reason other than stress. Leonardo Da Vinci cited an example of the condition in a soldier before a battle. The Greek text tells us that Jesus was in agony, agony. Truly, the body cannot lie. Jesus' agony starts long before the first lash of the whip or the first piercing of the nail. His agony starts in the darkness of the Garden. His agony starts inside his heart and mind. His agony starts in his sweat glands and the small capillaries on the surface of his skin. Our Great Litany says, "By thine Agony and Bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost, Good Lord, deliver us."

- What does stress do to you? How is it made known in your body?
- What do we learn about Jesus' humanity from his agony in the Garden?

Written by The Reverend Dr. David Peters

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