

PALM SUNDAY

Year B

Matthew Phillips is a seminarian at Nashotah House Theological Seminary.

Isaiah 50:4-9

⁴The Lord God has given me
a trained tongue,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens,
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I did not turn backward.

⁶I gave my back to those who struck me
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the
beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

⁷The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?
Let us stand in court together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Commentary from Matthew Phillips

Biblical scholars largely place this passage within what is called “Deutero-Isaiah,” the second of three movements in the Book of Isaiah dating to the end of the Babylonian Exile or the early post-exilic period. The passage contains the third of Isaiah’s four songs about the “suffering servant,” who is often identified as the book’s titular prophet, the Messiah, the people of Israel, or some combination of these.

In this passage, the servant self-identifies as both a student and teacher who is tasked with providing God’s weary people with sustaining words while in exile. God teaches these words to the servant each day and the servant dutifully relays God’s words to the people of Israel, even when doing so results in the servant suffering ridicule or violent persecution. Trusting in God to bring justice and salvation, the servant willingly and self-sacrificially endures this suffering with a “face like flint:” an extremely dense rock used in ancient tool building that signifies the firm resolve of the servant in the face of suffering. But as flint has also been used since antiquity to start fires, the willful suffering of the servant serves as an example for Israel of steadfast and self-sacrificial love for God and neighbor: an example that—when emulated—can spark exponentially more examples for Israel’s neighbors to follow until the world is engulfed in God’s love.

Discussion Questions

Like the suffering servant, Christians are called to proclaim God’s word to a world that often proves hostile to the Gospel. Have you ever experienced hostility or endured suffering when proclaiming the Gospel? What happened? How did you respond?

In our Baptismal Covenant, we vow to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” (BCP, 305). What is one way this week that you can proclaim the Gospel by example? What is one way you can encourage others to follow this example?

Psalm 31:9-16

- ⁹ Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am in trouble; *
my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my
throat and my belly.
- ¹⁰ For my life is wasted with grief, and my years with
sighing; *
my strength fails me because of affliction, and
my bones are consumed.
- ¹¹ I have become a reproach to all my enemies and
even to my neighbors, a dismay to those of
my acquaintance; *
when they see me in the street they avoid me.
- ¹² I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; *
I am as useless as a broken pot.
- ¹³ For I have heard the whispering of the crowd; fear
is all around; *
they put their heads together against me; they
plot to take my life.
- ¹⁴ But as for me, I have trusted in you, O LORD. *
I have said, "You are my God.
- ¹⁵ My times are in your hand; *
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and
from those who persecute me.
- ¹⁶ Make your face to shine upon your servant, *
and in your loving-kindness save me."

Commentary from Matthew Phillips

The Psalter is filled with expressions of intense human emotion: the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. In this passage from Psalm 31, we encounter the Psalmist expressing one of their lowest moments. Sorrow and grief compounded with enmity and persecution from friend and enemy alike have resulted in an affliction that has entirely consumed the Psalmist, whose very body is being destroyed by trauma. Suffering is ubiquitous to the human experience, and whether or not we have suffered to the extent expressed in this passage, the Psalmist's pain and the physical manifestations of that pain are deeply relatable. And in the midst of such immense suffering, perhaps we can understand the Psalmist's feelings of uselessness and abandonment.

But the Psalmist knows that their abandonment is not absolute. Though the Psalmist has "become a reproach to all," they know that God has not abandoned them. Even as their body is wasting away, the Psalmist remains confident that God is present and in control. Despite the suffering experienced at the hands of their enemies, the Psalmist affirms that it is God alone who is in control over their life and surrenders all their pain and grief into God's saving hands.

Discussion Questions

Have you—like the Psalmist—had an experience of intense grief or sorrow that resulted in physical symptoms? How did you find relief?

The Psalmist writes elsewhere that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted" (Ps. 34:18). Where have you witnessed God's presence and control amid great suffering?

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,

⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name,

¹⁰so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Commentary from Matthew Phillips

In this passage from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, the apostle encourages the church at Philippi to frame their thoughts, deeds, and entire lives on the example set by Christ. Paul then appeals to an early Christian hymn to articulate the nature of Christ's example. The hymn describes Jesus' incarnation as a process of self-emptying (or *kenosis*), whereby the divine adopted our humanity. And rather than choosing to be born to a wealthy or powerful family, Christ's *kenosis* goes even further, instead being raised in the lowly town of Nazareth. Though himself divine, the Lord of all, with the name above all others, Jesus consistently spent his life identifying with and serving the least, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. But Christ's life of self-emptying goes further still, culminating in his sacrificial death on the cross.

With this Christ hymn, Paul tells the Philippians and all Christians that the example set by Jesus Christ is a life of humility, self-emptying, and obedient self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Paul encourages us to model our entire lives after this example, prefacing this passage with an exhortation to "look not to [our] own interests but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). This means loving our neighbors—especially the most vulnerable among us—even when doing so requires us to empty ourselves of our notions of status, convenience, or comfort.

Discussion Questions

Who are the vulnerable/marginalized people in your community? How do you identify with them? What barriers might prevent you from identifying with them?

What is one act of loving service you can offer this week for the sake of the vulnerable/marginalized people in your community? What might you need to empty yourself of to complete this act of loving service?

Mark 14:1-15:47

Commentary from Matthew Phillips

In the Markan account of the Passion, we encounter the culmination of this week's readings. Like the Psalmist, Jesus is abandoned, denied, and betrayed by his friends, and the extent of his grief is made clear in Gethsemane. But even in his grief (again like the Psalmist), Jesus obediently surrenders himself to the will of God. Like Isaiah's suffering servant and as stated in the Christ hymn quoted by Paul, Jesus willingly endures derision, abuse, and all manner of suffering until his brutal death on the cross: Christ's perfect example of self-sacrificial love for the sake of the whole world.

Of course, Jesus had lived his entire life as such an example and this passage depicts several people who have been inspired to follow in his self-sacrificial footsteps. The woman at Simon's house sacrificing nearly a year's wages to anoint Jesus for burial, Simon of Cyrene taking Jesus' cross upon his own shoulders, Joseph of Arimathea boldly requesting Jesus' lifeless body before dressing and laying it in his own hewn tomb, and Mary, Mary, and Solome bearing witness to Christ's passion and staying to witness his burial after sundown on the day of Preparation: each has begun to follow Christ's example by offering their life as a living sacrifice to their God.

Discussion Questions

Of those in this passage who have begun to follow Christ's self-sacrificial example, who do you find most inspiring? Do you know any such inspiring people in your own life?

As we commemorate Christ's sacrificial life and death this Holy Week, what sacrifices might God be inviting you to make to better love both God and neighbor?