



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Palm Sunday (C)
April 14, 2019

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

Isaiah 50:4-9a

This passage from Isaiah introduces an overarching theme of servanthood, suffering, and salvation that echoes throughout the lessons appointed for today like an intensifying refrain. Often referred to as a Servant Song, it is the third of four such sonic poems in Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13 – 53:12; with some scholars suggesting that 61:1-3 be considered a fifth Servant Song). The steadfastness of the servant in these verses begins with the humble and faithful acknowledgment of exactly whom he serves. The importance of that message is underscored through the use of poetic anaphora; the phrase “the Lord God” begins four of these six verses. The Lord God gives speech to the teacher’s tongue, that he may “sustain the weary with a word” (v. 4); the Lord God opens his ear, and the teacher listens (v. 5); and the Lord God helps (v. 7), and helps again (v. 9). This passage is also an illustration of another common pattern found in much biblical poetry – one in which the narrative pivots, often quite quickly, from despair to hopefulness, from nadir to zenith; there’s a distinct before-and-after-ness to biblical poetry. Following this pattern, the teacher in the Servant Song moves determinedly (at vv. 6b and 7) from lament, suffering, and despair to a profession of trust and unwavering faith in divine salvation. The message in these lyrics is that the Lord will surely redeem the faithful.

- Faithful servanthood echoes throughout the Bible. We see it in Isaiah, but also elsewhere. What does faithful servanthood look like to you?
- The teacher in Isaiah is called to “sustain the weary with a word.” What words have sustained you? Why?

Psalm 31:9-16

Whereas Isaiah gave us a Servant Song about steadfast faith in God, the psalmist begins by singing the blues, only to reveal God’s steadfast love for us. The psalmist begins at an absolute low point of despair, and similar to the Servant Song, Psalm 31 also speaks to the suffering of servanthood. Who cannot relate to the psalmist’s plea in the midst of trouble and distress, and consumed by sorrow and wasting away from grief? But are we willing to linger with the psalmist in lament? While the psalmist’s suffering is unique to its composer, reading this portion of Psalm 31 as part of the Liturgy of the Passion, we are also invited to slow down and not jump immediately from Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem—with palms and hosannas—to his resurrection and ascension. There is suffering in between. In the verses immediately preceding these is the line that Jesus prays from the cross: “into your hands I commend my spirit” (Psalm 31:5a; Luke 23:46).

- How do you sit with grief or sorrow?
- Is lament a part of your prayer life? If not, how might you incorporate it?

- How have you experienced God’s loving-kindness in your life? How might you reflect God’s “shining face”?

Philippians 2:5-11

The lectionary is still singing in this passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which contains what many call the *Carmen Christi* or Christ Hymn. In it, we can hear the familiar tune of yet another servant song. Much has been written on whether this passage is based on an ancient hymn or is an example of Paul writing in elegantly exalting prose. Its uses of intensification and parallelism (e.g., v. 8: “obedient to the point of death / even death on a cross”) are certainly reminiscent of biblical poetry. But whether quoting an earlier hymn or composing original material, it is surely a shining example of Paul’s rhetorical brilliance. For in the Christ Hymn, we have not only something creedal (what we ought to *believe* about Christ’s pre-existence, existence, and exaltation) but also something missional (what we ought to *do* in response to that belief). What’s more, the opening “you” in which the mind of Christ ought to be is plural; it challenges both the individual and the community to be faithful servants through self-emptying, self-giving, and other-regard. As disciples of the one who emptied himself (v. 7), humbled himself (v. 8), and was obedient (v. 8), we are meant to echo that pattern, those actions, and that obedience. Or, as our Eucharistic prayer echoes, to be faithful servants of God “through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ” (BCP, 375).

- How might you move through Holy Week with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus?
- What does your Servant Song sound like?

Luke 22:14 – 23:56

The Servant Song reaches a crescendo in the gospel reading assigned for today. Read or heard in context of the other passages in the day’s lectionary, this great sweeping passion narrative might be considered a symphony of God’s suffering love for us. There are several details of this familiar narrative in which Luke’s version differs from those of the other Evangelists. In particular is Luke’s emphasis on Jesus’ innocence. Although Pontius Pilate alludes to Jesus’ innocence in the other gospels, in Luke he is much more explicit, repeating more than once that he finds no basis for accusation or sentence (23:4, 14-15, 22). Similarly, in Luke’s gospel, one of the thieves crucified with Jesus acknowledges his own guilt while noting that “this man has done nothing wrong” (23:41). Lastly, whereas the centurion declares in other gospels, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39; Matthew 27:54), in Luke, he declares, “Certainly this man was innocent” (23:47). Moreover, there are two prayers spoken by Jesus that are unique to Luke: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34), and a reprise of a line from Psalm 31, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Psalm 31:5a; Luke 23:46). In the context of Jesus’ innocence, these prayers are not only poignant but are cause for thoughtful reflection.

- Can you imagine yourself ever praying such prayers?
- What changes if we hear the second half of Psalm 31:5 in Jesus’ prayer, “You have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth” (v. 5b)?
- Whom does Jesus forgive in this passage?

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